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The Purpose and Types of Organizational Gossip

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1. Research topic and Literature Review

1.1 Relevance of the Research Topic

People might devote two-thirds of their speaking time to gossiping about others, regardless of their culture or demographic characteristics, making gossip one of the main human activities (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Gossip is relevant in small groups where people know each other (Ellwardt, 2011). In recent years, scholars recognized the relevance of gossip at the workplace and its effect on key organizational processes (Ellwardt, 2011; Kniffin and Wilson, 2010; Wittek and Wielers, 1998).

In the literature, the two main concepts related to gossip are cooperation and reputation. Gossip enables keeping track of each other within a social group, enhancing cohesion, and it is used to exclude free-riders from a group to enhance cooperation (Dunbar, 2004). In many cases, acts of cooperation can be motivated and explained by reputation (Feinberg et al., 2014). Gossip has many other antecedents and outcomes within workplaces, such as informing managers about important issues (Gholipour *et al.*, 2011), socializing employees, or influencing or lowering someone's social status (Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004). The social status comparison made with colleagues can occur due to perceived unfairness at the workplace where gossip is used to better one's position or gossip can be aimed to resolve frustration (Dunbar, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

The phenomena related to gossip depend can occur and be examined on multiple levels. The individual gossip sender's motivations are a key factor in the initiation of gossip. Gossip usually involves a sender, a receiver, and a target, forming a gossip triad. The sender can try to influence the target's reputation or establish a social bond with the receiver. Therefore, gossip can be interpreted within a dyadic relationship between the sender and receiver or the sender and target. According to the literature, gossip is more likely to occur when there is a certain set of relationships within the gossip triad. When the sender and receiver have a positive relationship, both have a positive relationship with the target, or when all three actors have a positive relationship relating to differently purposed gossip (Wittek and Wielers, 1998). On the level of a group, organizational norms are affecting gossip as well.

As gossip is a core human activity, researchers mostly focus on its reputation-building and cooperative function. However, gossip can be linked to a diverse set of mechanisms. The phenomena that provoke gossip and are possibly caused by gossip depend on the analytical level where they occur, such as individual, dyadic, triadic, and group level. The current research thoroughly analyzes the mechanisms behind gossip on unique organizational data. We are

decomposing and describing new mechanisms on each level of the analysis. These mechanisms are strategic gossip on an individual level, social comparison-based, envy-driven gossip on a dyadic level, gossip circulating in negative triads, or gossip enhanced by a competitive work environment.

1.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Individual-level mechanisms

Using our spontaneous speech corpus, we conducted exploratory research to discover the sender's various motivations for gossiping in chapter six of the dissertation. In the third research question of the chapter, we asked: What is the speaker's motivation for gossiping?

In chapter 4 ("Is it all about the Money? Gossip Induced by Unfavorable Comparisons in Organizations"), we examined the sender's financial, promotional, and personal motives of the sender to understand workplace gossip. In hypothesis 1a, we assumed that employees who did not get a raise at the last occasion are more likely to gossip negatively. In hypothesis 1c: Employees who did not receive a salary upgrade during the last raise are more likely to gossip negatively about those who did.

Dyadic level mechanisms

Chapter 4 of the dissertation ("Is it all about the Money? Gossip Induced by Unfavorable Comparisons in Organizations") focused on the sender-target relationship to understand what types of relationships drive negative gossip. Our main theory is that individuals use social comparison and social attribution at a workplace to measure their own and others' successes. We hypothesize that the comparison results in financial and personal envy. We had the following hypotheses: H1b: Employees that received a salary upgrade during the last raise are more likely to be the target of negative gossip. H2: If a colleague earns more money than the sender and is considered undeserved (despised), the employee will be more likely to spread negative gossip about them. H3a: Individuals will be more likely to gossip negatively about a target if they envy their financial position. H3b: Individuals will be more likely to gossip about a target if they consider the target to be an executive's pet.

We assumed that social comparison is more meaningful when the employees are on the same level of the hierarchy. Our hypotheses were the following: when controlling for other factors, negative gossip will be more likely between employees at the same hierarchical level in the organization (H4a). H4b: In our models with multiple effects, we expect that if the target is a

leader and earns more money than the sender, then negative gossip will be less likely compared to the situation when the target is not a leader and earns more money.

