

## **Examining Decision-Making and Critical Thinking Skills in Unwed Adolescent Fathers**

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### **Abstract**

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*The purpose of this study was to examine the decision-making and critical thinking skills of unwed adolescent fathers regarding the social, personal, emotional, and relational factors that influenced the decisions they made concerning their sexual relationships in high school. The researcher interviewed three unwed male adolescent fathers, four adult men who fathered in their teens, and four high school guidance counselors. This multi-case qualitative study utilized a multi-level coding process to extract themes from participant interviews, field notes and related documents. The findings indicated that adolescent males based their decisions on their friends, but they desired to have the sex talk come from their parents. Another finding was that the adolescent fathers had an easy time hiding in plain sight because society does not require the identification of fathers of babies born to adolescent teen mothers. Further, this study revealed that adolescent males need explicit instruction and guidance to develop decision-making and critical thinking skills.*

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**Keyword(s):** adolescent fathers, decision-making, critical thinking, character education, human sexuality

Teen fathers are a group deserving study because they have limited opportunities to share their story. They have been studied as sexual beings (Bollerud, 1987; Didion, 2007), financial providers (Burns, 2008), dropouts (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014), caregivers (Jewell, Tacchi, & Donovan, 2001; McCullough & Scherman, 1991), and even absentee parents (Martin, Specter, Martin & Martin, 2003); but when have they had an opportunity to *spea*k from their perspective? This paper serves as a vehicle to hear the voice of unwed teen fathers and provide an opportunity to address and assess their sexual decision-making and critical thinking skills.

The purpose of this study was to examine the decision-making and critical thinking skills of adolescent fathers regarding the social, personal, emotional, and relational factors that influenced the decisions they made concerning their sexual relationships in high school. This study additionally identified how adult men who fathered children in their teens reflected upon the factors influencing the decisions they made as adolescents.

The researcher interviewed three male adolescents who currently or recently fathered children, four adult men who fathered children in their teens, and four high school guidance counselors. This multi-case qualitative study utilized a combination of open-ended and semi-structured interview questions along with field notes, memoing, and artifacts as a basis for data collection and triangulation. Atlas qualitative software was utilized to aid in the data triangulation process.

### **1. Literature Review**

Across the United States, teens engage in high-risk sexual practices (Martin et al., 2003). The National Survey of Family Growth, commissioned by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, indicated that 4.5 million never-married females and males had sexual intercourse at least once. The study showed that 78% of females and 85% of males used contraception in their first sexual experience (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2011). The report further stated that adolescent birth rates have not risen much higher than the 2002 reports.

While statisticians and health service organizations touted the use of contraceptives as a positive, there are still a large number of the children born to these adolescents. Approximately 2,700 teenage girls in the United States get pregnant every day. It is estimated that 1,300 will give birth, 1,100 will have abortions, and 300 will miscarry (McCullough & Scherman, 1991, p. 809).

In a study of 719 adolescent mothers of various ethnic backgrounds, Wiemann, Agurcia, Rickert, Berenson, and Volk (2006) discovered that 90% of African Americans, 80% of Caucasian, and 73% of Mexican Americans had unplanned pregnancies. A number of the young fathers did not finish high school, were involved in gang activity, and were unemployed and/or used an illegal substance. Additionally, there were limited to no plans to become lifelong partners with the child's mother (Wiemann et al., 2006). These study results were especially troubling to the African-American community because "African-American men father children at younger ages and more often outside of marriage than males of other ethnic backgrounds" (Wiemann et al., 2006, p. 618). These activities call into question how the adolescents are thinking in the face of sexual decisions that have a potential to jeopardize their futures. Wolff and Crockett (2011) posited that educators and researchers must consider both social factors and cognitive reasoning skills when working with teen learners.

Teens are saturated with sexuality and the pressures of engaging in premarital sex from the media. Popular culture presents a number of sexual messages to teens on a daily basis (Ashcraft, 2006), many of which encourage sexual activity oftentimes without presenting an accurate picture of the consequences of those decisions. Consequently, teens become desensitized by the barrage of sexually suggestive behaviors and actions, fostering a belief that they can engage in sexual acts without the repercussions of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), or pregnancy (Ashcraft, 2006; Booker, 2011). Sawhill (1998) reported there is a rise in STDs and STIs among adolescents. Martin et al. (2003) corroborated this fact as they reported that one out of six adolescent teens contract STDs, but this statistic does not derail adolescents' participation in high-risk sexual practices.

