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The strategy-identity nexus: The relevance of their temporal interplay to climate change

By Majken Schultz¹

Abstract

Grand Challenges has initiated a search for new solutions at the interplay between fields and disciplines which previously have been separated. In this essay, I argue that a further development of a temporal interplay between strategy and organizational identity may enrich studies of Grand Challenges, exemplified by how actors respond to climate change. This interplay is motivated by recent elaborations of the differences in temporality between strategy and organizational identity from a distinction between a dominant focus on the future (strategy) or the past (organizational identity) to a conceptualization of the differences in temporal structures between them. Using the quest for management research to contribute to the fight against climate change, the essay suggests how sustained temporal interplay between strategy and organizational identity advance our understanding of how organizations may act now for distant future climate goals. The essay suggests questions for future research focused on making an impact.

Introduction

The articulation of Grand Challenges, most notably the urgent call for action in the IPCC reports on climate change (see link) poses new questions to science. Within management research, some scholars emphasize how addressing Grand Challenges requires new forms of collaboration among researchers across established topics and disciplines (e.g., George et al, 2016). Others argue how scholars must develop concepts that reflect the complexity and uncertainty of Grand Challenges (e.g., Fabrio et al.; 2015). Also, research has shown that one of biggest challenges in responding to climate change is the ability of actors to act now on commitments that reach into a distant future (e.g., Augustine et al., 2019; Bansal and DesJardine, 2014; Slawinski and Bansal, 2015; Wright and Nyberg, 2017). For example, an increasing number of corporate actors have formulated Science Based Targets (see link) in which they make binding commitments 15–30 years into the future - in most cases - without knowing how to reach those targets. At the same time, they must continue to

¹ This paper is drawing upon the ideas behind the research project “Making Distant Futures Actionable,” which I manage with Tor Hernes at Copenhagen Business School. It is funded by Novo Nordisk Foundation and involves both a local research team and several international partners. See more at <https://www.cbs.dk/en/research/departments-and-centres/department-of-organization/centres-and-groups/centre-organization-and-time-cot/projects>. Our discussions are a very important source of inspiration. In the writing of the essay, I want to thank the editor and two reviewers for very helpful and constructive feed-back.

develop strategies that define specific guidelines for action in a near future (e.g., Hernes & Schultz, 2020). In my view this poses new question to management research with respect to how corporate actors become better at connecting their aspirations for a distant zero-carbon future with their short-term, actionable strategies.

As pointed out by Nyberg and Wright (2020) in their analysis of management research, there is a need for much more management research on how managers, organizations and communities engage with climate change. One way to inspire new research is to draw upon the extensive knowledge within established fields and explore if the interplay between them open new avenues for research. In this essay, I argue how developments in the theorizing of temporality in social sciences (e.g., Bluedorn, 2002; Emirbeyer & Mische, 1998; Hernes, 2014, 2022) offer a novel view on the interplay between strategy and organizational identity, which is particularly relevant to how actors respond to climate change. By focusing on differences in temporal depth and enactment of time horizons between strategy and organizational identity, management research may advance our understanding of how actors may act now for a distant zero-carbon future.

For the most part, strategy and organizational identity have been developed separately enhanced by distinctive journals and academic communities. Strategy is a comprehensive discipline with a long history and multiple perspectives, while organization identity emerged as a central concept in organization studies in the mid 1980'ties, most notably by Albert & Whetten's (1985) definition of organizational identity as the "central, distinctive and enduring" elements of "who we are as an organization.". However, the concept of identity has a much wider presence in philosophy, psychology, and sociology (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2004). The temporal interplay between strategy and organizational identity, as argued in this essay, is embedded in more recent discussions of the nexus between strategy and identity, in particular the special issue of Strategic Organization in 2020 on the strategy-identity nexus (Ravasi et al., 2020). Also, a few early studies addressed the intertwined relationship between strategy and identity, such as the study by Dutton and Dukerich (1991) on how organizational identity influences responses to strategic issues caused by homelessness. Another example is a study of how identity is intertwined with strategy, "such that an organization may enact and express a valued identity through strategy and may infer, modify, or affirm an identity from strategy and the responses it evokes" (Ashforth and Mael, 1996: 33).

