The Narcissism Spectrum Model: A Spectrum Perspective on Narcissistic Personality

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Abstract

The *narcissism spectrum model* synthesizes extensive personality, social-psychological, and clinical evidence, to address three key, interrelated problems that have plagued narcissism scholarship for over a century. These problems can be summarized as: What are the key features of narcissism, how are they organized and interlinked, and why are they organized that way? By viewing narcissism as manifested in transactional processes between individuals and their social environments, this model integrates existing measurement and theoretical perspectives on narcissism and provides a guiding framework for future examination of its developmental pathways. Specifically, narcissism is defined as entitled self-importance, with an inflated sense of importance and deservingness marking the core phenotype. However, differences in entitlement reflect two distinct functional patterns of influence, based on approach-dominant (bold) and avoidance-dominant (reactive) personality orientations supported by reinforcing social experiences. Critically, these distinct patterns of influence yield distinct dimensions of narcissistic grandiosity (hubris and exhibitionism) and narcissistic vulnerability (resentment and defensiveness). The narcissism spectrum model builds common terminology regarding core features of narcissism, is grounded in a shared set of observations about the empirical structure of narcissistic traits, and provides a novel and comprehensive framework for integrating scholarship of narcissism with that of personality and psychopathology more broadly.

Keywords

Grandiosity · Vulnerability · Self-importance · Entitlement · Boldness · Reactivity

Although virtually all scholars accept the existence of a narcissistic personality, intense disagreements persist about what are its core features, how these features are organized, and what accounts for their manifestation. These three issues have plagued narcissism scholarship for almost a century, with divergent opinions on these matters often falling along the lines of scholars' own subdisciplines or the instruments they employ to assess narcissism (Ackerman, Hands, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Witt, 2016; Miller & Campbell, 2008), raising the proverbial question of "Will the real narcissism please stand

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up!?" Achieving at least a preliminary consensus on these issues is essential for advancing narcissism theory and clinical practice and for uniting views across social, personality, and clinical psychology—views which have often strayed uncomfortably apart. To this end, the present chapter summarizes the narcissism spectrum model (NSM), an integrative model of narcissism that specifies the structure of trait narcissism and points to underlying socio-behavioral processes responsible for this structure (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). First, narcissism is introduced and defined. Second, entitlement is positioned as the shared phenotype of narcissism. Third, distinct dimensions of narcissism (grandiosity and vulnerability) are described in terms of their personality bases and underlying self-regulatory styles (boldness and reactivity, respectively). Fourth and final, implications of the model for future research are presented.

Narcissism Defined Narcissism can be broadly defined as *entitled self-importance*. Narcissistic individuals are those who view their own needs and goals as more significant than others' and exhibit an inflated sense of importance and deservingness (synonyms include egotism and arrogance). This definition is inclusive of the foundational descriptions of narcissistic personality (e.g., Freud, 1914; Murray, 1938) and previously proposed definitions (e.g., "as a cognitive-affective preoccupation with the self"; Westen, 1990, p. 227). In this vein, it emphasizes features widely agreed upon as central to narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder (i.e., self-preoccupation and entitlement; see Ackerman et al., 2016) and features still listed as central "symptoms" of narcissistic personality disorder both in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the ICD-10 systems (World Health Organization, 1995). Critically, positioning entitled self-importance at the center of narcissistic personality enables meaningful theoretical and empirical linkages between grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic traits across a wide breadth (i.e., a spectrum) of personality features. These features are linked by a common psychological core: *a sense of oneself and one's needs being special and more important than others*. As a result, entitlement and self-importance are the personality characteristics that most consistently co-occur with both grandiose and vulnerable features of narcissism in both normal and clinical populations (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Miller & Campbell, 2008). This makes them the ideal conceptual and empirical anchors for understanding the surprisingly broad spectrum of narcissistic personality.

