The experience of adoption (2) The association between communicative openness and self-esteem in adoption

A study of the views of two groups of 11-year-old adopted children (one adopted as babies within the UK, n = 47, the other adopted from Romania, aged between two and 43 months, n = 133) indicates that parents underestimate the difficulty that their children have in talking about adoption. Children who found this harder experienced lower self-esteem at age 11 and were also more likely to feel different from their adoptive families, and both these factors were related to the individual child’s level of behavioural or cognitive difficulties. Children in the Romanian sample who had another adopted sibling found it easier to talk about their adoption. In summary, the ease with which children can talk about adoption does appear to be associated with higher self-esteem and the individual child’s difficulties, as well as family composition. This article by Celia Beckett, Jenny Castle, Christine Groothues, Amanda Hawkins, Edmund Sonuga-Barke, Emma Colvert, Jana Kreppner, Suzanne Stevens and Michael Rutter follows ‘The experience of adoption (1)’ (Hawkins et al, 2007), which explored intercountry and domestic adoption from the child’s point of view.

Introduction
Adoptive parenting has many challenges, but one additional role unique to substitute parenting is the need to explain to the child their origins and to help them to make sense of their beginnings (Grotevant, Perry and McRoy, 2005). Where there is continuing direct contact with birth relatives, or indirect contact in the form of letters, this may arise naturally. However, in adoptions without contact the adopters face choices about how to talk about their child’s adopted status, and the adoptive parents and children may influence the degree of communication. The way an individual adoptive family deals with communication about a child’s background may be affected by many factors: individual parenting style; the type of adoption; the age of the child at adoption; whether the adopted child is an only child or if there are adopted or birth siblings in the adoptive family; the background circumstances of the adoption; or the child’s apparent curiosity and self-confidence.

Research in this area is limited, but studies of adopted adults’ views (Howe and Feast, 2000; Smith and Wallace, 2000; Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle, 2005) suggest that not only are the majority of adoptees curious about their origins, but many also feel that it was difficult to discuss their background with their adoptive parents, constrained by their sensitivity to adoptive parents’ feelings. These studies further suggest that whereas the majority of adoptees enjoyed very positive experiences of adoption, for the minority whose relationships were not as close, the adult adoptees were more likely to have emotional difficulties and lower self-esteem. Studies that include the views of adoptive parents also indicate that some found that their adopted children were very reluctant to discuss adoption (Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle, 2005). A recent survey of adopted children’s attitudes revealed that the majority of adopted children were curious and did want more information about their background (Morgan, 2006). A study of children adopted from abroad also indicates that children who feel that they are different from their adoptive families may experience more difficulties in adjustment (Juffer, 2006), possibly as a result of differences in ethnic and cultural backgrounds between them and their adoptive families.

When adopters embrace a more open attitude to discussing their child’s background and the possibility of communication with birth relatives, they have been found to be more empathetic about the child’s origins, showing greater respect and regard than those...
who have remained in a more closed adoption (Mendenhall, Grotevant and McRoy, 1996). It has been argued that it is only if there is continuing contact with birth relatives that an adopted child will have a real sense of her or his origins and experience greater satisfaction with their adoption (Mendenhall et al., 2004; Neil and Howe, 2004). However, research findings also suggest that it is the degree of communicative openness that adoptive parents engender that is the more critical factor for self-esteem (Brodzinsky, 1990, 2005, 2006).

Models have been developed to explain how adopters cope with their role in accommodating the adopted child’s different status in the family. Whereas earlier models (Kirk, 1964) suggested two styles for coping with difference – ‘denial of difference’ or ‘acceptance of difference’ – research studies have proposed a broader model with a continuum of attitudes that explain outcomes (Dalen and Saetersdal, 1987; Kaye, 1990; Gair, 1998). This model includes a third position, ‘insisting on difference’, where adoptive parents emphasise the adopted child’s differing status. This, it is argued, could have negative implications for self-esteem and feeling different from the adoptive family (Kaye, 1990). This broader model recognises that attitudes can alter over time. Adopters may also deal with their child’s status in a different way if the child is placed as a baby or as an only child, when they may be more inclined to deny the difference and not talk to their child about their adoption (Kirk, 1964). However, with increasing emphasis on openness it may be less likely that adopters will deny their child’s different status than in previous eras. The way that the adopted child copes with information about his or her background may also change over time, from showing no interest to showing an active interest (Grotevant, 1997). In addition, the degree of interest can differ between adoptive siblings within the same family because of varying levels of curiosity, and differences in personality and pre-adoptive heritage.

