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Doing Reflexive Thematic Analysis: A Reflexive Account

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Reflexive thematic analysis (TA), widely used in education, social work, and counselling research, offers an accessible method for exploring and interpreting a qualitative dataset, and telling a story about patterns of meaning. Doing reflexive TA *well* requires a thoughtful, situated researcher or research team. As the method puts researcher subjectivity at the core of the approach, *reflexivity*, or acknowledging the researcher's role in knowledge generation, is vital for conceptualising *and* doing TA, and for quality. We briefly outline concepts and process for reflexive TA, including different analytic phases, and important considerations for quality—referencing key resources for readers to use to deepen their knowledge. Using Eileen's PhD research in social work, we embed a reflexive account of the processes, decisions and challenges in doing TA *reflexively* alongside a more didactic account of what TA is, and how to do it well. We offer a mix of insights, challenges, and provocations to help equip you for your reflexive adventures with data.

What is Reflexive Thematic Analysis and What Does it Offer?

Reflexive TA is an accessible, robust method for exploring and developing understanding of patterned meaning across a qualitative dataset. TA works well with many different data types, including interviews, media and much more. The method offers a way of getting into, unpacking, and repackaging a dataset, to develop deep, compelling (and sometimes unexpected) insights, and *tell a story* about these patterned meanings and why they matter. Reflexive TA can be used to tell analytic stories that range from the relatively straightforward and descriptive to complex, nuanced, and deeply theorised. What unites the different forms reflexive TA takes is a conceptual—and practical—process, situated within, and validated by, qualitative research values (see Braun & Clarke, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005).

People often talk of TA in the singular, when the term covers numerous analytic approaches, ranging from what Finlay (2021) usefully characterised as "scientifically descriptive" to "artfully interpretative". We (now) use the term *reflexive* to demarcate a particular way of doing TA (Braun & Clarke, 2019a)—with concepts, values and practices that can diverge, sometimes radically, from other forms of TA. We have referred to TA as a *family* of methods (Braun & Clarke, 2022b), because, while families share some things that unite them, family members can be quite different, and even disagree with each other. So, what unites the TA family? Briefly, a focus on themes—patterns of meaning across a

dataset—as the analytic end point, with processes for coding to get there. However, methods for TA vary radically in several ways; understanding these divergences is arguably more important than what is shared (to do good quality reflexive TA).

First, some core concepts are conceptualised quite differently—and, unhelpfully, *how* they are conceptualised is not necessarily explicit. Take *a theme*. For us, a theme conveys a pattern of shared meaning united by a central idea; this pattern will likely cut across several topics and data generation questions. We have called this central idea a "central organising concept" because it holds together multiple expressions of meaning like the axis of a flower holds together all the petals. Other TA methodologists use *theme* to capture the various ideas or meanings expressed around a core topic or domain (which often map closely onto data generation questions); we call these *topic summaries* rather than themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2022b). Second, the analytic process varies considerably—themes might be determined relatively early, with coding used to identify (topic-summary) themes in the dataset; alternatively, coding is a process *through* which understanding of meaning is expanded, and *from* which (shared-meaning) themes are developed. Coding can just be a process, or can produce something (codes)—themselves conceptualised as individual meaning units that collectively build into themes. Finally, the values that inform practice can range from a (post)positivist idealisation of objective researchers seeking unbiased truth/reality, through to a subjective, situated researcher who produces a contextualised *reading of* (or story about) the dataset. A basic differentiation Kidder and Fine (1987) made between "small q" (the use of qualitative data within positivist-informed research) and "Big Q" (the use of qualitative data within a *qualitative* paradigm, for example, Grant & Giddings, 2002), which includes valuing the situated, the subjective, and the partial, is helpful for grasping the significant variation in TA types.

Overall, we find it useful to differentiate three clusters of types of TA approaches (which sometimes go by different method names): *reflexive* TA, and what we call *codebook* and *coding reliability* types. Table 1 very briefly summarises key differences—but we encourage everyone using TA to read more widely to understand these different approaches (see Braun & Clarke, 2022a, 2022b, for a more detailed discussion).

