

Sense of Self: Voices of Separation and Connection in Women Who Have Experienced Abuse

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Les résultats d'études qualitatives menées auprès de survivantes de violence conjugale suggèrent que le sens du soi des femmes violentées constitue un élément fondamental dans la prise de décision de quitter la relation violente. Cette étude qualitative a été entreprise, en partie, pour identifier comment les femmes se perçoivent elles-mêmes, notamment pour mettre en lumière le discours de connexion et de séparation véhiculé dans les récits. Cet article présente les résultats des entrevues menées auprès de 18 femmes vivant en régions rurales, possédant des antécédents culturels différents et ayant vécu ou vivant encore dans une situation de violence conjugale. Les femmes ont répondu à la question suivante : « Comment vous décririez-vous à vous-même? » Les réponses ont été lues en utilisant la méthode interprétative, laquelle fait appel à la lecture des récits en s'adressant au soi et à l'entité morale. La théorie du développement moral a été utilisée dans l'élaboration du cadre de recherche. Les expériences du soi issues des récits sont présentées comme des expériences de séparation et de connexion qui sont progressivement interreliées. Les liens entre ces voix et le développement moral ainsi que les conséquences sur la pratique infirmière et la recherche à venir font l'objet d'une discussion.

The findings of qualitative studies with women who have experienced abuse by an intimate partner suggest that a woman's sense of self is a central feature in her decision to leave the abusive relationship. This qualitative study was undertaken, in part, to listen to how women describe themselves, specifically explicating voices of relational connection and disconnection within the narratives. This paper presents the findings of interviews with 18 rural women from culturally diverse backgrounds who had been or were currently in abusive relationships. The women were asked to respond to the question "How would you describe yourself to yourself?" The responses were read using the interpretive method of reading narratives for self and moral voice. The theory of moral development was used to frame the inquiry. The experiences of self that emerged from the narratives are presented as progressively relational voices of separation and connection. The relationship between these voices and moral development is discussed, as are implications for nursing practice and for future research.

Researcher: *How would you describe yourself to yourself?*

Theresa: *Well, that's a hard question, because I don't see any good in me...so I don't know. I can't even describe how I feel about myself...I feel like an empty shell.*

Theresa's powerful metaphor "empty shell" is an indication that she is experiencing both a negative sense of self and extreme disconnection

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from self. Previous studies have found that battered women are likely to experience a negative sense of self. Campbell (1989) found battered women to have significantly lower self-esteem than normative groups. Brendtro and Bowker (1989) report that strategies for male dominance depress the abused woman's self-image and self-confidence. In a study with Israeli women, Avni (1991) found that battered women experience a form of self-mortification that damages self and leads to serious self-doubt. Farrell (1996a) utilized a self-in-relation model to explore sense of relationship among women who have encountered abuse; this study found themes of lack of relational authenticity, emptiness, and disconnection.

The findings of several qualitative studies indicate that being in and ending an abusive relationship occur as a process and that a woman's sense of self is a central feature in that process. Mills (1985) describes loss of self and restructuring of self as stages in an abusive relationship. In Landenburger's (1989) theory of abusive relationships, submergence of self and re-emergence of self are components in a four-phase process of entrapment and recovery. Farrell (1996b) reports that sense of relationship is central to the healing process for an abused woman. Rosen and Stith (1995) report that the process of leaving an abusive dating relationship includes self-reclaiming actions. In a grounded theory study, reclaiming self emerged as the central process for survivors leaving and not returning to an abusive relationship (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). The literature clearly supports the notion that women experience changes in sense of self during an abusive relationship and that a process of reclaiming self occurs during recovery from an abusive relationship.

In my work with battered women, the struggles with major life decisions that I have heard the women describe sound very similar to the moral conflicts described by Carol Gilligan (1982). Specifically, I have often heard them describe what Gilligan has declared the central moral dilemma for women, the conflict between self and other.

The discussion presented here is intended to extend the body of knowledge on how abused and formerly abused women experience self, and to contribute to the discussion by adding the element of moral development.

