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Opening up the black box of civil servants’ competencies

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ABSTRACT
Employees’ competencies are key to understanding individual performance. In this article, we investigate which competencies are considered important in government using the results of a survey among civil servants. Respondents listed 248 competencies they deemed necessary for their current and future job. To some degree, these competencies can be linked to three major governance philosophies, traditional Public Administration, New Public Management, and New Public Governance, but several other meaningful clusters of competencies can be distinguished as well, including creativity-related competencies and self-development skills. Based on our results, we draw lessons for civil servants and public (human resource) managers.

KEYWORDS
Civil servants’ competencies; governance philosophies; human resource management

Within the human resource management (HRM) literature, it has been widely acknowledged that employees’ competencies – broadly understood as work-related skills, abilities, and attitudes – are key to understanding individual task-performance. Consequently, it has also been argued that organizations need to deploy HRM-instruments to stimulate competencies to maximize performance (cf. Appelbaum et al. 2000; Boselie, Dietz, and Boon 2005; Jiang et al. 2012). In line with this literature, ample research shows that government organizations use various HRM tools aiming at managing employee competencies, including recruitment and selection procedures (e.g. Sundell 2014; Farnham and Stevens 2000), career-development trajectories (e.g. Borst, Lako, and De Vries 2013), and – more generally – competency-management systems (e.g. Hondeghem and Vandermeulen 2000).

Although it is not too difficult to find suggestions on civil servants’ needed competencies, the ‘variable as a whole’ has received little systematic empirical research attention. That is, the literature on civil servants’ competencies is normatively oriented and predominantly concerned with (managerial) competencies of public managers and top civil servants (e.g. Van Dorp 2018; Bartelings et al. 2017; Lodge and Hood 2005; Noordegraaf 2000). Given that it has been widely argued that we need a new type of civil servant to deal effectively with the challenges of the twenty-first century (Needham and Mangan 2014; PMRA, 2018), in this article, we explore empirically which competencies civil servants themselves deem important using the results of a large explorative survey among Dutch civil servants.

To cope with the challenges of our era, it has also been suggested that governments adhere to different government principles (Van der Steen, Van Twist, and Bressers 2018;
Dickinson 2016; Osborne 2006). Until the beginning of the 1980s it has been widely assumed that government organizations should be run according to the principles of traditional public administration (PA); from the 1980s onwards, it was advocated that government organizations need to adhere to the principles of New Public Management (NPM); and nowadays some scholars state that governments are better off if they follow the New Public Governance (NPG) philosophy. As different governance philosophies imply different types of competencies (Kruyen et al. under review), the question arises whether civil servants either predominantly list ‘modern’ NPG-related competencies or mix competencies from different philosophies suggesting a layering of perspectives (cf. Dickinson 2016; Van der Steen, Van Twist, and Bressers 2018).

Knowledge about civil servants’ competencies – and their connections to governance philosophies – is not only relevant for discussions about governance philosophies and their empirical relevance (cf. Kruyen et al. under review), but also has implications for public (human resource) management scholars and practitioners (cf. Van der Steen, Van Twist, and Bressers 2018). For scholars, using governance philosophies as a framework to structure civil servants’ competencies can shed light on deficiencies in the HRM literature, and by doing so, contributes to a contextualized perspective of HRM in government organizations (Knies et al. 2018). For practitioners – civil servants, public managers, and HRM managers – this study hopefully stimulates to make better informed decisions regarding civil servants’ competencies to better cope with the challenges of our time.

To sum up, in this article, we aim to open up the black box of civil servants’ competencies. In particular, we answer the following three research questions:

1. Which competencies civil servants themselves deem important?
2. To what degree can these listed competencies be linked predominantly to NPG instead of traditional PA or NPM?
3. What can public (human resource) managers and scholars learn from our analyses?

The article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the role of competencies in government organizations. Next, we report the methodological details of our study. Then, we present our results, in particular we explore the degree to which the added competencies can be linked predominantly to NPG instead of traditional PA and NPM. Thus, we answer the first and second research question. In the last section – after discussing the limitations of this study – we draw lessons for both scholars and practitioners based on our study, that is, we answer the third research question.

Theory

The role of competencies in government organizations

For a long time, the competency concept has been around in public administration as shown by Hood and Lodge (2004). Until, say the mid-1950s, the term ‘competency’ was however exclusively understood as technical competency, that is, the ‘subject expertise and technical skills’ of individual civil servants (Hood and Lodge 2004, 781). It was not only nineteenth century Germany in which technical competency was deemed necessary to run government bureaucracy more efficiently as stated by Hood and Lodge (2004), but also, among others, the Chinese emperors (Bowman 1989), the Roman administrators (Jones
1949), and the Ottoman sultans (Quataert 2005) used technical competency as criterion for recruiting, selecting, and promoting civil servants.

From the 1950s onwards, Hood and Lodge (2004) identified at least three different meanings of the competency concept which, although developed in the business world, were sooner or later incorporated in the field of public administration (cf. Horton, 2002). First, competencies can be seen as ‘behavioral traits associated with excellence’ (Hood and Lodge 2004, 781). The origin of this meaning can be traced back to the work of McClelland (1973). McClelland argued that the Western education system had to be less preoccupied with assessing (and training) intellectual capacities, but had to focus more on assessing (and training) key traits that students need in real life, that is, their actual work. It was later added to McClelland’s school of thought by Boyatzis (1982) that these key traits – competencies – had to be understood as traits that differentiate excellent from average performers (cf. Boyatzis 2008). Applications of this approach in public administration can be found for example in Gertha-Taylor (2008) who tried to identify critical collaborative skills for civil servants, which were defined as ‘... differentiating competencies, or those competencies that distinguish superior performers from average performers’ (2008, 105, emphasis in original).

