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أخلاقيات البحث: نحو التحرّر وأشكلة هرميّة السلطة

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ملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة، من منظور نقدي، أسُس أخلاقيات البحث وإجراءاتها، مع التركيز على البحوث المموَّلة في سياقات العنف والتهجير القسري في المنطقة. وترى مؤلّفة الورقة أنّ البحث قد يُسهم في إعادة إنتاج اللامساواة واللاعدالة المعرفية والهرميات الراسخة التي تحكم إنتاج المعرفة. وانطلاقًا من أعمال مفكّرين وباحثين ديكولونياليين، تبيّن المؤلّفة كيفية ارتباط أنظمة التمويل والسياسات المؤسسية والإجراءات المنهجية بالاقتصادات السياسية الاستعمارية، بما يؤثّر في رسم ملامح ما يُصطلَح على وصفه بالمعرفة المشروعة، ومَن يُمنح حق إنتاجها. كما تتناول الورقة تجلّيات هذه الديناميات على أرض الواقع، من خلال استخراج البيانات من سياقات تتّسم بالهشاشة والعنف، وتوظيف الباحثين "المحليين" واستغلالهم، فضلًا عن تهميش المجتمعات التي يجري التعامل معها بوصفها مجرّد موضوعات للبحث. كما تقدّم الورقة كذلك نقدًا للأطر المؤسسية الناظمة لأخلاقيات البحث، باعتبارها إجراءات بيروقراطية تُخفي أوجه اللامساواة البنوية خلف ادّعاءات الحياد والصرامة العلمية. وأخيرًا، تنظر الورقة في كيفية مساهمة الترابط بين البحث العلمي والمساعدات والتنمية في تكريس العلاقات الاستعمارية الجديدة داخل الأوساط الأكاديمية. وفي الختام، تدعو المؤلّفة إلى إعادة التفكير في أخلاقيات البحث بوصفها ممارسة علائقية وسياسية ترتكز على المساءلة والعدالة المعرفية.

RESEARCH ETHICS: TOWARDS EMANCIPATION AND PROBLEMATIZING POWER HIERARCHIES

‘[T]he word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary.’ (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 1).

Tuhiwai Smith contends that from the vantage point of the colonized, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. This position is increasingly discussed and adopted by scholars and researchers from the global south, scholars and researchers of color, and their allies globally. Similarly, the increased atrocities globally that are being mainstreamed on social media and knowledge of the harms caused by aid and development agencies committed in conflict and violent contexts are becoming more connected to the work of researchers and universities in the global north, where they have become part of this aid-development-research triad that is part and parcel of neo-colonial, capitalist, and imperialist agendas, particularly in our region. These agendas have existed for decades, but in recent years, particularly with the expansion of the research-aid industry in response to the arrival of Syrian refugees to countries particularly Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, the awareness of the need to decolonize knowledge and problematize relations with western institutions and academics has been on the rise with the calls to decolonize research agenda and academic partnerships as well as curricula related to development studies and humanitarian aid.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work on decolonizing research methodologies is key to understanding the colonial aspects of research. Also, the work of Tuck and Yang: Decolonization is not a metaphor, highlighting the need to link research work and knowledge production to a political agenda of repatriation of indigenous land and life. Other scholars, such as Grosfoguel and Mignolo, have also written on decolonizing knowledge, and their writings became the basis for understanding the framework of decolonizing research. Choudry has written on linking knowledge that emerges from social movements to contextualized and decolonial knowledge production and highlighted how academia, as a colonial institution, disrupts revolutionary knowledge(s).

In our region, with the proliferation of research on Syrian refugees since 2011, critical scholars have identified unethical practices of Western scholars and institutions funded by their governments who parachuted into the region not to miss out on work that is fashionable, and builds financial capital and careers. The Syrian refugee as a research subject and host countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey became their field of play, and an opportunity to fulfil their so-called academic curiosity. Hardan, Sukarieh and Tannock, Kassis, Hashweh and Giacaman, and Abdelnour and Abu Moghli are some of the key scholars who have written extensively on the abuse of access to communities, particularly refugee communities in the region and the need of local and regional academic institutions to the funds by Western institutions and governments which lead to epistemic violence where knowledge produced erases the voices and experiences of the most marginalized, and is harmful and unethical.