In the introduction to the special issue on the strategy-identity nexus, the editors refer to the difference between *doing* (strategy) and *being* (organizational identity)(Ravasi et al., 2020: 5). In my view this distinction highlights the strategic emphasis on actionability versus the origin of

organizational identity in reflections on collective self-definition (Pratt et al., 2016). Others have emphasized the difference in temporal orientation between strategy and organizational identity. For example, Simpson and Sillince (2010) argue that strategy focuses on the *future*, while identity is concerned with the *past*. This is reflected in the definition of organizational identity by Albert and Whetten as “enduring”, while classic strategy concerns achievement of future goals and plans. The difference in temporal orientation is illustrated in a study of how an organization respond to identity threats. Here, actors use identity cues from the past to motivate stakeholders to act in certain ways in the strategy for the future (e.g., Ravasi & Schultz, 2006, see also Suddaby et al., 2010).

The ambition of this essay is to further develop the strategy-identity nexus by advancing the discussion of their complementary differences drawing on the conceptualization of temporality (e.g., Ancona et al., 2001; Bluedorn, 2002; Emirbeyer & Mische, 1998; Hernes, 2014, 2022). I argue that there is a great untapped potential for researching how strategy and identity may reinforce or thwart each other, as organizations are searching for new ways to address the future. First, I discuss how the unlocking of the nexus between strategy and identity has benefited from the historical turn in organization studies and the conceptualization of temporality in relation to organizational identity. Second, I elaborate the notion of temporal interplay between strategy and organization identity drawing on my own research. Finally, I discuss the conditions for how actors may create sustained interplay between strategy and identity and suggest additional areas for future research that become even more crucial as companies must cope with climate change. Last, but not least, I make a disclaimer: organizational identity and particularly strategy are comprehensive constructs, which in no way are being treated in their full complexity.

Unlocking the strategy-identity nexus

A first step in the conceptualization of the strategy-identity nexus is a move toward greater appreciation of the complementary differences between them. In my view, the historical turn in organization studies generates interest in how history weighs in on strategic directions for the future. Moreover, the conceptualization of the differences between strategy and identity is enabled by the theorizing of temporality in management research, i.e., how organizational actors address the connections among past, present, and future as they move through time (e.g., Ancona et al., 2001; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hernes, 2014, 2022). Thus, the nexus becomes increasingly explicit and developed in terms of a forward-directionality from past to future in early studies of organizational history, toward a multi-directionality between past and future in studies reflecting a

temporal view. This, in turn, challenges the rather binary distinction in the temporal orientation of strategy (future) versus identity (past).

The strategic use of history

Proponents of the historical turn in organization studies argue that organization and strategy studies would benefit from including insights from history (e.g., Kieser, 1994; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Suddaby et al., 2020). In my view, this also has implications for our understanding of the nexus between strategy and identity.

One example is the concept of rhetorical organizational history, which Suddaby, Foster, and Trank (2010: 215) suggest and define as, “the strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm.” The emphasis on history as rhetoric also appears in a study by Brunninge (2009) of how managers narrated the central idea of a company’s historical origin (here: decentralization). The author concludes that when managers narrate history, “history becomes a powerful resource that can be instrumentalized by actors to legitimize or delegitimize possible strategic routes for the future” (Brunninge, 2009:23). Other studies show how managers selected or deselected specific elements in the organizations’ history to legitimize a future strategy, such as how actors used strategic elements from Canada’s national history to legitimize a corporate narrative for the Canadian fast food chain Tim Horton (Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, and Wiebe, 2011; see also Kroezen and Keulen, 2012).

While these studies argue that history is used either to legitimize a future strategy or as a persuasive strategy by management, they are less explicit regarding identity. However, in most empirical studies of the strategic use of history, organizational history bears strong resemblance to identity in that history is translated into a central idea or significant ideational elements central to organizational self-definition. In addition, the emphasis on how history is narrated suggests that managers select and deselect aspects of history to create a more coherent narrative of what the organization is about (e.g., Anteby and Molnär, 2012). In my view, studies of how organizational actors deliberately use history to influence their future resemble discussions of how identity may serve as a reservoir of memories that actors may use to influence future strategies (e.g., Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Ravasi and Philips, 2011). Thus, a historically informed view on the nexus between strategy and identity suggest that actors use selected identity elements derived from the past to enable and legitimize a strategy for the future. All other things equal, identity is assumed to be associated

with the past and strategy is associated with the future. Together, they form a mutually influential trajectory.

