

Perceptions of Death among Pakistani Undergraduates

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The purpose of this study was to map the mental schema of death espoused by contemporary Pakistani youth. A convenient sample of 100 undergraduate students was taken and an open-ended questionnaire was used to procure words/phrases that came to the participants' minds when they thought of death. From among the response pool of 2000 words, the top 20 in terms of frequency were selected. Multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis were used for the cognitive mapping of the death concept. A two-dimensional map and a cluster structure consisting of three main clusters were thus obtained. Overall, the conceptualization of death in the minds of young men and women in Pakistan was found to be a complex interweaving of modernity and tradition with tradition being the stronger influence. In the death schema discovered, the sub construct of non-corporeal continuation proposed by Speece (1995) is very prominent. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: death concept, cognitive mapping, tradition, modernity, young adults

Of all the phenomena that have mystified humans since the earliest times to the present day, death is perhaps the most intriguing. It is so many things at the same time: it is the end of life and yet, as millions believe, the beginning of another; so it is potently present in literature and history, religion and philosophy, art and sciences, medicine and media and yet so carefully marginalized, tabooed and concealed; treated sometimes as an anomaly, a gross morbidity and sometimes as the very essence of nature. Simultaneously commonplace and magical, fearsome and fascinating, odious to most but alluring to a few, death seems to have a thousand faces and men and women throughout history have struggled to make sense of it.

Psychology's engagement with the phenomenon of death is fairly recent. For a long time after its inception as a separate field, Psychology remained supremely indifferent to death and mortality issues. Owing primarily to the efforts of Herman Feifel, the situation began to change in the 1950's and death came to be acknowledged as a legitimate area of inquiry. Research on the topic continued to increase thereafter reaching a 'publication explosion' in the 1970's (Neimeyer, Wittkowski, & Moser, 2004, p.311). Research addressed a wide array of issues including the causes, correlates, and outcomes of death anxiety, responses to life threatening illness, dynamics of grief and bereavement, risk-taking behavior, and suicide and involved diverse populations in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, personality variables, and health status, etc.

One important area that has received considerable attention is the concept or construction of death in different age groups, across cultures, and in relation to different variables such as trauma, bereavement or attachment (Kastenbaum, 2006). The bulk of these studies investigate death concept in children while studies on

adolescent population, young adults and other age groups are fewer (Cicirelli, 1998). The standard practice while exploring personal meanings of death has been to presume the existence of a 'mature' adult concept comprising four subconcepts: universality, irreversibility, non functionality, and causality (Mahon, 1999). It is also presumed that children progressively move closer to this mature conception in a manner that largely mirrors the Piagetian model. This mature-death- concept model has been questioned on several grounds (Kastenbaum, 2006; Speece, 1995). It implies that by the time a child reaches adolescence, he/she has managed to acquire a reasonably mature concept which remains largely unchanged thereafter. I. C. Noppe and Noppe (1997) argue that this has "inhibited continued exploration of the adolescents' conception of death" (p. 254). While challenging the view that there is only a single mature manner of regarding death (the one rooted in western rationality), Kastenbaum (2006) states, "there have been more believers than disbelievers in survival of human death since the beginning of human society. This view cannot be dismissed as the foible of the immature" (p.69).

The four-component model is bio-scientific in nature. Speece (1995) proposes that a fifth sub concept of non-corporeal continuation be added to the model. In support of this proposition, I. C. Noppe and Noppe (1997) found that belief in non-corporeal existence actually increases with age through adolescence. In another study, Holcomb, Neimeyer and Moore (1993) found that meaningfulness vs. meaninglessness of death and cessation vs. continued existence were the most frequently occurring constructs emerging from the narratives of college students. Death's construction as meaning-giving has been affirmed in other studies (Cicirelli, 1998; Kastenbaum, 1996). These studies point to the need of being more appreciative of diversity in death constructs and more sensitive to faith-based sub concepts.

