Deciphering Preservice Teachers' Intercultural Competencies: A Grounded Theory for Description and Demonstration

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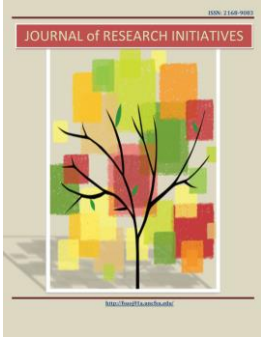# Deciphering Preservice Teachers' Intercultural Competencies: A Grounded Theory for Description and Demonstration

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Keywords

Intercultural Competencies, Grounded Theory, Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This constructivist grounded theory study explored the development of preservice teachers' intercultural competencies. The participants were thirty-two preservice teachers who were participating in a first-year field experience with diverse populations of students. They were asked to examine their understanding of difference, and, in doing so, revealed a four-stage transformational process for the displacement of limited or apathetic worldviews. This process, which is situated in the context of transformative learning theory, is described through the categories of resisting, tolerating, accepting, and valuing difference.

Introduction

As student populations become increasingly diverse, it is important for teacher preparation programs to focus on the development of preservice teachers' intercultural competencies (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009; Gordon & Deardorff, 2013). Defined here as a set of cognitive and behavioral abilities that enable us to responsibly navigate cross-cultural environments, intercultural competencies are significant not only because they encourage a fair and meaningful engagement with other cultures, but also because they promote a critical self-cultural awareness that can lead to reflection and self-monitoring. According to Hitchcock, Quan, and Dahn (2010), "even the seemingly simple concepts of time and space can differ considerably according to one's deep cultural assumptions, thereby affecting [teachers' and students'] viewpoints and must be given consideration in an interculturally competent manner" (p. 86). The purpose of this study, which frames multicultural field experiences as *choras*, or spaces of emergent potentiality, for intercultural competence, was to address the widening gaps, especially in terms of race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status, between teachers and their students (Paulston, 2000).

Review of the Literature

As the locus for cultural transmission, teacher certification programs are necessarily multifaceted in their approach to preparing preservice teachers for careers in education. In addition to providing them with opportunities to immerse themselves in the literature regarding effective methods of teaching and learning and creating spaces for them to reflect on what they learned, many teacher preparation programs also design field experiences that allow teaching candidates to work alongside expert teachers in serving diverse populations of students. In many cases, these situations expose pre-service teachers to practices that may challenge their understanding of their own experiences (Barnes-Johnson, 2008; Scherff & Singer, 2012). These placements often consist of observing classroom teaching and working in authentic, off-campus environments, as well as of reflecting on these experiences in a classroom setting, thus providing the participants with a vocational familiarity long before they enter the workforce (Bullough, 2005).

The potential of early field experiences to help preservice teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice is well-documented (Darling-Hammond, Cheung, & Frelow, 2002; Smagorinsky, Sanford, & Konopak, 2006). According to Anderson and Maninger (2007), for

example, most preservice teachers credit their time in the field as being the most powerful determiner of their instructional practices. Similarly, Musset (2010) found that teacher preparation programs are putting more of an emphasis on field experiences because of their potential to influence how they interact with their future students. Because field experiences are one of the most impressionable periods of teacher preparation—in some cases, these early forays into the classroom are the first time that preservice teachers are permitted to don the mantle of a classroom educator—they are also prime sites for transformative learning, a process that can facilitate the development of the intercultural competencies needed to engage with diverse populations of students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning, which requires a critical examination of one's own values and beliefs, occurs through the conscious displacement of limited or apathetic worldviews (Cranton, 2006; Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Mezirow, 2000). This can be challenging, not only because it is difficult to see how our assumptions may promote distorted ways of being, but also because it is more comfortable to maintain our dispositions, especially those in relation to our sense of self than it is to change them. As an iterative process, transformative learning can be facilitated by educators who understand the spiral-like progression of reflection and revision (Cranton, 2000). It is impossible, after all, to reflect on beliefs that we are unaware that we possess, or to revise our undesirable behaviors without a thoughtful consideration of the consequences.