The Narcissism Spectrum Model

The central premise of the model is that psychological processes that produce individual differences in narcissism (i.e., self-importance) reflect two distinct functional patterns of influence, based on approach-dominant and avoidance-dominant functional orientations supported by reinforcing social experiences (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Wood, Gardner, & Harms, 2015). Ultimately, these processes manifest themselves in two related yet distinct dimensions of narcissistic personality, namely, narcissistic *grandiosity* (marked by boldness and approach) and *vulnerability* (marked by reactivity and aversion). Although sharing attributes of self-importance and egotism, these dimensions are the result of separate, sometimes opposing, forces. How the spectrum model represents the structure of individual differences in narcissism is illustrated in Fig. 2.1, together with key features anchoring the three cardinal axes of the spectrum.

Common Phenotype: Entitlement Positioning entitled self-importance at the core of the narcissism spectrum reflects the premise that this feature defines narcissism in the *broadest sense.* In fact, that entitlement phenotypically ties manifestations of narcissistic vulnerability and grandiosity is one of the few premises that received widespread support in a recent survey of narcissism researchers' views on the subject (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2016). Considerable empirical evidence indicates that both narcissism dimen-

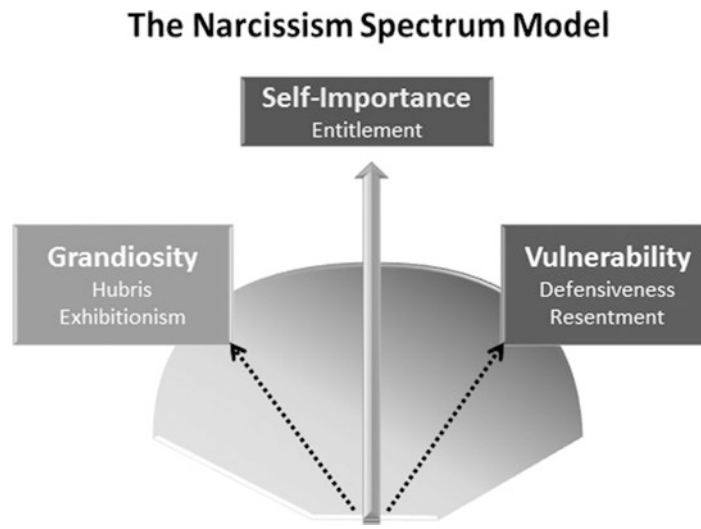

Fig. 2.1 The three core axes of the narcissism spectrum. (Reprinted with permission by Sage Publications (Copyright 2018))

sions predict impressions of arrogance (Wink, 1991) as well as relate to measures of entitlement, hypercompetitiveness, and image-consciousness (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Glover et al., 2012; Grubbs & Exline, 2016; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Krizan & Johar, 2012, 2015; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller et al., 2011). Finally, reports of clinicians who treat patients suggest that feelings of privilege, entitlement, and special treatment are the most indicative and distinctive markers of narcissistic pathology (Russ et al., 2008).

Distinct Functional Presentations: Boldness and Reactivity The functional orientation proposed to underlie grandiosity is *Boldness*: an eager and hardy disposition driven by high approach (relative to avoidance) motivation and manifested in seeking and satisfying self-aggrandizing goals. The orientation proposed to underlie vulnerability is *Reactivity*: a stress-prone and volatile disposition dominated by high avoidance (relative to approach) motivation and manifested in detecting and combating threats to self-image. In essence, the left "grandiose" quadrant of the narcissism spectrum in Fig. 2.1 reflects a *bold* aspect of narcissism, whereas the right "vulnerable" quadrant reflects a *reactive* aspect of narcissism. Put another way, the full narcissism spectrum is anchored by the core feature of entitled self-importance whose manifestation is shaped by distinct functional orientations (Boldness and Reactivity). The narcissism spectrum model thus provides an integrative framework for understanding diverse presentations of narcissism across both personality and social behavioral levels of analysis.