An attempt that has hardly, if ever, been made is the *mapping* of the death schema/concept through statistical techniques. The present study was one such attempt. It was the first in a series of three studies investigating the traditional and modern attitudes towards death. The second study involved the analysis of selected texts from the writings of modern and traditional authors including Bertrand Russell 2003, Sigmund Freud 1963, Imam Ghazali 1973 and Ashraf Ali Thanvi 2001. The third study consisted of semi structured interviews of contemporary modern and traditional

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scholars. Results indicated that the modern and traditional death attitudes differ considerably. This study had the twin purpose of obtaining a visual illustration of how death is conceptualized in the minds of contemporary Pakistani youth and determining in the light of the research findings of the other two studies, (and the extant literature) whether this conceptualization comes closer to the traditional or modern mindset. Modern, in this context, was defined as representative of the worldview of modernity with the defining features of secularism, scientism, and a marginalization of spirituality (Nasr, 2001). Traditionalism as a mindset involves subscribing to the ideology and practices of revealed religions (Nasr, 2001). This research was limited to the Islamic tradition.

Rationale

There is a growing awareness in the world of academics and research that a sound understanding of death is a prerequisite for a full understanding of life itself for life and death, after all, are intertwined and inextricable. Existential philosophers and psychotherapists have maintained that ontological confrontation and encounter with existential questions give greater meaning, value and intensity to life (Yalom, 2008). It is in the same spirit that the present study was conducted: to extend and enrich our understanding of death for the primary purpose of enhancing the experience of life.

In Pakistan, death, for most researchers, is *terra incognita*, a territory that is mostly left unexplored. Indigenous research on death will be a step toward breaking the taboo and portraying the subject as knowable and indeed worth knowing.

There is a special significance of studying the death concept of young adults in Pakistan in relation to modernity and tradition. The overall sociocultural and political scenario in Pakistan at the moment is predominantly youth-centered with an understanding at many levels of the society (e.g. media, public and politicians) that it is the youth that will become the harbingers for change. In this context, it is pertinent to study the ideology/ideologies of the youth to acquire a better understanding of where they place themselves on the modernity-tradition continuum.

It is unlikely that the view would be totally colored by tradition or modernity by itself in their entirety. Whatever views we do obtain, would reflect a mixture, a complex schema that incorporates both tradition and modernity in an integral and mutually inextricable mix.

Objectives

1. To discover the mental schema of death espoused by contemporary Pakistani youth.
2. To discover whether this schema comes closer to the traditional or modern mindset.

Research Questions

1. How do the contemporary Pakistani youth conceptualize death and dying?
2. Is their conceptualization predominantly modern or traditional?

Method

Participants

A sample of 100 undergraduate students (50 girls and 50 boys) was taken on the basis of convenience sampling from Lahore College for Women University (LCWU) and Government College University (GCU). Participants from GCU belonged to the departments of Political Science, Economics, Management Studies, and History; Participants from LCWU belonged to the departments of Psychology, Economics, Gender Studies, and International Relations. Age range was between 19 to 23 years ($M = 21$, $SD = 1.3$).

Procedure

Consent was obtained from the chairpersons of the concerned departments. Participants were approached either in their classrooms (where data was collected with the cooperation of the teachers) or elsewhere on the campus. After they consented to participating in the study, they were given an open-ended questionnaire with the instruction of writing down 20 words or phrases that came to their mind when they think of death. When they wrote the words, they were asked to rank order the responses in terms of their importance or how representative of death they were according to the subject's judgment such that number 1 was to be assigned to the most important response and number 20 to the least important.

Analysis

On the basis of the frequency of the responses, 20 topmost words/phrases were deduced. As the next step, the original data was converted into an arrangement that showed the ranking given by each participant (if any) to the top 20 responses. Multidimensional scaling (MDS) and cluster analysis was applied to map the mental schema of death. MDS transforms a matrix of similarity (or more often dissimilarity) data into a geometrical picture having one, two or three dimensions. In the graph that is obtained as the end product, the key element, in terms of interpretation, is the spatial location of the data points. The special strength of an MDS graph is that distance between two points represents their actual dissimilarity in the original data such that the farther apart two points are located, the more dissimilar they are. On the basis of the data a two-dimensional map was obtained that represents the schematic structure of death in the collective psyche of a sample of Pakistani youth in the early 21st century.

Cluster analysis identifies clusters or constellations of similar ideas from within the complex mass of data, thus making the data more meaningful and comprehensible. In the agglomerative method of forming clusters, the computer generates clusters that get progressively larger, ultimately getting to a single large cluster comprising all cases. Finally, we obtained through cluster analysis a tree-like structure called the dendrogram, which shows clusters of death-related words forming homogenous groups, thus spatially portraying the death schema in the minds of Pakistani youth.