For Mezirow (2000), the process of transformative learning is centered on critical self-reflection. For others, such as Dirkx (2001), intuition and imagination are situated at the core of transformation. In any case, "transformative learning occurs when a person encounters a perspective that is at odds with his or her current perspective. This discrepant perspective can be ignored, or it can lead to an examination of previously held beliefs, values, and assumptions" (Kroth & Cranton, 2014, p. 3). Even though it may have social consequences, especially in the case of preservice teachers opening themselves to diverse perspectives, the process of transformative learning is an individual endeavor, meaning that change has to happen within before it can be shared with others.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory is closely aligned with constructivism, which grew out of phenomenology and hermeneutics. According to Mertens (2009), "the basic assumptions guiding the constructivist paradigm are that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of the people who live it" (p. 16).

While there are no particular methods for initiating transformative learning—an informal conversation about recognizing prejudice, for example, is just as likely to inspire change as a structured lesson—Cranton (2002) offers some strategies for stimulating substantive change: mainly, creating an activating event, promoting an openness to alternatives, and engaging in the kind of discourse necessary to revise any practicum assumptions. In the present study, a first-year field experience for undergraduate education majors at a large urban university is framed as the activating event for developing intercultural competencies, while a course on the social foundations of education supplies alternate ways of thinking about intercultural competence and is provided as an opportunity for reflection and gradual change.

Methodology

Thirty-two preservice teachers, 24 females and eight males, enrolled in three sections of a course on the social foundations of education participated in this study. This course was not attached to a field experience; however, all of the participants were concurrently enrolled in a methods course that placed them in contact with diverse populations of students for the first time. Prior to entering the field, the preservice teachers immersed themselves in the literature (e.g., Scherff & Singer, 2012; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) and used the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric (AACU, 2015) to develop a shared vocabulary for describing their beliefs, specifically those in the context of cultural self-awareness, cultural worldview frameworks, and communication. During their time in the field, the preservice teachers kept disposition journals, which asked them to reflect on their interactions with students, and, upon the conclusion of their placement, participated in a series of 30 to 45-minute semi-structured interviews with the researcher.

Constructivist grounded theory methods, as described by Charmaz (1994, 2000), were used to analyze the data. Unlike Strauss and Corbin's (1990) systemic design, which pairs the use of open, axial, and selective coding with a paradigmatic/visual discourse, or Glaser's (1992) emerging design, which eschews a preconceived framework in favor of a less prescribed form of inducing theory from substantive areas, this approach relies on the research participants' feelings, values, and beliefs to explain how they experience a phenomenon or process. The steps included: (a) examining the interviews and dispositions journals for themes; (b) building analytic categories from the preservice teachers' assumptions about difference; (c) conducting follow-up interviews to refine these categories; (d) reviewing the categories in the context of similar scholarship (e.g., Bennett, 1993, 2004; Nieto, 1994, 2013); and (e) providing examples of the interrelations among the categories as a theory for description and demonstration.

Building the Analytic Categories

In order to build the analytic categories, which were later refined and labeled as stages in a transformational process, the participants' interviews were transcribed verbatim and appended to their disposition journals. At first, these texts were broadly coded to identify basic information about how the participants encountered difference during their field experiences. Passages that described specific interactions with individual students, for example, were flagged, as were those that made use of vocabulary from the course literature, especially in terms of empathy or cultural self-awareness. To this end, the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric (AACU, 2015) provided a loose framework for distinguishing between those interactions that articulated insight into one's own cultural rules and biases and those that demonstrated a minimal awareness of those rules and biases to the point where the participants were uncomfortable with identifying cultural differences with others.

 After the initial reading, data were grouped into categories based on how the preservice teachers encountered and negotiated difference during their initial field experiences. Data that suggested that preservice teachers recognized cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication, for example, were placed in one category, while data that implied that preservice teachers had difficulty suspending judgment about or finding value in culturally different others were placed in another. Similarly, there were categories for situations in which preservice teachers sought out answers to difficult questions about others and categories for situations in which they were incapable of viewing others through anything other than their own cultural worldview. There was, of course, some overlap among categories, and these were examined and cross-examined

until they could be distilled to their essentials, thereby creating even broader categories that were more nuanced in their similarities and differences.