The literature is clear on the fact that gossip can be explained by cooperation and reputational motives. On a sender-target dyad level, we not only included hypotheses regarding social comparison, promotional opportunities, and envy but reputational and cooperation motives were tested as well. The hypotheses were the following: H5a: If an employee perceives cooperation problems with a colleague, this employee will be more likely to initiate negative gossip about that colleague. H5b: If an employee thinks that a colleague does not belong to the team, the employee will be more likely to gossip negatively about that colleague. H5c: If an employee appreciates a colleague, this employee will be less likely to gossip negatively about them.

Triadic and structural mechanisms

Gossip is between a sender, a receiver, and a target. In the organizational dataset, we recorded gossip in a triadic setting, enabling us to test previously existing knowledge about how gossip is structurally likely to form involving a triad. In chapter 5 (“Relational Elements of the Gossip Triad”), we formulated the following hypotheses: H1: The presence of a gossip triad increases the probability of another existing triad involving the same sender and receiver. H2: If the sender gossips with the receiver, the sender will reciprocate it with gossip. H3: If the sender gossips with the receiver, the receiver is likely to reciprocate it with gossip about another target. H4: Gossip spreads, so it is likely that if the sender gossips with the receiver about the target, the receiver will spread the same gossip about the target in another triad to another receiver.

According to our previous knowledge, some of the relationships between the three gossip triad actors make it less likely for the gossip to arise. H5: If the sender has a trust relationship with the receiver, the receiver will not gossip with the target. H6: If the sender gossips about the target with the receiver, and then it is less likely that the sender gossips with the target about the receiver (about the same people) in another triad.

In chapter 5, we not only tested our existing knowledge but conducted exploratory research in order to understand the set of positive, negative, and uninterested relationships that lead to gossip as well. We formulated our research question as such: which triadic configurations lead to gossip?

In our spontaneous speech corpus data, we conducted an explanatory analysis to establish the grammatical structure of gossip speeches (Chapter 6. Grammatical and Semantic Analysis of Triadic Relationships in Gossip Speeches). RQ1: Which parts of speech are more significantly

present in gossip speeches than non-gossip speeches? What can we conclude about gossip from the usage of parts of speech?

In the spontaneous speech dataset, we also analyzed how the gossip triad members are represented in a gossip speech by looking at the detailed parts of speech such as pronouns and verbs. The research questions were the following: Which detailed parts of speech are more significantly present in gossip speeches than non-gossip speeches? How are the members of a triad represented in a gossip speech? In what combinations can we find the detailed parts of speech representing members of the triad? How are plural and singular personal pronouns used between gossip and non-gossip speeches?

Group level mechanisms

One of our analytic goals was to include some explanations for gossip formation on a group level, such as perceived fairness, competitiveness, or cohesiveness. In chapter 3 (“Organizational Factors and Their Possible Relationship with Gossip”), we attempted to answer the following research questions: What group norms are present in the examined organizations? How are the norms related to gossip?

Another direction of the research was to compare the discovered gossip-mechanisms within organizations to tell if they are universal or dependent on an organizational context. Examining the dyadic mechanisms in Chapter 4, we had the following questions: How are the different gossip mechanisms present in the organizations? What might be the reason for the occurrence of different mechanisms in different organizations? In Chapter 5, we analyzed the structure of triads that lead to gossip and compared these triads within organizations based on our knowledge about them. The research questions were the following: What are the structural differences in gossip triads between the organizations? What is the different function for each gossip?

1.3 Data

The thesis relies on two main data sources to analyze gossip, both of which were recorded as part of the EVILTONGUE ERC project (Takács, 2014).

Organizational data

The organizational dataset is based on nine workgroups operating in 5 different Hungarian organizations. Most of the workgroups are from private corporations operating in the knowledge-intensive sector, while a single public institution is also represented. People working in the former sector are expected to have room for wage negotiations, thus a higher

chance of getting promoted; on the other hand, the public sector generally entails more fixed wages with less flexibility. The surveyed workgroups contain 20-50 employees each, and the members of the EVILTONGUE ERC project (Takács, 2014) strived to include more than one of these groups to ensure comparability inside the same organization.