In the 1980s, the competency concept was also introduced in the strategic management literature (Prahalad and Hamel 1990). In this field, the term was ‘transposed’ from the individual level to the level of the organization (Hood and Lodge 2004). It is believed that organizations need to identify those capacities that they consider their main assets which, moreover, cannot be easily copied by other organizations. If nurtured correctly, these key capacities – dubbed ‘core competencies’ – were believed to result in a strong competitive advantage. Proponents of the ‘core competency school of thought’ encourage organizations to strengthen their core competencies further to remain ahead of the competitors. Originally, the literature on core competencies focused on private-sector organizations, but various authors tried to apply this line of thinking to public organizations too (e.g. Moore 1995).

In the 1980s, a humbler meaning of the competency concept was (re-)introduced. Instead of exclusively considering competencies as those abilities that distinguish excellent from average performers, competencies were in this stream of research defined as ‘minimum abilities required to tackle specified jobs’ (Hood and Lodge 2004, 781). Various public administration scholars, often implicitly, follow this humble meaning of the competency concept too. For example, Kruyen and Van Genugten (2017) investigated to what degree civil servants need to be creative in their work without assuming that excellent civil servants are by definition creative employees. In this article too, we follow the humbler meaning of the competency concept. Specifically, we define competencies broadly as work-related skills, abilities, and attitudes that civil servants need to apply to perform their job effectively (cf. Hirsh and Stable, 1995 in Horton 2002, 4). In this study, we aim to explore which competencies civil servants themselves consider important to enhance task performance.

**Method**

**Survey design**

Given the explorative nature of the study and to allay the response burden – due to the myriad of potentially relevant competencies – we decided to develop a survey tool with
open-answer questions in which we invited civil servants to share their own ideas. Also, rather than asking civil servants directly in a ‘sterile’ survey to list competencies, we presented our survey as a tool for civil servants to obtain insights in their own competencies. By doing so, we hoped both to maximize the response rate and to stimulate participants to share their thoughts. To make the survey more inspiring for respondents, we decided not to talk about competencies, but referred to work-related qualities in the invitation letter and, more concretely, to work-related skills and attitudes in the survey itself. Our tool was programmed in LimeSurvey Version 3.15 (Limesurvey GmbH. Limesurvey: An Open Source Survey tool. Hamburg, Germany. http://www.limesurvey.org).

Specifically, the survey tool consisted of five consecutive question blocks. In the first three blocks, we asked respondents sequentially to review 1) their work-related competencies; 2) competencies they believed they needed to develop further to perform better in their current job; and 3) competencies they deemed necessary to develop to be still successful in their current job in about five years. In the fourth block, we included a scale to assess individual task-performance and a scale to tap personality characteristics; both scales are irrelevant for the current study. In the last block, we asked respondents to fill out several job and background characteristics. At the end of the survey, a small report was automatically generated that included respondents’ main results. We hoped that providing such a report would stimulate respondents even further to participate in the study.

Collecting competencies
Appendix I (see supplementary material) contains screen shots of the relevant first three question blocks of our survey to visualize how we collected civil servants’ competencies. As we considered it unwisely to ask civil servants to list competencies ‘out of the blue’, we proceeded as follows. Each of the three question blocks contained two separate screens. On the first screen of each question block (Appendix I, pp. 1, 3, and 5), we presented six competencies we regarded prototype competencies of the three governance philosophies (i.e. traditional PA, NPM and NPG) that needed to be rated by the respondents. From the literature, we deduced that civil servants need to be 1) loyal and 2) neutral specialists in PA (Merton 1940; Weber 1922; Wilson 1887), 3) customer-driven and 4) result-oriented employees in NPM-type regimes (Osborne and Gaebler 1992); and, within NPG, must learn to be 5) creative and become 6) externally-oriented networkers (Pestoff, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2012).

On the second screen of each question block (Appendix I, pp. 2, 4, and 6), respondents were given the opportunity to list up to six additional competencies. We programmed the survey in such a way that competencies added on the second screen of the first and second question block, respectively, were shown in the consecutive block(s) too. For example, if a respondent in the second screen of the second block, listed ‘flexibility’ as a competency that she needed to develop further, she was asked, in the first screen of the third block, to what degree she felt she needed to develop this competency even further to be successful in her current job in about five years.

In each of the three question-blocks, on both screens, we asked respondents to rate their listed competencies to increase the practical utility of our tool (i.e. to construct a meaningful personal report at the end of the survey) on a seven-point scale ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘to a very great extent’. We note, however, that preliminary analysis of the data showed that respondents barely used the negative half of the
answer scales. Also, given the large variety of competencies added by respondents, we decided not to analyze respondents’ rating patterns at the individual level but solely explore possible patterns in the types of competencies added at the sample level.

Sample characteristics

Given that our aim was not to draw statistical inferences about the importance of specific competences for specific types of civil servants, but to widely explore the competency concept, we considered a convenience sample to be sufficient. In particular, the survey was distributed among 52,852 subscribers to the mailing list of Binnenlands Bestuur, a bi-weekly magazine for higher-educated employees in the Dutch public sector. On 8 June 2017, Binnenlands Bestuur sent the e-mail containing the invitation to the survey. A reminder was sent on 10 July 2017.

In total, 4401 respondents started the survey, but, conservatively, we removed 1992 people who completed the survey only partially and did not provide information about the type of organization they worked in. Also, we removed 76 respondents who indicated they worked for a non-governmental organization such as a school, hospital, or consultancy firm. We furthermore deleted 30 respondents from our data set who indicated they were either a top-level civil servant (e.g. were in the board of directors) or a politician (e.g. an alderman or municipal council member). Lastly, we removed 11 respondents who very likely were retired, either because they noted themselves they were retired or because they were over 67 years old, currently, the formal retirement age in the Netherlands. Thus, our final sample consisted of data of 2292 civil servants. Given that the survey was administered during the Dutch summer months (vacation season) and the relative difficulty of the survey tasks, we were satisfied with the response rate.