<p align="center">**Findings**</p>

The preservice teachers' time in the field suggested a four-stage transformational process: (a) resisting difference, (b) tolerating difference, (c) accepting difference, and (d) valuing difference (see Figure 1). In some cases, the preservice teachers moved from one stage to the next by consciously displacing limited or apathetic worldviews; however, most of the participants demonstrated growth within a single category as they examined their understanding of the difference in the context of their interactions with students of other cultures. It is important to note that while these stages share conceptual borders and seem to follow a linear progression, these borders are porous, meaning that there is room for overlap and exchange, and it was possible for the preservice teachers to occupy stages simultaneously.
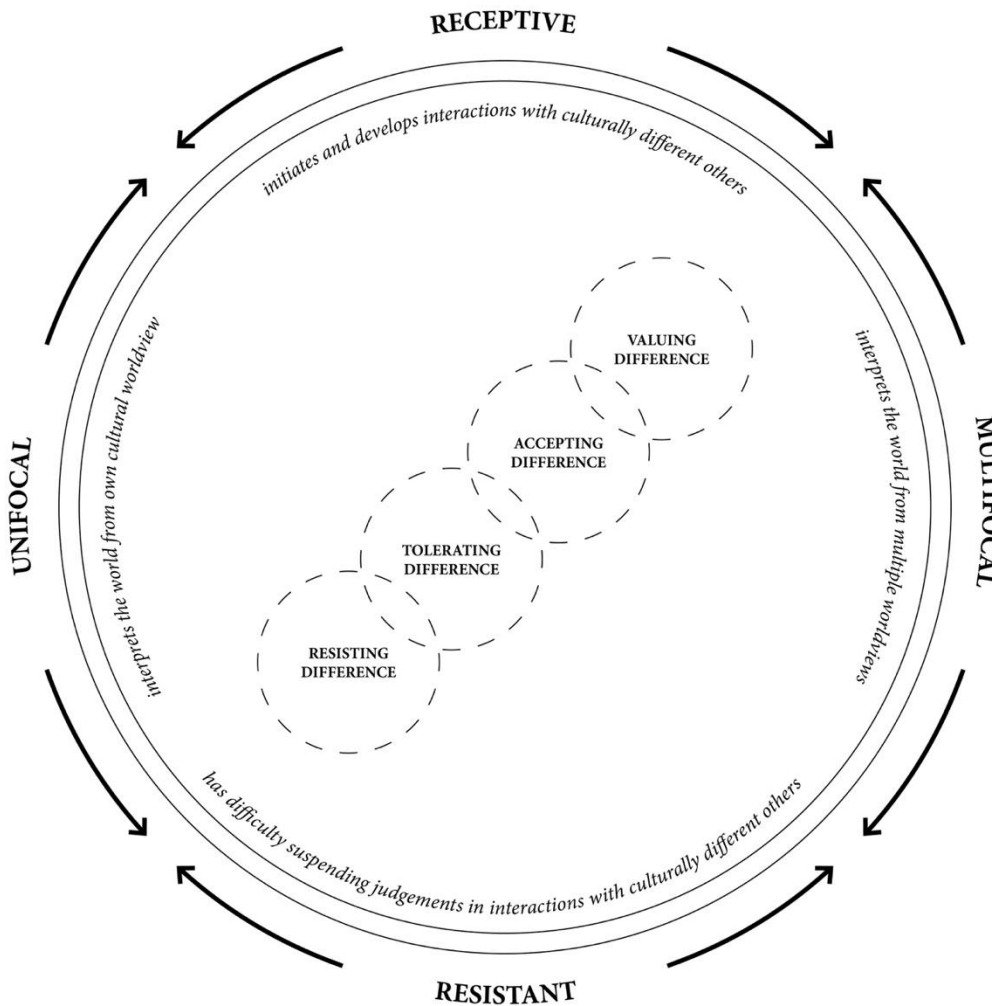

Figure 1. *Heuristic map of preservice teachers' intercultural competencies as a four-stage transformational process.*

