

Fear of crime in South Africa: Obsession, compulsion, disorder.

by Ravi Baghel

1. Introduction

This paper is an exploration into the fear of crime that pervades South Africa, indeed more than crime itself. The obvious linkage of high rates of crime resulting in higher degree of fear of crime suggests itself. However, in the South African context, there exist several paradoxes between actual risk and perceived risk, and the linkage between crime and fear is not as direct as it would intuitively appear. Further, in case of South Africa the fear of crime is not just at the level of fear but can better be described as hysteria, paranoia or obsession. Indeed this level of fear of crime has had consequences both for policing responses and popular responses (like lynching) to crime. Therefore, in this paper I shall apply a five factor social-psychological model to South Africa, that may explain not just the fear itself but also the reasons for the degree of fear expressed.

In the following section I shall critique the most commonly used formulations of "fear of crime", in order to include dimensions that go beyond fear, and beyond crime for this phenomenon. This is followed by a section that discusses the theoretical model used here. This is done in three steps: justifying the use of a social-psychological model, discussing the speculative models proposed by van der Wurff et al (1989) and Jackson (Jackson 2004; 2009) finally adapting it for the South African context, by identifying a list of five variable factors that contribute to a fear of crime. This section is followed by a discussion of the applicability of this refined model to the South African context. This is done by trying to relate the high prevalence of factors contributing to a fear of crime, to the social, political, economic and historical conditions that are peculiar or highly relevant to the South African context. The concluding section discusses the implications of fear of crime in South Africa in the light of this model, and discusses the future outlook.

In this paper I have consciously steered away from the more obvious or more accepted positions on factors causing a fear of crime and tried to explore alternatives possibilities. This does not mean that I either ignore or am unaware of these factors, just that I choose to focus elsewhere. So for example it may appear odd that in a paper about fear of crime, I do not give much attention to the linkage between crime and

fear, but this is only because I have tried to find explanations that supplement the obvious ones. In forming an understanding of the prevailing thinking on crime in the general public of South Africa, I have relied upon reports in 3 newspapers of SA: The Sowetan , Star (both dailies) and Mail & Guardian(weekly) over a representative period ranging from 20th -30th October 2006, discussions on a website about crime in South Africa¹, personal impressions, as well as impressions of temporary residents (Baghel et al. 2007).

2. Fear of crime: Common perspectives

The common sense understanding of the fear of crime is simple enough; high levels of crime create a fear of victimization in the public, this can be understood as the "fear of crime". This is the most direct contact with crime for most people, and fear is the way in which crime affects the public, with only a minority (even in South Africa) experiencing actual victimization. This fear has varied social consequences like loss of social cohesion, constraining free movement, economic consequences like increased security expenditure, reduced property prices, increased out-migration, etc. This has made it an important field of study for social scientists and especially criminologists with Chris Hale (1996 cited in (Lee 2001, 467) calling it 'a sub-discipline in itself'. Given the importance of this 'sub-discipline', I shall go beyond the common sense understanding, the more scholarly, but merely descriptive or empirical understanding of 'fear of crime' and give it a theoretical grounding, in the belief that 'fear of crime' must be understood before it can be addressed.

Fear of crime has been described by Ferraro (1995, xiii) "an emotional reaction of dread or anxiety to crime or symbols that a person associates with crime" cited in (Hollway et al. 1997, 256). It has also been seen more comprehensively as an aggregate of several empirical factors like "gender, race, age, neighbourhood cohesion, confidence in the police, level of incivility, experience of victimization, perception of risk and assessment of offense seriousness" (Box et al. 1988, 340). The research on fear of crime has thus centred on finding ever more complex empirical models and on how accurate citizen fears are when compared to actual risk of victimisation. An important example of this kind of discrepancy is that of heightened fear of crime in the elderly, with lower risks of actual victimization. Thus, Ferraro concludes that "perceived risk is the pivotal factor influencing fear of crime" (1995, p.xiv). He further concludes that the 'perception' of risk can be traced to a few factors that realistically influence it. This in the end leads him to conclude that "neither older people nor their interpretation of victimization risk is the problem. Crime is". Others have displayed

¹ www.crimexposouthafrica.org . Unless otherwise mentioned, the expressed beliefs and opinions on crime of South Africans are primarily drawn from this forum.

greater caution and divided fear of crime into cerebral and emotional components (Rountree 1998); which terms appear to be euphemisms for rational (measurable and explainable) and irrational (inexplicable variation from the expected) fears.