The primary dataset was an online survey filled by the employees of partner organizations. The literature-based questionnaire consisted of questions to record the employees' socioeconomic characteristics, norms, opinions related to the organization, promotional opportunities, and perception of own wage, job satisfaction, and various relationships toward other respondents. The latter group of questions included many network-like questions, where employees were asked to reveal with whom they cooperate; perception of their peers (personal and professional reputation, wage levels); and the gossip triads in which they received gossip information. The definition of gossip for this data source is formulated as "gossip is personal and evaluative information exchanged between sender and receiver about their colleague." A custom-developed survey software enabled recording the gossip triads in three, dependent, multi-choice questions where the respondents could choose from whom and about whom they received personal, evaluative information and of what type (negative, neutral, positive). This operationalization of receiver-reported gossip was heavily inspired by Ellwardt (2011). The respective human resources departments revealed additional data (demographic characteristics, salary levels, or positions) and also participated in semi-structured interviews to assess the internal organizational practices and the dynamics between the employees.

Audio recording

A novel, large text corpus derived from approximately 550 hours of audio recordings enabled us to analyze gossip in spontaneous speech. These recordings were captured in the course of an entertainment show, covering the full awake times of eight, Hungarian-speaking participants over eight days with very limited access to the outside world. The professionally recorded audio material was cleaned and filtered using automated methods. The transcription and annotation took place manually, resulting in 460.000 lines of text. The process of manual annotation has undergone multiple steps of quality assurance. The human annotators indicated multiple aspects together with their precise times, including non-verbal (laughter, lowered voice, or crying) and verbal (gossip) annotation tags. For this data source, gossip was defined as "gossip is about a third member of a group." Human annotators were instructed to label statements about third parties as gossip without respect to its evaluative nature since we assumed that identifying the connotation of such a statement is highly dependent on the social context, which may be hard to identify by the annotators and even simple observations without strong adjectives could also

be evaluative. Moreover, the manual annotators were unable to reliably identify whether the third party was present at the time of the conversation due to the limitations of audio recordings.

2. Analytical strategy

The present thesis relied on a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methodology to analyze the phenomenon of gossip on multiple levels: the individual's level, dyadic and triadic levels, within and between different organizations. Besides testing literature-derived and new hypotheses, the considerable room was dedicated to explorative analysis as well.

The chapter *“Organizational Factors and their Possible Relationship with Gossip”* demonstrates the results of an explorative analysis that has been one of the main drivers of our focus and hypotheses investigated in the later chapters. The analysis utilized two main strategies; both were implemented on the organizational dataset in a way to cover the between- and within-organization levels. Firstly, descriptive statistics of keys questionnaire items and HR-provided information (like gender, position, or salary level) are calculated and compared between the six organizations. These key questionnaire items include employees' opinions and organizational values like cooperation, fairness, and promotion opportunities. Some of the non-network variables have undergone factor analysis to uncover their underlying concepts. Secondly, a number of crucial network items were also analyzed that revolves around the perception of peers, cooperation, and communication. The different, individual-level variables are correlated with the number of dyadic gossip ties. Also, a general, qualitative overview was provided for each participating organization.

In order to analyze the emergence of a negative network between respondents of the organizational dataset, the chapter titled *“Is it all about the Money? Gossip Induced by Unfavorable Comparisons in Organizations”* relies on a qualitative analysis of organizations and social network analysis to account for the level of the individual and gossip dyads, while maintaining a within- and between-organization perspective as well. Descriptive statistics of questionnaire items associated with norms and perceptions (perceived fairness, equity, or opinions toward cooperation and competition) are demonstrated. With a specific focus on unfavorable comparisons and envy between employees, exponential random graph models (ERGMs) are estimated on the network data from three organizations. In each of the models, the sender-target gossip dyads served as the dependent variable, and structural effects were controlled for among the independent variables. Since the models' estimation took place on specific workgroup's data, a comparison of these organizations' results is also conducted.