The vast majority of the respondents worked for a municipality (n = 1842; 80.37%), while relatively few respondents worked for other types of government organizations that we distinguished, being advisory bodies (n = 2; 0.09%), inter-municipal bodies (n = 84; 3.66%), provinces (n = 125; 5.45%), national government (n = 159; 6.94%), waterboards (n = 53; 2.31%), and semi-autonomous agencies (n = 27; 1.18%). More than half of the respondents worked in an advisory (n = 725; 31.63%) or a policy function (n = 476; 20.77%), while the other half held other types of functions (i.e. ‘operational management’ (n = 208; 9.08%); ‘knowledge and research’ (n = 45; 1.96%); ‘line management’ (n = 194; 8.46%); ‘project/program management’ (n = 225; 9.82%); ‘regulation’ (55; 2.40%); ‘implementation’ (n = 173; 7.55%); and ‘other’ (n = 191; 8.33%).

Of the people in our sample, 434 respondents (18.94%) indicated that they supervised other employees. Regarding their job’s required educational level, except for a small number of respondents who indicated their work required a ‘vocational-level degree’ (n = 47; 2.07%), most respondents stated that their job either needed an ‘applied-science-level degree’ (n = 1125; 49.65%) or ‘academic-level degree’ (n = 1094; 48.28%). Note that 26 respondents did not provide the job’s required educational level. On average, respondents worked 21.81 years for a government (sd = 11.26). On average, respondents indicated they were 50.78 years old (sd = 9.43). Lastly, about half of the respondents were female (n = 1075; 50.26%).
Analyses

To analyze respondents’ listed competencies, we proceeded as follows. First, we recoded grammatical variations to their common stem (e.g. ‘flexibility’, ‘being flexible’, and ‘need to be flexible’ were all coded as ‘flexible’). Next, we clustered synonyms using a Dutch language dictionary (Van Dale woordenboek) (e.g. ‘agile’ and ‘adaptibility’ were coded as ‘flexible’ too). In this clustering process, we stayed as close as possible to the language used by the respondents.

A couple of respondents listed the same competency in two or even all three question blocks. We deleted these double counts. Moreover, while respondents rated six prototypical competencies on the first screen of the three question blocks, several respondents added these prototypical competencies on the second screen too. We decided to include these competencies in the data as well, because it appeared that at least some of the respondents believed these competencies important to list them multiple times (or forgot about them). Third, some respondents filled out multiple competencies in a single answer box. Hence, a number of respondents listed more than eighteen competencies in total.

Second, using an iterative coding procedure, we tried to categorize competencies on the basis of our understanding of the three governance philosophies. To do so, we first gained a shared understanding based on the literature of the three governance philosophies. Next, both authors went separately through the list of competencies and preliminary coded competencies, if applicable, according to one or more governance philosophies. We stayed as closely as possible to the descriptions of the governance philosophies in the extant literature. Following on that, we compared our coding and discussed inconsistencies. Only when we came to a mutual understanding of a clear link between a competency and a governance philosophy we coded a competency as such. If we did not achieve mutual agreement, we coded a competency as ‘unclassifiable’. We decided to code conservatively to make our coding procedure as straightforward and verifiable as possible.

Interestingly, in the group of ‘unclassifiable’ competencies it turned out that a considerable number of competencies were listed relatively often by respondents which could also be related to the extant literature. We grouped these competencies inductively in several meaningful clusters. In line with the explorative nature of this study, we decided in a final step of our coding procedure, to go through the list of competencies again and tried to link the remaining unclassifiable competencies to these other meaningful clusters. Similar to the previous step, both authors coded these competencies first independently, discussed discrepancies in their coding, and only when they both agreed on the coding, added competencies to a cluster.

Results

Descriptive results

Table 1 presents the number of competencies added in each of the question blocks. The table shows that a significant proportion of respondents added competencies in the first question block in which they were asked to list additional competencies they currently possessed. Instead, respondents were less enthusiastic to write down competencies they deemed necessary for the current and future job too in the second and third question block, respectively.
Across the three question blocks, 248 unique competencies were added by the respondents which are listed in Appendix II. A vast majority of 222 competencies were added by fewer than 5% of the respondents; 19 competencies were added by between 5% and 15% of the respondents. Only, seven competencies were added by more than 15% of the respondents, being ‘analytical skills’ (n = 900; 39.27%), ‘flexible’ (n = 563; 24.56%), ‘communicative’ (n = 493; 21.51%), ‘to collaborate’ (n = 482; 21.03%), ‘incorruptible’ (n = 434; 18.94%), ‘to plan and to organize’ (n = 420; 18.32%), and ‘persevering’ (n = 383; 16.71%).

The question now is to what degree these competencies can be linked predominantly to NPG instead of traditional PA or NPM. Below we first discuss competencies that we related to these governance philosophies and next we discuss other meaningful categories of competencies. For an overview, consult Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics, while Table 3 shows the competencies per category in sub clusters derived from the literature as described.

### Table 2. Competencies per cluster.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>&gt; 0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Public Administration</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Public Management</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Public Governance</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive competencies</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting things done</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>49.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and persuasion</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-development</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>89.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# = Number of competencies coded per cluster; Mean = Average number of competencies belonging to a specific cluster that a respondent added; Sd = Standard deviation of the number of competencies belonging to a specific cluster that a respondent added; Min = Minimal number of competencies that a respondent added for a specific cluster; Max = Maximal number of competencies that a respondent added for a specific cluster; > 0 = Percentage of respondents that added at least one competency belonging to a specific cluster; S = Because a number of competencies are coded in multiple categories, the sum of the competencies of all clusters does not equal the total number of competencies.