These approaches totally ignore the fact that 'fear of crime' is not an established fact but a conceptual construct of criminologists. Any conceptual construct must however, be inductive and able to accommodate and make sense of real world phenomena. Research such as that cited above, that has tended to focus on crime from a law enforcement perspective, often implies the reaction of the public to crime is one solely of fear, and reduces the 'fear of crime' to a fear only of crime. All these premises lead to any further research being blinkered and coming to the conclusions which are the only ones possible given these invisible premises. Such research, while being of some use in understanding the crime and fear linkage, ignores wider sociological and socio-psychological factors that may be important in explaining the fear of crime (Stephen Farrall et al. 2000, 399-400). I shall elaborate with some examples why such an incomplete understanding of 'fear of crime' is problematic.

The fear of crime research that measures perceived risk of crime against actual risks of victimization suffers from the fact that it chooses a law and order definition of crime, actual and individual fear may well extend beyond the fears of criminal acts to 'dangerous' acts and 'dangerous' persons, that may not necessarily be criminal. This is brought out by Lianos and Douglas:

"Who are the deviants today? They are not the moral incorrigibles of the past and they are known to be disadvantaged. They are not to be morally condemned but they are to be contained. They are not to be patronisingly 'treated' but they are to be avoided, even though without value judgements. They are not detestable but they are disposable. They are simply 'dangerous', 'suspicious', 'aggressive', 'threatening', 'dodgy'. They do not need to break rules to be excluded. Their committing an offence is a matter of secondary importance to those parts of society that define what deviance is, a matter to be dealt within the social and geographical spaces where the deviants are concentrated. What is important is their perceived probability of being dangerous and this can even be associated with completely legal behaviour, like that of adolescents gathering together at entrances of buildings in which they live." (2000, 263).

The second objection to the vast majority of research that looks at the fear-crime linkage, is that it excludes other possible reactions to crime. A study (J. Ditton et al. 1999)1999), for example, suggests that the

predominant response to crime is one of anger rather than fear, including in respondents who have been victims of crime. Lee (2001) in supporting the above study mentions that a “positivistic tendency to imagine fearing subjects in particular ways” has led to other narratives being silenced. The mainstream criminological perspective would fail to explain phenomena like ‘autonomous citizen responses’ of PAGAD (People Against Gangsterism and Drugs) in South Africa. PAGAD vigilantes had assassinated 30 gang leaders and drug dealers in two years (Baker 2002), such violence can only be described as anger, though perhaps with a bit of fear thrown in.

3. The Social-Psychological perspective

The necessity for a social psychological model arises out of the limitations of the approaches discussed above which generally rely on a demographic model. Generally the strongest correlation between demographic factors and fear of crime, is found in the case of gender and age. The models discussed below however either explicitly or implicitly see the role of demographic factors as one of mediation rather than that of causation.

3.1. Expressed fear and experienced fear

The majority of fear of crime research proceeds unquestioningly with the premise that the ‘fear of crime’ is just that. It fails to take into account that publicly expressed fear about crime may be a disguise for other fears, like a fear of difference or fear of the ‘other’. Jackson (2004) criticizes the mainstream approach to fear of crime and suggests that survey responses may articulate “both ‘experienced’ fear—summations of the frequency of emotion; and ‘expressive’ fear, or attitudes regarding the cultural meaning of crime, social change and relations, and conditions conducive to crime”. He sees the beginning of an alternative approach to fear of crime and describes it as being based on the notion that:

“... crime and the risk of crime represent things above and beyond the (actuarially considered) possibility of victimization. Or, more precisely, it is that public attitudes towards crime express and gather meaning within a context of judgments, beliefs and values regarding law and order and the social and moral make-up of one’s community and society. Fear and risk acceptability become more explicable when framed in such a socio-cultural way”. (2004: 1)

In my opinion a division of fear into 'experienced' and 'expressive' components² is needed if we are to understand the roots of fear of crime. The experienced fears are the ones that can be better explained with respect to the individual, while expressive fears are complex and tend to have roots in negative changes in society, feeling threatened due to political or social exclusion, etc. This is especially relevant for South Africa as I shall discuss later.