However, how an adopted child copes with the additional task of understanding their adopted identity may have implications for their sense of belonging and self-esteem.

In our previous article (Hawkins et al., 2007), we explored the views of a sample of domestic and intercountry adopted children, including how difficult it was for them to talk about adoption and whether being adopted made them feel different from their adoptive families. Here we explore whether there is any association between these factors and self-esteem. Findings from the English and Romanian Adoptees (ERA) study reported by Hawkins et al. (2007) indicate that many of the children at age 11 had trouble talking about adoption. This was related to their own cognitive and behavioural difficulties. The children with more difficulties were also more likely to feel different from their adoptive families.

The ERA study provides a unique opportunity to examine the association between communicative openness and outcomes in two groups of adopted children, which could provide an insight into the dynamics within adoption that may inform other groups of adopted children and their families. Whereas there is evidence that openness is critical for good outcomes (Brodzinsky, 2005, 2006), it is less clear what drives it. Is it a family dynamic guided by the parents or driven by the child, or an interaction between the two? Do adoptive parents and children share a view of how open they are, and are these views shared by different children in the same family? Are families with more than one adopted child more open? This study provides the opportunity to tease apart some of these issues.

Two unique features of the ERA study are: (1) within its sample there are a number of families (34) who have adopted two children from Romania at more or less the same time, of which 17 have both children included in the study; (2) many of the families had their own biological children, close in age to the study child; and (3), as is common...
with many adoptive families, there were earlier or subsequent additions to the family by adoption from other countries or the UK (Beckett et al., 1998). While earlier reports from the ERA study at age six suggest that neither the adoption of two children, nor the adoption of children closely spaced with birth children, affected outcome in terms of satisfaction with the adoption (Beckett et al., 1999), it is not known whether the family composition might influence the amount families talk about adoption. It could be predicted that adoptive parents of only children might be less inclined to talk openly than those who were bringing up two adopted children, or had birth children, as is suggested by Kirk (1964).

Based on predictions and existing findings, this study explored:

- whether parents and children share views about how easy it is to talk about adoption;
- whether this pattern is the same for domestic and intercountry adoptees and according to age at placement;
- whether children in the same family share the same view;
- whether greater openness is associated with the family composition, with children who have adopted siblings or who are in families with birth children being more open than only children;
- whether greater openness in talking about adoption is associated with feeling different from the adoptive family;
- whether greater communicative openness is linked to higher self-esteem.

**Method**

**Sample**
For details of the sample see our previous article (Hawkins et al., 2007). In addition, this study explored the family composition of the sample.

**Family composition**
A number of families (n = 34) had adopted more than one child from Romania at the same time or within a few months (three had adopted twins). Seventeen of these families had two children taking part in the study, including one of the UK families who also had adopted twins (Beckett et al., 1998). Approximately half of the families in the two samples had two adopted children by the time the study child was aged six. A third of the families in the Romanian sample had birth children close in age to the adopted child. Only 63 families had only one child in the family at age six (15 in the UK group and 48 in the Romanian sample).

**Procedures**
Again, for details of procedures see Hawkins et al. (2007).

**Measures**
The measures used in this study were taken from the parent interview and the child adoption interview and from standardised questionnaires.

**Parent interview**
The parent interview is a comprehensive semi-structured interview and was completed by 205 of the 217 parents at age 11. The questions used from the parent interview in this study were: ‘How difficult do you think it is for ‘X’ to talk with you about being adopted?’ The parents’ response was coded on a three-point scale: 0 = not at all difficult, 1 = some difficulty/difficult about some things and 2 = very difficult to talk about adoption.