Results and Discussion

The results obtained through frequency count, multidimensional Table 1

Sr. No	Responses	f
1	Fear	66
2	Grave	51
3	Beginning of a new life	49
4	Accountability	41
5	Heaven	39
6	Reality	39
7	End of life	38
8	Death as end	36
9	Sorrow	36
10	Hell	30
11	Thoughts or concern about family	30
12	Release	28
13	Darkness	27
14	Day of judgment	27
15	Thoughts associated with God	25
16	Loneliness	25
17	Reminded of wrong deeds	23
18	Everyone has to die	22
19	Meeting with God	22
20	Eternal life	21

scaling and cluster analysis shown in Table 1 reflect that the schema in our young men and women's minds are predominantly traditional or faith-based

Ten responses (Meeting with God, Heaven, (figure 1) Hell, Grave, Accountability, Beginning of a New Life, Eternal Life, Day of Judgment, Thoughts associated with God, and Being reminded of Wrong Deeds) are clearly derived from tradition. End of Life is clearly modern as modernists see death as the termination of existence, e.g., Russell (2003). The rest of the responses can be thought of as rather neutral and can belong to either worldview (Everyone Has to Die, Fear, Darkness, Reality, Release, Sorrow, Loneliness, Death as End of various states, and Thoughts or Concern about Family).

Another way of looking at the same result reveals that Fear is the topmost response which is more characteristic of modernity than the

spirit of tradition. Many studies have shown death anxiety to be negatively correlated with intrinsic religiosity (Clements, 1998; Rigdon & Epting, 1985; Suhail & Akram, 2002; Thorson & Powell, 1990) suggesting that a strong attachment to religion (which equates our definition of tradition) ameliorates death fears (Neimeyer, Wittkowski & Moser, 2004; Wen, 2010). In the Sufi tradition, on the whole, death is more a cause of felicity than fear (e.g. Thanvi, 2001). Still another way to look at the 20 top responses is to note that there is a synthesis or coming together of modernity and tradition.

Figure 2 shows the result of cluster analysis, a dendrogram containing hierarchical grouping of responses with varying levels of homogeneity. By splitting the dendrogram at a particular point, we get three main clusters as shown in Figure 3. One of them is disproportionately large including the majority of the responses and the other two are small clusters.

The first cluster includes Heaven, Hell, Grave and Accountability. This is the closest and the most homogenous of the clusters and clearly woven around the theme of tradition. Heaven and Hell are very closely linked, showing that there is a strong association between them for virtue of having conceptual proximity and being diametrical opposites. Grave and Accountability also form a close cluster, showing that the phenomena are strongly related in the minds of youth.

The second cluster includes twelve responses: Darkness, Day of judgment. Everyone Has to die, Meeting with God, Thoughts Associated with God, Being Reminded of Wrong Deeds, Eternal Life, End of Life, Reality, Death as End of various states, Family, and Beginning of Life. This large cluster shows the intermingling of modernity and tradition in the minds of our youth as it includes both kinds of words, phrases, and adjectives. Everyone Has to Die and Meeting with God are most closely linked in this cluster. In one way, we can say this is the perfect intersection of modernity and tradition where death is being viewed as natural-universal (the modern doctrine tends to focus on the naturalness and universality of death, e.g., see Freud, 1963) and

