Existential Fulfillment, Work Engagement and Job Burnout

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between existential fulfillment, engagement and burnout, as well as the contribution of the first two concepts to burnout. In a cross-sectional survey a random sample was drawn (n = 106) from a population of high school teachers. They were given a questionnaire that included demographic, existential fulfillment, burnout and engagement items. 89 respondents (which constituted a response rate of 84%) filled the questionnaire. The average age was 34 years and 60 percent of respondents were female. Participants had been in their current station for an average of four years and had on average 12 years of work experience. Existential fulfillment was positively correlated with engagement and both variables negatively correlated to burnout. These findings have significant implications for positive organizational behaviour and human resource development. It also demonstrates the importance of work engagement and existential fulfillment for the prevalence and prevention of burnout.

Key words: Existential fulfillment, Engagement, Burnout

Introduction

Existentially inclined researchers define burnout as a form of existential vacuum that is characterized by apathy, boredom and lack of interest in relationships. On the other hand, positive psychological perspective rephrases job burnout as the erosion of work engagement. It conceptualizes the way people relate psychologically with their jobs as a continuum between the negative experience of burnout and the positive one of engagement and fulfillment. Engagement predicts workers' outcomes, organizational success, and financial performance. However, the changing psychological contract at the work place has majority of employees either not fully engaged or disengaged leading to an engagement gap that is a recipe for burnout.

Research has established that besides environmental variables that predict the burnout phenomena, for example workload, social support and organizational administration, personality factors are significant in the research on burnout. These include personality traits (Cano-Garcia, Padilla-Muñoz & Carraso-Ortiz, 2005), perceived self-efficacy (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomić, 2002), existential fulfillment (Tomić, Evers & Brouwers, 2004), constructive thinking (Evers, Tomić & Brouwers, 2005), and work engagement (Hakanen, Baker & Schaufeli, 2006). Two of these person-specific variables, existential fulfillment and engagement have received little attention in research. This paper explores the relationship between existential fulfillment, engagement and burnout as well as the contribution of the first concepts to burnout.

Three broad objectives have been posited: first the research sought to establish the levels of existential fulfillment, engagement and burnout among the respondents. Secondly, the research explored the inter-correlations between existential fulfillment, engagement and

burnout variables. Third, the study explored the possible contribution of existential fulfillment and engagement to burnout among the respondents. Lastly, the study explored the influence of respondents' demographic characteristics on the existential fulfillment, engagement and burnout.

Literature Review

Schaufeli and Bakker (2001) observe that lot of psychological research has focused on unhealthiness and being indisposed. However, this century has witnessed a paradigm shift in studies on psychological wellness and researchers have shown an increasing interest in positive aspects of personal functioning in organizations (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2007). This has been attributed to the new movement called positive psychology, which Duckworth *et al.* (2005) describes as the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, as well as the institutions that facilitate their development.

The interest in the relationship between existential fulfillment and work engagement ensues from the view of healthy psychological functioning that has been developed by existential and humanistic psychology. Since self-transcendence is considered to be the core of existential fulfillment (Frankl, 2004), it is not surprising that some research has been done to understand the relationships between self-transcendence and well-being among workers. Kilpatrick (2002) found positive correlations between self-transcendence, spiritual perspective and wellbeing. Tomić and Tomić (2011) suggest that self-transcendence may increase with development.

In their research on the relationship between self-transcendence and burnout (the opposite of work engagement) Hunnibell (2006) and Hunnibell *et al.* (2008) found a significant negative correlation between self-transcendence and all three dimensions of burnout. Research conducted by Palmer *et al.* (2010) showed that the higher the workers' scores are on existential fulfillment the more energy they have towards their work and the higher their scores on work engagement dimensions are, i.e. dedication and absorption. This shows that existential fulfillment which helps workers derive positive meaning from their job experiences fosters work engagement. Therefore it can be envisaged that as existential fulfillment increases, engagement is predicted to increase and burnout symptoms decrease. Existential fulfillment and work engagement may therefore be considered as a resource for workers and may insulate them against job burnout.