Resisting Difference

At the one end of the spectrum were those preservice teachers who resisted difference by demonstrating little to no interest or willingness to learn more about other cultures. On the first page of her disposition journal, for example, one of the participants wrote: "The problem with education, one of the *many* problems, is that we are too preoccupied with diversity. Instead of white students and black students, rich students and poor students, male students and female students, we should consider them collectively. Students with a capital S!" While this preservice teacher was not denying that difference exists—her statement makes specific references to issues of race, class, and gender—she is suggesting that it should not affect the way that teachers interact with their students. While it is important for teachers to avoid discriminating against their students, this kind of "colorblind" perspective also demonstrates a resistance to identifying cultural distinctions among others that could lead to a more nuanced understanding of their unique contributions.

The preservice teachers who occupied this space also struggled with differentiating between issues of equity and equality. In response to a question about making accommodations for English language learners, for example, one preservice teacher said: "I understand that students come to schools with different skill sets; however, I don't think it's fair to give some students more time than others [for the same tasks]." This kind of response was indicative of those preservice teachers who were only able to view the experiences of others through their own cultural worldview. Instead of thinking about how society might benefit from giving students an equitable amount of time to demonstrate what they know, they were only able to frame assessment from a perspective that emphasized the needs of the individual.

Tolerating Difference

This stage included those preservice teachers who were tolerant of difference within the limits of their own cultural worldview. Even though these participants were able to express openness to most interactions with students from different cultures—they were aware of the misunderstandings that can occur between people of different cultures, for example—they still had difficulty suspending judgment about values or beliefs that differed from their own. After observing poor attendance at an open house in an impoverished school district, for example, one preservice teacher wrote in his disposition journal: "It's no wonder that some of these kids are the way they are. If their parents don't care enough to meet with their teachers, how can we expect them to care…about their grades or general academic performance?" Instead of considering the reasons why the students' parents were unable to attend the open house— perhaps they had to work a second job, or maybe they couldn't afford to pay for a babysitter—he equated their absence to a lack of caring.

The preservice teachers in this stage were just beginning to demonstrate an awareness of their own cultural biases, even if they weren't always able to negotiate a shared understanding with people of other cultures. "At first," said one of the participants who had the opportunity to lead a class discussion on the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "I was directing questions about black people specifically to black students…In hindsight, I was asking those students to speak for their entire culture…It would have been a different conversation if I was in front of a class of white kids." In the moment, this preservice teacher was uncomfortable discussing issues of race because, as a white person, he did not feel qualified to do so. Upon reflection, however, he realized that his fear of sounding insensitive actually caused him to single out the very students that he was trying to accommodate.

Accepting Difference

In contrast to those participants who simply tolerated difference, as a necessity rather than as an opportunity, the preservice teachers who occupied this stage demonstrated their acceptance of cultural diversity not only by initiating interactions with people from different cultures but also by recognizing the emotional and intellectual complexities of multiple worldviews. In one of the last entries in her disposition journal, for example, one participant wrote: "I was initially uncomfortable with the [Asian] students in my class…They never made eye contact with me, so I assumed they didn't like me or were intimidated by me…Through conversation, however, I learned that by averting their eyes they were actually showing me respect." Instead of remaining confused or uncomfortable, which many of the participants did when they encountered difference, this preservice teacher engaged her students in the kind of conversation that not only contributed to the development of her own intercultural competencies but also contributed to her students' development as well.

The preservice teachers who occupied this stage also demonstrated support for students of different cultures by consciously incorporating diverse and multiple perspectives into their everyday interactions. One preservice teacher, for example, created a bulletin board that featured a diverse group of mathematicians, including women and at least one representative from each culture present in the class. "I wanted to make sure that the students were surrounded by images that they could relate to," she said. "Without discounting the contributions of white males, who were represented as well, I think it's important for students to see people who look like them…being celebrated in educational spaces." While it was not always possible for the preservice teachers to demonstrate this kind of intercultural sensitivity in such a tangible way during their observations, the responses of the preservice teachers who occupied this stage all spoke to drawing on or seeking out diverse perspectives in their interactions with students.

