

USING THEORY TO ESCAPE THE DESCRIPTIVE IMPASSE

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ABSTRACT *In this article, I focus on the importance of theory for undertaking and making sense of research. In particular, I consider one of the most common challenges for postgraduate students, which is how to shift from describing findings (what I found) to theorising about them (why my findings turned out this way). Using a case study approach, I describe my engagement with a particular set of data and demonstrate how different theories led me to focus on different elements and draw different conclusions. I conclude that explicitly shifting my theoretical approach ended up guiding me towards a much stronger interpretation of my descriptive findings.*

KEYWORDS:

Theory, gender, nationalism, media, women's sport

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I discuss the value and importance of using theory to drive research, particularly focusing on how it can help researchers who find themselves in what I call *the descriptive impasse*. From my experiences as a journal editor, manuscript reviewer and postgraduate student supervisor, this impasse represents one of the most common challenges for researchers as they struggle to move beyond describing what they have found. This article, therefore, highlights the ways in which theory can, and should, lead researchers to produce more nuanced and valuable explanations of their research findings. However, before considering this aspect of the research process in more detail, I first outline why theory and theorising are integral to the entire research process. In this article, I define theorising as an attempt to develop a general explanation of how things are related to each other. I start from the position that research is "*inseparably empirical and theoretical*" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 160, italics in original). Thus, theorising should always exist in dialogue with specific research contexts. As Pierre Bourdieu said in an interview, "one cannot think well except in and through theoretically constructed empirical cases" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 160). Theory is not something that *is* but something that researchers *do*: theories and concepts emerge as researchers grapple with the concrete realities and practical challenges they face while trying to make sense of the research context. Bourdieu perhaps best explains the absolute importance of the dance between theory and research when he points out that "research without theory is blind, and theory without research is empty" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 162).

THEORY AND RESEARCH

A key point is that everyone theorises. This means that everyone has a view of how the world works and the nature of reality; in an academic context we refer to this as our ontological position (see Guba, 1990). Our ontological beliefs are usually a result of our upbringing; they are influenced by family, community, culture, gender, racial, ethnic or religious background or sexual orientation as well as our individual experiences. Although it may be difficult for us to explicitly state these beliefs, they drive our choices and actions. The major difference between personal and academic theorising is that in academic work we are required to explicitly use theory. We must be able to explain the underlying assumptions about how the world works or the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of the relationship between the knower and what is knowable (epistemology), and the most appropriate way for the researcher to go about discovering knowledge (methodology).

Theories are located and developed in different paradigms or frameworks. This means that their basic assumptions may be in conflict with each other. As a result, a pick-and-mix approach to choosing or using theory does not work very well. Egon Guba (1990) argues that every researcher must pledge allegiance to a paradigm (or theory). In order to do this, researchers need to clearly understand the ontological and epistemological assumptions, and methodological preferences, of different theories so they can decide which fits best with their view of the world, is most focused on similar kinds of questions, and supports the kinds of methods that seem most relevant to the specific research context. This means it is important to read widely in the early stages of developing the research project in order to identify theorists and theories that feel right in terms of the topic and questions.

We do not choose a theory because it will explain everything about the context we are researching. No theory can do this. However, what theory can do is help provide an initial focus for our data gathering. It can help us decide what aspects of the research environment we should focus on; it is a way of reducing the huge range of potential data to something more manageable. Thomas Kuhn (1970) points out that *facts* do not exist out there just waiting patiently to be discovered. Indeed, information makes no sense outside of an interpretive framework or theory. In the absence of a theory, all the facts that could possibly be relevant to the explanation of a research environment are likely to seem equally relevant (Kuhn, 1970). Using theory is somewhat like putting blinkers on a racehorse; it allows the horse to focus on what is important—the race—while not being distracted by irrelevant information such as crowds. Without the theory it is almost impossible to decide what is important and what is not. At the same time, just like the blinkers on the horse, our theoretical assumptions allow us to see certain elements in the research environment but mean we will miss other aspects. Each theory is likely to illuminate certain aspects of culture better than others. Guba (1985, p. 87) explains that “no single viewpoint ... provides more than a partial picture. Efforts to understand reality cannot be more than partial”. Building on Guba’s idea of viewpoint, the metaphor that I find most useful is that of a camera lens. As we know, camera lenses range from wide angle, in which we see a lot but not in much detail, through to macro zooms, which allow us to focus on only a small element

but in great detail. The theory determines which lens you are most likely to use, how tightly or broadly focused it is and, as a result, determines what you can actually see in the research site. Indeed, what is seen as relevant data in one theory may not even count as data in another. In some ways it is liberating to realise that there is no single, correct theory that can explain everything. Instead, there are multiple theories, grounded in different assumptions about the world, about how we research and about which methods are most useful, each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses.¹