Connecting past and future

While the discussion of the strategic use of history point at important linkages between the different temporal orientations of strategy and organizational identity, the development of a process-based, temporal view challenges the temporal orientation of organizational identity as directed towards the past only (e.g., Bluedorn, 2002; Emirbeyer and Mische, 1998; Hernes, 2014, 2022; Langley et al., 2013).

First, the concept of organizational identity itself expands from emphasis on the past to what we might become as an organization in the future. Process-based scholars emphasize that organizing is embedded in becoming as ongoing agency (e.g., Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Langley et al., 2013). An implication for organizational identity suggests that the collective reflections of “who we are” not only relies on reflections on our past trajectory but also entails ongoing reflections about who we may become in the future (e.g., Schultz et al., 2012). Also, drawing on Emirbeyer and Mische (1998), a temporal view on organizational identity includes questioning how actors project imaginations of who they might become in the future.

Second, while Albert and Whetten (1985) alluded to a trajectory in their emphasis on organizational identity as “enduring,” they conceived identity as a one-directional, accumulative movement from the past toward the future. In contrast, a temporal view stresses how actors make connections back and forth between the past and future as they navigate in their own time (e.g., Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016). Compared with the use of history, the past is not constituted by elements readily available to be selected or deselected. Rather, it requires active construction and shaping by actors as it is evoked in the present. Hence, identity becomes interwoven in the organizational trajectory, which is continuously constructed and reconstructed in the ongoing present as actors move through time (e.g., Basque and Langley, 2018; Schultz and Hernes, 2013). This implies that the nexus becomes more dynamic and is expected to change across time.

This rethinking of the temporal orientation of organizational identity to include orientation towards the future extends the temporal depth of organizational identity, defined as the distance between the past and future horizon (Bluedorn and Standifer, 2006). The extension suggests that projections of who we might become in the future may well exceed the habitual three-to-five-year

strategic horizon. This, in turn, implies that the temporal depth of organizational identity potentially may comprise multiple strategies with different time horizons.

Although, they do not refer to organizational identity, Kaplan and Orlikowski make a related argument, suggesting that a “compelling strategic narrative” may serve as a frame for several business strategies (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2014; see also, Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013). A strategic narrative depends on actors’ ability to create coherent connections between past, present, and future, which in my interpretation is enabled by reflections on organizational identity. According to Kaplan and Orlikowski (2014), strategic narratives are particularly needed in situations of uncertainty, where strategies must be more flexible in the short-term, while the long-term directionality must be compelling and plausible. Their contribution suggests that an identity reaching into both the past and future may constitute the strategy-identity nexus and frame multiple strategies.

A related example is found in a study of LEGO Group by Schultz and Hernes (2013) showing how the reconstructing of organization identity entails movements back-and-forth between past and future. In this process, the temporal depth of identity is expanded enabling the framing of multiple new strategies. The starting point In LEGO Group was a search for a new future after a decade of eroding beliefs in the classic brick-based core products followed by financial difficulties at the turn of the century. In this search, the management team somewhat accidentally came across forgotten stories, ideas, and artifacts from the distant, founding past. They became important reminders of what kind of company LEGO had been and could become. Consequently, they engaged in a more careful evoking of identity cues from the past (conceptualized as textual, material, and oral memory forms by Schultz & Hernes, 2013:5). These identity cues inspired the becoming of a future identity dedicated to “systematic creativity” combining physical and digital bricks. This future identity was also drawing upon deliberate efforts to imagine the future of children’s play, for example by visiting the Learning Lab at MIT and hearing other thought leaders arguing that kids in the future will need “systematic construction” skills. Thus, a shifting focus back and forth between past and future enabled the management team to keep extending the temporal depth of the organizational identity. The dedication to become a company for “systematic creativity” set the direction for a massive rollout of multiple strategies. These strategies were targeting different time horizons spanning from an immediate reduced brand portfolio to a more short-term outsourcing of manufacturing, and a more long-term aspiration to create a platform company in which the existing business model was turned upside down.