Parents were then asked: ‘How difficult is it for you to talk with ‘X’ about her/his being adopted?’ This was coded on a three-point scale, as above. Parents were asked at each stage of the study about the family composition, including the number of adopted or birth siblings. Finally, the adoptive parents were asked to give permission for their child to be interviewed about their background and adoption.
**The child adoption interview**
The child adoption interview is described in our earlier article (Hawkins *et al.*, 2007).

**Rosenberg self-esteem scale**
The Rosenberg self-esteem scale is a widely used self-esteem measure in social science research (Rosenberg, 1989). It is based on ten questions that are answered on a four-point scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The scores are then summed to give an overall score between 0 and 30, with 30 representing highest self-esteem. It has established reliability (Blascovich and Tomaka, 1993) with test-retest correlations in the range of .77 to .88 and has been found to be universal across cultures (Schmitt and Allik, 2005). There are no established norms for a population of adopted young people. Self-esteem relates to a positive or negative orientation towards oneself, an overall evaluation of one’s worth. In adulthood, self-esteem is generally found to be a stable characteristic developed through an individual’s life experiences (Blascovich and Tomaka, 1993). It is less clear how stable self-esteem measures are across the adolescent–adulthood transition. Mean scores for young adolescents’ self-esteem (age 10–12) in a population sample have been found to be 18 on a scale of 0–30 (Gabhainn and Mulan, 2003), based on a sample of 2,798 children in Eire.

**Measures of cognitive and behavioural difficulties**
In addition, a measure of the children’s cognitive and behavioural difficulties at age six, as described before, was used in the analyses (Hawkins *et al.*, 2007).

**Bias**
A check was made to see whether there was any bias in the group of children who did not take part in the interview, using data collected from the parents. The parents of non-interviewees did not find it harder to talk about adoption ($t$ (208) = −1.13, n.s.) than those whose children took part, and did not report that their children had greater difficulty in talking about adoption ($t$ (203) = −.19, n.s.). Also, the children who did not complete the interview had comparable self-esteem scores on the Rosenberg scale ($t$ (188) = −1.03) to the children who participated.

**Results**

**Gender**
As discussed in our companion article (Hawkins *et al.*, 2007), when it came to children’s difficulty talking about adoption or their feeling different from their adopted families, there were no distinctions according to gender. This was echoed in the parents’ perceptions. However, girls were more likely to have lower self-esteem than boys in the Romanian sample ($t$ (141) = 2.69, $p$<.01) and this result remained significant when controlled for the age of the child on arrival ($F$ (1,140) = 4.74, $p$<.05).

**Parent and child views on openness**
First, a comparison was made of the parents’ and children’s views of how easy it was to talk about adoption. As shown in Table 1, children at age 11 were more likely to report problems in talking about adoption than their adoptive parents on their behalf; they were twice as likely as parents to report that they experienced difficulties ($t$ (274) = −7.24; $p$<.000). There was no significant relationship between parent and child views at age 11 about the children’s difficulty in talking about adoption. Approximately half of the children reported some trouble talking about it whereas only a fifth of parents reported that their child had any difficulty. Only 23 parents of the 91 children who found talking hard considered that there was a difficulty for the child. However, in contrast, some parents (n = 15) considered that children had trouble talking when the child said that they did not. Among the children who said they had no difficulty in talking about adoption, there were 14 who also stated that they...
difficulties said that they found it harder to talk about adoption (Hawkins et al., 2007). The parents of the children from Romania who were over six months on arrival also reported that their children found it harder to talk about adoption than those adopted within the UK ($t(140) = -2.20$, $p<.05$), but when this result was co-varied for the children’s level of difficulties it was no longer significant. When the sample was split into three groups (UK vs Roman < 6 and Rom > 6 months), there was no difference between the UK group and the under-six months Romanian group in the parents’ reports of difficulties in talking about adoption ($t(107) = 1.19$, n.s.). However, there remained significant differences between parents and children in their perceptions of the child’s level of difficulty, as shown in Figure 1 (UK group, $t(45) = -2.63$, $p<.05$; < 6 months, $t(45) = -3.65$, $p<.01$; > 6 months, $t(83) = -5.23$, $p<.001$). This difference in perception was greater for the older Romanian children on arrival, with adoptive parents more likely to underestimate the degree of difficulty the child would have in talking about adoption. The adoptive parents’ own level of difficulty in discussing adoption with their child was not greater for the children who were older on arrival ($F(2, 207) = .21$, n.s.), nor was it related to the child’s level of cognitive and behavioural problems ($r = .02$, n.s.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Child and parent report of difficulty in talking about adoption</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No difficulty in talking according to child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child has no difficulty in talking according to parent</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child has some or great difficulty according to parent</td>
<td>15 (18%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
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$kappa = .035$, n.s.