In this paper, I summarize some of the main arguments highlighted in the literature that engage with unethical practices of academic institutions and researchers, particularly those tied to funding from Western governments. I also highlight the nature of the entanglement between research and colonial funding agendas, deconstruct the nature of hierarchical, unbalanced, and abusive relations that frame and are core to North-South research and academic collaborations, and finally draw from the literature and experiences of national and indigenous scholars and researchers' conclusions, lessons learnt, and recommendations for politically engaged, just, and decolonial research praxis. The paper answers the following questions:

- What are the characteristics or practices embedded in unethical research?
- How does funding impact the ethics of academic work and knowledge production?

- How do research practices manifest and impact research ethics?
- What are the connections between research funding and (neo)colonial agendas?
- What are the consequences of unethical research practices for/on academic equity and justice?
- How do marginalized scholars' praxis, experiences, and perspectives contribute to addressing unethical practices in research and academia?
- How can research have a political agenda of/for justice, freedom, and emancipation?

(Un)ethical Research: Definition(s) and Practice(s)

In this section, I highlight the trajectory of the emergence of research ethics and the process(es) through which scholars engage with criticizing research ethics and their procedures. Wackenhut (2018) claims that critical scholars have engaged with critical research ethics for the past three decades. While this might be true for scholars in the global North who have the luxury to engage critically with this type of work, scholars in the global South are either heavily dependent on funded research which is run by institutions that do not have ethics procedures, namely INGOs that produce reports, or by bureaucratic university processes such as the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) which create an ethical hurdle in itself to ethical research let alone critically engaging with it.

Additionally, although there is an emergence of scholarly work that touches upon critical and decolonial research methodologies, there is still a lack of critical research that touches on situations when research is conducted in difficult, potentially dangerous, and often less-democratic contexts (Wackenhut 2018). More importantly, there is a lack of critical and decolonial research on research ethics from within these contexts. Moreover, groups who have been systematically marginalized are usually epistemically demeaned as intellectually inferior and lacking credibility, and correspondingly, the privileged groups overestimate their intellectual powers and present themselves as intellectually superior, objective, and unbiased. Hence, individuals and groups belonging to marginalized contexts are at risk of being excluded from knowledge production and sharing, and as a result, their capacity to hear and be heard is compromised (Medina 2013, cited in Johnstone 2021, 637); this includes their reflections on and experiences of research ethics.

According to Kassis et al. (2021), the research ethics that we know and use today originated from the professional principles and obligations within the medical fields. At the beginning of the 20th century, after the violations that took place during WWII, and with the emergence of international human rights frameworks, standards for the protection of individuals who are part of research also emerged. Especially research related to medical and applied sciences. The focus was on research that affects the safety and privacy of people. Some of the examples of these standards are:

1. The Nuremberg Code (1947), which articulates the importance of consent in research with humans.
2. The 1954 UN draft of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that no one ought to be subjected to medical and scientific experiments without their free consent (Bull 2019).

With the emergence of the documentation of the history of war and the atrocities that took place during that period, awareness arose regarding the possible manipulation of the narratives, particularly of those who suffered these atrocities. From there, the idea of research ethics was linked to the documentation and research in the field of history and social sciences (Kassis et al. 2021). Yet, the influence of medical and applied sciences research is still visible in IRB forms and the focus of these research ethics standards is mainly on informed consent, anonymity and the principle of do no harm, without problematizing issues such as objectification of research participants, power dynamics, and the diverse contexts where the research is taking place where informed consent might be tokenized, and anonymity is impossible to uphold.

On the institutional and procedural levels, ethics procedures and criteria are considered to contribute to the ethical conduct of research, as these institutional procedures and criteria are guidelines and standards against which ethics can be measured. However, that is not always the case as the rules and conditions under which ethical review boards operate have been criticized as obstructive, bureaucratic, and in some cases, unethical. This is due to the negative and prohibitive conceptualization, practices, and roles of ethical review boards. For example, the main focus of these review boards is consent, harm, and anonymity. According to Haggerty (2004), these concepts are ambiguous, and their meanings can only be solidified over time as they are applied to different cases (Haggerty 2004, 392). Additionally, with covering more disciplines, and with the expanding multi/interdisciplinary as well as intersectional research, Haggerty (2004) warns that the bureaucracies of ethics boards will increasingly complicate, hamper, or censor certain forms of non-traditional, qualitative or critical social research (Haggerty 2004, 393).