Together these developments influence the conditions for the strategy-identity nexus first by suggesting that organizational identity may reach into both the distant past and future and potentially serve as a framing for strategies with multiple time horizons. Second, the forward-directionality of the nexus is challenged in that actors may move back and forth between past and future in ways that transform how they act in the present.

Nexus as temporal interplay

The impetus in my own research to further develop the strategy-identity nexus was the call for a special issue of *Strategic Organization* in 2018 on the strategy-identity nexus (see Ravasi et al., 2020). At the time, Tor Hernes and myself were engaged in exploring how temporality may enrich central topics in management research².

Since 2009, I had embarked on a longitudinal study of the transformation process of Carlsberg Group with Mary Jo Hatch. The core of the study included the five-year period after a mega-acquisition in 2009 known as the “transformation journey” (2009-2013) (Hatch et al., 2015). The company ambition was to create a new, more shared global organizational identity as a brewer with a “thirst for great”. However, the emerging identity increasingly became a source of opposition to the new strategy aiming to turn Carlsberg into “the fastest growing beer company in the world”. Proponents of the emerging identity found support in Carlsberg’s past as a quality brewer, which was perceived as conflicting with the aim to become an efficient producer of “liquids” role-modelling strategies of leading FastMoverConsumerGoods companies such as Unilever and Procter and Gamble. The new strategy became dominant, while aspirations for a new identity as an ambitious global brewer with a proud heritage never really took hold. In 2015 a new top management team was appointed to create a new and different strategy, as Carlsberg did not manage to deliver on its growth promises. The special issue on the strategy-identity nexus prompted Hernes and I to return to the field, collect new data, and revisit the existing extensive data base to study how the nexus was enacted before and after the “transformation journey” (Schultz and Hernes, 2020).

Complimentary temporal structures

To enable enough precision in the conceptualization of the nexus, we conceived the complimentary differences between strategy and identity in terms of specified temporal structures, defined as

² For a further reference to our activities, kindly look at this link to Centre for Organization and Time <https://www.cbs.dk/en/research/departments-and-centres/departments-of-organization/centres-and-groups/centre-organization-and-time-cot>

temporal depth, time horizons, and their empirical manifestations (Schultz and Hernes, 2020: 109; see also Bluedorn and Standifer, 2006; Kunisch et al., 2017; Orlikowski and Yates, 2002).

We characterized the temporal depth of strategy as oriented toward the near future, often defined by plans and programs, while identity stretches into both the distant past and the distant future. Likewise, the time horizon of strategy reflects sequential beginnings and endings of actionable periods, while the horizons of identity are open or defined by events marking past experiences or imagined future states. Thus, we argued that strategic time horizons are defined by targets with specific, chronological horizons (e.g., Kunisch et al., 2017) in contrast to the time horizons of identity, which are more concerned with a “state of being”. Organizational identity may refer to past and future events that stretchers through periods of chronological time, such as a “founding events”.

Finally, we made a translation of both constructs, which reflect how they in our interpretation were manifested empirically. Strategy is the least controversial, as it is most often explicitly manifested through strategic plans, programs, and roadmaps, such as the Sail22 corporate strategy or the “Funding the Journey” cost-cutting program in Carlsberg Group. In contrast, identity is more implicit in that it is not part of the corporate vocabulary. However, drawing on Albert and Whetten’s (1985) definition of organizational identity as manifested through identity claims we translated organizational identity as “binding commitments” reaching into both past and future (see also Whetten, 2006). In a corporate setting, identity claims are often expressed in various combinations of “core values”, “purpose”, and “narratives” and at times even “strategic narratives”. We treated those manifestations as identity claims, when they elaborated values connecting past and future in a narrative form. Although there is an extensive independent theorizing about narratives (e.g., Fenton & Langley, 2011; Vaara et al., 2016), it is the ability of narratives to connect “who we were” and “who we aspire to become” that resonates with organizational identity. Also, the classic concept of “purpose” has pervaded the business and consulting vocabulary, spearheaded by practice-based thought leaders such as Sinek (2009). Here, the question of “why are we here?” have encouraged multiple companies, such as Carlsberg Group to reflect on what it requires to be relevant to society in the future.