Table 1

Snapshot Summary of Key Aspects for Different TA Approaches

Aspect	***Reflexive TA***	***Codebook TA****	***Coding Reliability***
Paradigm/values	Big Q; meaning is contextual and situated	Big(ish) Q; a mash-up of some Big Q values and some small q techniques	Small q; objectivity is valued and prioritised

A theme is…	Shared meaning, with a central organising concept	Often a topic summary, sometimes shared meaning	Typically, a topic summary
Coding is…	Open and organic, evolving	Structured, through use of a codebook	Fixed, applied to data via a codebook
Coding…	Parses out meaning, produces codes	Is used to capture themes	Identifies themes
Themes are…	Recursively evolving, only finalised at the end	Mostly developed early	Identified early
Researcher subjectivity is	An essential resource; integral to the analytic process	Acknowledged but a codebook ensures consistency	A threat to validity that needs to be controlled through multiple coders

* Codebook approaches include a template (King & Brooks, 2018), framework (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), and matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) analysis.

In addition to variation across TA methods, there is variation in what reflexive TA can offer, and how it can be used: it can be deployed within various theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Ponterotto, 2005), including Indigenous knowledge frameworks (Le Grice & Ong, 2022); it can address a wide range of research question types, and data forms; it can be used within experiential qualitative and critical qualitative frameworks (see Braun & Clarke, 2013); it can be used to explore the surface level or explicit meaning, as well as more implicit or underlying meaning; and it can produce analyses strongly grounded in data, or shaped more by conceptual considerations. This variation means using TA requires conceptual and design thinking to ensure a coherent design and practice (Braun & Clarke, 2022a).

Through this chapter, we use Eileen's doctoral research (co-supervised by Liz Beddoe [Social Work] and Ginny Braun [Psychology]) to reflexively discuss key aspects of the TA process. Initially oriented to a question around the place and use of *early prevention sciences* in child protection in Aotearoa, Eileen designed a project with two data sources: five child protection policy documents (2011-2015) and interviews with 24 child protection social workers. Reflexive TA provided an analytic toolkit that allowed Eileen to grapple with the data, eventually developing a latent-deductive analysis across both datasets, theoretically shaped by intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016) and concepts of epistemic power (Fricker, 2007)—concepts related to Eileen's thesis are not the focus of this chapter so interested readers can consult these sources for more information.

Why Does Reflexivity Matter So Much?

Reflexivity is a type of thinking, a mode of research practice. It involves a researcher who is present as a *person* in the research process, someone who is questioning, critical, and considered in all aspects of what they do, who they do it with, and the context(s) in which they do it (e.g., see Gill, 2021). Eileen, for instance, located herself in her research as a former enthusiast for, but now a critic of, early prevention science, a positioning which shaped analytic interests and interpretation, but which she reflexively interrogated (e.g., through journaling; in supervision) as the project developed. Eileen's positioning is far from the neutral, distant, unbiased observer typically taught as ideal within postpositivist (quantitative) research paradigms; avoiding bias, for instance, is not a consideration in reflexive TA. Instead, the subjectivity of the researcher—what they bring to the process—is not only *not* a problem, or even a strength, it is *essential* to the whole endeavour. Reflexivity is the *tool* through which researcher subjectivity can be harnessed, the active (and knowing) role of the researcher supported, and the quality of the research facilitated. The valuing of researcher subjectivity in reflexive TA is consonant with both Big Q research generally, and various Indigenous research methodologies (e.g., see papers in Waitoki et al., 2017). We use *subjectivity* instead of *bias* because, aligning with Big Q qualitative values, we do not speculate about the possibility of, let alone *idealise*, a researcher who strives to neutrally reveal the truth through their research process. Instead, we inevitably shape our analysis; reflexive TA cannot be performed robotically, or mechanically, because it is a thoughtful, interrogative process, shaped by who we are as researchers. Reflexivity is the way we question who we are, and what we bring to research (for an excellent example, see Trainor & Bundon, 2021). We recommend a reflexive research journal as a useful tool for this process (Cunliffe, 2004). Eileen found that the reflexive journaling process offered a safe space to tease out and unravel the complex overlays of researcher and research, without needing to *know* the answers. A space to which she could return repeatedly and visit the same reflexive spot from different points. Different reflexive visits yielded new, sometimes quite different, insights, that ultimately made the end analysis and write-up richer and deeper.