---

1. The survey question was: ‘On the previous page, you have described yourself by means of rating six work-related qualities. Do you possess other work-related skills and attitudes that were not mentioned on the previous page? If so, you can list them below.’
2. The survey question was: ‘Are there any other skills and attitudes that were not listed on the previous page, but which you consider necessary to be successful in your current job? If so, you can list them below.’
3. The survey question was: ‘Are there any other skills and attitudes you need to develop further to be still successful in your current job in about five years? If so, you can list them below.’
Table 3. Competencies categorized per cluster.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Public Administration</th>
<th>New Public Management</th>
<th>New Public Governance</th>
<th>Cognitive competencies</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Getting things done</th>
<th>Communication and persuasion</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Self-development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expertise, competent</td>
<td>Result-oriented*, efficient, lean, time-management</td>
<td>To collaborate, to network, to connect people, co-creation, outward-orientation</td>
<td>Analytical skills</td>
<td>Incorruptible</td>
<td>Creative, to innovate</td>
<td>To plan and organize, to deal with resistance, to organize commitment, to make appointment, to meet commitment, to prioritize, willing to compromise</td>
<td>Communicative skills</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Learning ability, self-development, eager to learn, development-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juridical knowledge and skills, administrative skills, proceduralism, lawful</td>
<td>Project-, risk-, and program-, management skills, to work project-based</td>
<td>Social skills, communicative skills, people-oriented</td>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>Reliable, trustworthy</td>
<td>Integral, to switch, making cognitive connections, generalist</td>
<td>Persevering, stress resistant, result-oriented, solution-oriented, decisive, assertiveness, vigorous, resourceful, pragmatic, realistic, down to earth, practical, not to be swayed by the issues of today</td>
<td>To present, conversation abilities, language abilities, to explain, to visualize, to ask questions, knowledge of languages, clear, to debate</td>
<td>People-oriented leadership, leadership in groups, coaching leadership, natural leadership, change leadership, political leadership, result-oriented leadership, collaborative leadership</td>
<td>Self-management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Public Administration</th>
<th>New Public Management</th>
<th>New Public Governance</th>
<th>Cognitive competencies</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Getting things done</th>
<th>Communication and persuasion</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Self-development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Precise, attention to detail, conscientious</td>
<td>Tactical, strategic, negotiation skills, commercial, commissioning</td>
<td>Process skills, negotiation skills, arbitration skills, to weigh interests, to overcome self-interest, to manage expectations, improvisation abilities, to facilitate, to give room, flexible, tactical, strategic, to lobby, to deal with diversity, to consult</td>
<td>Overview, to structure, making cognitive connections, integral, to switch, generalist</td>
<td>Honest, conscientious</td>
<td>Flexible, bold, to take initiative, being enterprising, proactive, understanding the environment, curious, open mind, non-conformist</td>
<td>To excite, to convince</td>
<td>To coach, to motivate, vision for the future, having an exemplary role</td>
<td>Self-knowledge, self-reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Independence | To control, to hold someone accountable | Vision, to convince, to excite, to boost, to organize commitment | To obtain an objective view | Acting fairly | Directive, to delegate |

(Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Public Administration</th>
<th>New Public Management</th>
<th>New Public Governance</th>
<th>Cognitive competencies</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Getting things done</th>
<th>Communication and persuasion</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Self-development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive to politics, administration, and bureaucracy, discipline, loyal, docile, avoid risks</td>
<td>Customer-oriented, communicative skills, to listen, transparent</td>
<td>To listen, sensitive to environment, politics, management, administration, society, social, empathy, involved, an understanding of the environment, interested, tactful, approachable, high-sensitivity, patience, to respect others</td>
<td>(Technical) insight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Competencies printed in italics have been categorized in more than one category
below. Note that we categorized nine competencies under two governance philosophies.

**Linking competencies to governance philosophies**

We linked 83 of the 248 listed competencies to the distinguished governance philosophies. From Table 4 it can be deduced that 1824 respondents (79.58%) added at least one competency that we linked to one of the three governance philosophies providing evidence that our chosen classification scheme is meaningful in practice. Also, from this table it can be inferred that 1393 respondents (60.78%) added competencies from at least two of the three governance philosophies, suggesting a layering of perspectives, to which we return in the discussion section of this study (cf. Dickinson 2016; Van der Steen, Van Twist, and Bressers 2018).

**Traditional PA**

According to proponents of traditional PA, government organizations need to be organized in line with the Weberian ideal typical bureaucracy (Weber 1922). In such bureaucracies, civil servants are expected to make rational, authoritative decisions based on their domain-related expertise. Civil servants are responsible for developing rational policies – which are approved by politicians – and for rational implementation of these policies (Hood 1991; Olsen 2005; Rhodes 2015). About 26.66% of the respondents listed at least one of the eighteen competencies that we classified as traditional PA (cf. Table 2, first row; Table 3, first column).

Within traditional PA, problems in policy development and implementation are assumed to be ‘technical in nature’ (Olsen 2005, 3). In turn, to solve technical problems requires civil servants to display excellent ‘subject expertise and technical skills’ (Hood and Lodge 2004, 781; cf. the ‘traditional’ competency concept). For civil servants, nowadays, the need of ‘subject expertise and technical skills’ is still considered relevant as many respondents added references to technical competencies in the survey, including terms such as ‘competent’ and having ‘expertise’.