Sustained temporal interplay

Drawing on these differences between the temporal structures of strategy and identity, we analyzed the strategy-identity nexus in two additional periods, one a period of regional growth before the mega-merger (2000-2004), the other the period defined by new management after the failed global growth

strategy (2015-2018). We suggested *temporal interplay* as the conceptualization of the strategy-identity nexus based in the analysis of connections between their temporal structures. We were able to show three modes of temporal interplay, in which nexus could be both *punctuated*, as in the occasional connections between two otherwise separate processes; *subsumed*, in which one dominates the other; or *sustained*, in which strategy and identity were mutually reinforcing.

Sustained temporal interplay occurred as actor's deliberately pursued ongoing connections between strategy and identity, as found when they embarked on a new strategy from 2015. The process was spearheaded by the new management team but entailed comprehensive involvement across the company. For the first time, the company stretched the corporate strategy 7 years into the future, which was framed by the aspiration to recover and renew Carlsberg's identity heritage as an entrepreneurial, research-driven, and responsible brewer. It became articulated as a "Purpose" called "Brewing for a better today and tomorrow" reaching into 2030 and beyond (see Schultz and Hernes, 2020: 117, see also link). In turn, the ambition to link corporate strategy to the "Purpose" compelled actors to articulate identity claims that were more committing and well-defined than previous claims, enabling strategies to work as "proof points" for a better future for brewing. Finally, the longer time horizon for corporate strategy became an umbrella for multiple strategic programs with different time horizons, reflecting differences in actionability and urgency (e.g., different horizons for strategic targets in restructuring/cost-cutting versus diversity and inclusion programs).

Together, the temporal interplay occurred

[When] strategy includes multiple horizons and greater temporal depth, while identity has more defined horizons and a temporal depth spanning the distant past and future. In a sustained mode of interplay, strategy is meaningfully framed by identity, while strategy serves to enact identity. (Schultz and Hernes, 2020:106)

Thus, a temporal interplay between strategy and identity may help both concepts overcome their inherent limitations. Strategy becomes more complex, meaningful, and better connected to long-term aspirational identity, often expressed as purpose, while identity becomes less lofty and non-committing and more aligned with the actionability of strategy.

Fighting climate change through sustained temporal interplay?

It has become evident in discussions of climate change that corporate actors must become better at connecting the goals for a zero-carbon distant future with their more short-term, actionable strategies. Scholars have long argued how easily long-term goals may become victims of short-termism (e.g.,

Laverty, 1996; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015); how aspirations to fight climate change may become “normalized” and absorbed into ongoing practices (e.g., Wright and Nyberg, 2017), or simply just ignored outside of purposes for legitimacy. The much-cited “blah, blah, blah” speech at COP26 by Greta Thunberg (see link) expresses the need for society to act now in ways that are relevant and impactful for distant future goals. Such impact requires planned strategic action and comprehensive programs with different time horizons, which are framed by long-term climate concerns and narrated in ways that engage corporations, their employees, and other stakeholders. This is exactly what sustained temporal interplay between strategy and identity might enable.

Making distant futures actionable

Temporal interplay between strategy and organizational identity has the potential to offer a more existential meaning to the numerous strategies needed to realize who we might become in a zero-carbon future, which in turn may motivate actors to persist in linking strategies to the long-term climate goals.

No matter how they are articulated, identity claims have the potential to shape projections of what a zero-carbon future might look like in ways that go beyond specific strategic targets (related arguments in Augustine et al., 2019; Hernes and Schultz, 2020). Many climate goals, such as the Science Based Targets, are based upon rather technical commitments (e.g., scope 1, 2, and 3 in reduction of emissions,) whereas they say little about what kind of “future being” a company strives for. For example, narrating how central values of sustainability and innovation, can be enacted in a zero-carbon future may generate a belief that agency now matters in avoiding the dystopia of a much warmer future. Also, identity claims possess the ability to forge connections between distant past and future, which may create and experience of continuity in situations, where actors are confronting a disturbing and uncertain future. Here, recent studies suggest that a temporal interplay between strategy and identity also poses questions about how organizational actors evoke and/or leverage their past in preparing for the distant future (e.g., Bowden et al., 2019).