Valuing Difference

Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, were those students who valued difference by recognizing the specific contributions that people of all cultures can make. Only a few participants occupied this space, and then only occasionally, but those who did were able to articulate insights into their own cultural rules and biases, interpret intercultural experience from multiple worldviews, and suspend judgment in valuing their interactions with others. One preservice teacher, for example, described a situation in which she mediated a conversation between black and Middle Eastern students. "The [black] students were teasing the [Middle Eastern] students for eating *kibbeh*, a traditional dish made with lamb and cracked wheat," she said, "[because] they thought it smelled funny. After getting them to actually try some, they ended up asking for more." The preservice teachers at this stage were not only comfortable navigating cross-cultural environments, but they also tried to help their students do so as well.

The preservice teachers who reached this stage were the opposite of what might be described as "colorblind," which was a refuge for those at the other end of the spectrum who resisted difference, and instead saw each of their students in terms of the unique contributions that each one made to their classes. "Everyone has something to offer," one preservice teacher wrote near the end of her disposition journal. "I don't mean that in some generic 'everyone is special' kind of way, either…What I mean is that teachers have the opportunity to create something meaningful when they make sure that all of their students are being 'seen' as well as 'heard.'" Instead of trying to ignore difference or simply accepting it as an inevitability or an inconvenience of the modern classroom that has to be dealt with, the few preservice teachers

who reached this stage valued and respected difference, and seemed genuinely pleased with the opportunity to work with a diverse population of learners.

Discussion

The four-stage transformational process that emerged from the preservice teachers' first-year field experiences is consistent with Bennett's (1993, 2004) model of intercultural sensitivity, which also emerged from a grounded theory study and describes an individual's development from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism through the stages of denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration, and Nieto's (1994) model of institutional support for multicultural education, which moves from issues of tolerance, acceptance, and respect toward those of affirmation, solidarity, and critique. Where this study adds to the literature is by framing the development of intercultural competencies—specifically cultural self-awareness, knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks, empathy, verbal and non-verbal communication, curiosity, and openness—as a transformational process and mapping that process in an intertextual field, which aligns with Deardorff's (2014) suggestion that "intercultural competence assessment must involve a multi-method, multi-perspective approach that is focused more on the process of intercultural competence than on an end result" (para. 8).

Describing the stages in a process, especially in relation to something as subjective as personal transformation, can be tricky, as the rhizomatic nature of human experience is compressed, coded, and compartmentalized. Considering the complexity of deciphering intercultural competence, however, some level of classification is necessary for organizing it into manageable learning objectives (Deardorff, 2006). These objectives, which may appear fixed and absolute, should be understood in the context of a shifting, intertextual field, and the viewer is cautioned that nothing about social interactions among people of differing cultures, especially in politically-charged environments, such as schools, is easily described (Casebeer, 2016; Mann & Casebeer, 2016). As Nieto (1994) suggests, "whenever we classify and categorize reality, we run the risk that it will be viewed as static and arbitrary, rather than as messy, complex and contradictory, as we know it to be" (p. 8).

In order to move from one stage to the next, preservice teachers must experience some kind of transformative event, such as participating in a diverse field experience or an alternative spring break, that helps them displace limited or apathetic worldviews. This displacement, however, does not occur overnight; rather, it happens gradually as preservice teachers acquire new knowledge, such as cultural or sociolinguistic awareness, and skills, such as the ability to listen to and evaluate sensitive issues in the cultural surround. For one preservice teacher, who had the opportunity to observe young children at a predominantly Muslim daycare, the daily exposure to Islamic jurisprudence helped her overcome feelings of distrust. "At first, I tried to get out of this placement," she said. "But after a conversation—okay, after a *few* conversations—with [my method's professor], I decided to give it a shot…What I think affected me the most was how kind everyone was…even [the men]…The more time I spent at [the daycare], the more I came to understand the importance of adjusting my own behaviors and suspending my beliefs in different cultural contexts."