Within traditional PA, it is furthermore believed that rational decision-making has to take place in accordance to formal rules and regulations, which is echoed by respondents listing competencies such as being ‘lawful’, ‘precise’ and ‘conscientious’, and having ‘juridical knowledge and skills’ and ‘administrative skills’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Traditional Public Administration</th>
<th>NPM</th>
<th>NPG</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>20.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>382</td>
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For Traditional Public Administration, NPM, and NPG = 0 indicates the absence of competencies belonging to this governance philosophy; 1 indicates the presence of competencies belonging to this governance philosophy; n = the number of respondents for each pattern; % = the percentage of respondents for each pattern.
judgments and decision-making processes (Hood 1991; Rhodes 2015), which is emphasized by respondents’ added competencies such as ‘independence’.

Lastly, within traditional PA, civil servants need to adhere to the hierarchical chain of command (Merton 1940; Olsen 2005), more specifically to political primacy (Rhodes 2015). To run bureaucracies in a rational manner, civil servants are required to obey directions and orders from their superiors, strictly act in line with formal policies, procedures and regulations, and refrain from taking actions beyond their formal task description. There is no place for negotiation, participation, or flexibility in either policy development or implementation. Competencies listed by respondents which can be linked to these aspects of traditional PA (Rhodes 2015) are ‘sensitivity’ to politics, administration and bureaucracy, being ‘loyal’ and ‘docile’, and having ‘discipline’.

**New public management**

NPMs mantra is to ‘run government like a business’, meaning that private-sector competencies are fully embraced (Hood 1995). Indeed, the use of the modern competency vocabulary was propelled by the introduction of NPM in the public sector (Hondeghem and Vandermeulen 2000; Horton 2002; Hood and Lodge, 2004; Sandwith 1993). Rather than putting emphasis on the procedural rigor, for proponents of NPM, civil servants should above all focus on achieving ‘better value for money’ (Olsen 2005, 6; Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). About 54.10% of the respondents listed at least one of the twenty competencies that we classified as NPM (cf. Table 2, second row; Table 3, second column). Competencies such as being ‘efficient’, ‘lean’, and ‘result-oriented’ relate to this focus on better value for money. Also, several civil servants added competencies echoing business-inspired principles (Rhodes 2015) including ‘risk management’, ‘project management’, and ‘program management’.

To achieve better value for money, it is further argued within NPM that civil servants should be able to maintain effective principal-agent-relationships in contracting-out and quasi markets. In the role of principal, civil servants must be able to negotiate good deals with service providers and other organizations at arm’s length – that have to be formalized into written contracts – and to hold them accountable when they do not meet expectations (Rhodes 2015). This can be observed in competencies such as having ‘negotiation skills’, being ‘tactical’ and ‘strategical’, and ‘to control’ and ‘hold accountable’.

Furthermore, within NPM, citizens are conceived of as customers (Aberbach and Christensen 2005). This customer focus requires civil servants, among other things, to handle requests effectively and efficiently, communicate clearly what has been decided upon, and be open to feedback from their customers. This relates to various competencies that respondents listed, including being ‘customer-oriented’, ‘transparent’, ‘communicative’, and able ‘to listen’.

Last but not least, given these private-sector management ideas, and more specifically, the need to continuously improve productivity, being ‘flexible’ is another important competency that can be linked to NPM.

**New public governance**

About 75.26% of the respondents listed at least one of the 45 competencies that we classified as NPG (cf. Table 2, third row; Table 3, third column), making it indeed the most dominant group of competencies in the data. Both traditional PA and NPM are internally oriented; that is, proponents of both governance philosophies believe that the better government is internally organized, the more effective it will be. In contrast, NPG takes an external
orientation; that is, to improve government performance, government should be well connected to external actors (Pestoff, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2012). We recognize this in the importance of competencies (Kickert 1997; Rhodes 2015) such as ‘to collaborate’, ‘to network’, ‘to connect people’, ‘co-creation’, and having an ‘outward-orientation’. In its turn, such an external orientation (Williams 2002) requires ‘social skills’, being ‘communicative’ and ‘people-oriented’ to maintain relationships for the long run.

Such an external focus is required because we live, according to NPG, in a plural world, with conflicting values and interests, in which authority needs to be earned (Osborne 2006). To engage others in such a world (Williams 2002; Rhodes, 2015), asks for civil servants who have a ‘vision’, who are able to ‘convince’, ‘excite’ and ‘boost’ others, and to ‘organize commitment’. Meanwhile, to get things done (Williams 2002), requires ‘process skills’ including ‘negotiation skills’ and ‘arbitration skills’, but also the ability ‘to weigh interests’, ‘to overcome self-interest’, ‘to manage expectations’, ‘improvisation abilities’, ‘to facilitate’, ‘to give room’, and to be ‘flexible’, ‘tactical’, and ‘strategic’. The need to involve and engage others also implies that government and civil servants need to be responsive (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000), otherwise actors will not cooperate, start protesting, and try to frustrate policy implementation. To be responsive, civil servants first of all need to be aware of their environment, to be able to take the perspective of others and being sensitive of – that is, understand or are empathic towards – others’ needs (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). We recognize this sensitivity in several listed competencies, such as having ‘an understanding of the environment’ and to be ‘sensitive to the environment’ – including society, politics, and administration –, and to be able ‘to listen’, being ‘empathic’ to others’ needs, ‘involved’, ‘interested’, ‘tactful’, and ‘approachable’.

Second, responsiveness requires civil servants to display some creativity. Creative in the sense that they are able to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, to negotiate and mediate between different – sometimes even conflicting – interests, and to look for compromises (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000) in a context in which there are still formal rules and limited budgets. In total, 62 respondents (2.71%) referred to ‘creativity’ in the survey, despite the fact that creativity is also one of the six prototypical competencies we already included in the questionnaire (cf. the Method section). As shown by Kruyen and Van Genugten (2017) creativity in its turn requires different types of cognitive, behavioral and attitudinal competencies we recognize also in competencies respondents listed. We will discuss these as a separate category in a later section.