Unfortunately, much of what has been written about employee engagement comes from the practitioner literature and consulting firms and as Robinson *et al.,* (2004) aver there is a surprising dearth of research on employee engagement in the academic literature. For the purpose of prevention and intervention, a large body of burnout and engagement studies has focused on identifying their antecedents, including both environmental and individual ones (Langelaan, Bakker, Van Doornen & Schaufeli, 2006). Burnout researchers such Maslach *et al.,* (2001) consider burnout as an erosion of engagement.

Existential fulfillment

Existential fulfillment refers to a way of life that is full of meaning and purpose and reveals an existential psychological approach to life (Längle *et al.,* 2003). The three notions related to existential fulfillment are self-acceptance, self-actualization and self-transcendence (Loonstra *et al.,* 2007). Characteristic of existential psychology is the attention paid to the boundary

experiences of human beings as determinants of human existence (Yalom, 1980). Human existence is confronted by with several existential boundaries. According to Tomić and Tomić (2011), humans must overcome the psychological conflicts evoked by these boundaries in order to obtain a fulfilled existence. Those who accept the self accept their potentialities and intrinsic limitations. When they actualize the self they explore and develop their possibilities and potentialities for the sake of personal growth in understanding and abilities. Those who transcends the self recognize the otherness of the reality beyond the self, search for respectful relationships with this reality, derive life-meaning from these relationships, feel responsible for them, feel part of a larger whole, distinguish interests that surpass self-interests, and are able to see the self in perspective of the outer reality (Loonstra *et al.,* 2007; Tomić and Tomić, 2008). In fulfilling these existential tasks, people find life-meaning and a fulfilled existence. Self-transcendence is considered by Frankl (2004) to be the essence of human existence. This is the spiritual ability that enables the individual to make intentional contacts with the world beyond the self, which provides ultimate meaning to life.

The notions of self-acceptance, self-actualization and self-transcendence can be interpreted as basic attitudes in pursuing existential fulfillment and overcoming the psychological conflicts caused by human limitedness. The inability to achieve existential goals may lead to burnout (Pines & Aronson, 1988), whereas the achievement of these goals may result in work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2001).

Work Engagement

Work engagement has been given many definitions by many researchers. Schaufeli *et al.,* (2002) look at it as the positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. To burnout researchers it is the opposite or positive antithesis of burnout characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy, the direct opposite of the three burnout dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach *et al.,* 2001). Kahn (1990, 1992), defines employee engagement as the harnessing of employees' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances. Other researchers have defined it as emotional and intellectual commitment to the organization (Baumruk, 2004; Richman, 2006; Shaw, 2005) or the amount of discretionary effort exhibited by employees in their jobs (Frank *et al.,* 2004). Therefore, engagement implies being psychologically present when occupying and performing an organizational role. Rothbard (2001) expands this definition by adding that it involves two critical components: attention and absorption. Attention refers to the cognitive availability and the amount of time one spends thinking about a job role while absorption means being engrossed in a role and refers to the intensity of one's focus on a their role.

In the context of positive psychology, which focuses on health and well-being, the concept of work engagement is considered to be one of the positive dimensions (Tomić & Tomić, 2011). According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2001), it refers to a positive, affective-cognitive state of supreme satisfaction. The concept has three components. The first, vigor, is characterized by high levels of energy and mental flexibility while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and perseverance in the face of difficulties. The second component, dedication, refers to a commitment to work and is characterized by a sense of significance. Dedication is a useful and meaningful experience, inspiring and challenging; it evokes feelings of pride and enthusiasm. Absorption, the final dimension of engagement, refers to the full concentration on and deep engrossment in one's work. It has been established that vigor and dedication are the main characteristics of engaged behavior (Llorens *et al.,* 2007). Engagement is not a momentary and specific state, but rather, it is a more persistent and pervasive affective-

cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior (Schaufeli *et al.,* 2002). Research on burnout and engagement has found that the core dimensions of burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and engagement (vigor and dedication) are opposites of each other (Gonzalez-Roma *et al.,* 2006).