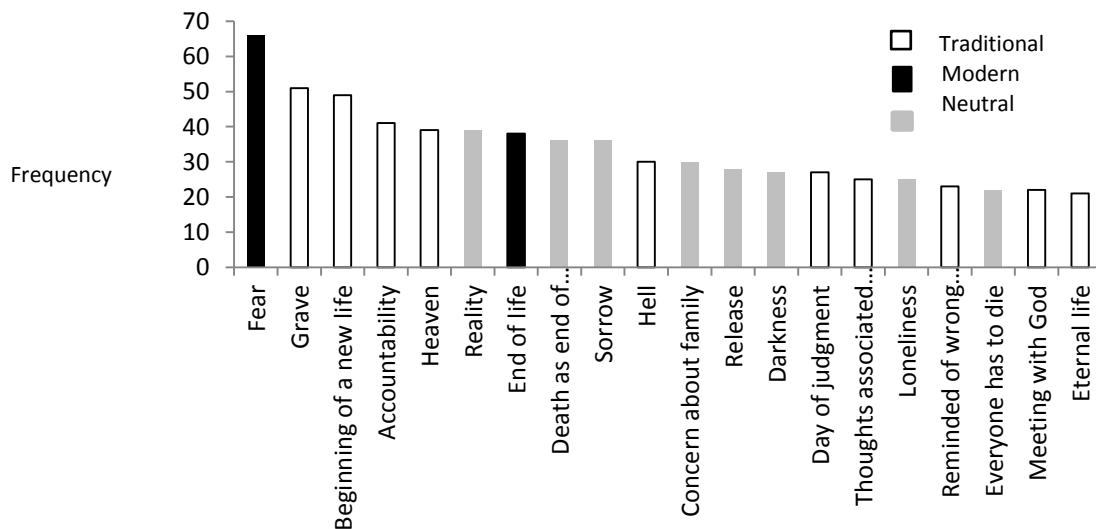


Figure 1. The frequency of the 20 topmost death-related responses and differentiation of the responses into traditional, modern and neutral.

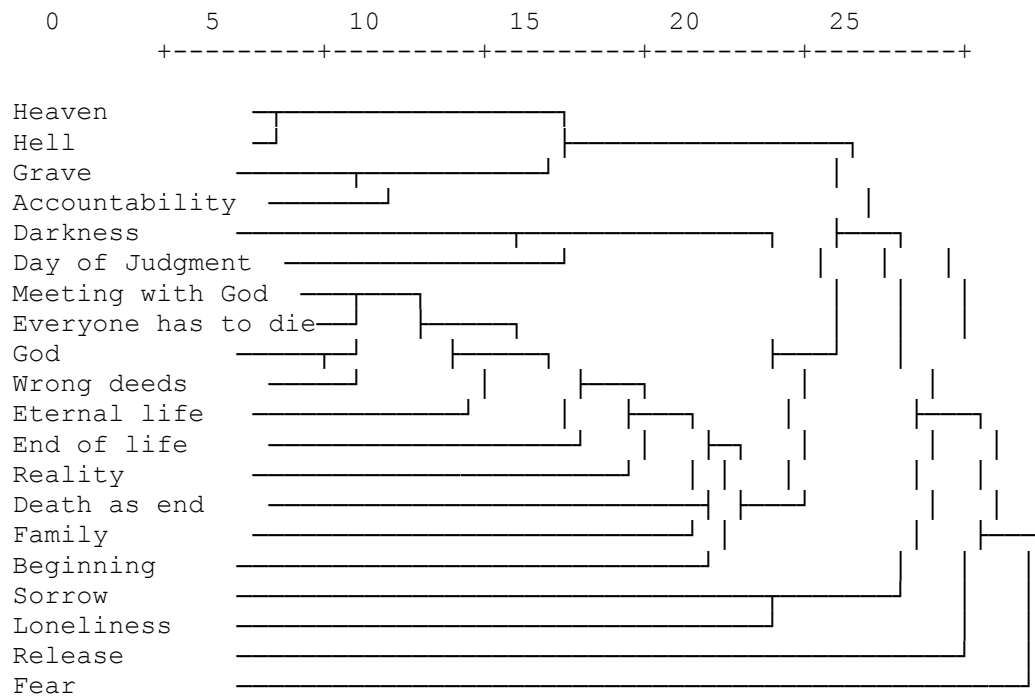


Figure 2. Dendrogram, showing clusters of death-related words forming homogenous groups.