Other meaningful clusters of competencies

In total, 1968 respondents (85.86%) listed competencies we could not univocally link to either traditional PA, NPM, or NPG, although we stress that none of these respondents referred solely to competencies unrelated to one of these three governance philosophies in the survey. Among these 163 additional competencies, we were able to inductively distinguish seven other meaningful clusters of competencies (85 competencies) which we discuss below.

Cognitive competencies

To start with, about 44.55% of the respondents added at least one of the eleven competencies cognitive competency (cf. Table 2, fourth row; Table 3, fourth column). In fact, ‘analytical skills’ was the competency listed by most respondents (39.27%). Other cognitive skills include ‘judgement’, ‘overview’, ‘to structure’, ‘making cognitive connections’, ‘to
obtain an objective view’, and ‘(technical) insight’. While the attention for cognitive competencies is understandable given civil servants’ type of work and its link with job performance (Hunter 1986), there is barely any attention for these types of competencies in the empirical public administration literature (cf. Crewson 1995).

**Integrity**

About 20.77% of the respondents mentioned at least one of the six competencies we classified as integrity (cf. Table 2, fifth row; Table 3, fifth column). These competencies are of particular importance in the context of government organizations regardless of governance philosophies being advocated, although some authors argue that they were marginalized within NPM (cf. Denhardt and Denhardt 2000; Rhodes 2015). We recognize the importance of these principles in competencies, such as being ‘incorruptible’, ‘reliable’ and ‘trustworthy’, ‘honest’ and ‘conscientious’, and in ‘acting fairly’.

**Creativity**

Work-related creativity and innovative work behavior relates to different types of cognitive, behavioral and attitudinal competencies (Kruyen and Van Genugten 2017; Meijer 2014) we recognize in competencies respondents listed. All in all, about 44.37% respondents listed at least one of the fifteen competencies related to creativity (cf. Table 2, sixth row; Table 3, sixth column). Some respondents explicitly listed competencies such as ‘creativity’ and ‘to innovate’. Others listed competencies that are related to the definition of work-related creativity in the public domain as defined by Kruyen and Van Genugten (2017, 837): ‘the act of trying out new things to deal better with specific problems at hand. That is […] not looking for original ideas to innovate, but for useful solutions to pressing problems or to cope with innovations’.

This first of all means thinking outside-the-box and making connections between different perspectives. These competencies, in turn, require first and foremost cognitive competencies, such as being a ‘generalist’, being able to ‘switch’, ‘making cognitive connections’, and think ‘integral’. Furthermore, this requires behavioral and attitudinal competencies such as being open to other’s insights, awareness of the context one operates in, having guts, and being proactive (Kruyen and Van Genugten 2017). In connection with these competencies, respondents listed having an ‘open mind’, being ‘curious’ and a ‘non-conformist’, ‘understanding the environment’, being ‘flexible’, ‘bold’, and ‘to take initiative’, being ‘enterprising’, and ‘proactive’.

**Getting things done**

About 49.87% of the respondents added at least one of the twenty competencies related to, what we coin, ‘getting things done’ (cf. Table 2, seventh row; Table 3, seventh column). While we found limited explicit references to ‘getting things done’ in the extant literature (cf. Alkadry, Blessett, and Patterson 2015), its intention is implied by various competencies that have been acknowledged in the literature (cf. Boyatzis 2008; Morrison and Phelps 2017). Specifically, we distinguish two components in the data. One component refers to organizing capacity and competencies, such as ‘to plan and organize’, ‘to deal with resistance’, ‘to organize commitment’, ‘to make appointments’ and ‘to meet commitments’. The other component includes attitudinal competencies, such as being ‘persevering’, ‘assertive’, and ‘vigorous’, ‘solution-oriented’ and ‘result-oriented’, and being ‘decisive’, ‘stress resistant’, ‘pragmatic’, and ‘realistic’.
**Communication and persuasion**

About 32.59% of the respondents listed at least one of the twelve competencies that we labeled communication and persuasion (cf. Table 2, eight row; Table 3, eight column). First of all, they predominantly listed ‘communication skills’, meaning written and oral communication skills (McClelland 1973; cf. Pandey and Garnett 2006). Some respondents, however, listed more specific communication skills, such as ‘to present’, ‘to explain’, ‘to visualize’, ‘conversation abilities’, ‘to ask questions’, ‘language abilities’, ‘knowledge of languages’, and to be ‘clear’. A small sample of respondents listed persuasive competencies, such as ‘to excite’ and ‘to convince’.

**Leadership**

About 25.35% of the respondents added at least one of the fifteen competencies that we classified as leadership (cf. Table 2, ninth row; Table 3, ninth column). Some respondents referred to ‘leadership’ in general or to broad leadership styles (Crosby and Bryson 2018), including ‘people-oriented-leadership’, ‘leadership in a group’, ‘coaching leadership’, ‘natural leadership’, ‘change leadership’, ‘political leadership’, ‘result-oriented leadership’, and ‘collaborative leadership’. Respondents (also) listed more specific leadership attitudes and behavior, including ‘to coach’, ‘to motivate’, ‘having an ‘exemplary role’ and ‘vision for the future’, of which the latter three can be linked to transformational leadership (Bass 1999). Interestingly, respondents did not mention any ‘command and control’ leadership competencies that fit well with traditional PA, except for ‘directive’ and ‘to delegate’. From an NPM perspective, we note that only two respondents listed ‘result-oriented leadership’ as a desirable competency. Furthermore, no competencies were listed that can be linked to transactional leadership, such as setting goals and giving rewards.