The recent years have witnessed a great deal of interest in employee engagement and personal fulfillment at the workplace. Research has established that engagement predicts employee outcomes, organizational success, and financial performance such as total shareholder return (Bates, 2004; Baumruk, 2004; Harter *et al.,* 2002; Richman, 2006). At the same time, it has been reported that employee engagement is on the decline and there is a deepening disengagement among employees today (Bates, 2004; Richman, 2006). Majority of workers today focus on the pecuniary benefits of their jobs and are either not fully engaged or they are disengaged leading to an engagement gap that costs businesses and organizations much in lost productivity (Bates, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Kowalski, 2003).

Schaufeli and Bakker (2007) observe that employees who display a high level of engagement work particularly hard and diligently because they enjoy their work, and not because of a strong, compelling inner motivation alone. When they experience fatigue, such individuals describe the feeling as quite pleasant because of its association with positive achievements rather than failures (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2008). The outcomes of work engagement primarily include positive attitudes towards work and the organization, such as job satisfaction, commitment to the organization and a lack of desire to turnover (Demerouti *et al.,* 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Likewise, engagement leads to positive organizational behavior, such as displaying personal initiative, a strong motivation to learn (Sonnentag, 2003) and proactive conduct (Salanova *et al.,* 2003).

When employees are engaged with their work, there is congruence between the employees' priorities and the organizations' goals. There are indications that the degree of work engagement is positively correlated with job performance (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2007). Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) conclude that engaged individuals have a well-developed ability to adequately respond to change, quickly adapt to a new environment and easily switch from one activity to another. Engaged employees continue to seek new challenges in their work and perform at a high-quality level, resulting in positive feedback from both managers and clients. Work engagement is contagious and thus is transferable from one person to another (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Finally, there are indications that work engagement is positively related to health. Demerouti *et al.* (2001) and Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) observed fewer depressed, stress-related and psychosomatic symptoms among workers who scored highly on the engagement scale.

There are indications that work engagement has many advantages for both employees and employers (Tomić & Tomić, 2011). However, the level of work engagement varies for each profession. Schaufeli and Bakker, (2004) and Simpson, (2009) have formed the basis for theories about the relationships between the dimensions of existential fulfillment work engagement and burnout.

Job Burnout
Burnout is a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a sense of diminished self-efficacy that can occur among individuals who work with other people in some capacity (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996). Job burnout is an important index of psychological well-being among working people (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). It is associated with decreased job performance (Brouwers & Tomić, 2000), reduced job

engagement and predicts low existential fulfillment (Lemkau, Rafferty, & Gordon, 1994), and stress related problems (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Cherniss (1980) identified that, in the process of burnout, both attitudes and behaviors change in an unconstructive manner in response to work stress. Cedoline (1982) depicted the physical and behavioral symptoms of burnout as the reluctance to go to work, disappointment with performance, an extension of work problems into the person's home life, and an ultimate feeling of worthlessness.

Pines (1993) reported that burnout systems include, but are not limited to, fatigue, poor self-esteem, inability to concentrate on a subject, and a tendency to blame others. Maslach *et al.* (1996) further asserts that individuals suffering from burnout experience a depletion of physical and emotional resources, develop cynical attitudes, and feel a loss of professional self-efficacy. Dunham and Varma (1998) stated that the most pervasive symptoms of burnout are a noticeable lowering level of job commitment, a loss of enthusiasm and interest, and feelings of disaffection and alienation. In addition to negative effects of burnout on individuals, organizations also face significant implications and costs associated with burnout (Shirom, 2003). Among these negative impacts, organizations experience lower individual work performance, high rates of turnover, lower levels of organizational commitment, lower reported job satisfaction, high health care costs, and decreases in creativity, problem solving and innovation (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004).

