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## Addressing the Impacts of the MUHC Superhospital through Community-Based Action Research

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### Abstract

Community-based action research can be employed as a means to address potential community impacts stemming from the construction and operation of the McGill University Health Centre's (MUHC) proposed new super hospital facility on the Glen Campus. Community-based action research involves researchers and community members working in partnership to understand problems and develop solutions through research. Successful research partnerships require clear articulation of the roles of all research partners, the research objectives and scope of work. Partners should share decision making powers equitably with respect to research directions to ensure relevant results for all partners. Data analysis should be carried out in collaboration with community partners to make use of local knowledge. Based upon these principles, this paper develops a potential action research strategy within the context of the development of the MUHC super hospital. Action research for the super hospital offers the opportunity to explore a diversity of research interests through projects of varying duration all the while building links with, and maximizing project benefits for the surrounding communities.

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## Executive Summary

Community-based action research can be employed as a means to address potential community impacts stemming from the construction and operation of the McGill University Health Centre's proposed new super hospital facility on the Glen Campus. Community-based action research involves researchers and members from the community working collaboratively to understand problems and develop solutions through research. This paper proposes a community-based action research methodology to guide the work of the Community University Research Alliance (CURA), in the context of the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC)'s proposed super hospital, participating universities, and neighborhood groups.

How does action research come about? The process is messy and iterative. An initial collaboration between researchers and community establishes a partnership. Academics and community partners may bring different goals and interest to the partnership: establishing clear research questions, scope of the research, and areas of common interest is paramount.

Next, selecting appropriate research design and investigative methods are necessary. Collaborators must anticipate the possibility for changing the research questions and design to accommodate new findings and previously unforeseen circumstances.

Researchers must always seek to include community partners and their knowledge in the data collection and analysis phases of the research. In many instances community members may be front line workers, and have in-depth knowledge and better access to information than researchers coming from outside the community.

Analysing the data with the collaboration of community partners is also essential; as action research aims to enable community members to solve their own problems, data should be carried out with the needs of community members in mind to ensure that the findings are useful in developing feasible courses of action for the community.

Finally, findings need to be returned to stakeholders in a timely and accessible manner. Care must be taken about how data is presented and how much data needs to be presented in order to get the point across. The goal is to develop understanding, and not to encumber non-academics with technical jargon or difficult and lengthy explanations. Academic members must show that they can

descend from the ivory tower to produce practical, relevant, and understandable results in order to build credibility with community partners and stakeholders (Small and Uttal).

The construction of a new super hospital facility for the McGill University Health Centre on its new Glen Campus site will bring positive and negative impacts for the neighbourhoods around it. Action research is proposed as a means to mitigate the negative impacts while enhancing the positive aspects of the super hospital. Through a collaboration between community stakeholders and researchers in the Community University Research Alliance (CURA), issues of concern for the community can be understood, and plans of actions that better integrate the new hospital with the surrounding neighbourhoods can be developed. Equitable collaboration and decision making, as well as open dialogue will ensure that findings best meet the needs of all collaborators. Action research aims to support communities in finding solutions to their problems. It is also a means for university faculty and students to produce work that is relevant and practical for the community, build links to the community, train future professionals, and ensure that university led projects like the MUHC super hospital also bring benefits to the people of the surrounding communities.





## Synthèse

La recherche-action centrée sur la communauté peut être employée pour pallier aux impacts possibles que la construction et l'opération du nouveau super hôpital de l'Université McGill, sur le campus Glen, pourraient avoir sur les communautés environnantes. La recherche-action centrée sur la communauté assure la collaboration entre les chercheurs et les membres de la communauté pour la compréhension des problèmes et le développement de solutions par la recherche. Ce travail propose une méthodologie de recherche-action centrée sur la communauté afin de diriger les efforts de l'Alliance de Recherche Université Communauté (ARUC), des universités participantes et des organisations communautaires dans le contexte de planification du nouveau super hôpital du Centre Universitaire de Santé de McGill (CUSM).

Comment fonctionne la recherche-action? Le processus est désordonné et itératif. Une collaboration initiale entre les chercheurs et la communauté sert à l'établissement d'un partenariat. Les universitaires et les membres de la communauté risquent d'élaborer des buts et des intérêts différents dans le cadre du partenariat : la définition de la portée de la recherche, de questions de recherche claires et de sphères d'intérêt commun est ainsi essentielle.