**Self-development competencies**

Lastly, about 17.67% of the respondents mentioned at least one of the seven competencies we classified as self-development (cf. Table 2, tenth row; Table 3, tenth column). ‘Self-development means seeking and using feedback, setting development goals, engaging in developmental activities, and tracking progress on one’s own’ (London and Smither 1999, 3). Competencies mentioned in this category include ‘self-development’ and ‘development-oriented’, ‘self-management’ and ‘self-knowledge’, and ‘self-reflection’. The need for self-development competencies in government can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, it ties in with a call for a more human public service in which the focus is on growth and development of individual civil servants (Wise 2002). On the other hand, the need for self-development can be explained – less romantically – by the need to adapt swiftly to changing working-conditions (London and Smither 1999) and to take control over one’s own career given the erosion of permanent contracts (London, Larsen, and Thisten 1999) as is argued in the private-sector literature.

**Conclusion and discussion**

In this study, we have tried to open up the black box of civil servants’ competencies. To do so, we invited civil servants to share their competencies in an online survey. In the introduction, we raised the question which competencies civil servants themselves deem important and to what degree these listed competencies can be linked
predominantly to NPG instead of traditional PA or NPM. Surprisingly, our respondents came up with 248 different competencies, of which 83 competencies could be linked to at least one of the three governance philosophies (traditional PA, NPM, and NPG). In line with the recent literature, many respondents included indeed competencies we related to NPG. However, at the same time, a vast majority of the respondents included competencies from at least two governance philosophies suggesting a layering of perspectives (cf. Dickinson 2016; Van der Steen, Van Twist, and Bressers 2018). Interestingly, another 85 competencies were related to seven other meaningful clusters, being cognitive, integrity, creativity, getting things done, communication and persuasion, leadership, and self-development competencies.

Before we discuss lessons for public (human resource) managers and scholars (i.e. our third research question), we discuss four specific research limitations. First, given the exploratory purpose of our study, we deemed a convenience sample to suffice. However, the vast majority of our respondents were employed at the local level, fulfilling mainly advisory or policy duties, in a job that required at least an ‘applied-science-level degree’. Hence, we cannot rule out that our study presents a biased view. Second, it is too tricky to analyze differences between ‘current’ and ‘future’ competencies. Respondents listed fewer (additional) competencies as the survey progressed either due to survey fatigue or because they genuinely did not believe that they needed to develop additional competencies. In this study, we assumed that competencies that were added in the different question blocks are all equally important from the perspective of civil servants at the aggregated level. Third, we cannot analyze answer patterns at the individual level as different respondents filled out too many different things. Fourth, we can interpret – based on theoretical arguments – how particular competencies fit together and other conflict, but we do not know the degree to which this fit or conflict is experienced by the respondents themselves. As we now have the broad list of competencies, these limitations can be dealt with in future research. On the one hand, our study can be replicated and extended using a representative sample of civil servants in quantitative research. On the other hand, our study provides avenues for qualitative-oriented research, especially to get a better understanding of potential conflicts between competencies as experienced by civil servants.

Turning back to our third and final research question, what can public (human resource) managers and scholars learn from our analyses? This study raises awareness of the challenges civil servants currently face that should also be on the agenda of public (human resource) managers. First of all, our study corroborates Kruyen et al.’s (under review) findings, who concluded – based on a study of over 20,000 job ads posted by government organizations since the early 1980s – that government is increasingly looking for the ‘renaissance bureaucrat’. In particular, as government organizations want to adhere to NPG-principles, there are a vast number of competencies that are deemed important to be effective. Things get even more complicated as government organizations want to implement multiple governance philosophies, because these competencies of different regimes can conflict. For example, being loyal and docile in traditional PA versus having an external orientation and being flexible in NPG. The question is what the implications are for civil servants when these conflicts arise and what is needed to make them better equipped to cope with these conflicts.

Not only the growing number of desirable (and sometimes conflicting) competencies makes a civil servant’s job challenging, but also the different types of competencies that are required. That is, the competencies that can be linked to traditional PA (e.g. loyal,
sensitive to politics and administration) and NPM (e.g. result-orientation, customer-orientation) are mainly attitudes. In contrast, NPG contains attitudinal (e.g. boldness, sensitivity, empathy) as well as behavioral competencies (e.g. to collaborate, listen, network, connect) and cognitive competencies (e.g. vision, creative). Thus, also in kind of competencies, the NPG civil servant is different than both traditional PA and NPM require. Within NPG, it is not about ‘simply’ following rules and regulations and implementing policies initiated by politics (i.e. traditional PA) or acting on the basis of business-inspired principles and incentives (i.e. NPM), but much more about continuously finding his or her own role in a plural and agile world. This responsibility requires a variety of attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive competencies.

In general, our study draws attention to the potential risks of stimulating particular competencies within government organizations and copy pasting insights from the business literature (cf. Beattie and Waterhouse 2018). In particular, it questions the appropriateness and applicability of HRM tools such as competency-management systems in the public sector to recruit, select, train, and promote employees. As other authors, both within public administration (e.g. Gertha-Taylor 2008; Hood and Lodge 2004) and the wider (business-oriented) HRM literature (e.g. Intagliata, Urlich, and Smallwood 2000), have already discussed these are often too generic, lack an empirical basis, and are based on the past. The large variety of competencies we find in our study urges even more caution in applying these systems.

Interestingly, our reservations with these types of HRM-tools draw attention to the self-development skills civil servants themselves deem important. Training these self-development skills could be a fruitful way in helping civil servants to constantly learn and reflect on their role and position, and to improve their performance (Cheetham and Chivers 1998). Moreover, self-development skills can be used as a means for dealing with the myriad of competencies considered important by civil servants.

What do these results contribute to the public (human resource) management literature? We started from the premise that over time, governments have gradually shifted from traditional PA, to NPM, and NPG. Various scholars argue, however, that, empirically, we find hybrid governance arrangements instead of archetypical governance regimes; that, although the alleged popularity of NPG, sentiments of PA and NPM can be detected in practice, and that a mixture of or balance between different regimes and competencies is actually beneficial for government performance (Dickinson 2016; Osborne 2006; Rhodes 2015). These scholars who suggest a layering of perspectives are supported by our research. We do indeed find that most respondents list competencies related to two or all three governance philosophies, suggesting that a mix of competencies from different philosophies is deemed important by non-managerial civil servants in their daily work.