Institutionalized and bureaucratized research ethics sit at the core of the power-knowledge connection, and within a system of corporate-like processes, systems, and rules. According to Smith (2005, cited in Guta, Nixon, and Wilson 2013, 308), regulating social sciences research through Institutionalized and bureaucratized ethics procedures is one aspect of the many corporate layers of research that also includes:

- Politics and dynamics of reporting and publishing;
- Agendas and priorities of funding agencies;
- Criteria through which some forms of research legitimate dominant forms of knowledge and maintain hegemony or dominant concepts and language;
- The chain and distribution of benefits from research and the intersection of research with policy and with interventions that are deemed necessary and, in some cases, saviorist.

Education and education in emergencies research are fields of study that I have worked in for almost two decades. They are a clear example of these corporate-like, saviorist practices. Since the early 90s, within the field of education, we have witnessed a proliferation of education programs on democracy, human rights, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding, particularly in the global south and ‘post-conflict’ countries. These programs were based on INGOs' research, which concluded that there is a need for interventions to build democracies, good governance, and human rights-respecting individuals and societies, starting from the classroom. These types of research that celebrate such concepts pose an ethical challenge, particularly around the universality of these norms and concepts and their applicability to various contexts without problematization (Abu Moghli 2020). While these programs and interventions are based on research-informed reports, rarely do these research projects adhere to any ethics procedures, especially those linked to INGOs, and when they are

conducted in collaboration with academic institutions, ethics boards are based in global north institutions, with rarely, if ever, institutions from the context itself consulted or meaningfully involved in the ethics review processes.

Reflecting on my personal experience being an inbetweener - between UK-funded research projects and based in UK elit(ist) academic institutions and working in contexts where I belong, namely: Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon, the colonial understanding of education research and programming comes with an increased number of displaced people. There has been a sharp increase in research in the field of education in emergencies, in what I call a 'research attack' (Abu Moghli 2023). These research projects focus mainly on refugee education, particularly access to primary education. With this research attack, governments in the global North, such as the UK, created funds to support education research in 'emergency contexts'. Many scholars and practitioners criticized these funding initiatives, particularly the ethics of these research projects, either the motives to support them or the ethics of conducting them. Sukarieh and Tannock (2019) stated that these research projects shifted the political economy of social science research in a way that allows for breaching ethics standards, such as the exploitation of local research assistants, the creation of unequal power dynamics that privilege and give professional and financial benefits to what they call 'research capitalists' at the expense of 'research proletariat'. This critique is shared by Chilisa (2019), who states that Western epistemologies are privileged and reproduced through research regimes, including research ethics.

The Politics of Research Funding

In November 2010, an estimated 50,000 people, the majority students, filled the streets of London to vent their anger at government plans to raise tuition fees while cutting the state grant for university teaching (Lewis et al. 2010). Since then, the higher-education landscape in the UK shifted, and the influence of the neoliberal policies of the newly elected conservative government manifested by transforming universities from institutions for the public good to the austerity-battered, low-resourced, exclusionary, securitized corporate-like bodies we know today. One of the main changes that happened under these conditions was the shift from public to private funding to maintain these institutions. Another type of funding that these universities were forced to rely on is the government conditional funding that is tied to major politically-motivated research projects such as the UK Research and Innovation fund (UKRI) and the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which are framed under aid and development agendas to be implemented through partnerships between UK-based universities and partners in global South countries. While these changes seem localized and affect British students and UK academic institutions, the repercussions, in fact, are far-reaching and impact the ethics of academic work, particularly research conducted in our region. For example, in a key article by Sukarieh and Tannock (2019), they question the reasons behind the influx of funding from the UK government to UK academic institutions in order to research Syrian refugees in the region. The answer is tied to a political and security agenda. They state:

