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Real men can't get raped: an examination of gendered rape myths and sexual assault among undergraduates

Cristina L. Reitz-Krueger, Sadie J. Mummert and Sara M. Troupe

Abstract

Purpose – *While awareness of sexual assaults on college campuses has increased, the majority of efforts to address it are focused on female victims. The relative neglect of male victims may be due in part to problematic rape myths that suggest men cannot be sexually assaulted, especially by women. The purpose of this paper is to compare rates of different types of sexual assault between male and female undergraduates, and explore the relationship between acceptance of traditional rape myths focused on female victims, and rape myths surrounding male victims.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Students at a mid-sized university in Pennsylvania (n = 526) answered an online questionnaire about their own experiences of sexual assault since coming to college, as well as their endorsement of male and female rape myths.*

Findings – *While women experienced more sexual assault overall, men were just as likely to have experienced rape (i.e. forced penetration) or attempted rape. Acceptance of male and female rape myths was significantly correlated and men were more likely than women to endorse both. Participants were also more likely to endorse female than male rape myths.*

Research limitations/implications – *By analyzing sexual assaults in terms of distinct behaviors instead of one composite score, the authors can get a more nuanced picture of how men and women experience assault.*

Practical implications – *Campus-based efforts to address sexual assault need to be aware that male students also experience assault and that myths surrounding men as victims may impede their ability to access services.*

Originality/value – *This paper contributes to our knowledge of a relatively understudied topic: undergraduate male victims of sexual assault.*

Keywords *Campus rape, College sexual assault, Rape myths, Male victims, Male survivors*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Since Koss *et al*. first sampled college students in the 1980s (e.g. Koss and Dinero, 1989), this population has increasingly been targeted in examining the prevalence, precursors, and sequelae of sexual victimization. Rates of sexual victimization on college campuses are disturbingly high; sexual assault rates among college-aged women are four times that of women of other age groups (Moreno, 2015). A 2015 study surveying 27 colleges and universities found that 27.2 percent of the 150,000 female college seniors surveyed reported experiencing some form of unwanted sexual contact (Cantor *et al.*, 2015). While a great deal of much needed knowledge has been generated concerning female victims, there is a relative dearth of information about college men and their experiences as victims of sexual violence.

Though research consistently finds that women are more likely to experience sexual assault than men (e.g. Banyard *et al.*, 2007; Elliott *et al.*, 2004), rates in men are not negligible. Banyard *et al.* (2007) found approximately 8 percent of their male college student sample reported unwanted sexual experiences (Banyard *et al.*, 2007). In another study of college students, Tewksbury and Mustaine (2001) found that approximately 22 percent of their male sample self-reported experiencing some type of sexual assault. Rates wildly differ from study to study depending on how sexual assault is operationalized or framed within the broader study (Abbey *et al.*, 2005; Peterson *et al.*, 2011).

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Similar to their female counterparts, male victims of sexual violence are also at risk of significant negative psychological and physical health outcomes following their assault (Choudhary *et al.*, 2010; Davies, 2002; Davies *et al.*, 2010; Frazier, 1993). With significantly less research measuring and examining the sexual assault experiences of men, it is necessary to continue to explore the prevalence of these incidents, as well as understand the societal issues that might be influencing whether a male would disclose or report an incident to begin with. One factor that may impact disclosure among male victims is the pervasiveness of rape myths.

Rape myths

Rape myths, which are erroneous assumptions or beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists, have traditionally applied to women and serve to justify sexual violence (Burt, 1980). Actions by women, such as dressing provocatively, flirting, or being promiscuous, are all used by society as a means of explaining how a woman might provoke her own sexual assault through her actions or appearances (Fisher and Pina, 2013). Although women have been the target of many rape myths, there are also rape myths toward males as victims. Kassing *et al.* (2005) identify six typologies of male rape myths which include, but are not limited to, men being too physically overpowering to be raped, men being the instigators of sexual contact thus rape cannot occur, the idea that forced sexual contact is still enjoyable for men, and male rape only happens in prison. Furthermore, other research suggests that male victims of rape are blamed for their encounters because they did not defend themselves or fight back during an incident (Davies and Rogers, 2006; Weiss, 2010).