Figure 1, which offers a model for deciphering preservice teachers' intercultural competencies, situates the transformational process in a heterotopic space (Foucault, 1986). In its outermost layer, space is arranged along the horizontal axis from unifocal worldviews on the left to multifocal worldviews on the right. Similarly, space is arranged along the vertical axis from resistant relationships on the bottom to receptive relationships on the top. In the model's innermost layer, the four stages, which are illustrated with porous boundaries to suggest overlap

from one stage to the next, are situated in an intertextual field (Paulston, 1996). Generally speaking, the stages that appear toward the lower left side of the model represent lower-level intercultural competencies, including resistant positions and unifocal worldviews, while the stages that appear toward the upper right side of the model represent higher-level intercultural competencies, including receptive positions and multifocal worldviews.

It is important to remember that becoming interculturally competent is a never-ending endeavor. As a constructivist grounded theory for description and demonstration—it is descriptive in the sense that it describes stages for personal transformation in the context of deciphering intercultural competencies, and demonstrative in the sense that it shows how preservice teachers might occupy these stages—the process that emerged from this study is situated in these particular preservice teachers' first-year field experiences, and, given a different group of participants in a different set of circumstances, the stages that materialized might have been very different. As it stands, however, this theory is useful not only because it may challenge teacher educators to reflect on what it means to encourage the development of intercultural competencies in their classes, but also because it can provide preservice teachers with goals for working with students of different cultures. After all, there is always a need for new ways of organizing educational phenomena from fresh perspectives and alternate vantage points.

Even though it can be difficult to assess the lasting influence of field experiences on preservice teachers' future practice or beliefs, especially in terms of engaging with a difference, this study suggests that these experiences can be sites for transformative learning when preservice teachers are consciously trying to develop their intercultural competencies. According to Nemec (2012), change requires a purposeful disruption "accompanied by critical reflection where learners examine their abilities, beliefs, assumptions, and values in ways that change them in some significant way" (p. 478). In order for learners to actually benefit from the disruption— in the present case, the disruption was the field experience in which the participants worked with people from other cultures, often for the first time, as well as the course on social foundations— they must "have some motivation to learn, a sense of safety in the learner, trust in the educator or guide, and adequate time for the transformation to occur" (p. 478).

As preservice teachers entering into their first field experiences, the participants in this study were motivated to learn as much about the students they would be serving as possible, not only because their advancement in the program depended on it, but also because they all indicated an interest in consciously displacing limited or apathetic worldviews as a vehicle for developing intercultural competencies. Considering that the participants' social foundations course was not directly attached to their field experiences, at least in terms of assessment, they felt safe articulating their beliefs and asking questions about cultural others during discussion without feeling "dumb" or worrying about sounding "insensitive." Throughout the semester, as the participants became more comfortable with the researcher, the depth of their interactions also began to increase. The participants devoted a significant amount of time outside of class for critical reflection, meeting as a group on several occasions, including the semi-structured interview sessions with the researcher.

Limitations

Even though social scientists have attempted to study the development of preservice teacher dispositions for decades, there is little evidence to suggest that change is actually occurring (Scherff & Singer, 2012). While studies that involve actual experience, such as the first-year field experience, tend to be more successful than those that occur strictly in a classroom setting, preservice teachers are often conditioned to respond to surveys, such as the

Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory, in certain ways, often distorting their own perceptions to frame themselves in certain ways. It is difficult, for example, to imagine a preservice teacher with racist tendencies would admit the extent of these tendencies when doing so might hurt his or her grade or ability to advance in the field.

Recommendations for Future Research

Nevertheless, an increasing number of teacher educators are attempting to enhance the intercultural competencies of preservice teachers (Gordon & Deardorff, 2013). Some programs have added multicultural course requirements, while others have increased the number of field experiences that their students have to complete. It is important to remember, however, that preservice teachers come to teacher education with almost two decades of values, assumptions, and beliefs, and that changing these deeply ingrained notions can be challenging, and there is almost no evidence to suggest that such programs can construct experiences that affect preservice teacher behavior. Changing behavior, after all, is a long and challenging process. Teacher educators, even those who are committed to transformative learning, are only one of many forces at work, and the responsibility cannot be thrust upon teacher educators or teacher education programs alone. The responsibility to help preservice teachers develop intercultural competencies is one that should be shared across all facets of the campus and larger community, ultimately reaching across all levels of society.

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