Reflexivity can also be directed to the discipline we research within (its norms and values), and wider society, to our research *practices*, including our methods (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). A reflexive orientation is essential to being a *knowing* researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022b)—someone actively and critically engaged with research values, choices, and processes. Becoming *knowing* around TA, and qualitative paradigms and values, is a crucial part of reflexive TA practice and quality. In practice, it can involve asking ourselves questions around the ideas, assumptions, and values that shape how we are interpreting the dataset; it can involve pushing ourselves to consider what we might *not* be noticing—this is where another's perspective, such as a supervisor, or other people who act as "critical friends" to our research and our reflexivity (see Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 113), can be useful in offering different noticings that can take our analysis deeper. Eileen's reflexive practice involved recognising instances of "positivism creep" (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p.

270), which she dubbed the "positivist thought police". She realised these thought police still held her rigidly to positivist concepts that she thought she had expunged. Eileen's experience highlights that reflexivity is a process, a way to *be* a researcher, not a destination you reach, and move on from. And our reflexivity is never perfect, never complete (Gill, 2021). We are never beyond partiality, but we should always be on a journey to interrogate and unpack when doing reflexive TA.

The Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process: A Reflexive Account

The approach to TA we have developed over 15+ years (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019a, 2022b) provides a six-phase process to guide you through the different aspects of analytic engagement—from familiarisation with the dataset, to telling your analytic story (writing a report). The most crucial thing to note, before we describe the process, and you engage in it, is that these phases are *guidelines* for your analytic engagement, conceptual tools to get you where you need to get to, rather than techniques to *apply* or rules to follow. They have flexibility and fluidity built in, and the process can (and often should) be recursive more than linear. Going backwards in reflexive TA is not failure, but evidence of good thoughtful (re)engagement! Once Eileen identified how the positivist thought police had been limiting her engagement, she embraced a spiral approach, travelling between phases more openly. She had initially resisted revisiting coding after developing initial candidate themes, as that felt like regression. But, in spiralling back, she realised a richer layer of analysis could be located. The spiral was not a circle; in going back she was revising the data from a (temporally and reflexively) different (view)point. Although it might seem to be the same point in the process, (re)coding was different from what it had been before. Her different view offered new ways of sculpting (coding) the same dataset (see also Ho et al., 2017). Even with fluidity and flexibility, the *processes* we describe are carefully developed and founded to align, conceptually and in practice, with the values of Big Q qualitative—so deviations from process (for instance, through using a codebook instead of an organic open coding process) would need to be thoughtful and considered, within a framework of knowingness.

So, what are the phases of reflexive TA? Here we only briefly sketch these; the fullest account can be found in our book (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). We give a bit more time and detail around two key aspects of the process (*coding* and *theme development and review*), reflecting on Eileen's projects to illustrate key aspects and reflexively discuss dilemmas and challenges. The six phases (now slightly renamed from Braun & Clarke, 2006) are:

1. *Familiarising yourself with the dataset*
2. *Coding*
3. *Generating initial themes*
4. *Developing and reviewing themes*
5. *Refining, defining and naming themes*
6. *Writing Up*

Familiarisation is about becoming intimately acquainted with the contents of your dataset—how much reading and re-reading (or watching/listening) this involves depends on a mix of how much you were involved in the production of the dataset (e.g., conducting interviews is quite different from compiling a set of policy documents), and how much time has since elapsed. In this phase, you also want to start engaging analytically, by which we mean thinking about the data content in relation to your research question; starting to think about what (repeated) ideas or concepts might be interesting or useful to explore. Note-making can be useful, both as you work through familiarisation for different data items, and overall, when you have worked through the whole dataset. Use notes to capture your thoughts and questions, noting what piques your curiosity about the dataset. This concept is a nice one, because *being curious* is an important analytic orientation for reflexive TA where you are aiming to tell an "artfully interpretative" story, rather than provide some kind of neutral (dull) "scientifically descriptive" account (Finlay, 2021, p. 104). These notes are also a space for reflexivity, and can be spiralled back to, during the meaning-making process. At this point, note-making is casual; with *coding* things become more systematic.