Karofoky, Zeng, and Kosork (2001) and Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon (1996) agreed that teen-parent communication plays a large factor in the sexual activity of the teen. If teens talk with their parents more about sexual topics, it lessened their introduction to sexual behaviors (Oden & Brown, 2010). Unfortunately, not all parents have the ability or the time to discuss sexual topics with their children, relegating the instruction to society, school, or the teen's peer group (Booker, 2011). In many instances, parents are fearful to discuss sexual issues, leaving the teens to debate the issue amongst themselves (Dilorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999).

The sex and sexual intercourse dialogue between teens and their parents becomes even scarcer in lower socioeconomic environments (McCullough & Scherman, 1991). Often, parents are absent from the home, working to provide financial and material resources for the family (McCullough & Scherman, 1991). Even in cases where both parents are in the household, the primacy to provide for the family trumps parents' ability to be available for the children. This leads to a vicious cycle where the lack of financial resources adds to family stress, which leads to less family nurturing and communication (McCullough & Scherman, 1991).

Not only do family and relationships play a factor in sexual activity, teens' environment impacts their exposure to sexual behavior. Factors such as puberty, family influences, ethnicity, poverty, desire for intimacy, cognitive ability, and family history all play a role in the high-risk behavior (Barnes, 2006; Fantasia, 2008). McCullough and Scherman (1991) indicated persons of lower socioeconomic environments are at a higher risk to be sexually active, which oftentimes led to many teens involving themselves in at-risk behaviors, including premarital sex.

Teen pregnancy, one of the results of sexual activity, affected more than just the adolescent, his or her parents, immediate family, and close friends. The public is greatly impacted by the rise of teen sexual activity. Child support is a critical factor in caring for teen babies, yet many young fathers do not marry their girlfriends nor are they able to pay child support. When the adolescent fathers are able contribute financially to their child's well being, it is usually less than \$800 per year (Booker, 2011; Sawhill, 1998). Consequently, the U.S. government yearly allocates \$9.1 billion to support and care for teen pregnancy. Of that amount, \$2.3 billion is designated for the foster care system, because children born to teen parents are more likely to end up in the state's care (Child Welfare League, 2009).

The local public school is a large component in the sexual education of the teens they serve. Sex education has largely been taught as a stand-alone or extracurricular class.

Stiff-Williams (2010) and Ashcraft (2006) posited there must be a shift to teach character education, which is inclusive of sex education, in a manner that connects lessons to the curriculum. Booker (2011) added to the discussion that school courses cannot fail to integrate lessons taught in class and make them applicable to the decisions and influences the students face outside the classroom.

The lessons educators present in class should target how the students learn. Scholars have questioned whether educators maximize the learners' ability to develop decision-making skills while in school. This is critical because the more learners are able to practice and apply critical thinking skills, the more they are able to successfully face challenging high-risk dilemmas (Steinberg & Scott, 2003).

During adolescent years, the brain is at a critical state of development. After age 17, the brain decreases its ability to develop new cognitive functions (McClelland, 2010). Consequently, development of the frontal lobe, the area of the brain that controls higher-order functions, has less ability to control one's decisions (Calabrese & Roberts, 2002). This is critical because a number of character education (CE) programs address high-risk sexual activity.

In addition to sexual activity and decision-making, there is a physiological component to train adolescents in critical thinking. McClelland (2010) indicated that the brain is completely developed at 16-1/2. Between the ages of 17 and 30, the main function of the brain is to process the things that have already been instilled in it during earlier years. Education, in the case of colleges and universities, serves to frame or shape how brain functions are overtly expressed. Therefore, it is essential to teach critical thinking during adolescence to make a greater impact on the minds of the learners, especially because a number of lower socioeconomic status persons do not attend college where further mental training and education occurs (Wiemann et al., 2006).