Theoretical Framework

Gilligan's theory of moral development is used to frame this inquiry. Of specific interest to this portion of the study is what she calls "the transition from goodness to truth" (1977, p. 498). According to Gilligan, this

transition occurs as the woman begins to have questions about utilizing the traditional feminine value of goodness as self-sacrifice as a basis for her moral decision-making. During the transition the woman strives to uncover her own needs. In the process of examining her own needs and those of others, she begins to ponder the consequences of self-sacrifice both for herself and for others; she also begins to reject the notion of goodness as equated with meeting the needs of others at the expense of her own needs. According to Gilligan (1982):

Although independent assertion in judgement and action is considered to be the hallmark of adulthood, it is rather in their care and concern for others that women have both judged themselves and been judged.... The "good woman" masks assertion in evasion, denying responsibility by claiming only to meet the needs of others, while the "bad woman" forgoes or renounces the commitments that bind her in self-deception and betrayal. (p. 70-71)

The central moral problem for women, then, is the conflict between self and other. Gilligan (1982) asserts that resolution of this conflict "requires a reconciliation between femininity and adulthood" (p. 71) and, furthermore, that without such reconciliation there can be no resolution of the moral problem. The feminine voice struggles to resolve this conflict between compassion and autonomy "in its effort to reclaim the self and to solve the moral problem in such a way that no one is hurt" (p. 71). In caring for women who are experiencing or recovering from abuse, it is critical that nurses and other professionals understand where the woman sees herself in relationship to others and in relationship to self. It is likely that very different interventions will be required for a woman who is struggling to reclaim her voice and trying to resolve her moral conflict through self-sacrifice, and a woman who has identified her own needs and no longer equates goodness with self-sacrifice.

This portion of the research analysis was undertaken with two purposes in mind: to listen to and record women's voices of separation and connection in the reclamation of self, and to explicate passages in these voices that indicate the transition from goodness to truth. Presented here are the findings related to the research question *What is heard in the women's voices concerning the transition from goodness to truth?*

Method

Participants were recruited from rural areas and small towns in an American midwestern state. Inclusion criteria were: self-identification as abused by an intimate male partner, and willingness to be exten-

sively interviewed on this topic. Eighteen women participated, ranging in age from 25 to 51 years. They self-identified their cultural/ethnic backgrounds as follows: Greek-American, 1; White, 8; Anglo, 1; Italian-American, 1; Jewish/Hispanic, 1; Mexican-American, 3; Mexican, 1; and African-American, 2. Fourteen of the women were no longer living with the abusive partner and four were currently living with the abusive partner. Annual (family) income ranged from \$4,000 to \$55,000. For this study, abuse by an intimate partner was defined as a pattern of coercive control, within a relationship, by means of threats, emotional and/or sexual abuse, economic abuse, isolation, and/or physical violence.

The semi-structured interview method used was an adaptation of the Real-Life Moral Conflict and Choice Interview (Brown, 1988). First the woman was asked to talk in general about her life. Then the question "How would you describe yourself to yourself?" was used to prompt a dialogue about self. Then the woman was asked to describe a real-life dilemma and her response to it. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

The strategy used in analyzing the qualitative data was that of listening for self and relational voices (Brown & Gilligan, 1990, 1992; Rogers, Brown, & Tappan, 1994; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). The developers of this strategy refer to it as a "listener's guide," as it allows the researcher to read or "listen to" the narrative for a number of interpretations. The narratives were read four times, with each reading focused on a specific research question (for further description of this method, see Belknap, 2000). In the interpretive reading presented here — that for "self" — the researcher attended to images that referred to self; how the narrator saw her choices in the conflict she described; the narrator's description of relationships, actions, thoughts, and feelings; and what the narrator perceived as at stake in the dilemma she described. The reader also specifically attended to passages that could be interpreted as representing the transition from goodness to truth. These passages were underlined and colour coded. A summary interpretation of self was written for each narrative. After all the narratives had been interpreted, they were examined for similarities and grouped thematically (with specific attention to the separations and connections described). Each group of narratives was then conceptualized as a specific "voice" and labelled accordingly.

Results

From the interpreted narratives, four distinct voices of separation and connection emerged. These voices become progressively more rela-

tional across the categories, forming a continuum, as presented in Table 1.