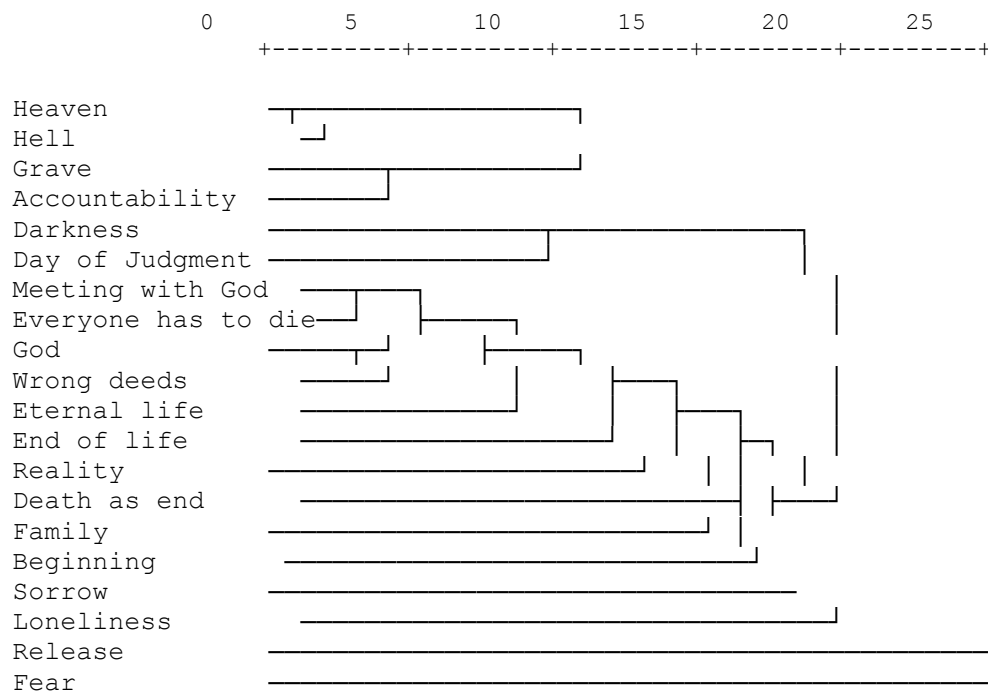


Figure 3. Dendrogram split into three clusters.

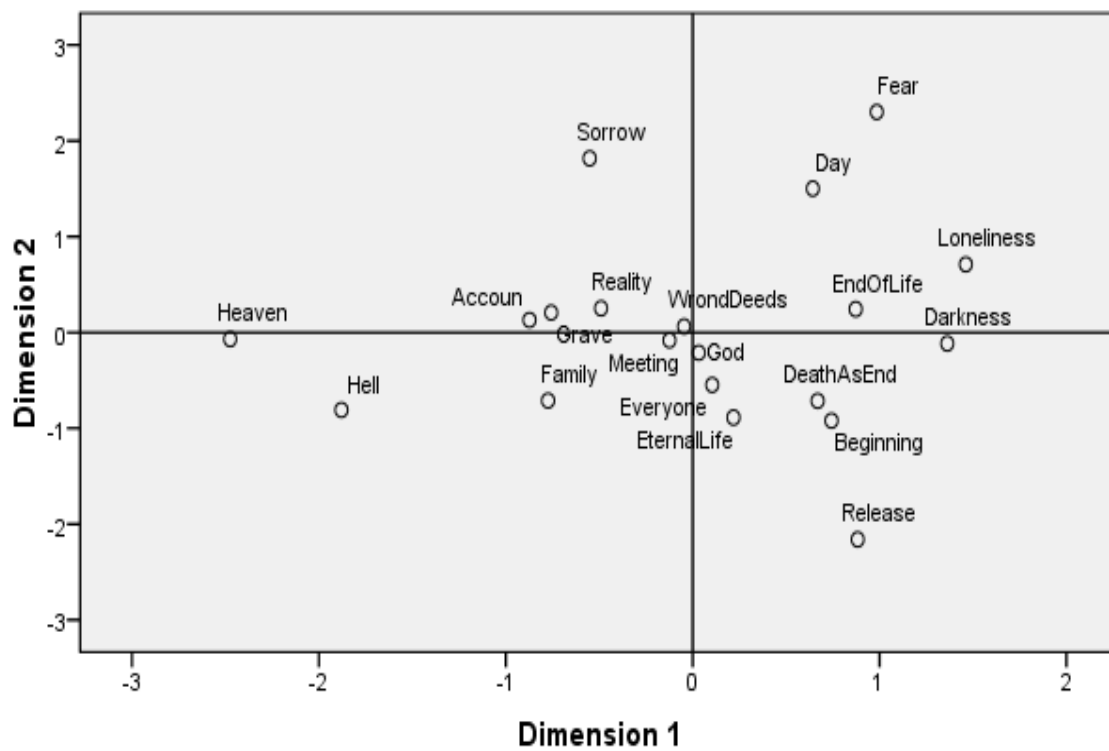


Figure 4. Two-dimensional map representing the schematic structure of death in the collective psyche of a sample of Pakistani youth in the early 21st century.