Despite adolescent males spending 13,000 hours in school over the course of their high school matriculation (Jensen, 2005), their lack of decision-making and critical thinking skills in regards to their sexual behavior is resulting in numerous children out of wedlock. In 2013, 98% of 273,105 babies born to adolescents were births that occurred outside of marriage (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). One in six of the births were to teens who previously had one or more children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). This problem has negatively impacted teens' futures (Dixon, Cassady, Cross, & Williams, 2005), their ability to provide for their families (Burns, 2008), their parents, and their future goals. A possible cause of this problem is the absence of decision-making and critical thinking skills being intentionally and systematically taught in school. Adolescent males are forced to make decisions that they may not have been trained to handle. Consequently, sexual activity, including teen pregnancy, is on the rise (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). This qualitative multi-case research sought to examine the decision-making and critical thinking skills of unwed adolescent fathers. The goal was to examine how these young men were trained to make decisions and to think critically. The data were derived from the following groups: unwed adolescent fathers, adult men who fathered children when they were between the ages of 15-18, and school guidance counselors. Additional insight came from school artifacts, field notes, and other observable data.

The researcher intends to achieve a number of expected outcomes. By conducting this research study, the researcher first will be able to better understand how teens make their sexual decisions. Second, the information gathered will assist in creating new programs and curricula to develop adolescents' decision-making and critical thinking skills. Next, the results will aid in determining what schools can do to teach decision-making and critical thinking skills to adolescent males. Last, the findings will enable schools to assess their sex education programs and curricula to determine how they are directly impacting unwed teens' decision-making and critical thinking skills.

## **2. Methodology**

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of adolescent fathers regarding social, personal, emotional, and relational factors that influenced the decisions they made concerning their sexual relationships in high school. It was important to understand how this phenomenon developed from the perspectives of the participants in the study. This research project also identified the young men's perception of the school's influence on their sexual decisions.

A secondary purpose of this study was to discover how adult men who fathered children as adolescents reflected upon the factors influencing the decisions they made as adolescents.

It was the researcher's objective to explore the stories about their sexual decisions as adolescents in their own words and perspectives to determine what type of school intervention and support could be provided in the areas of decision-making and critical thinking among sexually active adolescent males and adolescent fathers.

The following research questions were used to direct this endeavor.

RQ1: How are adolescent males influenced in their sexual relationship decision-making by school experiences, educators' comments, and teachers' instructions?

RQ2: What are some of the social, personal, emotional, and relational factors that influence decisions adolescent males make regarding sexual relationships?

RQ3: How do adult men, currently between their 30s and 60s, who fathered children as adolescents, reflect upon the factors influencing their decisions?

## **2.1 Participants**

This case study included interviews with individuals directly related to this topic: three unwed high school fathers, four guidance counselors and four adult men between the ages of 30 and 70 who experienced being an adolescent parent. Student participants were selected from local public schools in the southern United States in or around an urban area. Four guidance counselors were selected from public schools in the southern United States. The four adult males were also selected from urban areas in the southern United States. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the cities, counties, schools, and participants.

## **2.2 Data Collection**

To ensure rigor was applied to this study, the researcher used multiple data sources, which Yin (2009) identified as "data triangulation" (pp. 120-121). Sources included interviews from the three groups of participants; other sources included artifacts and field notes. The artifacts were comprised of pamphlets, brochures, and other printed material about teen sexual practices, teen pregnancy, and other high-risk behaviors that were available to the students. The researcher encouraged the participants to share based on their view of their educational experience. Additionally, the researcher wrote field notes during each interview to ensure the nonverbal communication was noted and utilized to validate the findings (Niles, 2007). In an effort to supplement the field notes, the researcher also engaged in the memoing process after the interviews.

Interviews were conducted with the three male adolescents who currently or recently fathered children, four adult men who fathered children in their teens, and four high school guidance counselors. Interviews were structured to enable the participants to fully address each question and discuss the topic from the individual's perspective and personal perceptions. The questions were "an investigation of the underlying reality which [supports] the motivating principles defining the decisions [the individuals] made" (Booker, 2011, p. 46). Prior to the interview, each participant received a copy of the interview questions allowing them to contemplate on their experiences and answer the questions in a complete manner.