Voice of Separation

At one end of the continuum, women voiced extreme disconnection and separation, describing a self separate from self, from others, and from God. All women in this voice spoke of a sense of disconnection. They found self-description painful and difficult, and responded with disparaging adjectives and phrases, describing self as lonely, angry, and of little value. Themes of concern for self and others were conspicuously absent from or sparse in their narratives. (Because the context of each woman's life is integral to her story, each quote will include her cultural/ethnic self-identification as well as the status of her relationship with her abuser.)

Sally (self-described as White, separated from abuser) responded with a list of negative descriptors:

Well, I've already told you I don't have a lot of self-esteem. I still feel like I'm a very heavy person [researcher observation: she was not]. I feel like I am a very weak person just pretending to be strong. I'm a very dependent person; I cling to people.



When asked to describe herself, Theresa (self-described as Italian-American, divorced from abuser) gave a particularly striking response:

That's a hard question because I don't see any good in me, maybe a little bit. I always see myself as a failure — you know, I never give myself credit.... So I don't know. I can't even describe how I feel about myself. Sometimes I feel like an empty shell. I feel like I put up a barrier around me and I'm afraid to let people close to me because I don't trust people. But the bottom line is, I guess, I still don't like me.

Theresa could not say how she felt about herself. Her use of the powerful metaphor "an empty shell" describes her entire loss of self. She had no relational words for herself — only words of distance and obstruction — no feeling for self, and no connection with others.

These women also specifically voiced separation from their bodies, further indicating loss of self: "It was like my body wasn't my own"; "I became very angry...then...meek...and I just kind of went numb." A sense of separation from others was also heard: "I've lost all my friends...everyone's going to hate me"; "I can't find anybody to love me for me."

However, even in this voice of separation, thin threads of narrative that spoke to the importance of connections in the woman's life were

Table 1 <i>Continuum from Goodness to Truth</i> 				
	<i>Voice of Separation</i>	<i>Voice of Self Separate from Self but Connected with Others</i>	<i>Voice of Self Finding Self</i>	<i>Voice of Self-Knowledge and Connection with Self and Others</i>
<i>Description of self</i>	Disparaging adjectives: "angry," "low self-esteem," "no good"	Adjectives that imply concern for others: "caring," "understanding," "good mother"	Adjectives that imply concern for others: "loving," "nurturing"	Adjectives and qualities that impart sense of self and strength: "sure of myself," "survivor," "I have self-esteem," "stronger"; and sense of caring: "caring," "loving," "compassionate"
<i>Concern for others</i>	Absent from narrative	Present in self-sacrificing way	Present; not self-sacrificing	Present; not self-sacrificing
<i>Concern for self</i>	Absent from narrative	Absent from narrative	Present but not explicit	Explicitly stated
<i>Transition from goodness to truth</i>	Not apparent in narrative	Not apparent in narrative; goodness as self-sacrifice is specifically voiced	Passages reflecting criticism of self-sacrifice and awareness of own needs: "too easy-going; I need to speak out more"	Clear articulation of importance of own needs: "I've learned I have to put myself first"
				
Goodness			Truth	

also heard. Sally described what happened following a violent episode with her husband:

I called my best friend. I mean, calling the police completely slipped my mind, because I needed somebody to talk to. I didn't know what was going on. I wanted somebody to come and help me.

The person Sally identified as being able to help was her friend. The help she was seeking, clearly, was a connection, someone who would understand.

None of the narratives in this group included statements that would indicate a transition from goodness to truth as described by Gilligan (1977). These women expressed no concern for self and made little reference to concern for others.

Voice of Self Separate from Self but Connected with Others

The voice represented in the next cluster of narratives is that of self separate from self yet connected with others. When asked to describe themselves, women in this voice chose adjectives that imply concern for others ("understanding," "caring," "good mother"). This group of women articulated a clear identification with goodness as expressed by self-sacrifice. Their descriptions included no references to consideration for self. These women also voiced a clear sense of disconnection of self from self.

Identification with goodness as self-sacrifice. Eva (self-described as Mexican-American, separated from abuser for many years and married to non-abusive man) most clearly articulated the societal prioritizing of concern for others. When asked to describe herself, Eva responded:

An understanding person that really doesn't take care of my own needs but puts other people's needs in front of mine. Like something's always telling me, oh, you know, leave your stuff for last, so nobody will judge you or something.