Before presenting a case study of how using a different theory provided the way out of a descriptive impasse in which I found myself, I briefly outline my own commitments as a researcher; the most important of which are directly related to my lived experiences.

MY JOURNEY TO ANALYSING MEDIA COVERAGE OF OLYMPIC SPORT

My main research interests are in the areas of gender, race/ethnicity and nationalism with a particular focus on the sports media. These interests result from my lived experiences, in which marginalisation and difference have been key influences. My gender interest emerged from my experiences as a competitive basketball player in four countries (New Zealand, the United Kingdom, United States and Australia) and from a six-month stint as the first-ever female sports reporter at the *Otago Daily Times*, as well as years of consuming sports media. My interest in race and ethnicity was fuelled by a number of key experiences, including the culture shock of shifting from a low-decile, predominantly Māori primary school to a high-decile, overwhelmingly Pākehā high school, as well as working with African-American children from inner-city areas in the United States, and my involvement in research projects in Australia focused on Aboriginal experiences in sport. My interest in national identity emerged from living in four countries, noticing how each nation constructed sport in line with its own visions of itself, and from too many years of never seeing New Zealanders while watching USA and Australian coverage of the Olympic Games.

My commitments as a researcher involve interrogating dominant cultural beliefs or ideologies, particularly as they marginalise or privilege particular groups of people. This has involved quantitative and qualitative analyses of media coverage, and fieldwork and interviews with male and female sports media workers and consumers of sports media. One of my aims has been to tell collective stories that give voice to viewpoints and experiences that are currently marginalised in the broader culture (e.g., Bruce, 2000). As Laurel Richardson (1997) describes it, “a collective story tells the experience of a sociologically constructed category of people in the context of larger socio-cultural and historical forces” (p. 14). Yet, as Richardson also points out, most people, including our participants, do not necessarily “articulate how sociological categories such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity have shaped their lives or how ... larger historical processes ... have affected them” (p. 15). This opens up the space for researchers to “give voice to silenced people, to present them as historical actors by telling their collective story”

(Richardson, 1997, p. 15). Another key aim has involved trying to understand what ideologies drive decisions by sports journalists and commentators in terms of what appears in the media.

USING THEORY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE 2004 OLYMPICS IN THE NEW ZEALAND MEDIA

In this section, I focus on how theory can help us make sense of and explain what we find out. The empirical case study that I present demonstrates the powerful influence that theory has on the type of data we gather and how we interpret it. I discuss how using two different theories to engage with essentially the same set of data—New Zealand newspaper coverage of the 2004 Olympics—led me to approach the research context in quite different ways. In this case, my research was driven by my interest in how the sports media reports on female athletes; an issue that has preoccupied me for several decades.

The first project drew upon the liberal feminist theoretical framework that has explicitly or implicitly underpinned much of the feminist critique of sports media. In this context, a liberal feminist approach is driven by the belief that sportswomen deserve what sportsmen receive in terms of media respect and visibility. Liberal feminism seeks equality *within* the existing structures of sport and sports media rather than arguing for a significant revolution in how the sports media and sport are organised (Bruce, Hovden & Markula, 2010). It is concerned with issues of equity and fairness. Implicitly, this approach sees the conventions for coverage of men's sport as the standard and, as a result, any gendered differences in terms of female coverage are interpreted as devaluation or marginalisation. Adopting this theoretical position, even if unacknowledged, leads to questions such as whether sportswomen's experiences are *accurately* reflected or represented by the sports media. It often results in "accusing the mass media of conveying a distorted picture of women's lives and experiences and demanding a more accurate reflection instead" (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 68; Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney & Wise, 2006; Jones & Jones, 1999). This first project was part of a large international comparison involving 18 countries (Bruce et al., 2010). The focus was on whether or not females were receiving equitable coverage, which was determined by comparing the percentage of overall coverage to data such as the proportion of women on the Olympic team and the proportion of medals won by women, as well as to previous national and international studies. It was quantitative in nature and analysed all sports coverage during the Olympic period in New Zealand's largest-circulation daily newspaper. This study resulted in the finding that New Zealand women, and those from many other countries, received much higher amounts of coverage than normal, although it was still not fully equitable. In New Zealand's case, there was a disproportionate focus on females who either won or were predicted to win medals (Bruce & Scott-Chapman, 2010).