> In 2015, the [UK] government created a new five-year, £1.5 billion Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) to procure research that will "contribute to realising the UK aid strategy": this is to be done through forming "high-quality", "equitable" partnerships with

> academic staff in the global South to create a “global community of researchers”, who together can tackle global development challenges. The GCRF is itself aid funding, diverted from the UK DfID, and is legally required to support the government’s aid agenda. Also in 2015, this aid agenda was redefined by the government so that all foreign aid must directly serve UK “national security and foreign policy” interests: controlling migration flows triggered by the Syrian conflict was explicitly highlighted as a priority concern for these interests. (670)

Such research projects serve as a political tool that violates the rights of refugees, which goes against the ethical principle of do no harm and instead whitewashes state violations. While the UK provides millions for these projects, they at the same time reject calls by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees “to develop more safe and legal routes” for Syrian refugees to come to the UK to claim asylum (McGuinness 2017).

In addition to whitewashing the government’s violations, these research projects create exploitative conditions for academics and researchers in the region. According to Abu Moghli and Shuayb (2022), when scholars from the global North arrive in the region, local scholars are appointed a new role: the ‘fixer’. Our knowledge of the context is sought after to inform proposal development or access to research ‘subjects’ and the ‘field’. The ‘local’ researchers and the ‘fixers’ are considered a group of people with homogeneous characteristics of class, geography, religion, and citizenship. Our role, while some of us are senior academics and scholars, shrinks to translation, facilitating access, fieldwork, and data collection. Knowledge production and theorization are hardly ever areas where our experience is utilized as equals to our global North partners. In this case, the ethics of the power dynamics between researchers and the hegemony of the global North does not necessarily suspend research ethics altogether, [by objectifying and silencing], rather they are based on the protection of “the white political field under the guise of a ‘humanistic’ social concern” (Decoloniality Europe 2013, cited in Al-Hardan 2014).

As ‘local’ academics, we are expected to act as tokens for diversity and inclusion. For example: ‘One of our 'partners’ blatantly asked us to be present because the donor is there. Others would script the content of our contribution or apologize for forgetting to include a budget for our time, leaving the option to us to either work for free or withdraw’. What these unethical practices do, in addition to exploiting individual academics, is that they normalize the violent context as a field of study; they objectify the research participants and silence the voices of those who have the knowledge and experience. Abdelnour and Abu Moghli (2021) state that violent contexts are not normal research spaces where researchers, particularly those from outside of the context and those not affected by it, can parachute in. Such contexts involve abuses, power disparities, and collective histories of violations and atrocities that researchers should be aware of. Researchers who deal with such contexts as normal workspaces commit unethical conduct by causing harm in the form of objectifying people and the context. They normalize violence and the silencing of voices. Such researchers are complicit with the maintenance of violence if not its perpetuation.

In a time where academics are tangled in a funding war to maintain their jobs and advance their careers, the purpose of academic research is increasingly lost, and the ethics of research are becoming marginal. There are certainly various motives and interests that shape the decision to engage in research that requires work in violent contexts. These motives can be placed on a spectrum between cause and career. Academics who are connected to the context of their research are driven by the urgency of the situation, the safety of their loved ones, and the aspiration of their community to thrive. Those researchers work from the margins, have to deal with precarious contracts, and limited opportunities to share their voices. These researchers and academics find themselves against an imposed hierarchy and efforts to silence their critical engagement, not to become detached and allegedly objective (Abu Moghli and Shuayb 2022). Surely, "[i]f in the colonial past, academic imperialism was maintained via colonial power, today academic neo-colonialism is maintained via the condition of academic dependency" (Alatas 2003, 602).

The Coloniality of Research Ethics

The coloniality of research itself is related mainly to its historical and systematic connection to the civilizing and modernizing mission, as well as the objectification and dehumanization of the 'other'. Harrison (2008) gives the example of the "widely spread practice of collecting skulls that after the battle of Kambula during the Anglo-Zulu war in 1879 the survivors visited a Dutch trader Cornelius Vijin, at his homestead to ask, 'Why did the Whites cut off the heads of those who had fallen, and put them in their wagons? What did they do with these heads? The decapitated heads were transported to the homes of lieutenants and generals to sit on mantelpieces, to European museums to be exhibited or to be '*studied'*, with some of them yet to be returned". These violent colonial practices continue to our present day, where "there have been reports of the unlawful use of Palestinian corpses held by Israel, including the theft of organs and their use in Israeli university medical school labs". Israeli doctor Meira Weiss disclosed "[...] that organs taken from dead Palestinians were utilized in *medical research* at Israeli universities' medical faculties […]". (Middle East Monitor 2023).