Coding is about parsing out meaning into discretely identified units—trying to build yourself a fine-grained understanding of all the different ideas, concepts, assumptions, experiences, and so on. We conceptualise this as a kind of *picking apart*, and a shift in focus from *whole picture* to *micro aspects*, to develop an enriched understanding of the nuance and complexity of the dataset.

In reflexive TA, coding is both a *process*, and produces analytic *outputs*—the codes which are part of subsequent phases. Coding is systematic—working thoroughly and closely through each data item, and the whole dataset. Any time you notice something of potential relevance for your research question, you code it—meaning you apply a short, analytically meaningful, description (code label) to the segment. You continue this process, tagging as you go (this tagging can be done numerous ways, including manually with hard copy data, on electronic data, or using specific software; see Braun & Clarke, 2022b). In reflexive TA, coding can be coarser (capturing broader meanings) and/or more fine-grained (capturing quite specific ideas or concepts). Your coding should capture a single idea (broad, or specific); if there is more than one relevant idea in a bit of data, code it twice (or thrice…). There is no limit to the number of codes, although you are aiming to get some repetition with your code labels. You do not want 1,000 unique codes! Coding needs to be guided by what *you* are interested in, but there's much flexibility, including coding at different levels (surface or semantic meaning, through to conceptual or implicit meaning, which we term *latent*). For example, in Eileen's research, a semantic code labelled "Māori as hard to reach" was used to tag data that described Māori quite explicitly through this framing. In contrast, instances of what Eileen interpreted as tokenistic attempts to include Māori concepts and words was tagged with a latent code that she labelled "brown-washing". This highlights another point: coding is not *just* about summarising and reducing content, it is also about capturing your *analytic take* on the data. Finally, coding is organic and open, meaning codes

can evolve, can be refined, as your analytic understanding grows. Expect some back-and-forth re-coding.

Eileen's experience with coding (spiralistically) demonstrates this evolution. In the second round of coding, Eileen learnt to put the positivist thought police to one side and embrace the messiness of moving things around. This meant rejecting the notion that just because things were already coded and initially *thought* relevant, they would remain relevant to the evolving analytic story. Eileen's theoretical lens shifted between first and second rounds of coding: intersectionality remained useful, but she discarded Foucauldian notions of biopolitics and governmentality and included epistemic power (Fricker, 2007). This meant the relevance of some codes, and code clusters, had shifted, with some moving outside analytic scope.

From coding, you move into *generating initial themes*—note how *active* this phrasing is. Themes do not (simply) emerge, nor are they waiting in the dataset for you to find (Braun & Clarke, 2016). They are produced by *you*, from the familiarisation and coding you have done, your skills, your contextualised knowledge, and what you make of the dataset through this. Following the idea of picking apart meaning through coding, you are now moving into a process of putting back together, to generate some clusters (candidate themes) that each potentially has something interesting, relevant, and important to say about your dataset, related to your research question. Each cluster needs to be organised around a central idea but to include multiple different manifestations of it; themes need to be multifaceted. This initial putting together is done using your codes, making the most of the diversity of meanings you have picked apart through coding. This clustering is very provisional, as you are testing things out at this point. You might have multiple tries at putting things together in different ways, to explore different versions of the story you might tell about your dataset. Being open, exploratory, and curious, not *quickly settling* or *seeking the answer* is an important mindset. You might try doing this in different modes—combining hard copy slips of paper (e.g., see Trainor & Bundon, 2021); using digital whiteboards like Miro to cluster virtual Post-Its; drawing visual mappings…

Eileen's initial theme generation happened *before* her theoretical lens shift and was guided by her use of QDAS (Qualitative data analysis software, e.g., NVivo). She used NVivo to *control* data messiness, coding in an increasingly fine-grained manner, until she eventually felt overwhelmed by the number of codes and instances of them. To control this further, Eileen then clustered codes to gain *clarity* and *logical order*. This rush to clustering locked her into a hierarchical structure, as NVivo's system did not allow for more organic ways of linking data between codes and/or clusters. At this point, rather than dwelling in the messiness, Eileen prioritised developing her initial themes. Validated by the positivist thought police, complex, messy, and different stories were firmly put to one side. It was only after a break away from the data—what she calls a generative interregnum (time spent not *actively* working on the project, which inadvertently allowed ideas to percolate

organically, without any expectation or pressure to *do work*)—that she started to embrace the messiness of revisiting and revising initial coding and theme development, using a manual process.