Although it is apparent that rape myths are present in society toward both male and female victims, there are gendered nuances in the form those myths take and in the ways in which they may impact victims. Javaid argues that the context of hegemonic masculinity, in which we all exist, leaves male victims of sexual assault with an additional crisis of identity and masculinity (Javaid, 2015, 2016a, 2017). Unlike women, men are expected to be able to physically defend themselves against unwanted (i.e. male) sexual attention, and to be receptive to any other (hetero) sexual advances; as such, these rape myths cut at the core of victims' masculinity (Davies and Rogers, 2006; Javaid, 2015, 2017; Weiss, 2010). Furthermore, because male victims have "failed" in upholding their manhood, they may be especially likely to experience shame (Weiss, 2010) and less likely to experience empathy and understanding from police or service providers (Javaid, 2016b, 2017). This may be especially true in cases where the perpetrator is female.

Weiss (2010) argues that men in particular are forced to renegotiate their gender and sexuality in the wake of their victimization, which can result in coping mechanisms designed to reclaim their masculinity. Unfortunately, this can include choosing not to report or seek help, which men are indeed less likely to do. Thus, rape myths may also serve as a barrier to reporting sexual victimization experiences of men by shaming them for not conforming to the traditional masculine gender roles. Indeed, Pino and Meier (1999) found that men are less likely to report rape when the situation is particularly jeopardizing to their sense of masculinity. However, feelings of shame or self-blame are not unique to men. Both college men and women report that common barriers to reporting included shame or embarrassment and fear of not being believed, and that men may additionally not report for fear of being perceived as gay (Sable *et al.*, 2006; Javaid, 2015). While the specific types of myths may differ, female and male rape myths share a commonality in that they are based largely on social expectations that individuals conform to traditional gender roles, and they are harmful to victims.

The present study

The present study focuses exclusively on sexual assault that occurs during college, and aims to expand on the research currently being conducted on male victims of sexual assault by including a direct comparison to undergraduate female victims. Consistent with large community data sets (e.g. Weiss, 2010), we hypothesized that women would report more instances of each type of sexual assault than men. We also examined students' endorsements of rape myths targeted at male and female victims. We hypothesized that individuals' endorsements of male rape myths would be positively correlated with traditional rape myths about female victims, as many female rape myths also pertain to the perceived violation of traditional or acceptable gender roles (Payne *et al.*, 1999). Additionally, we expect that men will be more likely to endorse both types of rape myths than women; a trend that has been well documented in the literature (Chapleau *et al.*, 2008; Schulze and Koon-Magnin, 2017; Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson, 1992). The research is mixed regarding whether male or female rape myths are more strongly endorsed, which likely has to do with the way they are operationalized in various studies (e.g. Davies and Rogers, 2006). As such, we had no a priori hypothesis regarding whether we would find differences in the endorsement of male vs female rape myths.

Method

Participants

Participants ($n = 526$) were recruited through Psychology and Criminology courses at a mid-sized university in rural Pennsylvania as part of the Pennsylvania Sexual Health and Risk Study. Psychology participants were recruited through the Psychology Subject Pool, which is comprised of undergraduate students enrolled in General Psychology courses. Participation in six hours of research through the Psychology Subject Pool is a requirement for all General Psychology students. Students received one hour of credit for their participation in the current study. Psychology students in upper-level statistics courses and all undergraduate criminology students were contacted for participation via e-mail and chose to participate in the study voluntarily.

In total, 14 participants were removed from the original study because they provided consent but did not complete any measures. In total, 11 participants from the original sample were permanently removed from future analyses because they had finished in less than five minutes or more than 400. After piloting the survey, we believed that a completion time of less than five minutes was an indication that participants had not actually read the questions. Participants who took more than 400 minutes were removed due to concerns that having the survey open for so long presented the possibility of data contamination in other ways (e.g. someone else getting on the survey, the participant talking about the survey with others before completing it, etc.). Another 14 participants were removed from the data set for rating a score of "less than average" on an item assessing the validity of their provided survey responses. For the present analyses, six additional participants were removed because they had not completed any of the measures addressed in this paper. Additionally, as this paper focuses on binary gender differences, an additional three participants were removed because they had either not identified a gender at all or identified as transgender.