In terms of social sciences, elitist universities in the global North use government funding and partnerships with universities and institutions in the global South to effectively distance themselves from their role in colonialism, including land theft and violence that impact(s) generations, such as slavery, genocide, and epistemicide. These types of violence frame the current unequal research order and hierarchy. For example, epistemicide persists in modern-day social science research, where in many cases, researchers who are structurally positioned within academic institutions of the former/current imperialist powers and their allies engage in research in communities that are on the other end of the equation (Al-Hardan 2014, 61). This unequal power/knowledge dynamic entails silencing and epistemic violence.

The other form of coloniality that manifests in research ethics, or the manipulation of it, is the fallacy of objectivity and neutrality by the requirement of the research to be apolitical for it to be considered 'scientific' and publishable. While research is far from an apolitical and ahistorical activity as it occurs within a set of historical, political, and social relations of power (Al-Hardan 2014, 63), there are myriad examples of apolitical research, particularly in and on our region. An example of that from the field of education, highlighted by Abu Moghli and Shuayb (2022), they stated: 'while the process of developing responses to what has been dubbed the 'refugee crises' occurs in a politicized sphere, most of the scholarly work on the education of refugees is apolitical. Refugee policies of countries in the global North have been

motivated by racism and xenophobia, to pay host governments in the global South to keep refugees away from their borders. Yet, there was limited discussion on that within education research. Another example of the fallacy of neutrality is the imposition of certain language to be used that is deemed objective and universal, such as resilience rather than the language of resistance, and conflict rather than colonization, particularly when writing about Palestine. Additionally, and in the same context, Palestine is framed within humanitarian terms rather than being framed within political terms to avoid what the academia in the global North would deem 'controversial' and biased. Yet, another example of breaching research ethics by silencing, perpetuating colonialism, and normalizing violence.

The third colonial aspect of research and research ethics is knowledge dissemination, i.e., publication, which is completely erased from our thinking when discussing research ethics, where research ethics are usually linked to the process of data collection and fieldwork. The expression 'publish or perish' causes substantial pressure on academics and institutions in an environment where careers, promotions, funding, and livelihoods are dependent on disseminating one's research. While the discussion about the risks of such pressure is focused on the technicalities of losing quality of publications in terms of content, increased plagiarism and other technical unethical practices, it is rarely, if ever, discussed within the concepts of decolonial and critical research ethics where the well-being of the research participants is considered, the risk of silencing is highlighted or even the impact and possible harm gaining any attention. Such an environment promotes the ethics of exploitation and epistemic violence. In the case of Palestinian scholars, for example, the situation is complicated further because they are often disqualified, censured, and excluded from presenting their research and analysis of the Palestinian predicament. If they state a truth verified by practice and lived experience, but contradicts the mainstream narrative, they are labelled as biased or unscientific (Kristensen 2015, 648). Hence, they are silenced and excluded in a process of continuous epistemicide.

Research is used as a colonial tool when its procedural ethics are weaponized to deprive certain scholars of their livelihoods and right to thrive in their fields, in addition to silencing them. Again, this is most stark in the case of research on Palestine, particularly research conducted by Palestinian scholars who are deprived of acknowledgement and promotion because, according to Kassis et al. (2022, 106), "their research generally is incompatible with what these regulations assume faculty members should be producing, which is not locally informed knowledge that speaks to Palestinians' reality from a multi-disciplinary emancipatory perspective. However, such research does not help them in getting promoted, and they eventually realize that to get promoted and tenure, they must abide by the regulations". Kassis et al. (2022) continue to state: such promotion regulations require particular research output defined to a significant extent by the prevailing mainstream literature [and depoliticized language as mentioned previously], which frequently camouflages and reframes the Palestinian predicament and its causes, and is based on disciplinary frameworks. This leads to a distorted understanding of the Palestinian reality through the academy, particularly that produced in the English language. Consequently, "pluralism and societal relevance tend to be suppressed to create papers of interest to the gatekeepers of high impact: English-language journals" (Hicks et al. 2015, 430).