3.2. A four factor social psychological model

A promising speculative model for understanding experienced fear is the one originally proposed by Van der Wurff et al (1989), and tested by Farrall et al (2000). This is a social psychological model that is based on the premise that fear of crime is associated with four social psychological factors, namely:

3.2.1. Attractivity

This factor refers to the extent to which people see themselves or their possessions as an attractive target or victim for criminal activities.

3.2.2. Evil Intent

This is represented by the extent to which a person attributes criminal intentions to another individual or group.

3.2.3. Power

This refers to the degree of self-assurance and feeling of control that the person has with respect to a possible threat or assault by another. This is a combination of the perception of one's own power and the perceived power of the other.

3.2.4. Criminalizable space

This refers to the situation in which a crime may take place, specifically with how much a situation or space may facilitate crime or the criminal as perceived by the potential victim. A more detailed discussion of the relations between fear and the experience of space can also be found in Pain (2000) and Baghel & Mayr (2007).

Here the first factor has reference to the potential victim, the second to the potential wrongdoer, the third to their relative power and the fourth to space and situation (Farrall et al 2000: 400-401).

² This is a better division than a cerebral and emotional one because it avoids the rational vs irrational dichotomy; gives due attention to the individual as inhabiting a social structure and allows for overlaps between the two components.

3.3. Fifth factor: Expressed as fear

In addition to these factors that explain 'experienced fear', a fifth component should be considered, i.e.; a component that is 'expressed as fear'. This is slightly different from the 'expressive fear' proposed by Jackson (2004) in that this includes all reactions that may be expressed as a fear of crime, regardless of whether these responses are actually those of fear or can be directly linked to crime. It is also important to mention here, that I do not see this component as being completely distinct from the other factors outlined in the social psychological model cited above. There is a considerable overlap between experienced fear of crime and emotions expressed as a fear of crime, and the degree of overlap would vary individually.

In the next section I shall apply this model to South Africa and also bring in other factors that are not applicable at the individual level but need to be considered when considering a country and its 'fear of crime'³. I shall also attempt to find out what the expressed fears of crime can tell us about South African society itself. In this I shall focus more on the groups with lower victimization risks but higher fear, to find explanations for their 'irrationality'.

4. The Case of South Africa

Crime is not just a reality for South Africans, it is an obsession. The crime discourse in South Africa appears to be banal; people talk about it all the time, just like people elsewhere talk about the weather (Baghel et al. 2007). This should be unremarkable given that South Africa has one of the highest reported rates of violent crime. Yet this obsession cannot simply be seen as a direct result of very high rates of crime, for there are many things South Africa could be obsessed about, but isn't. The number of murders in 2002 was around 22,000, in addition there were 35,102 attempted murders and 11,087 culpable homicides, a total of around 68,000 victims. This is certainly cause for alarm, however, this number pales in comparison when compared to the fact that 39% of all deaths in South Africa are due to AIDS (J. Comaroff et al. 2006, 214). The question immediately arises why crime, why not AIDS? The linkage between crime and 'fear of crime' in S.A. cannot be taken at face value. As Luhmann has said:

"One of the essential characteristics of a critical sociology is a refusal to be satisfied with merely describing the regularities discerned in society. Extending the range of apprehensible regularities- for instance by using statistical procedures and by uncovering latent structures in statistical data- is certainly

³ In the following sections I continue to use 'fear' of crime, as a term. This is done merely for ease of use; this term should be seen to include all responses to crime ranging from anxiety to anger.

amongst its tasks. We go beyond this, however, if we ask how society itself explains and handles deviance from the norm, misfortune, and the unanticipated occurrence". (1991: vii; cited in Hollway & Jefferson 1997)

Therefore I shall attempt to look beyond the obvious linkage of crime and fear and look for other factors that may be responsible for this national obsession. This is not to deny the importance of countering crime to address this fear, nor to trivialize the grim reality of crime for most South Africans. However, this is an attempt to understand the numerous paradoxes in the case of crime in South Africa. South Africans trust statistics to show the exceptional rates of crime in the country, but distrust those very statistics when they show a decline in violent crime (J. Comaroff et al. 2006). Those who have the least to fear, show or at least express the greatest fear of crime. South Africa has high rates of interpersonal violence, and this leads people to shift to gated communities, yet the fact that most interpersonal violence is not committed by strangers is routinely ignored. All these paradoxes cannot be dismissed as the irrationality of a fearful people, instead they must be seen to be rooted in the social, economical and political structures of South Africa.

