

Culture-Based Perceptions of Academic Achievement Among Low-Income Elementary Students

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*This study examined the influence of culture on students' perceptions of academic success. Students read scenarios depicting hypothetical classmates achieving success through the cultural themes of individualism, competition, communalism, or *verve*. Students reported their social endorsement for the hypothetical classmates. A 2×4 repeated measures analysis, examining the effects of cultural group and cultural theme on students' endorsement, revealed an interaction between the two variables. African American students were significantly more accepting of communal and *vervistic* high-achieving peers than European American students. European American students endorsed individualistic and competitive high achievers significantly more than African American students. These and other findings suggest that the value students attach to academic success should not be understood in the absence of cultural considerations.*

Keywords: culture, communalism, individualism, cultural orientation, African American academic achievement

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The academic performance gap between European American and African American elementary-grade students is well known. Whereas some have examined the factors that sustain it, others have sought to determine which factors are instrumental in its closure. Among them is a community of educators and researchers investigating the factors that enhance African American student performance in academic settings. Within this community exists the notion of building on students' cultural assets to foster optimal academic performance. Many agree that using student cultural assets in academic performance contributes to educational success by allowing the school context to resemble an out-of-school context in which cognitive competencies are emergent (Delpit, 2004; Gay, 2000). Although it is recognized that this alone does not account for students' educational success, African American student academic achievement has been sponsored by infusing fundamental cultural themes identified with a traditional African cultural legacy into the classroom (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boykin & Cunningham, 2001; Bell & Clark, 1998; Dill & Boykin, 2000; Jagers, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lee, 2001; Leslie, 1997; Teel, Debruin-Parecki, & Covington, 1998; Tuck & Boykin, 1989; Tucker & Herman, 2002). Such themes have been labeled *Afrocultural*.

What has not been empirically ascertained from this line of research is whether students systematically perceive the classroom in cultural terms, and if so, are such perceptions germane to students' conceptualizations of high academic achievement? The purpose of this article is to investigate whether perceptions of high academic achievement among low-income elementary-level students are mediated by aspects of fundamental culture. The literature on the culture-based learning interventions is discussed. What follows is an empirical examination of the perceptions of high academic achievement under specific cultural orientations.

Culture-Based Learning Interventions

Twenty years ago, Gilmore's (1985) seminal research illustrated the importance of incorporating aspects of students' lived experiences into classroom activities. Through qualitative methods, Gilmore inferred that African American students' reading performance was enhanced when their out-of-school, culturally informed, behavioral repertoire was allowed to manifest in the classroom. His conclusion—that the examination of literacy should occur within the sociocultural context of students—suggested that certain cognitive competencies are sanctioned in the classroom, although their development is not limited to the classroom. Indeed, Gilmore's work was instrumental in capturing the salience of culture in the cognitive development of African American students from low-income communities.

In more recent years, educators and researchers have proactively investigated the cultural antecedents promoting academic achievement for this population. Several have sought to determine how culture influences academic performance within specific academic domains such as literacy and language arts (Bell & Clark, 1998; Lee, 2001; Teel et al., 1998). Their efforts focus on creating and centering educational interventions in the proximal, everyday experiences of students placed at academic risk. This integrity-based approach (see Boykin, 2002, for elaboration) to ensuring academic success reconceptualizes learning and instruction by actively incorporating aspects of students' lived experiences, values, and competencies inside the classroom. It is argued that students are provided a sense of ownership of classroom material and activities and their overall learning experiences. This results in increased task engagement and motivation and an overall enhancement of academic performance (Boykin & Bailey, 2000; Gay, 2000).

For example, the work of Karen Teel and colleagues (Teel et al., 1998) demonstrated the positive effects of including aspects of

student culture in the academic curriculum. Their study qualitatively investigated the effects of culture-based, student-oriented teaching strategies on the motivation and task engagement of low-income African American seventh-grade students. The strategies included the following: effort-based grading, in which emphasis was placed on cooperation among students and between students and teachers; multiple performance opportunities, in which students demonstrated creativity along with skill mastery in several ways, including oral narratives and art; increased student responsibility, in which all students participated in specified classroom roles, thereby providing a sense of ownership to the educational process; and validation of cultural heritage, in which students were allowed to choose and read biographies or history texts consistent with their own cultural backgrounds. Teel et al. reported increased motivation and task engagement among students placed at academic risk. In particular, choosing and reading books by or about African Americans resulted in a strong sense of self-worth along with increased motivation to read.