Research Ethics, Equity and Justice

Academic research plays a significant role in shaping society, informing policy, and framing knowledge. However, the ethics of the knowledge produced through research need to be deconstructed and criticized, particularly the domination of Western epistemology that perpetuates inequalities and the continuation of colonialism. While there are standardized research ethics, Research Ethics Committees and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), institutions in the global North, and those in the global South who follow these standards, continue to dominate the nature of knowledge production, its methods, language, and channels and forms of dissemination, including language. This domination perpetuates its harmful impacts on global South communities and hinders the deconstruction of the colonial knowledge/power nexus (Al-Hardan 2014). According to Kassis et al. (2022), "ethical research principles are universal, but their application is contextual". Hence, there is a need to rectify the transposition resulting from reducing the 'universal' to the 'western,' which constitutes a breach of universality (Kassis et al. 2022). This can be achieved by adopting an approach of internationalism and pluriversality, where researchers and research institutions should rethink Eurocentric ethical frameworks and recognize the value systems inherent to global South research contexts, embracing the language, experiences, and perceptions of these contexts and their people.

To decolonize research ethics and reach justice in knowledge production, structural epistemic injustice and epistemicide must be addressed through systemic action (Anderson 2012). This can be achieved by prioritizing majority-world methodological expertise over Western-centric epistemologies, particularly when research is done in non-Western contexts. This approach also redresses epistemic imbalances in knowledge production and citation practices. This also requires unlearning harmful practices and reconfiguration of disciplinary methodologies (Guerzoni and Walter 2023). Achieving knowledge justice demands thinking of research ethics as part of each step in the research, from inception to publication and dissemination, where the voices of the research participants and all those who are involved in the research are part of the structuring and framing of these ethics based on agreed values and practices. Decolonized research ethics should not be limited to the practices of institutions and researchers when planning and conducting research in the global South or in violent contexts. Institutions in the global North should practice epistemic humility and embrace reparations by engaging with and forefronting philosophies and oral traditions from the global South, thus innovating and transforming their practices (Tegma and Fox 2023).

Research ethics are not and should not be a mere ticking box exercise that would project tokenistic professionalism and institutional perceived academic rigor. They should sit at the very core of knowledge production in universities and other research institutions. It is the critical facet that foreshadows decisions as to whether research proposals have ethical merits, how researchers engage with and apply ethical principles to their work, and in shaping the output (Tegma and Fox 2023). Research ethics should be part of the researchers' training and embedded in each step of the research process. In terms of values and praxis, it should promote equity, justice, and knowledge reparation, moving beyond colonial legacies to enhance equitable and contextually grounded knowledge systems. This transformation is imperative to engaging with and rectifying historical epistemic violence.

Conclusions

As we have been witnessing genocide in Palestine since October 2023, one needs to question their positionality in such an unprecedentedly violent context, particularly in our region. One question is what our moral responsibility is to create knowledge and educate in a world where our dehumanization is normalized and enforced by governments, the media, and even academic institutions such as universities. In such an environment, where do we stand as academics, researchers, and scholars; how does our work stand on the right side of history; and how do we ethically engage in meaningful academic work in such dire times?

In this piece, as I was struggling with these questions, I aimed to critically examine the colonial and neo-colonial foundations of research practices. Through personal reflections and review of critical literature on research ethics, I aimed to shed light on how research, particularly that which is tied to Western funding, causes and sustains epistemic violence, silences marginalized voices, and reinforces hierarchies of knowledge production, leading to our epistemicide. Decolonial and indigenous scholars have shown us that there are ways through which we can link knowledge production to political agendas of justice, repatriation, and emancipation rather than the political agendas of oppression and sustaining Western supremacy of knowledge through exploitative, extractive, and complicit (neo) colonial research agendas. In this piece, I call for a reimagining of research ethics that centers equity and justice, where research ethics are embedded in the research process rather than being an afterthought or a step that needs to be ticked off for institutional purposes.

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