Procedures

Participants received a link to the survey (either via the Psychology Subject Pool system for Psychology 101 students or via e-mail for all others) and were provided with information about the study, including possible benefits and risks, directions on how to participate, and contact information of the primary investigators if participants should have any questions or concerns prior to participation. Participants consented to take the study by clicking "Agree" and then proceeded to the rest of the survey. After completing the survey, participants were provided with debriefing material including a list of victims' services, references for a few articles relevant to the study, and contact information for the primary investigators if they should have any questions or concerns following their participation. The methods for this study were approved by the institution's ethics review board.

Measures

Though participants answered many questions related to various aspects of sexual health as part of the larger Pennsylvania Sexual Health and Risk Study, only those used in the present paper are described in detail here.

Demographics. Participants answered standard demographic questions including age, biological sex, sexual orientation, race, and year in college (see Table I).

Acceptance of rape myths. To assess acceptance of rape myths directed at female victims, we used the 22-item updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) (Payne *et al.*, 1999; McMahon and Farmer, 2011). The original IRMA measure was updated to reflect modern language used on college campuses and to capture more subtle rape myths. The measure consists of four subscales – "She Asked For It," "He Didn't Mean To," "It Wasn't Really Rape," and "She Lied." For this paper, we used the overall composite score.

To assess rape myths regarding male victims, three items were added at the end of the IRMA. In this study, we focused on myths pertaining mostly to female perpetrators. While many may assume that sexual assault is overwhelmingly committed against men by other men, several studies have indicated that many women admit to perpetration, and as many as 45 percent of male assaults may be perpetrated by a female partner (Fisher and Pina, 2013; Weiss, 2010). Items included: "Men are never the victims of rape," "A woman could never sexually assault a man because men are always interested in sex," and "It's physically impossible for a woman to rape a man." These three items collectively had a Cronbach's α of 0.89 and the mean was taken to create a composite male rape myths score. All the rape myth items, including IRMA, were on a scale of one to six, with one corresponding to "strongly agree," and six corresponding to "strongly disagree," such that higher scores indicated lower levels of rape myth acceptance.

Sexual assault. Participants were asked several questions pertaining to experiences of sexual assault that occurred while attending college. Items assessed for experiences of forced sexual acts, coerced sexual acts, attempted but unsuccessful sexual acts, unwanted touching,

Table I Participant demographic information

Demographic	*Sample n*	*Percentage of Sample*
Biological sex		
Men	236	44.9
Women	290	55.1
Age		
18	140	26.5
19	226	42.8
20	90	17.0
21	39	7.4
⩾22	18	5.9
Not identified	2	0.4
Race/ethnicity		
African-American	64	12.1
Caucasian	420	79.5
Hispanic	20	3.8
Asian	8	1.5
Other	16	3.0
Sexual orientation		
Straight	497	94.1
Lesbian	8	1.5
Gay	5	0.9
Bisexual	18	3.4
Year in school		
Freshman	340	64.4
Sophomore	113	21.4
Junior	45	8.5
Senior	28	5.3
Not identified	2	0.4
Department		
Psychology	473	89.6
Criminology	55	10.4

and any type of unwanted or uninvited sexual penetration (see Table II). These measures were modeled off of measures from the National College Women Sexual Victimization study of college women (see Fisher *et al.*, 2000, 2010b). These items used a behavioral definitions approach rather than directly asking students if they had ever experienced rape, for example, as individual may define terms differently. Since Koss *et al.*'s first looked at college students in the 1980s, the behavioral definition approach has been used to gain more accurate measures of sexual victimization experiences (Fisher *et al.*, 2010a). Possible responses included "yes," "no," and "unsure." The "unsure" option was included to account for cases in which the victim was unaware of the assault while it happened (e.g. due to intoxication, being unconscious, etc.) but suspected that they had been assaulted, or other situations that were unwanted but perhaps confusing.