The interview questions were created to allow the adolescent fathers address their educational experiences and possible challenges that have been critical in their educational journey with special emphasis on developing decision-making and critical thinking skills. Questions also addressed school culture and their relationship with adults in the educational system that impacted their decision-making.

Interviews for the adult fathers focused on their educational experiences prior to and after having a child. Like the current teen fathers, they had a section of questions that focused on an adult's impact on their decision-making process. The researcher reserved the opportunity to make use of emerging design to allow for unexpected questions that developed from responses to the formal questions in the interview process. All of the interviews were digitally recorded. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed to deduce findings.

Guidance counselors were asked to briefly describe the types of programs and provide information distributed to male students. All artifacts available for distribution were collected for review and analysis. The artifacts collected were comprised of brochures, and pamphlets that addressed high-risk behavior, CE programs, sexual conduct, teen pregnancy, decision-making, and critical thinking. Field notes of the climate and culture of the school were also utilized to analyze the results.

## **2.3 Data Analysis**

The analysis of this study described and examined the factors that affected the decision-making and critical thinking skills of young unwed fathers who became fathers during their teenage years.

The triangulation process, as stated previously, was utilized to ensure a complex understanding of the decision-making and critical thinking phenomena. Fossey et al. (2002) and Creswell (2013) agreed that the triangulation process guides qualitative research by ensuring that information will be gathered from multiple sources (e.g. people, events) and multiple ways (e.g., interviews, field notes, observations) to assist revealing the complexity of the research study. This method “permits comparison and convergence of perspectives to identify corroborating and dissenting accounts, and so to examine as many aspects of the research issue as possible” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 728). By reflecting on these elements, the researcher was able to identify ways to improve adolescent male decision-making.

The data were coded based on the major themes that recurred through the information collected in the interviews, surveys, and observations. The researcher used Atlas qualitative data coding software to aid in a two-cycle coding process. In the first cycle, the researcher coded the data without viewing any outside data. As patterns arose, the significant information was structured to create categories to allow the pertinent information to be further analyzed.

To increase validity and comparison with similar studies, the researcher utilized Booker’s (2011) coding process in which “participant’s accounts of meaningful events, settings, plots, and thematic trends were used for coding purposes” (p. 50).

In the second cycle, the researcher used what Saldaña (2013) identified as “Elaborative Coding” (p. 229). This process allowed the researcher to identify codes that were used in the Booker (2011) dissertation addressing unwed female adolescents and use those thematic codes, where applicable, for the unwed adolescent fathers. New themes were created where the a priori codes were deemed not applicable to this study.

### **3. Results**

The findings indicated that adolescent males based their decisions on their friends, but they desired to have the *sex talk* come from their parents, particularly their fathers. Another finding was that the adolescent fathers had an easy time *hiding in plain sight* because society, including the school system, does not require the identification of fathers of babies born to adolescent teen mothers. Further, this study revealed that adolescent males need adult male instruction and guidance to develop decision-making and critical thinking skills regarding their early sexual activity.

#### **3.1 Key Factors That Influenced Adolescent Boys’ Decisions Regarding Sexual Relationships**

One key factor that influenced the adolescent fathers was their feelings. This prominent factor was prevalent in the mature adult data and the younger fathers. When asked about why they engaged in sexual activity, one said it was his “raging hormones.” Another mentioned it was the natural thing to do. One of the adult fathers said it was a part of his lifestyle; “Everyone was having sex.” In his eyes, having a child was a part of the territory.

One thing was evident—there is a lack of parental conversation about sex. Character educators Stiff-Williams (2010) and Berkowitz (December 2011-January 2012) acknowledged that for CE to be successful, it must be taught in a harmonious fashion between the school and the home. What the school teaches should be reinforced in the home.

This is supported by Jaccard et al. (1996) who concluded that having a discussion about sex and birth control allows adolescents to be taught based on the family’s value system, and parents are able to dictate the timing and content of the information to the needs of their teens. It is important to reach out to adolescents early about sexual activity and have conversations about birth control because “a substantial percentage of unintended pregnancies occur within the first six months of first intercourse, and adolescents delay, on average, a year after first intercourse before they obtain birth control, if they do so at all” (Jaccard et al., 1996, p. 165). In the case of the teens in this study, they did not have the conversation nor did they actively obtain some form of birth control.