Boykin and colleagues have also argued that providing fundamental cultural themes in classroom contexts is beneficial to the cognitive development and school performance of low-income African Americans. Their work has determined the salience of and preference for the Afro-cultural themes of communalism and verve, both at home and in academic contexts (Boykin, 2001; Boykin, Miller, & Tyler, in press; Ellison, Boykin, Towns, & Stokes, 2000). Communalism is broadly defined as embracing the pre-eminence of interdependence and mutuality of kindred people and verve, as an especial receptiveness to elevated levels of physical or sensate stimuli (i.e., marked by the variability, intensity, and density properties of stimulation; see Boykin, 1983, for further discussion). Their work has also incorporated such themes into academic content and activity. It was determined that the presence of these fundamental cultural themes in academic content and activity enhances

academic performance for many African American children (Boykin, Lilja, & Tyler, in press; Dill & Boykin, 2000).

For example, Tuck and Boykin (1989) found that low-income African American elementary-level children reported significantly higher levels of home stimulation and variability preference than their Anglo American counterparts. Performance on a range of cognitive tasks was also comparatively greater for African Americans than Anglo American children when the tasks were presented in a highly variable format than when presented blocked by task type (hence, a low-verve format). In communalism, Albury (1993) examined the effect of learning condition on the academic performance of low-income African American and Anglo American elementary school students. The experimental task was one of vocabulary learning, performed in one of four learning conditions: individual, interpersonal competition, intergroup competition, and communal. Results indicated that African American students had significantly better performance than their Anglo American counterparts under the communal learning context and they had better performance under this context than in the individual learning condition. The reverse finding was obtained for the Anglo American sample, for whom performance was significantly superior to that of African American students in the individualistic learning context.

What our efforts have not yet determined is whether an endorsement of specific cultural learning orientations is linked to students' perceptions of academic achievement. Some authors are convinced that low-income African American youth reject academic achievement overall (Ogbu, 2003). Yet, we resonate with the lineage of research that maintains school achievement and educational attainment are important to African American students (Radziwon, 2003). We extend this thinking, however, by advancing that low-income African American students do not reject high academic achievement. Instead, among African American students, there is a

rejection of mainstream cultural themes that many high-achieving students are expected and encouraged to use in the pursuit of such achievement.

Similar to Gilmore's (1985) assertions, we propose that African American students placed at academic risk will embrace high academic achievement when the means to achieve reflect purported aspects of their lived experiences outside of school. On the basis of previous studies, we also believe that Anglo American students' perception of high academic achievement will be different from that of African Americans. Assuming there is legitimacy to the ideas regarding the cultural nature of cognitive development (Rogoff, 2003), it would follow that there would be a relationship between culture and learning orientation, along with a relationship between learning orientation and academic achievement.

This study seeks to further explore these relationships by determining low-income African American and European American students' perceptions of high academic achievement through the use of four different cultural learning orientations.

Method

Sample

The participants consisted of 66 African American and 72 European American (138 total) fifth-grade students, ages 10 and 11 years, with a mean age of 11.16 years. The sample within each ethnic group was divided equally by gender. All of the children were from low-income backgrounds as determined by their participation in free or reduced lunch programs. This information was gathered by school administrators at two racially integrated public schools in an urban southeastern city.

Instruments

The Learning Orientation Scenarios were developed to assess student attitudes toward

high achievers and the learning orientations in which they prefer to achieve. The measure consisted of four written scenarios, each approximately 90 words in length. Each scenario depicted a hypothetical high-achieving student who preferred to achieve within one of the four distinct cultural learning orientations. Two of the learning orientations were informed by cultural themes or values commonly ascribed to European culture, namely individualism and competition (A. Howard & Scott, 1981). The remaining two were characterized by cultural themes arguably consistent with traditional African culture and, thus, likely part of the proximal experiences of many African Americans from low-income communities (who likewise are not apt to participate as greatly in "mainstream" American culture; Akbar, 1979; Boykin, 1983). These two are communalism and verve.