Par la suite, la sélection d'un mode de recherche et de méthodes d'enquêtes appropriées est nécessaire. Les collaborateurs doivent prévoir la modification des questions de recherche ainsi que des résultats et circonstances inattendues.

Les chercheurs doivent constamment tenter d'inclure les partenaires de la communauté et leurs connaissances durant la collecte de données et l'analyse des résultats. Dans certains cas, les membres de la communauté peuvent être des travailleurs de première ligne ayant des connaissances étendues ainsi qu'un meilleur accès aux informations que des chercheurs provenant de l'extérieur.

L'analyse des données en collaboration avec les partenaires du milieu communautaires est également essentielle, puisque la recherche-action vise à permettre aux membres de la communauté de régler leurs propres problèmes. Les données devraient être adaptées aux besoins de la communauté afin qu'elles soient utiles au développement d'un plan d'action.

Finalement, les résultats doivent être rendus aux participants dans un contenu accessible. Une attention particulière doit être portée sur la façon dont les données sont présentées et sur la quantité

de données nécessaire pour faire passer l'information. Le but est de permettre la compréhension, non pas d'embrouiller les non-universitaires dans un jargon technique ou difficile et des explications trop élaborées. Les membres universitaires doivent démontrer qu'ils peuvent descendre de leur tour d'ivoire pour produire des résultats pratiques, pertinents et compréhensibles afin d'assurer leur crédibilité auprès des partenaires (Small & Uttal).

La construction du nouveau super hôpital du CUSM sur le site du Campus Glen entraînera des impacts positifs et négatifs sur les communautés avoisinantes. La recherche-action est proposée comme un moyen de mitigation des effets négatifs et de renforcement des effets positifs. À travers une collaboration entre la communauté et les chercheurs de l'ARUC, les préoccupations des résidents pourront être mieux comprises, et des plans d'action visant l'intégration optimale de l'hôpital dans son environnement pourront être élaborées. Des processus de participation et de prise de décisions équitables de même qu'un dialogue ouvert assureront l'utilisation des résultats au profit des collaborateurs. La recherche-action supporte les communautés dans la recherche de solutions à leurs problèmes. Il s'agit également d'un moyen pour les chercheurs et les étudiants de produire des travaux pertinents et pratiques pour la communauté, de créer des liens avec celle-ci, de former de futurs professionnels et de s'assurer que des projets menés par des universités tels que celui du CUSM apportent des bienfaits aux communautés avoisinantes.





## **Introduction**

Community-based action research can be employed as a means to address potential community impacts stemming from the construction and operation of the McGill University Health Centre's proposed new super hospital facility on the Glen Campus. Community-based action research involves researchers and members from the community working collaboratively to understand problems and develop solutions through research. In the following paper, the background of the super hospital and the issues it generates for the surrounding neighbourhoods will be presented. Next, the goals, principles, and strategies for conducting community-based action research are discussed. Finally, a possible community-based action research methodology is proposed within the context of the McGill University Health Centre's proposed super hospital and the McGill School of Urban Planning.

## **Context of Research**

Five hospitals, the Montréal Hospitals, the Montréal Children's Hospital, the Montréal General Hospital, the Royal Victoria Hospital, The Montréal Chest Institute, and the Montréal Neurological Hospital together form the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC). Affiliated with the McGill University Faculty of Medicine, this agglomeration seeks to provide patients with the best possible care while also carrying out leading research and teaching (McGill University Health Centre). In the face of aging facilities, such as the 110 year old Royal Victoria Hospital, lack of adequate space for patients and equipment, and a host of other medical delivery quality issues, the idea of building a new larger facility, or super hospital, to address these issues was conceived in 1991. After a fifteen year deliberative process on the funding and planning specifics of the project, the plan to build the new super hospital was finally approved by the Québec government in April 2006 (Coates). The current \$1.6 billion dollar plan envisions two campuses for the new MUHC health centre. The first focuses on renovating and upgrading the Montréal General Hospital, and together with the Royal Victoria, Neurological Hospitals and Montréal Chest Institute, will form MUHC's new Mountain Campus. The second campus, which is the focus of this paper, will be located on the former Glen Railway yards site bordering Westmount, Notre-Dame de Grâce (NDG) and the Sud-Ouest, where a lengthy seventeen month soil decontamination project was recently completed. Construction delays, financing problems, or political disputes notwithstanding, completion of the new facility on the