essentially spiritual (the traditional doctrine sees death as a primarily spiritual occurrence, e.g., Ghazali, 1973). Thoughts Associated with God are very closely linked with Being Reminded of Wrong Deeds. This seems to point toward the predominant image in our minds of God as a punitive agency. These two clusters are linked up with Eternal Life but the distance is large. Progressively larger and increasingly less homogenous clusters are formed subsequently. On the whole, this main cluster depicts the complexity of the death schema in the minds of young Pakistani Muslims.

The third cluster shows a distant grouping of Sorrow and Loneliness. These are practically synonymous terms, hence the association. Death of the other leads to Sorrow; perhaps the death of the self was being thought of when Loneliness was mentioned.

Fear and Release are left out of the cluster structure. Release (encompassing such responses as End of Pain) is very remotely linked to the large cluster. Fear is even more distant. It is to be noted that Release and Fear are polar opposites. Fear denotes a repulsion caused by death, Release an attraction. Fear is also the most frequently occurring response in the data, whereas Release lies at the 12th position. Table 1 indicates a general fearfulness of death and an estrangement from it that is characteristic of modernity (Aries as cited in Porter, 1999).

Figure 4 shows a two-dimensional map generated through Multi Dimensional Scaling. Dimension one on x-axis was labeled as *metaphysical versus material*. Dimension two on y-axis was named *death = forbidden versus death welcomed*. The metaphysical aspect includes Heaven, Hell, Grave, Accountability and Meeting with God etc. The material aspects include Fear, Loneliness and

Darkness etc. Death forbidden includes Fear, Loneliness, End of Life and Being Reminded of Wrong Deeds. Death welcomed includes Release, Eternal Life and Beginning of new life etc. The dimensions of the map (Figure 4) reflected two fundamental ways in which modernity diverges from tradition. Whereas for the traditional mind death is associated with metaphysical entities and occurrences, the modern mind sees the material aspects of death whereas the modern sensibilities are forbidding of death (Aries as cited in Porter, 1999) and traditional approach is welcoming of it.

These results have provided a glimpse into the death conceptualization of a sample of Pakistani youth and an examination of this conceptualization from the tradition/modernity angle. In the death schema discovered, the (tradition-based) sub construct of non-corporeal continuation proposed by Speece (1995) is very strong (directly reflected in at least 8 of the 20 topmost responses: Meeting with God, Heaven, Hell, Grave, Accountability, Beginning of a New Life, Eternal Life, Day of Judgment). The other (modern) sub concepts of universality and non-functionality are present to a lesser degree, reflected in the responses of Everyone has to Die, End of Life and Death as End of Various States. On the whole, this cognitive mapping exercise of the death schema has been an exciting venture into an uncharted territory and has thrown light on some dimensions of the cognitive component of the death attitudes of Pakistani undergraduates.

Conclusion

In the light of the discussion we conclude that modern and traditional influences intertwine to form the conceptualization of

death in the mind of the average Pakistani young men and women with tradition being the stronger influence.

Limitations

In the present study, multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis were run on the data while limiting the analysis to the ranking given to the 20 most frequently occurring responses in the data. The original data pool was staggering in the breadth and diversity of cognitions expressed. The richness of the qualitative data has been compromised, to some extent, by statistical analysis. Secondly, the sample was limited to only two institutions based in Lahore and no claim as to representativeness can be made as such though effort was made to include participants from diverse disciplines and gender was equally represented. In conclusion it can be said that the study was an exploratory first step in the area and should be followed by further research.

Implications

The current study has highlighted the need for an in-depth examination of the death concept (and overall death attitudes) of youth (and other age groups) through further research since the schematic structure of death uncovered is complex and should be studied in more detail and from various angles. Also, there is a need to be more open to the area of death research on an indigenous level as our relationship with death has important implications for social life on the whole as well as for the psychological health of individuals.

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