The unfortunate reality is that young men are looking for male role models who have experienced similar struggles that they have, but the men are not present in their own homes. In the instance where fathers were in the homes, they did not have regular and consistent dialogue about sex. In the few cases where the conversation was had, it was merely, “don’t do it,” or the adolescent males were given what was described as “a biblical answer.”

The young men were hungering for practical advice on how to navigate their emotions, and they were not provided by someone they trusted and thus they looked to their friends or society to learn how to make decisions about the opposite sex.

Martin et al. (2003) and Steinberg and Scott's (2003) findings were still accurate when they assessed that peer influence is the highest factor that affects an adolescent's judgment and decision-making skills.

### 3.2 Key Factors That Influenced Adult Men When They Were Teens

A number of factors impacted the adults' decision-making when they were teens. Peer influence and lack of consistent dialogue with a male parent or a male father figure were addressed, but the adult fathers identified that there was an emphasis on instant gratification and lack of future goals that contributed to their becoming fathers. The future was seen as a long way off, and their decisions were based on immediate gratification rather than looking at a more global/linear perspective. One father said he was in college but was studying to do "nothing." Another father said he did not think anything could happen to him. A third adult father said it was an experiment and a desire to be "cool." Those factors play a pivotal role in their ability to have as fulfilled a life as they would have liked. One father, who spent most of his time in an out of jail as an adolescent father, is just now completing his bachelor's degree after starting college over 13 years ago. He lamented that he is not able to spend regular time with his son, who is now a teenager. Another father said that he negatively impacted the subsequent generation because two of his children had children out of wedlock. He felt that if he were in his girls' lives at an earlier age, he could have shown them how to make better decisions.

### 3.3 Outcome of Teen and Mature Father's Decision-Making and Critical Thinking Skills

The common theme among the teen fathers and the mature adult fathers was a concept of invincibility. They could do whatever they wanted and they were not going to experience any negative results. The idea that "I can do what I want and nothing is going to happen to me" was confronted with the realities of their decisions. One adult father consistently said he was prepared to face life because, whatever happened, he thought, "I can handle it." Unfortunately, none of the fathers really knew how hard it would be to raise a child and deal with the mother of their child.

To date, none of the adults are still in a dating, married, or positive relationship with their child's mother. The fathers all moved on to a new relationship and remarried later in life. The adult father who felt he could "handle it" married the mother of their child, but the union ended in a divorce after a few short years. Another adult father said that it took 9 years for he and the mother of his child to be on speaking terms. Another adult father had his children (he had two children with his then girlfriend) were sent to live with aunts where they were abused and neglected. The father said had he known it was going to be that way, he would have just struggled through and kept them himself.

The current teen fathers agreed that they did not know life would be this hard having a baby so soon. Another said the dating relationship with his girlfriend was on and off. One of the young men said he saw a notable disparity in the socioeconomic difference between his family and his child's mother's. That put a strain on their relationship, and it limited his options of colleges he could attend. The third young man said there was a notable difference in the relationship even though he and his girlfriend had been together for a year and a half. He plans to enter the military to provide for his young son and girlfriend. He lamented that he would have a car by now and did not know how long it would take for him to get substantial hours on his job. While he works two jobs, he said he did not realize how hard it would be for him to get enough hours to make ends meet. It was a rude awakening.

## 4. Recommendations

A major recommendation for the educational system is to identify how to make a greater impact in the lives of adolescent males. The first would be to create a system that identifies the teen fathers. Mirroring the way the adolescent mothers are identified in the system can easily rectify this challenge. This initial step does not require large amount of additional human or economic resources. This will allow the school districts to measure if there is a need for services for this population. This can be a small step in which the adolescent fathers become aware that they will be held accountable and determine who will need services and assistance. By tracking the males, they can know how to better serve them and provide for their needs.