Many South Africans believe that crime has rapidly gone out of control since 1994, however on closer examination it appears that South Africans have continually believed that. Jonny Steinberg (2001, 2) offers a valuable insight:

For as long as we [South Africans] have kept written records, South Africans have expressed panic about the current crime wave.... Crime, and the fear of crime are as old as South Africa itself... our preoccupation with crime is testimony to how this country was stitched together with violence, to how we worry that malevolence is our most abiding pedigree. Fear in this country is saturated with politics; it is the product of generations of estrangement between races, classes and individuals. We are preoccupied with revenge; we worry that it will burst its walls. (emphasis added).

This theme of violence, estrangement and revenge ran through many of the opinions of South Africans related to crime posted online. To elaborate on this, I cite just one fairly representative example, from an online discussion forum, about a murder of farmers in South Africa⁴, the racial identity of victims was not given, and the perpetrators had not been identified.

⁴ <http://www.crimexpouthafrica.org/node/3663#comment-10361> accessed November 19, 2006.

This is just another declaration of war against whites in this country. This [sic] cowards only attack woman and children or elderly people. White people should organize themselves into armed defence units and begin to fight back.

“They want war; lets give them war”: Submitted by disweerekke on Fri, 2006-11-17 21:27.

Here, though this reaction is about a criminal incident, it is not one of fear but of violent rage, further this reaction is, at best, only partly to crime, it is better seen as an expression of anger at the social and political realities of majority rule in South Africa. Indeed, if war is diplomacy by other means then this post is definitely about apartheid by other means. Lianos & Douglas (2000, 261) seem to be referring to just such an eventuality, when they state:

“The liberal vision of equality before the law is neutralized by assigning dangerousness to certain social identities. Belonging to a particular social group establishes or excludes the sense of threat and disarms or arms segregating avoidance strategies. Society is more deeply divided than ever on principles of security seeking. The probability of victimization is at the centre of segregation”.

With the end of apartheid, its effects cannot be presumed to have vanished as well and there are still remnants of the old notion of *Swart Gevaar*⁵. As S.A. society has moved to an overtly egalitarian one, the internalized discourse of difference finds overt expression as a fear of crime. Many white South Africans continue to believe that the real danger is from black people out to kill, rape, rob, assault, hijack them, much of this cannot be classified as fear of crime, their perception is more that of an apocalypse. This is true in a sense, because majority rule was indeed presented as the doomsday scenario under apartheid, and this “nightmare” has now come true.

All the factors that contribute to fear in our model are present at relatively high degrees in South Africans. Thus the component of ‘attractivity’ is present to a large degree in South Africans with the least risk and highest fear of victimization. This is also a legacy of apartheid, as that created a highly unequal society with minorities being rich with the majority kept poor. This can be seen in the case of white farmers controlling land out of all proportion to their numbers. This perception of others having ‘much less’ and therefore being jealous or covetous of one’s ‘much more’ may create a higher degree of fear.

⁵ *Swart Gevaar* is a term used during Apartheid that is translated as “Black threat”, and was used to denote the security threat to the regime from the majority. It has been used in the sense of a cultural threat, or a threat of assimilation of the Afrikaner culture within the majority culture in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The second factor, that of ascribing 'evil intent' to other individuals or groups, is once again exacerbated by the segmented nature of South African society, which makes it easier to ascribe 'evil intent' to the 'other'. This further serves functions of inclusion and exclusion. The 'evil intent' of the other serves to cement solidarity within the group, and it also legitimises the exclusion of the 'undesirables' with evil intent. This exclusion in South Africa takes place through processes of exile away from the inner cities and inclusion into gated communities or fortified houses with armed response. Though there is little difference in actual crime rates, between high income gated and non-gated communities (and no difference at all, between lower income gated and non-gated communities), there is a great difference in terms of increased perceptions of safety and reduced fear of crime in gated communities (Wilson-Doenges 2000). The reduced fear of crime can be seen as arising firstly, from the exclusion of those perceived to have criminal intent; and secondly, from an increased sense of 'power', which is our third factor.