To construct the cultural orientation scenarios, we carefully explored the literature for definitions and conceptualizations of the culture themes used in the present effort. Several characterizations from the social science literature were retrieved and used to operationalize the constructs (Akbar, 1979; Boykin, 1983; Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; A. Howard & Scott, 1981; Mbiti, 1970; Sampson, 1977; Spence, 1985; Tuck & Boykin, 1989). Once definitions were gathered, several meetings were held to construct the scenarios. The scenarios were to depict either a male or female student engaged in high academic achievement behaviors. The behaviors exhibited were consistent with the cultural themes in question. Once the scenarios were completed, they were given to a panel of judges who had experience and formal knowledge in the study of culture. The judges reached consensus that the content of the scenarios represented the cultural themes in questions, and therefore content validity was established.

In the individualistic learning orientation scenario, the high-achieving student was depicted as preferring learning and instruction that provided the opportunity to

work independently or achieve through individual accomplishments. For example, the individualistic high achiever was described as “performing better on school tasks when working independently,” “preferring to work with the materials that she or he owned,” and “enjoying solving problems all on her or his own efforts.” The high-achieving student in the competitive learning context scenario was described as preferring to compete with other students to be the best in the class. This student was characterized as liking “the challenge of seeing who is best” and “not liking to have the second highest test score in the class.”

In the communal learning scenario, the high achiever was portrayed as preferring to share ideas and materials with other students when it will help them. This hypothetical student felt “it is a good idea for students to help each other learn” and “they can learn a lot of important things from each other.” Lastly, the high-achieving student in the verivistic environment was depicted as preferring the teacher to use many different ways to teach. He or she also preferred a lot of different activities going on at the same time in the classroom. This student “enjoyed working on several different subjects within a class period” and was “not bothered should music be playing in the background while she or he was working.” Two versions of the scenarios were developed, one depicting female high-achieving students and the other depicting male high-achieving students. This minimized the potential rejection of high-achieving students based on their respective gender. Flesch-Kincaid readability indices for the scales ranged from 3.4 to 4.2, indicating that the scale could be read and understood by someone with a third- to fourth-grade reading level.

Each scenario was followed by four questions that evaluated student attitudes toward engaging in social interaction with the high achiever in the scenario. There were two response options for each of the four questions. Two of the questions assessing student attitude included “Would you like Mary to

be your good friend?” and “Would you like to each lunch with Mary at school regularly?” A “yes” option was assigned a score of 1, and a “no” option was assigned a score of 0. The total score for each scenario was obtained by summing the four responses. Total scores ranged from 0.0 to 4.0 with a midpoint of 2.0. Scores above the midpoint reflected positive attitudes toward social engagement with the high-achieving peer and thus, by implication, an endorsement of the cultural learning orientation. Scores below the midpoint reflected negative attitudes toward social engagement with the high achiever and thus a rejection of the cultural learning orientation.

Procedure

Once institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained from the host institution, the research proposal was submitted to and approved by members of the research and evaluation division of the local school board. The board identified two elementary schools where research would be conducted. Principals at each school identified the classrooms that would participate in the study. To begin the recruitment process, we asked students in these classrooms to take home the parental consent forms and give them to a parent or guardian. The forms announced the purpose and schedule for participation in the study. The form also listed the telephone contact information of the African American female researchers. Parents were strongly encouraged to contact the researchers if they had any concerns regarding their child’s participation in the study. Within 2 weeks, 100% of the consent forms were signed and returned to classroom teachers. No telephone calls were received by the research team from parents of participating students. One African American researcher collected the consent forms from the participating classrooms. Similar IRB-approved research procedures have been used in previous studies (Allen & Boykin, 1991; Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boykin & Cunningham, 2001; Tuck & Boykin, 1989).