Methodology

Existential fulfillment. Existential fulfillment, composed of the three dimensions self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self transcendence, was made operational by means of the Existential Fulfillment Scale (EFS) (Loonstra *et al.,* 2007). The EFS consists of 15 items, 5 items for each dimension, measured on a 5-point Likert scale, running from 0 (*'not at all' relevant to me*) to 4 (*'fully' relevant to me*). The five items on self-acceptance refer to the urge to prove oneself to others, rejection of the self, inner uncertainty and psychological reliance (e.g., *'Often I do things more because I have to than because I want to'*). The self-actualization items deal with intrinsic motivation, the passion of one's own ideals, and feeling free to calmly pursue one's goals (e.g., *'I remain motivated to go on, even when things are going against me'*). The self-transcendence items focus on feeling part of a larger, meaningful totality, conceiving a sense of life that transcends personal interests and being convinced that life is good for something. The maximum score per dimension is 20. The internal consistency coefficients for the existential fulfillment scale were 0.79, 0.76 and 0.82, for self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self transcendence respectively.

Work engagement. Work Engagement was assessed with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli *et al.,* 2002). The UWES has been found to be a reliable and valid self-report questionnaire (Schaufeli *et al.,* 2006). The factorial validity of the UWES has been demonstrated in previous research (Hakanen, 2002). In addition, previous studies carried out in other countries have shown that the UWES has satisfactory psychometric properties (Schaufeli *et al.,* 2002). There are three subscales with five items each: vigour, dedication and absorption. Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always, daily), with a maximum score per subscale of 30. Examples of items are: *'At work I bubble over with energy'* (vigour), *'Work inspires me'* (dedication) and *'I am totally absorbed in my work'* (absorption). High scores on these scales indicate greater work engagement (vigour, dedication and absorption). The reliability of the data was found to be high with an overall $\alpha = 0.91$. Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 for vigor, and 0.83 for dedication and 0.79 for absorption subscales respectively.

Job Burnout. Burnout was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Scale (MBI–GS; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). The MBI (20 items) consists of 3 sub-scales: emotional exhaustion (8 items), e.g. *"Working with people all day is really a strain for me"*; depersonalization (5 items), e.g. *"I don't really care what happens to some of the young residents"*; and self efficacy (7 items), e.g. *"I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job"*. Teachers responded on a 7-point scale, from "never" to "always". MBI reliability tests (Schaufeli, 1990) showed that the emotional exhaustion sub-scale is the most reliable of the three; Cronbach's alphas vary between .80 and .90. The other two sub-scales appeared to have Cronbach's alphas of between .70 and .80, which may be regarded as sufficient for research purposes according to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). This study yielded an internal consistency of 0.85 for emotional exhaustion, 0.78 for cynicism and 0.73 for efficacy. These fall above the acceptable threshold for testing of reliability. The three-factor structure of the MBI has been investigated with confirmatory factor analysis (Green & Walkey, 1988). The factorial validity of the MBI–GS has been confirmed across occupational groups and across nations (Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, & Schaufeli, 2000).

Population

In a cross-sectional survey a random sample was drawn (n = 106) from a population of high school teachers. The respondents completed a questionnaire that included demographic, existential fulfillment (EFS), burnout (MBI) and engagement (UWES) items. The questionnaires that were properly filled were 89, which constituted a response rate of 84%.

Procedure of Data Collection

All respondents were directly contacted by the researcher. A self-administered questionnaire was used as an instrument to collect data. Participation of the respondents was voluntary.

Results

Descriptive analysis revealed that 4% of the respondents were younger than 25 years old, 30% were between 26 and 35 years, 25% between 36 and 45 years, 27% between 46 and 55 years, and 14% were over 55 years of age. The mean job tenure as a teacher was 12 years (S.D. = 10.1). With respect to job seniority, 18.7% have held their jobs for 1 - 5 years, 27.9% for 6 - 10 years, 27.9% for 11 - 15 years and 25.5% for over 15 years. Regarding job position, the great majority of the respondents (69.8%) are classroom teachers, followed by heads of departments (15.1%) and deputy principals (15.1%). Most participants were female (60%).