Results

Prevalence of sexual assault

We examined each type of sexual assault separately, cross-tabulating the data by gender and then performed χ^2 analyses to compare sexual assault rates. The reported prevalence of attempted and completed rape and non-penetrative sexual assault are reported in Table II. As expected, women were more likely to report non-penetrative sexual assault (item 3 in Table II) $\chi^2(2) = 23.56$, $p < 0.001$, and general unwanted sexual contact (item 5) $\chi^2(2) = 29.72$, $p < 0.001$. However, in our sample males and females reported similar rates of rape and attempted rape, χ^2 $(2) = 2.82$, $p = 0.24$ and χ^2 $(2) = 0.75$, $p = 0.69$, respectively. There was also no significant difference in terms of sexual coercion (item 4 in Table II), χ^2 $(2) = 0.76$, $p = 0.69$.

Rape myth acceptance

As predicted, endorsement of traditional rape myths, in which the victim is female, was positively correlated with endorsement of male-focused rape myths, $r = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$. Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in rape myth endorsement. Men were more likely to endorse both traditional rape myths, $t(522) = -6.38$, $p < 0.001$, and male-focused rape myths, $t(425.35) = -4.63$, $p < 0.001$. That being said, overall acceptance of male rape myths was relatively low among both men ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.08$) and women ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 0.81$). Recall that a score of six indicates the highest level of disagreement with rape myths while a one indicates the strongest endorsement. Female rape

Table II Numbers of students who have experienced unwanted sexual contact since coming to college

Since coming to college...		*Male n (%)*	*Female n (%)*	*Total n (%)*
Did anyone ever make you have vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse, including penetrating you with a penis, a finger, or a foreign object, by using force or threatening to harm you?	No	226 (96.2)	270 (93.8)	496 (94.8)
	Yes	5 (2.1)	14 (4.9)	19 (3.6)
	Unsure	4 (1.7)	4 (1.4)	8 (1.5)
Has anyone ever attempted but not succeeded in making you have vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse, including penetrating you with a penis, a finger, or a foreign object, by using force or threatening to harm you?	No	221 (94.0)	264 (92.3)	485 (93.1)
	Yes	10 (4.3)	17 (5.9)	27 (5.2)
	Unsure	4 (1.7)	5 (1.7)	9 (1.7)
Have you ever experienced any unwanted or uninvited touching of a sexual nature, or threats or attempts of such touching, including forced kissing, touching of private parts, grabbing, fondling, and rubbing up against you in a sexual way?	No	212 (90.6)	219 (76.3)	431 (82.7)
	Yes	17 (7.3)	65 (22.6)	82 (15.7)
	Unsure	5 (2.1)	3 (1.0)	8 (1.5)
Has anyone ever tried to make you have sexual intercourse or sexual contact when you did not want to by making either threats of nonphysical punishment or promises of a reward if you complied sexually?	No	222 (94.9)	268 (93.1)	490 (93.9)
	Yes	10 (4.3)	17 (5.9)	27 (5.2)
	Unsure	2 (0.8)	3 (1.0)	5 (1.0)
Is there any type of unwanted or uninvited sexual intercourse or physical contact that you ever experienced?	No	220 (94.8)	234 (81.3)	454 (87.3)
	Yes	6 (2.6)	50 (17.4)	56 (10.8)
	Unsure	6 (2.6)	4 (1.4)	10 (1.9)

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding myths were not accepted on average, but were also not strongly rejected by men ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.90$) or women ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.88$).

Though the scales used to measure male vs female rape myths were quite different, we were still curious whether we would observe a difference in participants' endorsement of each. On average, for the combined sample, participants were more likely to be accepting of female rape myths (overall $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.93$) than male rape myths (overall $M = 5.35$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(525) = 22.22$, $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine gender differences in both the prevalence of sexual assault during college, and the acceptance of gender-based rape myths. Though not an entirely new topic, there are still relatively few studies that focus on this specific population of male victims and directly contrast them with women. Replications, particularly those with large sample sizes like ours, are absolutely necessary to allow us to make generalizations about this population, convince colleges and universities that male victimization is a serious concern, and elucidate the extent to which harmful myths are present among students.