The children were surveyed by an African American female researcher at their schools. Students were randomly assigned to race-homogeneous groups of 3 (either 2 girls and 1 boy or 2 boys and 1 girl). Once students were situated in their respective groups, they were told of their rights not to participate at the beginning of the study and to cease participation at any point throughout the study. All students indicated that they understood this right. The children were informed that they were to read about four hypothetical students and then answer some questions about them. The children were then administered a pencil and the gender-appropriate version of the Learning Context Scenarios. The scenarios were presented individually so that each was completed before proceeding to the next one. The order of scenario presentation was predetermined by a counterbalancing sequence. This controlled for order effects. The researcher read the scenario aloud as the children read quietly to themselves. After the reading of the scenario, the children responded to the four questions. The children were instructed to circle their response after each question was read aloud by the experimenter. Students returned the surveys and pencils to the experimenter and were thanked for their participation.

Results

Reliability of Measure

The Learning Orientation Scenarios were designed to assess student attitude toward hypothetical high-achieving peers in four culturally informed learning orientations: individualistic, competitive, communal, and

vervistic. The internal reliability alpha coefficients for the learning context scales for the combined sample were .90 for individualism, .89 for competition, .76 for communalism, and .90 for verve. The alpha coefficients for each cultural group are presented in Table 1.

The low alpha coefficients obtained for the African American sample on the communalism and verve scales were attributable to extremely low variance among the students' responses on these scale items. For two of the scale items, there was no variance at all among the responses. All respondents gave "yes" responses to every question under the communal orientations. All of the African American children reported positive social attitudes toward the communal high achiever. The remaining two communalism items yielded variances of 0.006 and 0.007, which indicated that 94% (62 students) and 92% (60 students) of the African American sample reported positive endorsements of the high-achieving communal peer, respectively. Similarly, all but 1 student (99% of the sample) in the African American sample revealed positive endorsement ratings for each of the four verve items. When outlier scores on both the communal and verve scales were removed, the analysis revealed 100% endorsement and no variance for both scales. Consequently, alpha reliability coefficients could not be recomputed.

Analysis of Difference

We performed preliminary analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether there were differences in the children's attitudes toward high achievers due to school, grade, gender, and order of scenario presentation.

TABLE 1 Reliability Coefficients for Learning Orientation Scales: Ethnicity of Students ($N = 38$)

<i>Cultural group</i>	<i>Individualism</i>	<i>Competition</i>	<i>Communalism</i>	<i>Verve</i>
African American	.77	.83	.38	.66
European American	.87	.90	.75	.82

No significant differences in student attitudes were found on these variables. As a result, these variables were not included in further analyses.

A 2 × 4 ANOVA was performed to examine significant differences in African and European American students' attitudes toward hypothetical high-achieving peers in four culturally informed learning orientations. The independent variables were cultural group (African American and European American) and learning orientation (individualistic, competitive, communal, and vervistic) as a repeated measures variable. Peer endorsement level served as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed one main effect and one interaction. Table 2 displays the significant main effect revealed for learning orientation, $F(3, 405) = 69.67, p < .01$. The overall sample reported the greatest level of endorsement for high achievers in the communal learning orientation followed by the vervistic, competitive, and, finally, the individualistic learning orientation. This main effect was qualified by a cultural group by cultural learning orientation interaction.

Table 3 illustrates the significant interaction revealed between cultural group and cultural learning orientation, $F(3, 135) = 79.98, p < .01$. Post hoc analyses verify the interaction by revealing significant mean differences between learning orientations scenario within each cultural group. African American children reported more positive attitudes for the communal and vervistic high achievers and less positive attitudes for the individualistic and competitive high achievers. European

TABLE 2 Analysis of Variance Significant Main Effect for Endorsement of High Achievers: Learning Orientation of Students (N = 38)

<i>Learning orientation scenario</i>	<i>Overall mean score</i>
Individualistic	1.46
Competitive	1.56
Communal	3.38
Vervistic	2.79

TABLE 3 Analysis of Variance Significant Interaction Effect for Endorsement of High Achievers: Learning Orientation by Cultural Group

<i>Learning context scenario</i>	<i>European American students (n = 72)</i>	<i>African American students (n = 66)</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Individualistic	2.51	0.41	2.1
Competitive	2.21	0.91	1.30
Communal	2.90	3.86	0.96
Vervistic	1.65	3.94	2.29

American children's endorsement pattern was relatively flat across the four learning orientations, although they did endorse communal and individualistic high achievers significantly more than vervistic high achievers. Significant differences in peer endorsements were also found across cultural groups. African American students reported significantly more positive attitudes toward communal and vervistic high achievers than did European American students. European American students endorsed individual and competitive high-achieving peers significantly more than did African American students. Figure 1 depicts the interaction.