Playing with codes to generate themes can only take you so far, and you need to move back to your data to assess the fit of your initial candidate themes, in relation to the dataset. This phase of *developing and reviewing themes* is about considering validity and viability of the data-oriented meaning they capture, but it is also about nuance and importance. You are asking: does each of the themes tell a convincing and compelling story about an important pattern of shared meaning related to my dataset, and my research question? *Collectively*, do the themes highlight what I judge to be important (and interesting) patterns across the dataset, in relation to my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022b)? Occasionally, the answer might be a resounding *yes*! Far more often, it is *somewhat*, *a bit*, *maybe*, or even a resounding *no*. Re-theming is a key and valuable part of reflexive TA, not just for ensuring quality, but for slowly! (see Braun & Clarke, 2021b) building rich and surprising insight and understanding of *what* the most compelling analytic stories (themes) will be.

Eileen's experience provides an example of the value of what she describes as "taking the scenic route". She revisited the data, starting from recoding and then comparing that with initial coding. Eileen toggled back and forth between codes and potentially theme-relevant clusters, simultaneously adjusting the view from fine-grained coding to clustering and even theme development. The phases blurred, producing a more organic (and messy) process. Instead of NVivo, Eileen used large wall spaces and sheets of paper to track concepts, allowing a *literal* toggling back and forth between viewing coding data and clustering/theme development. She moved in multiple directions across and through the data landscape, allowing her to take in the scenery from multiple vantage points. Once this process felt complete, she then took these concepts and played with them on Miro; using Miro she was able to map messy links between codes that had been hidden in the NVivo process and to generate what became the shape of the final themes, the final analytic story. Eileen's final analysis involved one over-arching theme that *anchored* three other themes. The over-arching theme captured the idea that early prevention sciences are effectively being used to produce ideal capitalist citizens. Each of the three themes subsumed within this overarching theme focused on a notably different, but patterned, subjectivity for different groups/stakeholders within child protection: social workers, children and parents. Children, for example, were positioned as "the raw/pure capital of the future"—the failure to protect children is not (just) about humanity, but about loss of (capitalist-framed) potential.

By this point, the broad shape of your analysis will often have been developed, and the remaining two phases are about refinement, and developing the argument (the story). However, as you move into *refining, defining, and naming themes* it is good to hold onto the

possibility of change in themes—either small changes, such as possibly adding or removing a subtheme, or large changes, such as completely re-doing or rejecting a theme. By asking questions of the analysis developed thus far, you are ascertaining whether it works, whether it tells a compelling story, and whether it conforms to conceptual and other quality requirements for reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). Ask:

- What is the overall analytic story, and how does each theme contribute to this?
- What story is each theme telling?
- Is each theme clearly delineated, focusing on a separate part of the analytic story?
- Does this theme have an identifiable central organising concept, with multiple *expressions* of the core meaning?
- What theme *name* concisely captures the focus of this theme—and something of my analytic take?

These refining processes continue into the final phase. *Writing up* is a bit of a misnomer, as you will have been writing (often a lot) already! This phase involves developing the final version of your analytic story, contextualising and locating your analysis in relation to existing knowledge and the wider (e.g., policy or practice) context it aims to be part of. Ultimately, you want to include compelling, vivid data extracts, woven into an analytic narrative, written in a way that aligns with your research paradigm and values, and serves your research purpose (see Braun & Clarke, 2022b). Your purpose is to tell a coherent and persuasive story about the dataset that addresses your research question. It is easy to underestimate this phase, both in the skill of writing (and the value of editing), and the time it will take. One of the common problems we see in writing TA is limited interpretative narrative, effectively treating the meaning as self-evidently *in* the data extracts, and obvious to the reader. Analysis is not (just) clustering extracts; analysis is in the telling of a story about them, about why (you think) they matter, and what they mean (e.g., Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). Avoiding overly complex analytic structures is important for prioritising such interpretative depth in writing up reflexive TA.