Eva was aware that she would be judged negatively if she put herself first. Her sense of self separate from self, as reflected in her use of the second person when referring to herself, was also detected in other passages, in which Eva discussed her feelings of shame and her sense of being judged.

Estella (self-described as Mexican, married to abusive man) articulated the notion of goodness as self-sacrifice in describing her struggle to choose between her husband and her mother, a choice forced on her

by her husband. Here also, there was no evidence of consideration for self. Estella said, "When you marry you owe your kids and your husband." She further explained the near impossibility of her being a "good woman": "If I choose my mom I am a bad...wife; if I choose my husband I am a bad daughter." For Estella, choosing self was not an option.

Sense of self separate from self. The voice of disconnection from self was also evident in this cluster of narratives. The sense of self separated from self was heard as the women referred to themselves in the second person. When speaking about herself, Lenore (self-described as Anglo, married to abusive man) said: "You always worry about the damage [done to children]...you must stand up for your children... You can't think straight; they [the abuser] keep you confused."

These women also gave specific examples of disconnection — a sense of self separated from self. Estella's words on this were very direct:

I find myself now more like...my mind is sleeping... I listen to him, I listen to my mom and...I have learned to disassociate myself from what they say.... I just feel like I'm disassociating a lot...like if I close my mind [he] can be bitching and screaming and yelling, and I'm there but I'm not thinking about what he's saying. ...sometimes if I listen to him I find myself being hurt, I'm ready to cry or I'm going to slap the heck out of him. And I don't like to do it, I don't like to cry, I don't like to slap him...disassociating myself is just like I go blank.

Eva also described this sense of disconnection: "I try to put on a front for everybody all the time now so nobody will know anything." Similarly, Lenore expressed a need to conceal. In describing herself, she said, "It's sad, though, most of the times, you know...crying on the inside."

Estella "disassociated" to avoid being hurt by or reacting to the abuse, Eva "put on a front," and Lenore was "crying on the inside." All of these descriptions indicate a sense of self separated from self.

The women who spoke in the voice of self separate from self talked of the importance of caring for others, concern for others, and connection with others. For them, self-sacrifice was something that was necessary to fulfil their obligation to others. They did not extend the obligation to themselves. These narratives did not include passages indicative of the transition from goodness to truth.

Voice of Self Finding Self

Next along the continuum is the voice of self finding self. The women in this voice described themselves using positive adjectives such as

"caring," "good mother," "understanding," and "very loving and very nurturing." They also indicated that they were thinking about themselves in new ways, becoming aware of the needs of the self. These narratives reveal a criticism of self-sacrifice and passages indicative of the transition from goodness to truth.

Keesha (self-described as African-American) was actively working on forming a connection with herself. She had begun to keep a journal and brought it with her to the interview. Keesha's interview took place a few weeks after she had left her abuser. She was living in a safe house and spoke of being very much afraid for her life because the police could not locate her abuser to arrest him. Even though she was in hiding and occupied with developing a plan to protect herself and her children, she was reaching a new level of self-understanding. She was beginning to see herself as a strong woman able to make self-protective decisions as well as care for herself and her children. When asked to describe herself, she began to cry, very quietly. The subject was clearly painful to her. I could see the pain in her eyes, but I could also see that it was very important to her that the matter had been raised. Keesha began her description of herself slowly and quietly:

That I'm a very [pause] truthfully I'm a very vulnerable person, that [pause] when I say things don't matter, such as, like, when he would hurt me or something, when I said it didn't matter it really did matter. I'm caring, I think. I'm caring. I'm a good mother. Even though he beat me in the head a lot, sometimes I forget things, but I feel like I'm intelligent, you know. And [pause] I think that I'm the type of person that's strong enough to do whatever is necessary to keep me happy, whatever I think that is. [pause] I don't know.

She began by describing some painful truths about herself, then said that she had always thought of herself as someone who could not leave an abusive relationship. Later, she indicated that she now viewed herself in a more caring and connected way:

But in reality I'm actually doing it...I'm going through it...there's always a tomorrow... So I just, I was hoping I [would get] through it with my life, and I did.... I feel like I am strong. I am strong. I mean...I've got a plan and I've got goals for my future.... I can...do anything I put my mind to, you know. I can.