Figure 1

Difficulty in talking about adoption according to mothers and children by group status (UK and Romanian samples < and ≥ 6 months)

had no problem but were not interested in discussing it and three parents felt unable to judge how hard their children found it. The overwhelming majority of the parents (85%) said they themselves had no difficulty in talking to their child about adoption; 13 per cent said they had some difficulty and two per cent great difficulty.

Communicative openness according to domestic or intercountry adoption and by age on arrival

It has already been shown that the children with greater cognitive or behavioural difficulties said that they found it harder to talk about adoption (Hawkins et al., 2007). The parents of the children from Romania who were over six months on arrival also reported that their children found it harder to talk about adoption than those adopted within the UK ($t(140) = -2.20$, $p<.05$), but when this result was co-varied for the children’s level of difficulties it was no longer significant. When the sample was split into three groups (UK vs Rom < 6 and Rom > 6 months), there was no difference between the UK group and the under-six months Romanian group in the parents’ reports of difficulties in talking about adoption ($t(107) = 1.19$, n.s.). However, there remained significant differences between parents and children in their perceptions of the child’s level of difficulty, as shown in Figure 1 (UK group, $t(45) = -2.63$, $p<.05$; < 6 months, $t(45) = -3.65$, $p<.01$; > 6 months, $t(83) = -5.23$, $p<.001$). This difference in perception was greater for the older Romanian children on arrival, with adoptive parents more likely to underestimate the degree of difficulty the child would have in talking about adoption. The adoptive parents’ own level of difficulty in discussing adoption with their child was not greater for the children who were older on arrival ($F(2, 207) = .21$, n.s.), nor was it related to the child’s level of cognitive and behavioural problems ($r = .02$, n.s.).
Did adoptive children in the same family agree about the extent of communicative openness?

As well as comparing parent and child views, it was possible to test whether children in the same families shared a view of openness. To test whether openness was a family style or dependent on the particular interaction between parent and child, the findings for the families with two adopted children within the same family (n = 34) were examined. There were 17 families with two children in the study and we had data on both children for all but one, totalling 32 children (one UK adoptive family and 15 adoptive families of Romanian children). Of these, 14 children were in agreement about whether they were comfortable talking openly about adoption or found it difficult, but 18 held different views from their sibling about how easy it was and four parents reported a variation in the degree of difficulty their two children had in talking about adoption.

Association between communicative openness and family composition

Next, an examination was made of any relationship between communicative openness and family composition. In the UK sample, there were no differences in the ease with which children could talk about adoption according to whether or not they had an adopted sibling ($t_{41} = –.20$, n.s.) (NB Very few of the families (n = 2) had birth children.) In the Romanian sample, where more families had birth children, there was no distinction between those with an only child (the study child) and those who had birth children in the ease with which the adopted child could talk about adoption. However, there was a significant difference between those who had another adopted child and those with an
only child (see Table 2): children with an adopted sibling reported finding it easier to talk about adoption. There was no difference in the parents’ view of how easy the children found it to talk according to the family composition \( (F(2,150) = .10, \text{n.s.}) \), nor in their own reports of difficulties in talking \( (F(2,155) = .15, \text{n.s.}) \).

**Association between feeling different and communicative openness**

A minority of children, 19 per cent in the total sample \( (n = 32) \), felt different from their adoptive families to a lesser or greater extent. An examination was made of the association between feeling different and difficulty in talking about adoption (see Table 3). This showed that the children who could not talk openly were more likely to feel different from their adoptive families, compared to their counterparts who found it easy. Only 13 per cent of the children who felt different could talk easily about adoption \( (t(166) = -8.07, p<.001) \).