TAKING A WRONG TURN: GETTING STUCK AT THE LEVEL OF DESCRIPTION

The second project involved a qualitative companion to the quantitative study, in which researchers used various feminist theories to make sense of media coverage of female Olympians in a range of countries (see Bruce, 2009). Because the quantitative project had revealed a major focus on female medal winners, I adapted the newspaper data collection in two ways: 1) narrowing my focus to stories about medallists Sarah Ulmer (cycling gold) and Caroline and Georgina Evers-Swindell (rowing gold); and 2) extending the sample to include all major New Zealand newspapers except the *Otago Daily Times*, which was not included in the Newztext Plus database or retroactively web-searchable. So I began with a collection of data (newspaper articles about Ulmer/the Evers-Swindells and the quantitative data) which needed to be interpreted and explained.

For a conference presentation that was intended to be a preliminary draft of the chapter, I directly compared the New Zealand coverage with existing research on how sportswomen are usually represented by the media. In general, researchers argue that the most common representation is ambivalence, where coverage that treats women seriously as athletes, such as emphasising success and competence, is juxtaposed with coverage that undercuts their athlete identities in favour of highlighting heterosexuality, gender marking their sports (e.g., *women's* rugby versus rugby) or overemphasising their appearance or lives outside sport (Wensing & Bruce, 2003a). Although I found that New Zealand coverage significantly disrupted the usual forms of female representation—the women were presented as powerful, strong, determined winners of whom the nation could be proud—and incorporated the statistical evidence to show that Olympic coverage was different from usual coverage, this analysis did not take me very far. I found myself unknowingly blinded by the liberal feminist theoretical position that had informed the initial research project. As a result, my thinking was limited by the theoretical focus on equality. My analysis told me *what* I had found out (coverage seemed to be more equitable because it reflected the desired conventions of male coverage) but did not offer much help in terms of *why*. Although the *what* was clearly important, the analysis was stuck at the level of description, and descriptive data (quotes from the newspaper articles, summaries of the kinds of photographs, etc.) comprised the bulk of the presentation. I had analysed the thousands of words written about these three women athletes throughout the Games and assessed them according to themes that the existing literature had suggested were important. These themes, in turn, described the broad dimensions of the coverage. However, once I had reached this point, I was left with the question: So what? The analysis at this stage did not clearly advance knowledge, a key purpose for research. Even more importantly, it left me dissatisfied in terms of how to explain why the results came out this way. There was something missing. It was a different theory that led me out of this impasse.

THEORY AS A PATHWAY TO EXPLANATION

In order to move forward, I had to take a step back and reconnect with the theoretical position that most informs my work, which is cultural studies and, in this case, feminist cultural studies more specifically. This reconnection reinforced for me how much the existing research and my own thinking had been implicitly influenced by a liberal feminist position. Re-reading cultural studies theory reinforced one key reason why I felt so uncomfortable about the initial analysis. In large part, it was the fundamentally different ontological and epistemological assumptions of liberal feminism and feminist cultural studies that left me feeling as if my results were missing something. My re-engagement with cultural studies theorising led to me a quote that resonated with what I had been thinking about. It read

... the study of culture involves *exposing the relations of power* [emphasis added] that exist within society at any given moment in order to consider how marginal, or subordinate groups might secure or win, however temporarily, cultural space from the dominant group. (Proctor, 2004, p. 2)