This time I want to do it the right way by taking care of some goals, personal goals for myself, first, and then maybe I can include somebody else in my life, you know, like a significant other or whatever.

Putting self before the relationship was a transition for Keesha: "I mean, there was a time when the most important conflict or whatever was that I loved him and that was greater than him beating the shit out of me."

Keesha's description illustrates the transition from goodness to truth in a rather dramatic and frightening way.

The women who spoke in the voice of self finding self described an awakening to one's own needs. At times the process was painful and frightening, yet this voice conveyed a sense of hope. These women were legitimizing their needs and beginning to see the negative impact that self-sacrifice had made on their lives.

Voice of Self-Knowledge and Connection with Self and Others

Narratives clustered at the most relational end of the continuum voiced a clear sense of self-knowledge and of caring and connection. When asked to describe themselves, the women in this voice chose adjectives and phrases indicating concern for both self and others. These narratives also included clear indications of the transition from goodness to truth.

The most striking similarity among these narratives was the positive language used by the women in describing themselves: "I'm happier...I like myself"; "I'm proud of myself. I'm a good person...have a good sense of humour"; "I'm fun-loving...I like to go out and have fun"; "I think I'm a pretty nice person."

In their self-descriptions, the women identified strengths: "I'm more sure of myself"; "I know that I'm a survivor now. I can get through anything if I put my mind to it"; "If you cross me, look out, 'cause all hell's gonna break loose!"; "I'm a lot better, a lot stronger...I have self-esteem."

Concern for others and self. In her description of herself, each woman spoke of her ability to care for others. Natalie (self-described as Greek-American, separated from abuser for many years and married to non-abusive man) said, "I'm a very caring person. I help a lot of people." Barbara (self-described as White, divorced and living with non-abusive partner) responded, "I'm caring, loving. I have a lot of compassion and understanding for other people." Lydia (self-described as Mexican-American, divorced and married to non-abusive man) said, "I'm very giving, very nurturing." These women did not characterize caring as self-sacrifice. They described a very different phenomenon: gaining strength through caring, as illustrated in Barbara's narrative:

But months after that I became more self-assured. I developed from a very low self-esteem to a very high self-esteem. I was proud of myself because I cared enough about someone, meaning my little girl, to put her above everything else — my feelings, his feelings — and did what was best for

her. I'm very proud of myself now, you know. And I'm a lot stronger because of it. Because now, in any situation, whether it be work, at home, whatever, I say exactly what is on my mind, and if people don't like it that's too bad. I held things in and was afraid to speak for fear of getting hit, kicked, beaten, anything, for 7 years, and I'm not going to do that any more, you know. So I've come a long way, long way.

Barbara's connection with her daughter gave her the strength to speak out and get out. Self-esteem, pride, and strength grew from her connection with her daughter and led to a connection with her true self.

When asked to describe self, the women who spoke in this voice indicated a belief that caring for and helping others requires awareness of one's own needs. Lauren (self-described as White, separated from abuser) responded, "I kind of try to...be there for people, but I've learned I have to put myself first too." Missy (self-described as White, married to abusive man) said, "I'll do anything in the world to help you out, within my limits." Lydia's response indicates an awareness of the need to continue developing concern for self:

I feel like I want to please everybody and...make everybody happy. And I know that's impossible, but...that's my problem.... I still have some trouble about being passive, allowing people to...run my life. Not as much as they used to...I won't let them. But I...think I understand it better. I work on it every day.

Transition from goodness to truth. At this end of the continuum, the narratives also included passages that were interpreted as representative of the transition from goodness to truth. Both Barbara and Lauren had left the relationship even though they still loved their partner. They described the relationship as abusive and described self in the relationship as self-sacrificing. Barbara (self-described as White, living with non-abusive man) articulated a moment of transition after she had left the relationship:

Through learning, through getting to know me, I guess. I learned from reviewing my home life, the way I was raised, the way my parents were, you know, and then comparing that and everything that my counsellor and I talked about and...reliving, and going over and over my relationship. It finally came to me: Hey, it wasn't me. It was not me. I shouldn't have been trying to bend over backwards to please him. What I was doing was OK, it was fine, you know, I didn't have to give in to everything he wanted...it was just excuses he was giving to hit me. But that took a long time in coming.