Analysis of Relationships

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to determine relationships among cultural learning orientation endorsement scores. Overall, significant positive associations were found between peer endorsements for communalism and verve ($r = .61, p < .01$) and individualism and competition ($r = .54, p < .01$). These coefficients suggest that as peer endorsement scores for communal and individual high achievers increased, scores for vervistic and competitive high achievers increased, respectively. In addition, significant negative relationships were obtained between peer endorsements for communalism and individualism ($r = -.50, p < .01$), communalism and competition

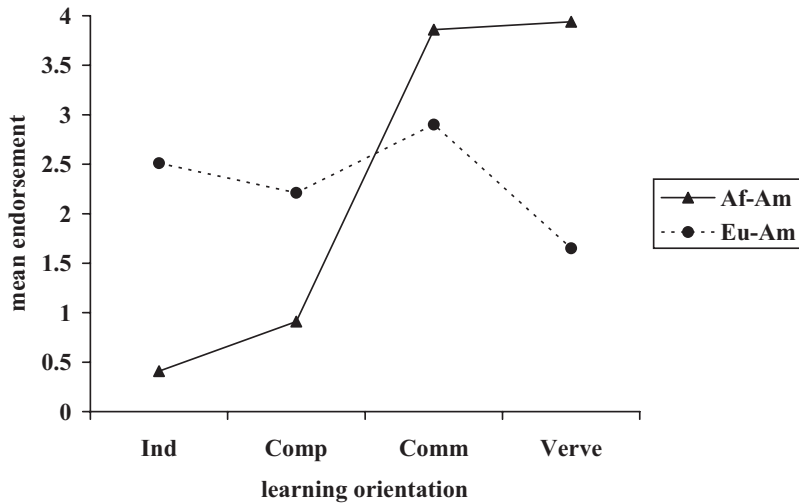


FIGURE 1 Cultural group by cultural orientation interaction. Ind = individualism high achievement; Comp = competition high achievement; Comm = communalism high achievement; Verve = verve high achievement; Af-Am = African American students; Eu-Am = European American students; numbers 0–4 on y-axis = mean for peer endorsement.

($r = -.43, p < .01$), and verve and competition ($r = -.49, p < .01$). These coefficients indicated that as peer endorsement scores for communal high achievers increased, scores for individual and competitive high achievers decreased. Also, endorsement scores for verve high achievers increased as scores for competitive high achievers decreased. The correlation matrix for cultural orientation endorsement scores is presented in Table 4.

Discussion

The present study determined whether the perception of high academic achievement

was mediated by culture. The endorsement of high academic achievement was also ascertained as a function of both cultural group and cultural learning orientation. Cultural orientation was measured through the development of scenarios in which hypothetical high-achieving students behaved and achieved in ways that were consistent with particular cultural themes. Students responded to whether they endorsed social affiliation with the students, and given that the distinguishing features for each scenario were cultural-themed behaviors, it could be inferred that they were responding differently to these themes and by implication in their endorsements of the high-achieving student in the derived vignettes. The present study also examined whether there would be explainable patterns of relationships among the endorsement levels of the culturally distinct hypothetical peers.

TABLE 4 Correlation Matrix for Cultural Orientation Endorsement Scores

Learning orientation	1	2	3	4
1. Individualism	—	.54*	-.50*	-.61*
2. Competition		—	-.43*	-.49*
3. Communalism			—	.60*
4. Verve				—

* $p < .05$.

Analysis of variance procedures revealed that there was a significant main effect for the cultural learning orientation independent variable. Communal high achievement was endorsed more than the individual or competitive high achievement. This main effect is substantially qualified and clarified by an obtained significant interaction be-

tween cultural group and cultural learning orientation. Specifically, African American children displayed overwhelming endorsement of hypothetical peers who achieved highly via the Afro-cultural themes of communalism and verve, and clear-cut rejection of ones who achieved highly via the ostensibly Euro-cultural themes of individualism and competition. For the European American children, their endorsement pattern across the four scenarios was not so markedly distinct. However, they did endorse the two Euro-cultural themes more greatly than did the African American children, while in contrast, African American children in this sample more greatly endorsed the two Afro-cultural themes.