The chapter “*Relational Elements of the Gossip Triad*” focuses on the triadic level to uncover triadic configurations leading to the emergence of negative, neutral, and positive gossip on the organizational network dataset. The basic probabilities were calculated and assessed using probability theory to identify network settings that are more probable than pure chance. Using a partially data-driven approach, supervised and unsupervised quantitative methods were utilized to identify triadic configurations that lead to gossip. In our data structure, factual and possible gossip triads were indicated as well. The 34 network items that are assumed constituent parts of uncovered configurations have been grouped to form negative, neutral, and positive composite networks using the network dimensionality reduction technique of Vörös and Snijders (2017). Hierarchical clustering, an unsupervised method, and multiclass classification trees, a supervised method, were used to detect triadic configurations. These two methods gave well-interpretable and hierarchic rulesets that define triadic configurations. The resulting triadic configurations were validated by comparing their occurrences between gossip and non-gossip triads using probability theory, ensuring that they occur more frequently than random, and by estimating Triadic Relation Models (TRM), a class of random-effect logistic regression model taking the complex, triadic nature of data into account.

The occurrence of gossip in speech is analyzed in an exploratory way in the chapter titled “Grammatical and Semantic Analysis of Triadic Relationships in Gossip Speeches”. The unique, large textual corpus derived from the audio recording dataset was used to identify the actors' representation in gossip triads in spontaneous speech. The corpus has undergone Part-of-Speech (POS) tagging using the Magyarlanc software (Zsibrita *et al.*, 2013) to find the grammatical descriptors of each token. The occurrence of main (verbs, nouns, or adverbs) and detailed parts of speech (e.g., third-person, singular verbs) was compared between utterances containing and not containing gossip using descriptive statistics, t-tests, and effect sizes. Representative, textual examples are also discussed in a qualitative setting. Due to the nature of the dataset and the analyses conducted, the chapter has to do with the triadic, dyadic, and individual levels.

3. Results by Chapters

3.1 Organizational Factors and Their Possible Relationship with Gossip

Since gossip is contextual and embedded in group dynamics, this analysis of the organizational context and the beliefs of employees by participating organizations and from a perspective of their relation to gossip was crucial. This analysis of the organizational dataset was one of the primary drivers of our focus and hypotheses in succeeding chapters.

Regarding the demographic variables, an employee filling a leadership role or being female had a positive and statistically significant relationship with more frequent gossip of all types (negative, neutral, and positive), while a higher level of education was associated with more negative gossip. Since the concept of cooperation is linked to gossip, we have attempted to measure the perceived cooperation in the surveyed workgroups by asking how well the group worked together and the perception of community cohesiveness. Perceived group correlation was significantly and positively correlated with the number of positive sender-target dyads. The importance associated with group values (positive characteristics that make an employee popular in an organization) had a statistically significant correlation with a more intense inclination to share negative and positive gossip. As perceived by respondents, fairness was associated with a higher number of positive and all sender-target ties initiated by the employee. Also, larger differences in perceived wage levels showed a positive relationship with negative gossip.

The examined workgroups have demonstrated considerable differences with regard to their perceived values and organizational culture. The software developer workgroups tended to show higher perceived cooperation and fairness, but a differing inclination to gossip was also apparently associated with leadership roles or wages. Employees of a competitive brokerage firm seemed to be more prone to gossip with higher wages. In a public organization with low perceived fairness, cooperation, and considerable wage differences, the difference between received and requested salary increase was associated with all types of gossip.

3.2 Is It All About the Money? Gossip Induced by Unfavorable Comparisons in Organizations

This chapter investigated what drives negative gossip in the workplace (Ellwardt, 2011; Kniffin and Wilson, 2010; Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Our theory is that social comparison can be the main driver for gossip next to cooperation, reputational and social exclusion motives. When a social comparison is unfavorable (Bedeian, 1995; Dogan and Vecchio, 2001), it can lead to frustration and envy, where the social comparison is more meaningful with those colleagues who are at the same level of the hierarchy. Gossip might also be an undermining tool (Gershman, 2014), or a tool to outcompete the gossip target in a competitive workplace setting (Pál, 2016; Pál et al., 2016). In the current chapter, we investigated negative gossip drivers such as hierarchy, perceived wage equity, wage differences, personal and financial envy while controlling for social exclusion and cooperation motives.