Glen campus is scheduled for 2011 (Aubin “Politics Delaying Construction of McGill Hospital”). The new facility plans to accommodate the Montréal Children’s Hospital, the research institute of the MUHC, and offer 514 new beds, 21 operating rooms, and adult inpatient facilities (Coates). Possible additions to this scheme are still being negotiated.

Much political, acrimonious, and lengthy debate has occurred over the new facility. Everything from cost sharing and site selection to benefits and feasibility has been hotly contested by politicians, advocates, and detractors of the new super hospital. The debate became even more complex and heated when a second, French language super hospital, the Centre Hospitalier de l’Université de Montréal, was proposed in 1999 (Derfel “Québec Takes Scalpel to Superhospital Plans”; Derfel “Superhospital Already over Budget, and Nobody’s Sure Who’s Paying for It”; Coates; Aubin “Superhospital Study Raises Some New Questions”). However, missing from the discussions are concerns about what impacts the new facility located at Glen Yards will have on the surrounding neighbourhoods and its residents. How is the project going to integrate itself with the surrounding neighbourhoods? How are potential impacts such as increased numbers of patients, workers, students, faculty, vehicles, noise, economic activity, as well as changes to the visual aesthetics going to be mitigated for the surrounding neighbourhoods? What efforts are being made to ensure that the positive aspects of a new research, teaching, and health facility are also maximized for local area residents? Since construction is likely to begin shortly, project leaders, planners, and the university should focus on addressing the issues that are likely to arise with the new super hospital.

### **Community-Based Action Research**

This project proposes one avenue, community-based action research, as a means to address and find solutions to many of the potential impacts of the new MUHC super hospital. Community-based action research (or just action research), as defined by Stringer, is “a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems” (Stringer 15). It seeks to make members of the community who are affected by the issues of interest into active collaborators in the research process. Community members, whether they be residents or workers, have intimate and valuable knowledge about their own situations. Not only do they have more at stake than outside researchers in finding resolutions to community problems, but

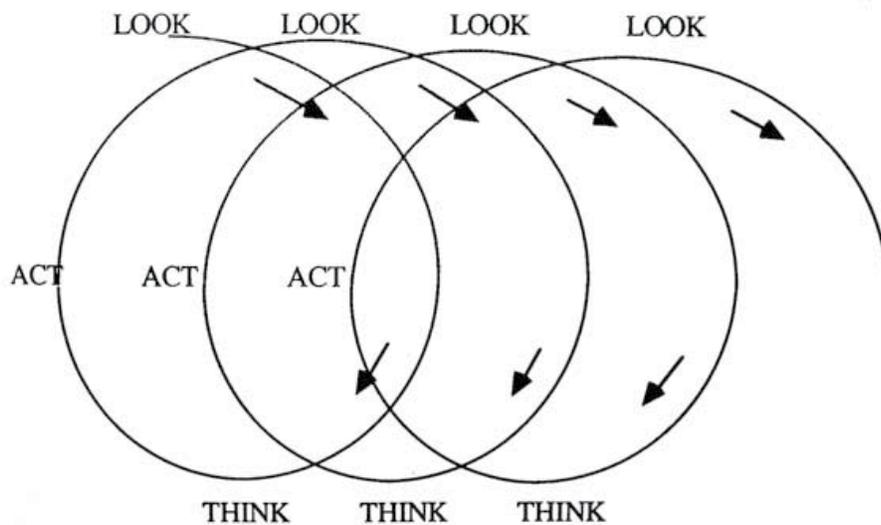
they can be valuable contributors to a better understanding of the issues. As active collaborators in action research, community members become a part of developing viable and feasible solutions for dealing with the potential impacts of the new super hospital.