Likewise, the complexity and uncertainty of climate change imply that companies simultaneously must engage in multiple strategies with different time horizons, such as between midterm business strategy, a more long-term sustainability/environmental strategy, and perhaps a short-term strategy for a more circular mode of operating. Here, sustained temporal interplay with identity creates a framing of multiple strategies and enhances connections between business strategy and sustainability strategy, which otherwise easily become separated.

Thus, a temporal view of the strategy-identity nexus provides a conceptual underpinning for how actors may forge connections between distant future climate goals and their actionable strategies. Moreover, I expect that the ability to create compelling narratives becomes even more important in the future, as narrative can both express a temporal trajectory spanning distant pasts and futures (e.g., Hernes et al., 2021) and create coherence among multiple actors and their concerns for the distant future (Fenton and Langley, 2011; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013).

Avenues for future research

Obviously, there is a need for more research on whether the strategy-identity nexus provides a platform that enables companies to sustain their pursuit of distant future climate goals, making them more actionable.

Empirical studies have focused on established business organizations with a bias toward companies with a long history (e.g., Bansal & Slawinski, 2015; Schultz & Hernes, 2020), albeit with a tendency to explain why climate goals are not becoming realized (Wright & Nyberg, 2016). In the current situation, I would encourage more research on companies with the most ambitious climate goals in their industries, such as those with the most comprehensive Science-based Targets. Such actors have established highly formalized ways of planning and executing strategies, just as they often possess the resources and the inclination to carefully craft and express identity claims, group purpose, or a corporate narrative. Thus, they have the potential to provide inspiration and serve as much needed role-models for other actors. A deliberate search for positive role-models echoes recent calls for how researchers may contribute to “desirable futures” (e.g. (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022). Although there are plenty of pitfalls in a more normative science, the quest for action combined with the magnitude of climate change, may well encourage management research to enhance the important role of companies in the fight against climate change, being responsible for significant parts of the CO₂ emissions. So far, the research on climate change has been dominated by the need for evidence and knowledge from multiple natural sciences. However, given the escalating need to innovate and enact solutions that actively fight climate change, the role of social sciences becomes more important.

Also, there is a need to go beyond studies of focal business organizations, as other types of organizational actors may address strategy and identity in very different ways. Several contributions in the special issue on the strategy-identity nexus (2020) discuss how strategy and identity connect in other types of organizations, such as emerging firms (Oliver and Vough, 2021) or social movements (Georgallis and Lee, 2020). In these situations, the strategy-identity nexus is more likely to be dominated by identity, as moral credibility and multiple stakeholders’ reactions to identity claims

take center stage. By the same token, the practicing of strategies may be more emergent and ongoing, as Oliver and Vough (2020) argue. Also, responding to climate change requires more collaborative innovation among organizations that previously might have seen themselves as disconnected or as competitors. Here, further exploration of how the strategy-identity nexus may unfold across organizational boundaries and industrial sectors becomes important. In our research team at Copenhagen Business School, we pursue some of those questions by focusing on how leading actors (i.e., potential role models) from different industrial sectors enact distant future climate goals through specific strategic efforts (see link below).

No matter the motivation, the strategy-identity nexus poses opportunities for academics to make an impact in society, as the challenges of creating alignment (Ravasi et al., 2020) between strategy and identity pervade the search for solutions in society. I have argued that sustained temporal interplay is one way to create alignment that reflects the need for actors to combine actionable strategies with distant future purpose and goals. The temporal interplay between strategy and organizational identity is one perspective on the nexus, deriving from a focus on complementary differences in temporal structures but there may be others. In any case, fighting climate change requires that we know more about how different types of organizations can enact distant future goals in ways that avoid getting carried away by distant future imaginaries or losing sight of the long term in frenetic attempts to solve short-term problems.

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Links:

IPCC Reports:

<https://www.ipcc.ch/>

Science-Based Targets:

<https://sciencebasedtargets.org/>

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BIO

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