We tested our hypotheses using exponential random graph models (ERGM) examining employee characteristics such as being a leader, sender-target ties, the sender's perception about, and relationship with the target. We recorded the data in three organizations, where the three organizations were selected based on having different values and organizational cultures. The values and organizational culture were explored by semi-structured interviews conducted with H.R. personnel and managers.

Our findings demonstrate that negative gossip was present in all three organizations. We could not support the hypothesis that people would gossip negatively about those in a similar hierarchical position. We did find support for envy driven negative gossip in some but not all of the examined organizations. In two of the organizations, people tended to gossip negatively about those who received a wage that was perceived undeserved or when they perceived somebody as the executive's pet, receiving an unfair social advantage. In contrast, in our third organization with a higher cohesion, people tended to use negative gossip as a tool to resolve their cooperation problems and to sanction the norm violators.

Overall, our results indicate that gossip can be driven by financial motives and envy or informal sanction purposes, although it does depend on the organizational context. The selected organizations and their organizational context can serve us as an explanation. There was a broker company where the financial factors were the most prevalent, and we have seen financial envy driven gossip. The group perceived itself as non-cohesive, competitive and the perceived fairness was low. In the interviews, we have seen that they had a practice where they centrally distributed clients, which caused a major competition. In an organization that belonged to the state sector, financial motives were less central as wages were largely comparable. Perceived fairness was also low, but the cohesion was perceived high. In this organization, social envy was prevalent. In the third organization, where both cohesion and fairness were perceived high, negative gossip was used to punish norm violators.

Our analysis demonstrates that gossip has multiple purposes and might be a result of social comparison-driven envy. The selected organizations' case studies might demonstrate how organizational norms and practices are interrelated with negative gossip. This research area has further potential to provide insights about informal communication at the workplace to reduce frustration and enhance cooperation.

3.3 Relational Elements of the Gossip Triad

In the chapter titled “Relational Elements of the Gossip Triad,” we attempted to test hypotheses regarding the structure of employee networks and uncover configurations of dyadic ties associated with gossip, an inherently triadic social phenomenon.

Regarding the basic structural hypotheses tested using probability theory, we have found that the presence of a gossip triad makes the emergence of another triad with the same sender and receiver more likely (H1). Revealing gossip-containing information seems to be reciprocated: a sender’s gossip tends to entail the receiver sharing such information as well (H2), but mostly about the same target instead of new ones (H3). In line with the assumption that gossip tends to spread, our analysis demonstrates that gossip shared between a sender and a receiver will also be shared by the receiver in other gossip triads about the same target (H4). We did not find empirical support for the receiver not gossiping with the target in cases where the sender and receiver have a trusting relationship (H5). Hypothesis H6 (“it is less likely that, in another triad, the sender gossips with the target about receiver”) could not be supported either.

The second approach of the chapter is a partially data-driven one where multiple statistical methods were used to identify configurations of negative, neutral, and positive ties between the employees of the organizational survey that lead to the emergence of gossip and test the stability of these configurations. Our novel dataset has contained possible but not materialized triads besides the factually present ones as well. We have found configurations predicted by scientific literature like the coalition, closure, unstable or convincing triads. Interestingly, our results indicate a number of triadic configurations containing distant or uninterested relationships that lead to gossip. These configurations may emerge due to the information-seeking and strategic purpose of gossip. We have also found distant coalition triads, where sender and receiver shared gossip information about a target they barely knew. Burt’s constraint triad (Burt, 2000) was not present in our dataset, similarly to Wittek and Wielers’ (Wittek and Wielers, 1998) analysis. New configurations leading to gossip not described by the literature were also discovered due to our partially data-driven approach. Even in cases where the sender and the receiver of the gossip had a negative relationship, negative gossip triads could be identified. Since gossip can be considered a risky action due to the associated costs of self-revelation and humiliation, these negative triads’ appearance is surprising.

Differences in terms of emergent configurations were apparent between the workgroups represented in the organizational dataset. In a competitive brokerage firm and the only public organization in our dataset, the triadic configurations entailing negative gossip were overrepresented. Both of these groups had the lowest perceived fairness and cooperation levels

in our dataset. Software development teams with generally high perceived cooperation levels tended to support more coalition, closure, and even convincing triads. Gossip's information content (negative, neutral, positive) seemed to be associated with work cultures, a positive culture entailing positive gossip, while negative workplace culture was associated with negative gossip triads.