Action research arose from the need to develop more effective interventions to deal with complex social problems than traditionally imposed solutions from academic institutions or centralized agencies have thus far delivered (Loka Institute; Stringer). Cities have been left to deal with increasing workloads due to the downloading of responsibilities by provincial governments without adequate or proportional increases in budgets or staff resources. These tasks are coupled with the ever growing need for more knowledge of, and resources for dealing with problems ranging from poverty, economic decline, and crime. At the same time, universities and researchers face calls for the production of knowledge that is more responsive, relevant, and applicable to the social problems and needs that arise in the neighbourhoods around them (Boyer). Action research thus presents a powerful means of generating knowledge and courses of action by combining local and knowledge and experience with the theory and research expertise of academic institutions (Savan and Sider).

While action research makes use of traditional social science techniques of investigation, it is a more user-friendly and accessible form of research because it calls for more consensual and participatory practices during the research process. Action research may not always be the solution to complex social problems, but it does “provide a means for people to get a handle on their situations and formulate effective solutions to problems they face in their public and professional lives” (Stringer 16).

The action research process has an information gathering, analysis, and solution phase. In gathering information, intimate and systematic knowledge is sought to describe and define the problem or issue. This knowledge is analysed, and hypotheses are proposed to understand how and why things are happening. Finally, a plan, usually in the form of a report, is prepared, disseminated, implemented, and evaluated. While action research may proceed in this step-wise fashion, many authors recognize that the process is in fact more complex, cyclical, and iterative; information goes back and forth between various stages of the research process. Findings gathered from one phase allows for a different or better understanding of the issues, which in turn change later analyses and solutions (Stringer; Small and Uttal; Lederer and Seasons; Rubin). In figure 1, Stringer presents a very concise

diagram illustrating the three phases, look (information gathering), think (analysis), and act (solution) as a continually recycling set of activities.



**FIGURE 1: ACTION RESEARCH AS A CYCLICAL AND ITERATIVE PROCESS (STRINGER 17)**

Many examples of action research can be found in the literature. The problems they address are wide ranging: partnerships between academic institutions and communities have employed action research to deal with downtown revitalization, health service provision, racial tension, sustainable development, local economic development, and affordable housing (Bate; Dewar and Isaac; Lederer and Seasons; Mayfield, Hellwig and Banks; Prins; Reardon; Rubin; Savan; Savan and Sider). From these studies come several common and key principles that guide action-research. They are discussed in the following paragraphs in order to highlight some important considerations necessary for successful action research collaborations.

### **Principles for Successful Action Research**

Action research requires collaboration of researchers, who are typically, but not limited to, academic faculty and students, with community partners such as local politicians, community organisations, citizen groups, and working professionals. It is important for successful alliances to clarify the role and purpose of their partnership, the scope and relevance of their work, and their own interests in the process (Lederer and Seasons). Often, academic researchers and community collaborators bring different goals to a project; pressure on university researchers to produce peer-reviewed academic

publications that have wider general implications or make theoretical contributions to their discipline leads to the production of work that differs in nature to that which is action driven (Reardon; Small and Uttal). Thus, partners must be careful of contradictory interests, share a mutual desire to resolve community issues, and develop a clear and common vision (Savan and Sider).

Another principle for successful action research is equity in the collaboration by all partners. After establishing common goals, members of a collaboration need to distribute decision making powers equitably among themselves. This allows the group to make decisions that maintain a common research locus and to achieve results that are useful to all members (Lederer and Seasons). Input and knowledge from community partners should always be kept in a researcher's view in order to avoid skewing the findings in favour of a researcher's perspective (Small and Uttal). Contributing to the research process allows community members to gain an in-depth understanding about the problems that they face, and be actively involved in finding solutions to those problems. By participating in the research process, action research allows community partners to develop the capacity to take actions to improve their own circumstances (Stringer). Equitable collaboration, power sharing, and participation in the research process also builds trust in the partnership, and creates the potential for future work.

Ongoing dialogue between all collaborators is necessary to nurture the relationships that are critical to collaborative work. Throughout any project, people may leave jobs or change positions, and constant efforts must be made to recruit and train new partners in the working dynamics and progress of collaborative work. It is also important for reports and findings to be presented in a manner that is accessible to both professional and lay persons, allowing continuous and inclusive knowledge sharing among all stakeholders. This permits community partners to suggest modifications to the research process as necessary in order to deal with new circumstances. Open ongoing dialogue becomes even more important when conflicts arise and collaborators should make the effort to establish conflict resolution mechanisms early on. While action research has the potential to benefit all parties, collaborators should also recognize when projects are not working and be prepared to discontinue their collaboration (Small and Uttal).