A second major challenge for the teen fathers was trying to provide for their children and still complete their educational requirements for graduation. School districts can create a program where the young men can work a half-day and go to school the other half. One of the adolescent teens attending King High currently has a half-day schedule, but it is not connected to a work program. While the school may be out of its scope in providing jobs for the young men, adolescent fathers may benefit from having an alternative schedule to provide more hours were they can work to earn funds to provide for their family.

A third recommendation is to lessen the load on the school guidance counselors. None of the teen fathers or the mature adult fathers mentioned the guidance counselors as a resource or aid in the development of their decision-making and critical thinking skills. Only one adolescent father mentioned the life skills teacher as a source of information. Additionally, the participating guidance counselors indicated that they are from 50 to 250 students over the caseload suggested by the American Counseling Association. Working with that large a number makes it near impossible to make an impact on an adolescent male that needs regular contact and communication.

## **5. Future Research**

Future research should include a formal study identifying how male and female adolescent parents benefit from counseling and programs offered by the schools. Only one of the schools in this study had a school-sponsored program for teen parents – either male or female. It would also be advantageous to researchers to expand this study to be more specific on socioeconomic lines and if other schools in the south, find similar ideas prevalent for their unwed adolescents.

Another area of research to be considered is the decision-making and critical thinking skills of the father of adolescent fathers. Sipsma et al. (2010) highlighted a possible predisposition to “increased sexual risk behavior and adolescent parenthood” (p. 517). Was training that was provided to the adolescent available to the father as well, resulting in a possible lack of information he was able to provide for his son? It would be beneficial to know if there are similarities in the resources and training provided from one generation to the next. Is there something that was missing or a conversation that creates a lifestyle and sociosexual behavioral habits?

A third area of future study is parental education and its influence on teens. Low parental education was cited by Sipsma et al. (2010) as a factor that increased the potential of the cyclical nature of teens fathering children. The limited education may have a direct impact on the exposure the adolescents have to experiences outside of their direct environment. This could potentially lead to the teen viewing adolescent pregnancy as a societal norm that they cannot escape. Future research can take a specific look at the impact educational levels attained by parents has and whether there is a direct correlation to adolescent pregnancy rates and their sociosexual decisions.

Additionally, critical thinking skills need to be addressed and assessed in the middle school curriculum. Several of the guidance counselors mentioned that the students come to high school well versed in sexual discussions and sexual practice. How can educators and curriculum developers make a more substantial impact on the integration of decision-making in the middle schools? What can be done to create a seamless track of cognitive thought process from the middle school to the high school curriculum? This is a stage where the hormones begin to rage. The adolescent participants stated that they learned about sex education in a class in middle school that ended upon their entrance to the high school. What would be the impact of a seamless transition from the middle school to the high school?

Mentoring relationships in the high schools was another theme that arose from this study. This concept can be studied in a number of ways, particularly in the realm of how it directly impacts adolescent fathers and the decisions they make. What relationship is there between the academic achievements of teens who had mentors and the ones who completed high school and had no one in their life to shepherd them along life’s journey? Additional studies may need to be conducted to include a larger number of high schools and teens to determine the level of impact male role models have on adolescent fathers and the life choices that they make.

Lastly, research can be done to assess the effectiveness of the CE programs in the high schools of the participants. Two of the counselors stated that CE was integrated into the curriculum. The researcher would like to assess what specific goals and objectives were they trying to achieve and what would be the desired impact on the learning of the young people? Why were the CE programs discontinued in the school districts, and were they replaced with a program equally effective? Are the students learning in such a way that the school district can quantifiably say it is making a difference?

## **6. Conclusion**

The multiple case study included participants representing a diverse span of informants for understanding decision-making and critical thinking for unwed adolescent fathers. Current fathers, former adolescent fathers and guidance counselors provided insights through in-depth qualitative interviews. Qualitative coding procedures elicited themes worthy of further exploration including: intentional conversations with parents, improving identification processes in school systems, and direct instruction and guidance to develop decision-making and critical thinking skills.

The examination of decision-making and critical thinking for unwed adolescent fathers is an area of academic study requiring immediate attention. As society continues to deal with the rise of pregnancy rates among teens, it is necessary to identify ways to decrease occurrences. The information contributed through this study provided qualitative data to improve the development of future curricula and programs among schools and community organizations.

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