3.4 Grammatical and Semantic Analysis of Triadic Relationships in Gossip Speeches

In this chapter, we worked with a unique, spontaneous Hungarian language corpus recorded during an entertainment program. We conducted exploratory research to examine the nature of gossip and the representation of interpersonal relations represented in the sender's gossip speeches. We assume that word selection of the sender is a tool that relates to the social network (Conein, 2011), describing the relations between the sender, the target, and the receiver.

Our first research question examined the significant differences in the structure of gossip and non-gossip sentences. In our second research question, we asked which detailed parts of speech are more significantly present in gossip speeches than non-gossip speeches and how the triad members are represented in a gossip speech? In the third research question, we looked into the sender's motivation behind the gossip statements. POS (part of speech) tagging (Zsibrita *et al.*, 2013) of our corpus allowed us to analyze the grammatical structure of parts of speech used in gossip-related sentences compared to a non-gossip related one. We were able to identify verbs and pronouns related to the first, second, and third-person.

Our findings show that gossip speeches use more complex sentences with the same number of names as non-gossip speeches and more pronouns. Non-gossip speeches had more nouns and meaning that they are more elaborated (Ellis and Hamilton, 1985) and descriptive. Interjections (i.e., psst) are more representative of gossip speeches. Gossip appears to be a less explicit talk, using fewer names and being more secretive. This is in line with the finding that gossip has costs associated with it; therefore, it occurs between two parties that trust each other.

We measured the occurrences and co-occurrences of detailed parts of speech to see how the gossip triad parties are represented in gossip speeches. In most gossip speeches, the sender did not use any verbs or pronouns, implicitly referencing the target.

The second most frequent case was when the sender used verbs to describe the sender's actions and tell stories about the target. The sender often referred to the target using both verbs and pronouns (Goffman, 1978) as a characteristic of gossip sentences. The next most common syntax of a gossip sentence was when the speakers referenced themselves doing a self-

representation or expressing opinion while laying down norms in which they believe. Senders often referred to the second person as a social bonding tool. The represented dyadic relationships, when sender referenced the first and the third person, were a more directly evaluative stance. This might also expect that the receiver picks sides between target and sender. Plural pronouns and verbs were used to demonstrate a sense of community, usually between the sender and receiver.

4. Synthesis of the Results

To measure the antecedents and consequences of gossip, we approached it with a multilevel analysis using a spectrum of mixed methods. We found evidence that gossip is used as a tool for enhancing group cohesion. Positive organizational group values facilitated the prevalence of both positive and negative gossip. On a triadic level, we have seen that gossip was prominent in the balanced triads where norm enforcing happened between all parties and social bonding between the sender and the receiver. We have shown in our speech corpus that gossip is a secretive, implicit talk between trusting parties. Gossip was used for reputation influencing or demolishing according to multiple of our results. Besides the more obvious reputation influencing tools, senders might use more subtle actions such as self-reference or self-representation or assert themselves directly related to the target, affecting both of their reputations. We found that perceived low fairness and competitive practices might drive negative gossip among employees. The mechanism behind this on a sender-target dyadic level is that unfavorable social comparison drives envy, which leads to negative gossip. If someone is liked by the boss or undeservedly makes more money, the sender uses gossip to gossip out envy, reduce frustration, and as a strategic tool intended to level the playing field. Some of our other results demonstrate that gossip might be used intentionally as a strategic reputation demolishing tool. As evidence, structurally analyzing the gossip triads has shown that negative gossip is likely to form in negative sender-receiver relationships, contrary to our knowledge from the literature. This indicates that the sender might risk self-revealing and humiliation for the potential reputational gains. In our analysis of the speech corpus, we have seen that the sender sometimes involves the receiver and the target in their speech as a more direct form of influence. Using our triadic dataset, we demonstrated that when the sender gossips with the sender, the receiver will gossip with the target, potentially breaking their trust to make gains. The sender is also likely to gossip further with the target. We found other probable driving factors for gossip such as information seeking. In many cases, people gossiped about others that they did not know well, which is assumed to be crucial to gain reputational information about one's cooperative behavior.

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6. The Author's Publications

Publications in English

Book chapters

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