These findings most certainly call into question the claim by some that African American students, particularly ones who are economically marginalized, reject high achievement or their high-achieving peers (Ogbu, 2003). Indeed, the findings are consistent with the conception that academic success is likely highly valued in low-income African American communities but that the endorsement of high achievement could be conditionalized by cultural considerations. These results lend credence to the notion that many African American children typically may not reject high achievement or high-achieving peers per se but reject the cultural factors that so often are yoked to such achievement in traditional schooling contexts. The results are also compatible with the position that many young African American students are sensitive to distinct cultural manifestations, and their endorsement of Afro-cultural themes here support that such themes may play prominent, affirmative roles in their everyday, proximal experiences outside of school (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Lee, 2001). Certainly, if results like these continue to obtain, it could be inferred that bringing such cultural themes into classroom contexts could be motivationally propitious for many African American children from low-income backgrounds. Certainly, other work converges with this stance. As reported earlier, research has

shown that academically relevant outcomes for many African American children can be enhanced when learning and performance contexts are imbued with such Afro-cultural themes (Boykin & Bailey, 2000; Boykin, Lilja, & Tyler, 2004).

Beyond this, the correlational findings go further to lend support that a theoretical divergence can be drawn between Afro and Euro-cultural themes. Results revealed that relationships among endorsed levels clustered along cultural lines. The responses to the two Afro-cultural themes correlated positively with each other as did endorsement of the two Euro-cultural themes. Moreover, endorsements across this cultural divide tended to correlate negatively. Thus, children responded in similar fashions to the themes within a cultural theme category, and in opposing fashions across the two theme categories. These findings also suggest that reconciling the displays of these two cultural domains within the same classroom setting would be challenging to say the least. But such a challenge may need to be successfully met if we are to do a better job of educating well greater numbers of our nation's children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Indeed, closing the achievement gap may depend to some degree on how well this challenge is addressed.

Limitations and Future Directions

Generally speaking, findings from this investigation support theoretical contentions. However, at a glance, there seems to be one noteworthy exception. European American students in this sample endorsed communal high achievers to a notable degree. Should we thus conclude that European American students endorse this Afro-cultural theme? Perhaps this is so, but this finding is not necessarily anomalous or surprising. We would assert that cultural orientations and preferences are not deterministically dictated by racial group membership but by exposure and access to certain experiences

and how those experiences get qualitatively coded (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003; Rogoff & Chavajay, 2003). The children in this study came from the same neighborhoods and attended the same schools, and all are from low-income backgrounds. They certainly have had overlapping and interpenetrating proximal experiences. Given this, it might be more arresting to consider not this instance of convergence, but the several instances of divergence between the two groups. Moreover, research literature is replete with examples of the universal appeal of cooperative learning settings (Haynes & Gebreyesus, 1992; Slavin, 1983). In our other work, we have drawn a distinction between cooperative learning and communal learning, between cooperation and communalism, even while accepting their operational similarities (Boykin & Bailey, 2000; Dill & Boykin, 2000). But in the inspection of the present communal scenario, it does not sharply draw out this distinction. Indeed, this scenario might be more properly labeled as cooperative/communal. Future work deploying the present paradigm should create more sharp operational distinctions.

Then too, this study dealt with hypothetical reactions to hypothetical students. It inferred that the endorsement patterns are tied to out-of-school, proximal experiences. It also implied that the findings might be pertinent to school performance. These considerations merit further research. How do students conduct themselves in actual classrooms with their actual peers? Can we link empirically their preferences to out-of-school experiences and in-school performance? Although other work in this general domain would seem to suggest that such linkages can be verified (Boykin, 2001; Bailey & Boykin, 2001), it is to further research to link stated preferences to actual proximal experiences and to social and academic behaviors. Additional work should address the generalizability of the present findings by increasing sample size and ethnic variability among people of African descent, expanding to other ages, and consid-

ering academic rather than social engagement with high-achieving peers. Such work is under way.

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