When universities partake in action research, the involvement of faculty is usually almost always the case. However, action research is also amenable to work by students. Communities

often welcome the energy and enthusiasm that students bring to projects. At the same time, students are forced to confront their own values and the utility of their coursework. The experience is ultimately an invaluable, formative experience for future professionals (LeGates and Robinson). Student involvement is dependent upon the timeframe which students have to contribute, as well as the flexibility their university curriculum permits. Savan explains how short (one semester or one academic year), medium (one to three years) and long (over three years) term projects have differing degrees of student involvement, institutional requirements, and benefits. Short term projects require more planning by community and faculty members before students become involved to lay out the framework for a project. Undergraduate or graduate students then principally carry out the research through course based, COOP work, or study terms. Medium term projects allow for graduate students to partake in research design of a project. Longer term projects allow students to work with faculty and community partners to identify issues and appropriate research design. Longer term collaborations also afford the greatest, ongoing benefits to the community because the continuity of the relationship between partners allows more time for research, feedback and iterative modifications to a project without having to deal with 'startup' costs of establishing relations, expectations, and work guidelines. Longer term collaborations provide a more stable basis from which to explore in greater depth mutually important and interesting research pursuits (Savan).

The success of academic involvement in action research also depends on recognizing potential barriers and conflicts. Generally, historic hostilities, suspicion between partners, differing backgrounds and expectations, inequitable distribution of power and control, unrealistic and conflicting goals, agendas, priorities, and lack of funding are potential barriers to successful collaborations (Savan and Sider). Dewar and Isaac identify differences between academic and community institutions in project expectations, working style, schedule (semesters versus continuous), clear direction versus multiple opinions, and a range of acceptable solutions which can lead to unsatisfactory projects for community members and frustrated and angry students by semester's end (Dewar and Isaac). When faced with a deliberative and often multidisciplinary process, where no single solution exists, students may prefer to redirect their efforts into other course based work that is more clearly defined and subject to a clear university merit based system. The need for students to work off campus may also raise conflicts with other classes and their ability to attend meetings with community partners (Savan

and Sider). Community members welcome student involvement so long as the time and efforts they spend supervising a student is adequately compensated by the work that is produced. Communities resent being simply studied for student projects and assignments, and means must be developed to familiarize students with the nature, sensitivities, and needs of working within a community (LeGates and Robinson).

### **An Action Research Strategy**

The following paragraph lays out a common strategy for conducting action research. This will be followed by a discussion that returns our focus to dealing with the impacts of the MUHC super hospital. Small and Urral discuss the need to find collaborators between researchers and community partners to establish a partnership. Then they need to identify stakeholders, anyone who makes decisions or desires information that can be obtained through the research process. As mentioned above, academics and community partners may bring different goals and interest to the partnership, and hence the need to establish the research questions, scope of the research, and areas of common interest is paramount.

Next, selecting appropriate research design and investigative methods are necessary. Collaborators must anticipate the possibility for changing the research questions and design to accommodate new findings and previously unforeseen circumstances. The rigor, relevance, depth, breadth, and complexity of the information sought will all depend upon the availability of financial resources, time, and parameters of the research. Researchers must always give consideration to the equitable involvement of community partners and their knowledge in the data collection and analysis phases of the research. In many instances community members may be front line workers, and have in-depth knowledge and better access to information than researchers coming from outside the community.

Analysing the data with the collaboration of community partners is also essential; as action research aims to enable community members to solve their own problems, data should be carried out with the needs of community members in mind to ensure that the findings are useful in developing feasible courses of action for the community.

Finally, findings need to be returned to stakeholders in a timely and accessible manner. Authors stress the need to carefully decide how data is presented, as well as how much data needs to be pre-

sented in order to get the point across. The goal is to develop understanding, and not to encumber non-academics with technical jargon or difficult and lengthy explanations. It is necessary in action research partnerships for academic members to demonstrate that they can descend from the ivory tower to produce practical, relevant, and understandable results in order to build credibility with community partners and stakeholders (Small and Urtal).