Finding this quote was like the light coming on. It crystallised my existing understandings of cultural studies, was directly related to the context I was studying and even used language (“to win”) that resonated with sport. This quote highlighted exactly what I needed to do in this project while staying true to the basic assumptions of cultural studies. More specifically, it incorporated the cultural studies focus on culture and power relations and it highlighted the issue of gaining cultural space, of which media coverage is a key example. Within cultural studies, the study of cultural texts, textual meaning and issues of representation is a key trajectory and one that I have followed in other analyses of mainstream media production, texts and audience consumption. Cultural studies assume that media relations are relations of power and that media stories do not merely reflect society but actively create our understandings of reality. As Denzin (1996) argues, “those who control the media control a society’s discourses about itself” (p. 319). The quote also opened the door to the issue of gender, for it is clear that females are a subordinate group in the broader sport context (Cameron & Kerr, 2007). My earlier reading had identified gender as an important tension within the early development of cultural studies; feminism disrupted and challenged cultural studies theorising and focused on legitimising the feminine (Brunsdon, 1996; Franklin, Lury & Stacey, 1991; Hall, 1996; McRobbie, 1997; Parameswaran, 2005; Zelizer, 2004). However, what proved challenging for me was to find appropriate cultural studies work by feminists, given that most of the research focused on cultural products—such as girls’ magazines, dance and romance novels—produced for and consumed by women (e.g., McRobbie, 2006). However, where I found common ground was in the focus on how gender and gender relations are represented and understood in relation to dominant ideological definitions of ideal femininity.

One result of adopting a feminist cultural studies lens was that, in stark contrast to a liberal feminist position, issues of accuracy in terms of representation became a non-issue. I did not need to be concerned with whether or not the sports

media was telling the truth about New Zealand's female Olympians. Instead, my focus was on what definitions of women's sport were activated in the sports media, taking into consideration that sports journalists, editors and photographers always make choices within a range of options about which narrative angle to highlight, which photograph to publish and what to focus upon in the headlines and captions. Cultural studies assume there is no truth to be told, only a series of possible truths. Which truth dominates is a result of struggles by groups with more or less power to have their vision become the dominant one. In New Zealand's case, for example, despite regular demands by women's sport supporters for increased female coverage, little has changed in the 30 years since research first began. Male sports editors and media managers continue to dismiss and trivialise such demands, along with the research that provides evidence of this marginalisation (see Fountaine & McGregor, 1999).

FINDING THE RIGHT CONCEPT/S

The next step was to identify the concepts that would be most helpful in structuring my analysis and argument. Within cultural studies, one of the key concepts is articulation. As Stuart Hall describes it, "a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain circumstances, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures" (in Grossberg, 1996, pp. 141–142). Articulation challenges us to move beyond our personal ontological positions in order to consider how certain beliefs or elements come to be taken for granted in our culture. The theory argues that there is no necessary correspondence or linkage between such elements. This means that no matter how strong (or natural) the linkages appear to be, they can be broken. In my analysis, the articulations that required the most attention were those that linked sport and masculinity², and sport and nationalism. There is little doubt that both sport and nationalism have been constructed as ideologically male in New Zealand (see Phillips, 1996). For example, Cameron and Kerr (2007) recently argued about sport that "women's place generally is subordinate, inferior, invisible, or at best, marginal" (p. 339). The linkage between sport and men is so taken for granted that it is very difficult to challenge. For example, even though almost 30 years of sports media research has found that about 80% of everyday sports coverage goes to men (see Bruce, Falcous & Thorpe, 2007), few sports journalists or fans see this as anything but natural. The only time this linkage is disrupted is during international, multisport, mixed gender events such as the Commonwealth and Olympic Games. Thus, the Olympic Games constitute a moment when female athletes become highly visible and valued members of sporting and national culture, albeit temporarily.