**Self-esteem**

The scores on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale were explored according to the groups (UK adoptees, Romanian adoptees < 6, ≥ 6 months). There was an overall group difference in self-esteem \( (F, 2,187) = 4.23, p<.05) \), but this was only significant between the within-UK group and the Romanian children adopted at over six months \( (t(137) = -3.50, p<.001) \), with the UK group having higher self-esteem than the children in the Romanian sample who were older on arrival. All three groups had mean scores on the Rosenberg scale that were similar to the mean found in other population studies. The children who felt different were more likely to have lower self-esteem \( (t(162) = 3.46, p<.01) \) and also experienced greater behavioural or cognitive differences difficulties \( (t(165) = 3.03, p<.01) \).

When the association between feeling different and self-esteem was co-varied for the group status of the children (UK vs Romanian < 6 months ≥ 6 months) and the degree of behavioural or cognitive difficulty, the association between feeling different and self-esteem remained significant \( (F(1,169) = 10.20, p<.01) \) and the effect of group \( (F(1,169) = .41, \text{n.s}) \) and level of difficulty \( (F(1,169) = .64, \text{n.s}) \) were no longer significant.

Finally, the association between finding it easy to talk about adoption and self-esteem was explored. There was no significant link between how hard the adoptive parents found it to talk about adoption and the children’s self-esteem \( (F, 2,187) = .56, \text{n.s.}) \) nor between the latter and their view of how hard their children found it to talk \( (F, 2,184) = .73, \text{n.s.}) \).

However, in both the UK and Romanian sample there was a significant association between self-esteem and the ease with which children themselves said that they could talk about adoption: the children who found it harder experienced lower self-esteem (see Figure 2). As reported above, there was also a significant association between group (UK vs Romanian ≥ 6 months) and self-esteem. To test whether the level of self-esteem was related to a child’s group according to intercountry or domestic and by age at adoption, rather than the degree of openness, an analysis of co-variance was carried out. This
analysis indicated that when group and difficulty in talking about adoption were controlled, the group difference was no longer significant \( F(2,171) = 1.05, \) n.s.), whereas the level of openness \( F(3,171) = 4.74, p<.01 \) continued to be associated with self-esteem and there was no interaction between the two factors.

**Discussion**

In this study we explored six questions:

1. We looked at whether adoptive parents and children shared views about how easy it was to talk about adoption. The study found that there was a difference between adoptive parents and children, with the parents reporting much lower levels of difficulty for their children in talking about adoption than the children reported themselves. Even fewer adoptive parents said that they found it hard to talk about adoption.

2. The association between openness and domestic or intercountry adoption and age at adoption was examined. No differences were found other than those accounted for by the child’s difficulties.

3. The study examined whether children within the same family shared the same view and found that this was not always the case.

4. We explored whether greater openness was associated with family composition. It was found that having an adopted sibling made talking easier in the Romanian sample.

5. The study looked at whether greater openness in talking about adoption was associated with the child feeling different from their adoptive family. It was found that feeling different was more likely when children did not talk about adoption and that this was also associated with self-esteem.

6. We examined whether greater communicative openness was associated with higher self-esteem. It was found that ease of talking about adoption was associated with self-esteem regardless of the age of the child when adopted or whether they were adopted from abroad or within the UK.

These findings add to the existing understanding of adoption by showing that many adopted children, aged 11, have considerable difficulty in talking about adoption and that their adoptive parents did not always share this perception. Perhaps it is hard for adoptive parents to appreciate how difficult it can be for their children to talk about their background, or perhaps it reflects the developmental stage at age 11, when discussing any personal issues with parents can be problematic. This does not imply that there was any attempt by parents to deny the child’s background, but perhaps it is not as easy to address these issues as parents assume. That the disparity existed between parents and children in all the groups suggests that this is a problem for adopted children, regardless of whether they are placed in domestic or intercountry adoption, but it becomes harder for children who are older on placement and who also have difficulties. As is shown by our companion article (Hawkins et al, 2007), there is little difference between children adopted within their country of origin and those adopted from abroad in their level of curiosity and the need to have information about their background, but there is significant variation in the desire to know more in both samples. That children within the same family often had different experiences of openness suggests that this is a dynamic that is possibly driven by the child’s curiosity and ease with the subject, as much as by the adoptive parent’s style and the opportunity to talk. As described in Hawkins et al (2007), it was apparent that in the majority of interviews children felt uncomfortable talking about their adoption and this was clearly a sensitive issue for adoptive families to deal with. The finding of an association between difficulty in talking about adoption and feeling different from the adoptive family is interesting. It is possible that,
in this sample, being able to be open about adoption makes the child feel more connected with the adopted family; alternatively, it may be that the children who feel different find it harder to talk about adoption. The association between low self-esteem, level of difficulties and feeling different suggests that the latter is the more plausible explanation.