Something important in reporting—but often neglected—is providing a *specific* and *reflexive* account of *your* analytic process, not a generic description of the six phases (we have some examples from student projects on www.thematicanalysis.net). This matters for quality evaluation. Qualitative considerations need to drive your practice, as you do not want to produce a report that unknowingly reproduces common problems in TA research (Braun & Clarke, 2021c).

Where Things Go (Horribly) Wrong

TA in general, and reflexive TA specifically, are unfortunately often misconceptualised, and practised and reported in ways which are methodologically and conceptually incongruent. Much of this seems to reflect *unknowing* practice: researchers not being aware of, and/or thinking through, the conceptual foundations of their method,

broader paradigmatic and values-based aspects of their research, and what that means for what they do, what they claim, and the quality measures they draw on. (Post)positivist descriptive reporting of the *truth* of the dataset, informed by aligned concerns with (preventing) *bias* and ensuring *accuracy* in coding, fit with the scientifically descriptive small q modes of TA. But they do not align with the artfully interpretative Big Q forms of TA (Finlay, 2021). The frequency with which we encounter papers that report that they "followed" our reflexive TA process, but then do something at odds with what we advocate, such as using a (fixed) coding frame, reporting inter-coder reliability measures, or claiming themes emerged, is unfortunately far too high (see Braun & Clarke, 2021c). Perhaps the most common mismatch we see, is (often descriptively) reporting topic summaries instead of shared-meaning-based themes.

Some of the problems may stem from not actually reading methodological guidance—an easily resolvable challenge! Some may stem from not *getting* the method in anything other than a technical way. This can be remedied by reading more, thinking more, and by striving to become a *knowing* researcher—by understanding that you cannot *do* reflexive TA in a technical way; TA must be used thought*full*y. For those who come from heavily positivist contexts and training, the idea that to do research, you need to think about theory (What do I think my data give me access to?), research values (considering knowledge as contextual, situated, and political), and engage reflexively and thoughtfully, without following rules, can be not just novel, it can contradict deeply embedded ideas of research practice. It can be stressful. But it is necessary for quality in TA. Not all quality measures and practices align, conceptually, with reflexive TA (e.g., see Braun & Clarke, 2019b, for a discussion of why *data saturation* is problematic).

So, what is our key advice for quality? Be thoughtful, read widely, be reflexive, and do not use TA if it does not suit your project. There are many wonderful methods out there, including those focused on shared meaning (for a quick comparison of some of these with reflexive TA, see Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Eileen's Key Takeaways For Doing Good, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

My first takeaway, and I think the most important one, is to be prepared to continually interrogate your own epistemological positioning. I started my PhD believing—even *knowing*—that I rejected positivism, so I was unprepared for how frequently the positivist thought police popped in. Positivist concepts seem like the right and correct way to do things; my school education, and a significant amount of my university education, had firmly etched the scientific method into my thinking. Even when I rejected elements of positivism, for example the notion of *objective truth* and *linearity*, these concepts were insidious. The positivist thought police *revealed the truth* of their power and influence throughout my research journey. Their presence was noted, not just in the coding and theme development already discussed, but also in writing; word choices such as "reveal" (so close to "emerge") when I wrote about data, demonstrated their insistent influence.

My second takeaway is to fully embrace the role *you* play in *your* data-story. Think and write reflexively about what you bring (and do not bring) to the analysis. Only *you* can write about your data in this way. A key strength of reflexive TA is how it demands a visible author/analyst. In my project, I centred social justice; honesty about my role, my presentation of the data, and resultant analysis, rendered me *more* accountable for the whole process (Lainson et al., 2019). And that (I say to the positivist thought police) does not make my research any less valid, rather it makes visible exactly how and why I did what I did.

Key Takeaways

- Consider and interrogate your epistemological positioning; aim to approach your knowledge production process *knowingly.*
- Be on alert for when the positivist thought police might show up — interrogate where elements of positivism may be shaping your practice or values.
- Construct your *own* story with your data and consider the strengths and limitations of your positionality in this process.

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