In this passage Barbara describes the process of connecting with self, "getting to know me." This connection helped her to reject the notion

of goodness as self-sacrifice and to view her actions as "fine"; it was no longer necessary to "bend over backwards to please him."

Lauren struggled with a relational pull. She "wanted to be a family; I didn't want to do it on my own." In her narrative she described having sacrificed herself for the relationship. Transition is evident in her voice in this passage: "Yet I felt that the way it was going, all it was doing was hindering me and pulling me back and I couldn't go forward with things that I wanted." Lauren left the relationship to "go forward." She described herself as capable and able to "speak up." Lydia voiced transition in this way: "I've always put their [the children's] feelings first. But I'm not doing it any more. I don't know if it's right or wrong but I can't...I've come to the point in my life that I'm going to say no."

The women who voiced a sense of self-knowledge usually spoke of the importance of caring; they found strength and self-knowledge in their connection with others. Each narrative in this voice was interpreted as reflecting the transition from goodness to truth and as including self in the circle of care and concern.

Discussion

In summary, when the findings on separation and connection in the voices of women who have experienced abuse were clustered thematically, four constructs of voice emerged. Due to the cross-sectional design of this study, interpretation that implies progression is made with caution. However, it is noteworthy that as the women began to include connections and relationships in their descriptions of self, they also progressed from very negative to positive descriptions of self. This finding supports the assertions of self-in-relation theorists regarding the importance of relationships to a woman's sense of self (Surrey, 1991).

Statements indicating engagement in the transition from goodness to truth closely aligned with the woman's experience of self. As the women began to experience self-in-connection rather than self-separate, they demonstrated a corresponding movement towards the transition from goodness to truth. According to Gilligan (1977), this transition facilitates movement to a level of moral development that she terms a "morality of non-violence," in which one's obligations apply to both self and others. A morality of non-violence suggests that a woman faced with a moral choice will consider her own needs as well as the needs of others, and will, in turn, choose an action that is caring and responsive to both the needs of self and the needs of others.

Implications for Nursing Practice and Future Research

It is argued elsewhere (Belknap, 1999) that women view the decision of whether to leave an abusive relationship as one of moral conflict and, furthermore, that decisions made in the context of abuse are coerced. Therefore, decisions that appear to be self-destructive may indeed be life- and self-preserving when viewed from the perspective of moral conflict/moral choice. The dilemma concerns the central moral conflict for women, that between self and other.

The findings of the present study indicate that women who are in the process of transition, or who have rejected the notion that goodness equals self-sacrifice, have progressed to a more positive view of self. It seems reasonable to suggest that these women are also likely to make decisions that preserve the self. The tension between caring for others and caring for self is mediated when women begin to view their choices as not either/or but, rather, based on sense of self-worth.

Because women experience the decision to stay or leave as moral conflict, it is critical that nurses understand the process of moral-conflict resolution (Belknap, 1999). According to Landenburger (1993), a woman in the enduring phase of an abusive relationship feels responsible for the abuse and tries to cover it up, consistent with the stage of moral development in which goodness is equated with self-sacrifice. In order to help women to name the abuse and to become self-protective, it is important that we foster the transition from goodness to truth, as described by Gilligan (1977). It is through this transition that a woman begins to scrutinize the logic of self-sacrifice and to deliberately uncover her own needs. Once the transition is made, the woman rejects the notion of goodness as self-sacrifice and includes in her reasoning an obligation to herself as well as to others. This inclusion of self reconciles the disparity between selfishness and responsibility, freeing the woman to act in her own behalf and to regard the action as morally correct.

The findings of the present research suggest that connection with others is important in this transition within moral development. Interventions that encourage connection are essential. Encouraging women to explore the means by which they reach out to others, and to make connections where none exist, will help them to see themselves in a more positive light, thus leading to a view of self as worthy of care and protection.

Further systematic inquiry is appropriate at this juncture. Attention should be focused on the role that nurses can play in facilitating the connection with self and with others, including the emerging legit-

imization of the needs of self. Inquiry should also be extended to assessing the effectiveness of such strategies in helping women to live lives in which the needs of self are fully recognized and attended to.

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Author's Note

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