Table 1
A Survey of Mean Scores, Standard Deviations and Correlations between Burnout Dimensions and Existential Fulfillment sub-scales (N = 89)

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Emotional Exhaustion	12.65	6.24	-					
2. Depersonalization	3.31	2.61	.42**	-				
3. Self Efficacy	32.28	4.56	-.29**	-.30**	-			
4. Self-Acceptance	37.41	4.82	-.37**	-.34**	.37**	-		
5. Self-Transcendence	73.34	5.08	-.33**	-.45**	.40**	.53**	-	
6. Self-Actualization	52.29	5.78	-.34**	-.39**	.43**	.55**	.66**	-

* p < .05, ** p < .01

Table 1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations and correlations between the three existential fulfillment subscales and three burnout dimensions. The results show that self-acceptance, self-transcendence and self actualization are negatively correlated to both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization: the less the scores on the existential fulfillment subscales, the higher the scores on the two burnout dimensions. However, the fulfillment subscales positively correlated to professional efficacy: the higher the scores on the existential fulfillment scale, the higher the self efficacy scores. Correlation coefficients were significant at p<0.01.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistencies of the burnout (EX, CY, reduced EF) and engagement (VI, DE, AB) scales (N = 89)

	Mean	SD	F	EX	CY	rEF	VI	DE	AB
EX	2.24	1.23	227.52	0.85					
CY	1.87	1.21	48.50	0.46***	0.84				
rEF	1.65	0.86	29.22	0.21***	0.38***	0.73			
VI	3.82	0.86	55.89	-0.20***	-0.27***	-0.64***	0.79		
DE	3.74	1.29	60.70	-0.14*	-0.51***	-0.68***	0.60***	0.89	
AB	3.53	1.00	4.51	-0.12*	-0.22***	-0.60***	0.74***	0.56***	0.72

$* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001$

Table 2 indicates that as expected, all burnout and engagement scales are negatively related, whereas interrelations of the burnout and engagement scales are all positive.

The correlations between the dimensions of existential fulfillment and work engagement were also investigated. There appeared to be a significant positive correlation between self-actualisation and the three dimensions of work engagement: vigour (_¼0.42, p<0.01), dedication (_¼0.30, p<0.01) and absorption (_¼0.43, p<0.01). The explained variance was 10%, 8% and 13%, respectively. The higher the score on self-actualization, the higher the scores obtained on work engagement. Self-transcendence correlated significantly but negatively with one dimension of work engagement, namely vigour (_¼_0.16, p<0.05), and explained 2% of the variance. Higher scores on transcendence predicted lower the scores on vigour. There was no correlation between self-acceptance and the dimensions of work engagement.

Multifactor Multivariate Analysis Of variance (MANOVA) revealed that there were no significant main effects found in the data. There was no significant differences in work engagement between male and female respondents (F (57,152) = 0.176, p>0.05). The participants' age did not have significant effects on subjects work engagement (F (177,139) = 0.983, p>0.05). Education background had also no significant effects on subjects work engagement (F (57,149) = 0.131, p>0.05). This means that the respondents with or without advanced levels of education engage equally with their job. Teaching experiences had no significant effects on the subjects work engagement (F (116,150) = 0.305, p>0.05). There were no significant differences in work engagement between respondents of different status (F (116,149) = 0.613, p>0.05).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationships between existential fulfillment, work engagement and job burnout. In addition, the extent to which the first two independent variables influence job burnout was investigated. A thorough search for related literature yielded no published empirical data on the relationships between these concepts in Kenyan setting. Therefore, a comparison with results of previously conducted studies is hardly feasible. In the Loonstra *et al.* (2009) study, similar concepts were examined, i.e. the relationship between existential fulfillment and burnout (the opposite of work engagement) among secondary education teachers.