Contrary to our expectations, not all types of sexual assault were more likely to be experienced by women. Though there was a higher incidence of non-penetrative sexual assaults among the women in our sample, both women and men reported comparable levels of rape or attempted rape, which is generally not the case in community samples (e.g. Weiss, 2010). While this may be a fluke of our data, we are not alone in finding similar rates of forced or attempted intercourse between undergraduate men and women. In a similar study of college students, Hines *et al.* (2012) found significant gender differences in general sexual assault, but not rape or attempted rape. In a multi-national study of more than 7,000 undergraduates, Hines (2007) found the same pattern, adding support to the notion that our findings may reflect an actual phenomenon unique to a college population and not just spurious data. At the very least, this suggests that in future research it would be informative to analyze distinct types of sexual assault separately. If they are collapsed into one composite sexual assault score, as is frequently reported (e.g. Banyard *et al.*, 2007; Elliott *et al.*, 2004), we may miss important distinctions such as this.

Though rates of completed or attempted rape were relatively low for both genders, nearly 23 percent of female participants reported experiencing other types of sexual assault. This number is consistent with other reports of campus sexual assaults (Koss *et al.*, 1987; Fisher *et al.*, 2000; Krebs *et al.*, 2009), but we would also point out that the majority of students in our sample are freshmen. High rates among this relatively young group suggest that these rates would likely be even higher if we had sampled mostly seniors.

Rates would also be higher if we assume that answers of "unsure" actually represent an instance of sexual assault. This option was included, in part, because so many assaults take place in the context of drinking (Abbey, 2002) and also because we have personally known several individuals who said they believed they were assaulted, but could not remember exactly what had happened. The addition of this option allows us to get a sense of the extent to which college students are finding themselves in a position where they suspect they have been assaulted, but for whatever reason are not entirely sure. In some cases, the number of "unsure" responses was equal to the definitive reports of assault. Again, we suspect that many of these cases may involve alcohol, but there may be other explanations as well. Future research should explore cases of uncertainty in order to see under which conditions they are most likely to occur and how those who suspect they have been assaulted, but are not certain, cope with that situation.

As predicted, acceptance of female rape myths correlated with acceptance of male rape myths, which is in line with the work of Davies *et al.* (2012). This correlation also supports the theory that female, as well as male rape myths are fueled by similar underlying beliefs and attitudes. Indeed, several studies have noted the relationship between sex-role stereotyping, benevolent sexism, or gender-role traditionality and the acceptance of rape myths (Burt, 1980; Davies and Rogers, 2006; White and Yamawaki, 2009). Fisher and Pina (2013) note that this is in contrast to traditional feminist explanations of rape, which often fail to take into account male victims and would not necessarily predict that these two types of rape myths would be so strongly correlated. This correlation and the fact that men are more likely to endorse both myths is in keeping with theories of hegemonic masculinity posited by Javaid and others (Fisher and Pina, 2013; Javaid, 2015, 2016a; Weiss, 2010).

Limitations

As with all studies that employ self-report, there is the possibility that participants were not entirely honest. This can be especially problematic in studies that ask about sexual topics (Fenton *et al.*, 2001). We attempted to mitigate the impact of any social desirability bias by making the survey completely anonymous and allowing participants to take it in the privacy of their own home. Participants were also instructed that they could skip any questions that made them feel uncomfortable and six participants, who had otherwise completed the questionnaire, appeared to do so. Though this is a rather small portion of the overall sample, it still suggests that some missing data may not be missing at random. It may be that those cases represent further assaults and they were too uncomfortable to answer, or perhaps they just ran out of steam at the end of the survey, but we cannot be sure.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of context surrounding reported assaults. It would be especially helpful to know more about the instances of assault against the men in our sample. Given the myths that women cannot rape men, or that all cases of male rape are perpetrated by other men, we wish we had asked more questions about the perpetrators of each assault. We do know that the majority of male victims in our sample (23 out of 26) identified as heterosexual, though that still does not tell us who their perpetrators were. A few studies that did address context found many similarities with assaults on women in terms of demographics, the presence of alcohol, drug use, and acquaintance with the perpetrator (Banyard *et al.*, 2007; Tewksbury and Mustaine, 2001; Turchik, 2012; Weiss, 2010). Future research should include a more in-depth analysis of the context surrounding the assaults of college men, which may be different from assaults experienced by other samples of adult men. For example, veterans and inmates report higher rates of sexual assault than the general population, and the situations in which these assaults occur is likely different from assault in the general community (Peterson *et al.*, 2011). How college men compare to these and community-based samples is a topic for future research.