Children in the Romanian sample with adopted siblings did find it easier to talk than those who were only children. That this finding was only evident in the Romanian sample may reflect the larger sample size, or could be something to do with the children being adopted from abroad rather than from within the UK. Most of the adopted siblings in the Romanian sample were from Romania or other non-UK countries, and it may be that there was more opportunity or interest in talking about their background if there were two children from overseas. This suggests that there may be some benefits in families adopting more than one child from abroad and it might help with the child’s ease in talking about their background.

This study emphasises that self-esteem was significantly lower in all age groups if children felt unable to talk openly. However, the direction of the association was not self-evident. Children with low self-esteem may find it harder to talk about adoption, rather than the reverse; perhaps low self-esteem and difficulty in talking stem from some other underlying cause, such as the overall level of children’s difficulties. Self-esteem was also lower in the girls in the Romanian sample. This result remained when controlling for the age of the children when they left Romania, suggesting that they may be more vulnerable. Difficulty in talking and feeling different were also associated with the level of cognitive and behavioural difficulty that the children experienced. Although the overall self-esteem scores of all groups were within a comparable range to that reported in other population groups, the differences in self-esteem between those who were able to talk and those who found it difficult were consistent across and independent of the effect of the age on adoption. It should also be stressed that there are no established norms for adopted children’s self-esteem at age 11. In addition, it is not clear how stable measures taken at 11 would be in later life. These issues will only be established by replicating this study and by the follow-up of this sample.

Overall, these findings seem to support those of Mendenhall et al (2004) and Grotevant and McKoy (1998) of higher self-esteem in adoptions that are more open. However, it must also be recognised that the children who found it hard to talk and who felt different from their families were also more likely to be those who genuinely were different as a result of cognitive and behavioural difficulties (see Hawkins et al, 2007). The study does not support the idea that there are any negative associations between open communication and feeling different. These areas will be explored much more fully in the follow-up study currently being completed at age 15.

As all the families did not agree to their children completing the adoption interview, to eliminate any question of bias a check was made as to whether these families differed in any way from those who had taken part. This was possible because the families had participated in other aspects of the study – the adoptive parents had either completed an interview (n = 25) or the children had completed other aspects of the assessment (n = 15). The children who did not take part did not differ in self-esteem and their parents did not report higher or lower levels of difficulty in talking about adoption for this group. This suggests that the exclusion of this group did not result in bias in the findings.

This study confirms the findings of previous adoption research that there are different models of openness within adoption and that these can be associated with the self-esteem of the child.
placed. The data suggest that there may be more difficulty in talking about adoption than adoptive parents realise, as a result of the problems that children have in expressing their views in such a sensitive area. Full details of the parent–child relationship and communication style were not available and would only be possible as a result of a more narrative-based study, such as research carried out by Kaye and Warren (1988). The ERA study suggests that the dynamic driving these differences within adoptive families may be as much due to the child’s difficulties as to the adoptive parents or the family structure.

Our study has major implications for the need for post-adoption support and services for adopted children and adult adoptees to discuss their origins. In particular, it highlights the importance and sensitivity of adoption issues that adoptive parents need to recognise. It is hard for adopted children to talk openly and adoptive parents should provide them with the opportunity to do this in a sensitive fashion. Open communication appears to be both positively associated with self-esteem and with promoting integration in adoptive families, although it also needs to be acknowledged that for some children the process may be more difficult because of developmental or behavioural difficulties. Adoption support services need to address the issues by providing support material for children that acknowledges their need to discuss adoption issues and work alongside adoptive parents, both during the preparation and post-adoptive periods to support them in how to provide a more open forum for discussion.

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