The 'power' component of fear of crime depends not only on one's own perceived strengths, but also on perceived strengths of the potential wrongdoer. The rapid change in the political hierarchy brought about by the transition from apartheid, led to a perceived loss of power for some of the formerly privileged. This is brought out by numerous references to 'your' government or 'your' A.N.C. in online discussions of crime, which implies a loss of 'our' power relative to 'yours'. In addition the easy availability of guns in South Africa, means that the feeling of control over potentially criminal situations is further eroded. Though many potential victims preach the use of guns to match the power of potential wrongdoers, this does not seem to redress the loss of control, perhaps due to the perception of a greater willingness or ability of potential wrongdoers to use guns.

The fourth factor contributing to fear of crime, 'criminalizable space', seems to be relatively exaggerated as well, especially if one is to look at the electric fences, high walls and armed response signs outside most S.A. homes that can afford them (and some that can't!). This is possibly caused due to an attempt to recreate a sense of security that existed earlier due to segregation in space, with the 'others' out of sight. Now that the 'others' are perceived to be at the gates, the gates better be electrified and have armed response. The loss of confidence in the state's ability to police the exterior may also have caused South Africans to have their houses resemble laagers on the frontier. This strategy may not have worked out though; as per the 2003 National Crime Survey, "whites no longer felt safe in their residential areas, even during the daytime, in spite of an increase in excessive fortification. As those with wealth have blockaded themselves in, their fear of the increasingly unknown outside has exploded, leading to further fortification and, hence, deeper fear" (Lemanski 2004, 106).

The fifth factor in the model is a catch-all one and therefore can be seen to account for all the emotions that are expressed as a fear of crime. Understandably, these cannot be generalized for a country. However, since crime is a national obsession, everything seems to be measured against it, the government is criticized for being incompetent (as elsewhere) because it cannot control crime (unlike elsewhere), and not for failure to achieve equality, or employment, etc.⁶ ; the desirability of a neighbourhood is more likely to be considered in terms of its perceived level of crime than the view from the terrace, and so on.

5. Strategies to address fear of crime in South Africa

Having developed an understanding of public response to crime, and its applicability to South Africa, it is apparent that addressing the fear of crime is not as simple as merely addressing crime (which is again no simple thing). The National Crime Prevention Strategy (1996) recognises the importance of addressing the fear of crime in policing. It recognizes that crime can "dominate the public psyche, contributing to counter-productive public anxiety, fear and helplessness". It also underlines that public perceptions of crime place an undue burden on policy makers to address these crime priorities. It however blames the media for creating incorrect perceptions and sees the solution as education of the public through superior information (p 13).

The role of media in creating or amplifying fear of crime is often suggested, this is primarily because of some media exaggerating crimes as well as highlighting especially horrifying ones, based on the journalistic imperative, "if it bleeds, it leads". South African newspapers like the Sowetan, The Star and Mail & Guardian were however not seen to indulge in sensationalizing crime to any great degree. Tabloids tend to focus on sensational stories; in this regard Daily Sun is especially remarkable. It seeks not just to sensationalise crime but also to mobilize public opinion. For example, one single edition⁷ had the cover story "Hang them All" campaigning for reinstating the capital punishment, with the question "how many more must die before violent men pay the full price for their evil deeds?" The same article mentioned a crime in which the victim (who was a child) had her "small body crushed to death after evil robbers stuffed her under a heavy double bed". A few more articles were: "People's justice for cruel rapist", "Bouncers shot dead for doing their job!", "Booze killing!" etc. However, the linkage between media representation and fear of crime remains inconclusive. Banks (2005) suggests that media representations of

⁶ This was brought out very strongly in an interview with the poetess and director of the BAT centre, Durban, Nise Malange. She said that the present government had failed because it could not provide people with a sense of safety by eradicating crime, indeed, even her recent poetry was about crime.

⁷ Tuesday, 3rd October 2006.

crime do have an impact on fear of crime and that these representations are interpreted in the context of the home and the neighbourhood. Ditton et al (2004), however in their review of the literature, conclude that there is insignificant linkage between media consumption and fear of crime. They posit that what may be more important in determining fear of crime is the relevance of the reporting to the consumer. Using this argument, stories such as those cited above are unlikely to increase fear of crime in more affluent people due to their lack of relevance, and in the less privileged neighbourhoods, these stories may only underline what is already experienced.