### **Action Research Methodology for the MUHC Super Hospital**

The next section focuses on developing a methodology for action research as a means to deal with the issues that are likely to arise with the construction and operation of the new super hospital. The McGill School of Urban Planning is ideally suited to carry out action research with community members from the neighbourhoods surrounding the new facility. The program offers many different opportunities for students to undertake projects of various lengths. Short action research projects can be undertaken within the framework of studios, summer internships, and supervised research projects. Students can also undertake medium terms projects as supervised research projects, which can be lengthened when combined with their summer internships. And longer term collaborations are suitable for doctoral candidate theses.

By its very definition, we cannot yet know exactly what projects will come about through any action research collaboration with the communities around the new super hospital. The involvement of community partners is essential to define their concerns, goals, and projects. However, we can identify areas of concern, such as neighbourhood change, governance, sustainability, economic development, community health, and housing that encompass the potential impacts of the new facility (Bornstein). As such, the first phase of any collaboration needs to start by building contacts with the community. Links need to be created, and relationships built with potential partners for action research who share common interests, concerns, and a readiness to collaborate. These members of the community will also be important in helping to identify other stakeholders. Secondly, workgroups need to be formed around the areas of concern specified above, and group members will have to work to establish the goals, principles, and projects that will aid the community. Furthermore, here is the stage where group members should identify the expertise that they bring to the collaboration. Already, we know that the interdisciplinary nature of the school, as well as its focus

on planning issues makes the school ideally suited as a collaborator, consultant, and facilitator of the collaborative process. Furthermore, the school will be able to provide technical as well as practical expertise. The school will likely be the principal, though not necessarily the only, supplier of research work by engaging the expertise of its faculty and students to support the collaboration. However, it is stressed that researchers should be careful to consider the needs, opinions, and directions provided by its community partners in carrying out action research. Workgroups will also need to set out research design guidelines for projects not only to guide research work, but also to begin building a framework for student interest.

The next phase of the project will involve actually doing the necessary research on various projects. Here researchers and community partners need to specify the exact details of the each project, decide together what kind of information to collect, and how to collect it. The research work will almost invariably require pilot work. Pilot work provides essential information quickly about community circumstances, and allows community members and research partners to adjust the research design according. Pilot work is also a less resource and time intensive way to feed information back to all collaborators, and could serve as a “mini-cycle” in the cyclical, iterative, and complex process of action research.

The following steps, analysis, reporting, acting, and evaluating, are not treated in this paper because the means of accomplishing them are specific to each project and are subject to the specific needs and decisions of all collaborators. However, principles of action research with respect to analysis, reporting, and evaluation have already been previously discussed.

As well as recognizing the barriers to successful collaborations outlined in the text above, we have to look at potential barriers that affect the new super hospital facility on Glen campus. Already, economic disparities between the wealthier neighbourhoods of Westmount in comparison with NDG and the Sud-Ouest should be taken into account. Groups coming from all three neighbourhoods will likely come with many similar, but several different concerns, while their abilities to contribute financial resources to any collaboration will likely vary. Furthermore, Westmount is a city on its own, while both the Sud-Ouest and Notre Dame de Grâce are boroughs of the City of Montreal, adding complexity when dealing with municipal government organisations. Care should be exercised when building workgroups, and open discussion should be employed to recognize the potential

for conflict that differing financial and organizational structures between the different neighbourhoods bring to the collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

The construction of a new super hospital facility for the McGill University Health Centre on its new Glen Campus site will bring positive and negative impacts for the neighbourhoods around it. Action research is proposed as a means to mitigate the negative impacts while enhancing the positive aspects of the super hospital. Through a collaboration between community stakeholders and researchers at the School of Urban Planning, the issues of concern for the community can be understood, and plans of actions that better integrate the new hospital with the surrounding neighbourhoods can be developed. Equitable collaboration and decision making, as well as open dialogue will ensure that findings best meet the needs of all collaborators. Action research aims to support communities in finding solutions to their problems. It is also a means for university faculty and students to produce work that is relevant and practical for the community, build links to the community, train future professionals, and ensure that university led projects like the MUHC super hospital also bring benefits to the people of the surrounding communities.

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