USING THEORY

Understanding the key concepts and assumptions of a theory is one thing. Putting them into practice is quite another. In this case, using cultural studies theorising and the concept of articulation meant that my data gathering expanded well beyond the boundaries of the media texts themselves. With the focus on *exposing relations of*

power that might explain my unusual findings, I had to look for other facts that might be relevant. The focus on culture meant that I needed to be sensitive to broad trends or tensions in New Zealand society that could explain this sudden increase in visibility and that might be important in terms of revisiting the raw data (the newspaper coverage). The theory led me to focus on three key issues that connected in some way to New Zealand's understandings of gender, sport and the nation: 1) tensions around the place of women in society and sport; 2) the importance of sport to national identity and concerns about New Zealand's place in the world; and 3) tensions over changes in New Zealand sport in the wake of professionalism in rugby and other key sports.

Gathering relevant facts directed me to evidence that cultural studies considers valuable; more specifically, evidence that circulates in the broader culture, including examples from celebrity and reality television shows, blogs and telephone polls, as well as news coverage, letters to the editor and previous research on related issues. It also led me back to the newspaper articles, to look at them again through a different lens. As a result, examples and discourses that I did not see in the initial analysis became evident.

One area in which this happened related to tensions around the place of women in New Zealand society. These tensions had appeared in public debates on issues as diverse as the failure of boys in schools, the effects of Helen Clark's political leadership and the so-called Nanny State, and the public reaction to some of my research with students that critiqued a popular sports comedy show (Bruce, 2008; Hurley, Dickie, Hardman, Lardelli & Bruce, 2006). Discussions by researchers and media commentators indicated that the rise of strong, powerful or outspoken women was generating a backlash so significant that Susan Fountaine argued it "may harm the terrain of gender relations in New Zealand" (2005, p. 3). When I returned to the raw data, I found hints that this tension was also playing out in sport. Hidden beneath tongue-in-cheek comments by a number of male journalists and commentators was a hint that female success might be a concern. Despite their humorous intention, several quotes from newspaper articles carried an underlying assumption that in the natural order of things men should be leading the way in sport. For example, one male writer described the women's success as having "heaped humiliation on the ordinary Kiwi bloke already cringing with emotional and intellectual inferiority" (McLauchlan, 2004, no page number). Another wrote that "things were getting a tad embarrassing for us blokes, with the female brigade leading the way in the medal hunt" (Hills, 2004, p. 15). The strength of the articulation of sport with men was also evident in the resigned response of a female letter writer to an earlier letter about New Zealand Olympians that failed to mention a single female: "What is also sad is that this sexism is almost certainly unintended but is so ingrained as to be completely unwitting" ("Lest we," 2004, p. 4). Thus, the theory led me to consider how this broader cultural tension about the place of women might reveal itself as relevant in the sport context. Although the evidence was not widespread, there were sufficient examples to include it as a section in the argument.

The second area was the strength of the articulation of sport to nationalism. Although there was more evidence in the original data for this part of the argument,

the evidence gathering was again more strongly related to demonstrating the strength of this articulation in the broader culture, and how it could help explain why the coverage of women did not follow the usual discourses. Researchers take for granted that sport is strongly articulated to nationalism in New Zealand (see Collins & Jackson, 2007; Cosgrove & Bruce, 2005; Evans & Kelley, 2002; Phillips, 1996). To support the existing research arguments, I marshalled a range of evidence from popular cultural texts, only some of which could be included because of space limitations. These included the remarkably high number of athletes who not only appear in but win celebrity television shows in which public voting plays a major role (such as *Dancing with the Stars* and *Celebrity Treasure Island*). It also included the astounding finding that not only have sportspeople held 90% of the top 10 spots in recent *Readers' Digest Most Trusted* polls but half of them are sportswomen. The visibility of sportspeople in New Zealand polls contrasted markedly with Australian polls, in which sportspeople rarely appeared in the top 10.

In the newspaper coverage, both the original quantitative data and the qualitative analysis highlighted female athletes who won for the nation. The use of both the terms “golden” (which appeared in many headlines and stories) and “our” (e.g., “our golden girls”), as well as images of success, medals and medal ceremonies demonstrate how important winning in an international arena is to New Zealand’s sense of itself, as did comments that connected Ulmer and the Evers-Swindells to past successes. For example, one article represented them as having joined “the pantheon of truly great sporting New Zealanders” (“And didn’t,” 2004, p. 4).