Not just the public but also the South African state treats crime as a central priority and has allocated immense resources to it. S.A. in the year 2000 spent about 1.9% of its GDP on public policing, which was approximately twice the world average (Shaw et al. 2003, 58). Further, this is in addition to the extensive non-state policing structure in South Africa, which is one of the largest in the world. However, the state by this very magnitude of state investment in security, ends up unremittingly placing crime at the top of the political agenda, which further generates insecurities that cannot easily be assuaged. These insecurities would lead to a demand for further expenditure and lead to a cyclical increase on security expenditure accompanied by an amplification of fear of crime. (Bauman, 1998: 116 cited in (Zedner 2006, 269).

In addition, it is important to mention that there is a wide range of actors who benefit from the fear of crime in South Africa. While beneficiaries of the status quo may not be responsible for creating it, they certainly have an entrenched interest in preserving it. In S.A. the list of beneficiaries includes:

The state: it can and does use the fear of crime to maintain and extend social control

The state police: An increased fear of crime benefits them in two ways; firstly by leading to greater resources being available to them, and secondly by removing the pressure to reform.

Private security industry: Higher fear leads to higher sales and higher profits.

Insurance industry: They can charge higher premiums and also have higher sales.

Government: Fear of crime helps to direct attention away from other issues, many of which may be underlying causes of crime, like unemployment and inequality.

Society: Fear of crime provides a legitimate justification for maintaining social stratifications, at a time when society has to overtly appear egalitarian.

This is not meant to be a conspiracy theory, but just meant to identify actors that have an interest in maintaining fear independently of crime, and therefore who are likely to subvert a decline in fear irrespective of the reality of crime.

6. In conclusion

'Fear of crime' should be seen as a far more nebulous concept than merely a response of anxiety or dread to crime, if we are to address it. Taking an approach that considers social, psychological, political and economical aspects of this phenomenon may be far more helpful in addressing it as well as seeing the obstacles in addressing it. Though some tactics like community policing and hot-spots policing have been suggested as ways of reducing fear of crime (Weisburd et al. 2004), these can address only part of the problem. In my opinion, in the future the strategies to reduce fear of crime are likely to take two approaches- actuarial and spectacular.

6.1. Actuarial response to fear of crime

An actuarial approach is one that is directed at reducing risk as well as managing statistics to reduce fear of crime. This may lead to policing practices like zero-tolerance policing to remove deviance before it can add to the statistics or to the risk. This approach is apparent in actions like that of the past moratorium on crime statistics in South Africa. The 'management' of statistics is however unlikely to have much of an impact, due to the trust in some statistics, accompanied by mistrust of other statistics which do not tally with popular perceptions of crime (J. Comaroff et al. 2006)

6.2. Spectacular response to fear of crime

The second approach to addressing fear of crime is likely to be one of creating spectacles of success (Jean Comaroff et al. 2004) as a substitute for any real achievement. An example of this is the 2003 raid by the S.A. police in Johannesburg, where armed police abseiled onto high rises from helicopters (Leithead 2003) with more entering from the streets adding up to a total of 250 policemen. The use of helicopters instead of elevators is emblematic of what I mean by 'spectacular' or big bang policing. The S.A. police is especially fond of spectacles like military fatigues, shiny guns, flashy cars, helicopters etc. This can again be linked to the focus on branding in place of substance, which is typical of late modernity. Thus the SAPS may have policemen unable to take down a report, abseiling down from helicopters. This also extends to

private security in South Africa, which again, the more expensive ones anyway, seem to step straight out of a Hollywood cop movie. This kind of spectacle does seem to increase feelings of safety, at least for a while, until disenchantment sets in, and a novel spectacle is needed.

All these approaches go hand in hand with the others that seem intuitively effective, like community policing, some forms of which may indeed reduce fear of crime. However in S.A. a community policing strategy, in the absence of any real sense of community seems absurd. Another important thing to remember is that all these approaches the actuarial, the spectacular and the tried and tested go hand in hand. This may give rise to schizophrenic policing strategies like zero-tolerance policing accompanied by community policing, a 'police force' that had its name changed to 'police service' but little else.

And in the midst of all these strategies there remains a society that refuses to look itself in the eye, someone else is always responsible for its fears.

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