A positive relationship between existential fulfillment and work engagement was confirmed for the dimension of self-actualization. The results show that self-actualization explained a substantial percentage of variance in all three dimensions of work engagement. On the other hand, self-acceptance and self-transcendence hardly explained variance in work engagement dimensions. With regard to self-transcendence, this is consistent with the results reported by Loonstra *et al.* (2009).

Job burnout explained a substantial proportion of variance in vigour and dedication. A higher burnout level experienced by teachers resulted in lower scores on vigour and dedication on one hand and self-transcendence and self-actualization on the others hand. This finding is consistent with Van Rhenen's (2008) study, in which he advises that people concentrate on work pleasure because enthusiastic staff members are a positive contribution to an organization. A higher degree of perceived job burnout may result in decreased vigour and energy, including mental resilience and perseverance. Dedication, a particularly strong work involvement, diminishes, and the question is to what extent respondents experienced their work as meaningful and inspiring. It is likely that teachers with a higher perceived burnout will not be fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in their work (absorption).

The results of this study have several implications for research. First, it was revealed that the teachers had an average score on the emotional exhaustion subscale, high degree of depersonalization, and low degree of personal accomplishment. According to Budinick (2005), higher scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales indicate higher levels of burnout. Personal accomplishment subscale is scored in the opposite direction; where lower scores on personal accomplishment indicate higher burnout. The overall results of this study describe the teachers to be on the borderline of burnout showing signs of moving toward a high degree of burnout.

Differences between female and male teachers' burnout levels provided an interesting comparison. Although no statistical significant was found, female teachers were found to have scored higher on all three burnout dimensions over their male counterpart. These results point to a significant need for further research related to gender and burnout in high school teachers.

This research established that existential fulfillment is positively correlated to work engagement and negatively correlated to job burnout. Existential fulfillment and work engagement are mutually reinforcing and developing ways of boosting them at the work place can be a powerful tool not only for combating burnout but also for insulating workers from experiencing an existential vacuum.

Conclusions
Several limitations may have influenced the results of the current study. Firstly, this study was limited by its cross-sectional design. Some reservations must be expressed in terms of

the direction of causation. The relationships shown do not reveal the causal direction. The results indicate that self-actualization influences work engagement, but one can also imagine influences moving in the opposite direction: a low level of work engagement leads to diminished self-actualization. When teachers are subjected to strict demands from their superiors and the work environment does not offer opportunities for personal development and growth, self-actualization, absorption and dedication may be diminished. Secondly, the direction of causation requires further investigation. Future longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the possibility of causal relationships between existential fulfillment, work engagement and job burnout. Thirdly, the measurements in this study were based on self-reports. Consequently, the extent to which these self-reports accurately reflect existential fulfillment, work engagement and perceived job burnout is not known. Naturally, the results of the present study for the association between existential fulfillment, work engagement and burnout should be interpreted with caution, but there are no indications that these findings solely reflect biased respondent reporting. Combining self-report data with data obtained in a more objective manner is recommended for further research so that powerful statistical techniques can be applied for hypothesis testing. The findings of the present survey could be used to generate hypotheses for future research. Fourthly, since this study did not take into account geographical spread or the various working environments of teachers, generalizing the results to all teachers in the county should be done with caution.

Despite the limitations, the current study contributed to the knowledge of the teaching profession with regard to existential fulfillment and work engagement in relation to job burnout. Because the aim of the present study was to generate empirical knowledge about positive behaviours in organizations, it may be concluded that this study fits into the research context of positive psychology. Existential fulfillment, in part, and work engagement appear to be determinants of job burnout. In order to maintain and promote work engagement and the high performance of employees, organizations should provide sufficient challenging work (Bakker, 2009) because engaged professional teachers are critical to preserving the quality of education (Laschinger, *et al.,* 2006).

Suggestions for Further Research

The research established a need for studies in the following areas:
  i. Gender and burnout in high school teachers in Kenya
 ii. The reciprocal determinism of burnout and the two antipodes (each may significantly and negatively influence the other)
iii. The reason for lack of correlation between self-acceptance, self-transcendence and engagement dimensions

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