However, one question remained: if nationalism in New Zealand was strongly articulated to masculinity, how could female athletes (who were usually represented in relation to discourses of femininity) be articulated to national identity? Theoretically, either the dominant discourses of nationalism would have to change or the way in which female athletes were represented would have to shift closer to dominant discourses of masculinity. My earlier analysis of the dominant discourses strongly suggested that it was representations of the female athletes that had shifted. Going back to the newspaper stories made this re-articulation of female athleticism very clear. All three women were described as having characteristics that have historically been coded as masculine—such as strength, determination, power, and mental and physical control.

One other discourse of nationalism also emerged as important. Previous research has suggested that modesty is a key attribute of those who are held up to us as national heroes (Cosgrove & Bruce, 2005). New Zealand sports media coverage often negatively represents Australian and United States athletes, for example, as cocky or arrogant (Wensing & Bruce, 2003b). Modesty thus emerged as an important theme in the media coverage, sometimes implicitly but more often stated in direct fashion, such as the article that explained that all three women “not only know how to win, but how success should be celebrated. They showed that pride and passion are part of the winning formula, but that winners can also show humility” (“Finally some,” 2004, p. 9).

This finding on its own would not be that surprising to many New Zealanders. However, its intersection with another powerful cultural discourse—the unease

about the effects of professionalism, particularly in men's rugby—did go some way towards explaining the high levels, and positive tone, of female coverage. Ongoing concerns about the effects of professionalism on the accessibility of televised rugby games and the commitment of male athletes, such as rugby players and America's Cup yachtsman Russell Coutts, to the nation are regularly expressed in the media via letters to the editor and calls to talkback radio (Phillips, 2000; Scherer, Falcous & Jackson, 2008; Wensing, Bruce & Pope, 2004).³ Thus, although analysing the public reaction to professionalism in rugby and America's Cup racing might seem irrelevant to a study of newspaper coverage of women's sport at the Olympic Games, the theory directed me to seek out tensions in the broader culture that might help explain my findings. It led me to consider whether the public embrace of female athletes might be related to their primarily amateur or semi-professional status, which articulated more strongly to older notions of amateurism when athletes were believed to compete for the love of their country rather than for financial rewards.

CONCLUSION

This case study attempts to demonstrate, in a concrete way, how theory enabled me to make sense of a particular set of data and to interpret it in a way that added to knowledge, rather than merely describing what I found. It resulted in a book chapter in which descriptive data comprised a very small proportion of the material—in stark contrast to the earlier conference presentation. Instead of the descriptive data being the main focus, it was used in the service of a larger theoretical argument regarding why sportswomen suddenly received so much media coverage. Working at the intersection of theory and practice not only helped me “think well” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 160) but to think differently about what was ostensibly the same data. In this case, a feminist cultural studies approach led to the identification of circumstances under which the historically potent articulation of sport and masculinity might weaken and sportswomen become highly visible. There is little doubt that without this theoretical approach, the analysis would have remained stuck at the level of description, with a limited comparative focus on men's versus women's sport coverage. The directive to expose relations of power to consider how marginal groups might gain cultural space encouraged me to look for additional evidence, particularly evidence that related to the major tensions around gender, sport and national identity that exist in New Zealand culture. Ultimately, it directed me towards a broad (wide angle) lens, trawling New Zealand culture in order to understand the power relations that intersected with the narrow (close-up) lens I had turned on the original data set of newspaper articles and images. Overall, therefore, this case study of using two different theories clearly highlights the ways in which theories powerfully influence what we see as evidence and how we make sense of it.

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¹ This is not to say that our engagement in research is completely driven and predetermined by the theories (or concepts) we use to frame our research. Instead, we must acknowledge that theorising is an open process through which we may come to new understandings: Bourdieu, for example, has argued that some of his most important conceptual developments emerged out of concrete problems he faced in the practice of doing his research (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

² In this case, masculinity refers to the culturally dominant form of masculinity that emphasises characteristics such as strength, power, domination and the ability to inflict and stoically receive pain and injury (see Cosgrove & Bruce, 2005; Phillips, 1996; Pringle, 2001).

³ Since New Zealand's loss in the 2007 Rugby World Cup quarter-final, such concerns have intensified, with the media highlighting decreasing levels of national interest in the sport. Angst about rugby's status is reportedly widespread.

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