Finally, though we did compare participants' acceptance of female vs male rape myths and found that they were more accepting of female rape myths, we caution against generalizing this finding. In Davies and Roger's (2006) review of the literature, they found that men were often blamed more than female victims depending on the way the questions were framed. However, other studies have found that victim blaming and the minimization of male rape tends to be higher if the perpetrator is female (Davies *et al.*, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 1988; Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson, 1992), which would suggest that acceptance of male rape myths might actually be elevated in our study. We only used three questions to assess male rape myth acceptance, and those focused almost exclusively on beliefs regarding sexual assaults perpetrated by women. By contrast, the scale used to assess female rape myths was much more varied and had many questions that probably felt more socially acceptable to endorse. More research is needed to assess the extent to which there are true differences in the acceptance of rape myths for male vs female victims and under what conditions. Ideally, these would involve a randomly assigned, between-subjects design with more comparable rape-myth scales. However, using truly comparable scales may be difficult given that the specific myths differ slightly by gender of the victims as well as the offender (Fisher and Pina, 2013; Javaid, 2015, 2017).

Implications

Compared with that of women, the sexual assault of men is still an understudied phenomenon. The present study adds to a growing body of literature on this topic and supports the theory that individuals often endorse both male and female rape myths simultaneously, suggesting that there are common underlying attitudes or beliefs supporting both. This suggests that in order to address rape myths for any gender, and the victim blaming that often accompany those myths, we may need to look to beliefs about gender roles and acceptance of violence (Burt, 1980; Davies *et al.*, 2012; Fisher and Pina, 2013). While many sexual assault prevention programs already address this, they are often focused on women as victims and may fail to point out how detrimental sex-role stereotyping can be for males as well (Weisz and Black, 2009). This is especially important for men to hear, as they are more likely to endorse rape myths when compared to women, regardless of the victim's gender. In the case that they are victimized themselves, male rape myths may make it all the harder for them to come forward and seek help (Fisher and Pina, 2013; Pino and Meier, 1999; Sable *et al.*, 2006).

Further, and somewhat surprisingly, our results supported the work of Hines *et al.* (Hines, 2007; Hines *et al.*, 2012), which found that college men actually report similar levels of rape and attempted rape to college women, though their rate of overall sexual assault is much lower. Together, there is mounting evidence that college sexual assault is not a strictly female experience and, as such, the experiences of male victims need to be affirmed and more adequately addressed on college campuses. There also needs to be more research into the context surrounding these assaults in order to create and implement more effective prevention programs.

Finally, we concur with Javaid (2016b) that by ignoring male rape, "gender roles of men and women are reinforced instead of being tackled" (p. 732). The focus on female victimization to the exclusion of males, particularly in campus programing, may reinforce male rape myths, which are inextricably tied to the gender role stereotypes that promote violence against women. In order to promote healthy, equitable relationships among college students, we need to address the underlying views that promote the minimization of sexual assault against anyone. Finally, we are unaware of any systematic review of campus support services available to men, but it is likely that many resources for sexual assault victims are explicitly oriented toward women. Javaid (2016b) argues that many community-based sexual assault agencies operate on a traditional feminist platform that makes it difficult for employees to know how to effectively advocate for male victims, and may even lead to further traumatization. While Javaid focuses on men raped by men, this sentiment is especially true in cases where the perpetrator is a woman. Campus-based efforts to address sexual assault will need to be sensitive to the fact that, while there are undoubtedly many similarities (e.g. Banyard *et al.*, 2007; Tewksbury and Mustaine, 2001; Weiss, 2010), there may also be differences in the experiences of men and women. In order to help these male victims, there first needs to be an acknowledgment that the assault of college men is a serious issue happening with more frequency than we might expect.

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