We also find that some competencies imply different things in different governance philosophies. This becomes visible when we take a look at the competencies we linked to more than one governance tradition. For example, we linked sensitivity to politics and administration to both traditional PA and NPG. In traditional PA this competency is related to the Weberian model and political primacy, while in NPG it is part of being sensitive in a broader sense, namely in being able to consider the interests of all – internal and external – actors involved. Another example is negotiation skills. Although this competency can be connected to both NPM and NPG, the aim of negotiation is completely different in both philosophies. In NPM this competency is needed to be effective in principal-agent relationships, for example in
contracting relationships with service providers. In NPG, however, it is essential in organizing commitment of all actors involved.

As the previous reflections show, our typology based on governance philosophies offers interesting insights. We are, however, aware that this is only one way of categorizing competencies. In the academic literature as well as in the grey literature a myriad of different frameworks have been proposed to cluster competencies. For example, Boyatzis (2008) differentiated between cognitive competencies, emotional-intelligence competencies, and social-intelligence competencies. The European Commission (n.d.) grouped 42 competencies in its ESCO database (European Skills/Competences, qualifications, and Occupations) in four different categories being attitudes, values, social interaction, and thinking. In the USA, the National Center for O*NET Development (n.d.) clustered 35 competencies in six categories (i.e. basic skills, complex problem-solving skills, resource-management skills, social skills, system skills, and technical skills). As our typology is closely related to academic thinking about the challenges and developments in public administration and management, we think it provides a more contextualized understanding of the challenges civil servants currently face.

We conclude from our findings that the following groups of competencies deserve more research attention. First, scholars should focus not only on ‘popular’ competencies in their research, such as flexibility, creativity and proactive behavior, but also on more traditional competencies including analytical skills and political sensitivity which are deemed important in practice too. They are not only important in itself (Rhodes 2015), but the traditional competencies seem essential for popular competencies as well. Think for example of the traditional competencies, such as cognitive competencies and communication skills, needed for being a creative civil servant (Anderson, Potočnik, and Zhou 2014). Second, a competency that does deserve more research attention is creativity. Although various public administration scholars have stressed the importance of civil servant creativity (e.g. Denhardt, Denhardt, and Aristigueta 2013; Kruyen and Van Genugten 2017; Rangarajan 2008) and in our study we indeed observe a cluster of creativity-related competencies, more research is needed into these creativity-related competencies. For example, to what extent these conflict with other (traditional) competencies such as discipline and integrity-related competencies (cf. Cohen 1970)? Third, as well as in the practice of government organizations, self-development skills deserve more attention in the academic literature. Although Cheetham and Chivers (1998) bring together the reflective practitioner approach – of which reflection and self-development are important elements – and competency-based approaches, the literature on these meta competencies (cf. Cheetham and Chivers 1998) – is still scarce. Fourth, Meijer, Rodríguez, and Gil-Garcia (2018) recently have called for more research on e-government because of its practical relevance for government, but did not explicitly address civil servants’ required competencies to get e-government running. Interestingly, none of the respondents added digital skills under their current competencies and only 38 respondents listed digital skills as currently needed and future required competencies.

Furthermore, bearing in mind the limitations of our research design as discussed above, several ad hoc analyses show that not task characteristics but background factors seem to be related the number of competencies added. Specifically, the data shows that, overall, civil servants with longer tenure, older employees, and female workers were more likely to report competencies. We speculate that older employees, and workers with longer tenure have more reflective capabilities. The question arises whether the same holds for female employees or that female employees believe they
need more competencies than male employees to be considered successful. Research is welcome in which the connection between gender, age, and tenure on the one hand and competencies on the other hand are being further explored.

One overall remark and challenge for the literature on civil servants’ competencies is that the literature is scattered and it is difficult to get a good overview of the state-of-the-art of this subfield in public management and HRM. A large variety of related and – to some extent – interchangeable concepts are being used by different authors in different types of publications, such as skills (e.g. Rhodes 2015), craft (e.g. Van Dorp, 2018), aptitudes (Crewson 1995), and competency (Horton 2002; Gertha-Taylor 2008; Analoui 1995; Virtanen 2000; Williams 2002), the concept we also use in our study. We recommend scholars to conduct review studies for specific (clusters of) competencies in government settings – especially those that were often reported by civil servants in our survey – to get a better view of what we know and do not know about civil servants’ competencies.

Finally, we hope that our research stimulates other (comparative) research. First, we welcome research in which desirable competencies are compared between the public and private sector. The application of business-level insights in the public sector have been problematized previously (e.g. Denhardt and Denhardt 2000; Rhodes, 2005), but to get a better insight into the problems, it would be interesting to know if employees of different sectors think differently about competencies too. Second, we call for cross-country comparative research. Various research has already shown that different governance models have been applied differently and to different degrees in various countries (e.g. De Vries and Nemec 2013), and that the culture of countries (e.g. more hierarchical versus egalitarian, individualistic versus collectivistic) matters (e.g. Gelfand, Lim, and Raver 2004). The question is what this means for desirable competencies of civil servants. Finally, on the basis of our research the question arises how civil servants deal in practice with different requirements. By linking competencies listed to the governance philosophies, we can theorize that some competencies function in tandem, while other competencies conflict, but we do not know to which degree civil servants experience the interaction of competencies in practice. Further research in this respect is needed as well.

Note

1. The anonymized Appendix II can be retrieved from the website of the Open Science Foundation: https://osf.io/ksafx/?view_only=2d8d0062b0274070bb38a911a1d9a9c7

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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