Narcissistic Satisfaction Seeking: Grandiosity as Boldness

According to the model, narcissistic grandiosity reflects a *Bold* functional orientation underlying entitled and arrogant self-views. Boldness can be broadly described as a heightened motivational orientation toward seeking rewarding experiences, often trumping concern about risks or costs associated with reward pursuit (Block & Block, 1980). Critically, narcissistic boldness parsimoniously captures grandiose individuals' (1) approach-dominant personality and (2) a self-regulatory style focused on self-enhancement benefits over costs revealed by boastful, assertive, and exhibitionistic social behavior.

A Reward-Driven Personality First, Boldness characterizes core aspects of grandiose individuals' temperament and personality. Closely related concepts include fearless dominance, daringness, and eagerness (Patrick et al., 2009). All these constructs share strong appetitive and exploratory tendencies that typically overpower avoidance tendencies. In terms of biobehavioral motivational systems governing the responses to rewards and punishments, this implies a strong behavioral activation coupled with muted inhibition, i.e., a strong desire for, and sensitivity to, opportunities and rewards that outweighs concerns over costs (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Depue & Collins, 1999; Gray & McNaughton, 2002). In terms of adult temperament and personality, this implies especially high positive emotionality, extraversion, and assertiveness, with only somewhat lower *negative* emotionality (Clark & Watson, 2008).

Consistent with these premises, evidence consistently finds grandiosity to strongly correlate with extraversion, especially facets of dominance and assertiveness most closely tied to social boldness (Johnson, Leedom, & Muhtadie, 2012; Miller et al., 2011). Similar links are observed with behavioral activation scale, intended to capture individual differences in chronic approach motivation (Foster & Trimm IV, 2008). Moreover, studies of both trait-level and daily affect show that grandiose individuals have higher than average positive affect (with smaller differences in negative affect, Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998). Consistent with the conception of boldness, this positive affect often reaches the level of hypomania (Fulford, Johnson, & Carver, 2008). Finally, grandiosity reflects a chronic propensity toward sensation-seeking and daring behavior such as jumping out of planes and diving with sharks (Emmons, 1981; Miller et al., 2009). Whereas grandiosity is sometimes negatively linked with avoidance-oriented constructs such as neuroticism, shyness, distress, doubt, and negative affect, these links are weaker (Brown, Freis, Carroll, & Arkin, 2016; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2011; Rhodewalt et al., 1998). In short, existing evidence clearly implicates a highly agentic, dominant, and excitement-drawn personality as a key aspect of narcissistic grandiosity (see Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Paulhus, 2001 for a similar argument).

A Confident and Exhibitionistic Self-regulatory Style How is boldness embodied by social self-regulatory processes of those exhibiting grandiosity? Grandiose individuals should be intently oriented toward enacting their entitled self-views, acquiring the riches they view as rightfully theirs, creating social impressions of superiority and status, and maximizing social and sexual pleasure. In terms of person-environment transactions, this social confidence and expansive thinking is likely to fuel general satisfaction of narcissistic needs and expectations, as a grandiose person surrounds him or herself with a social circle ready to admire, follow, and listen while dismissing those that don't. Existing evidence on self-regulatory processes in those high on grandiosity is consistent with these assertions. In fact, existing theoretical perspectives on narcissistic grandiosity emphasize that narcissists are driven by pursuing power, status, and admiration while drawing on a flexible set of interpersonal and intrapsychic self-enhancement strategies to keep themselves going (Back et al., 2013; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). In this vein, empirical evidence overwhelmingly indicates that grandiosity reflects (1) high self-esteem, overconfidence, and self-enhancement; (2) pursuit of social status, admiration, and power; and (3) engagement in exploitative and self-serving relationships focused on personal pleasure.

First, grandiose individuals have high self-esteem, positive self-views, and an exaggerated sense of ability. This pervasive pattern extends to high self-liking and self-competence (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), a sense of clear superiority in ability and importance over others (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005; John & Robins, 1994; Krizan & Bushman, 2011), and exaggerated appraisals of status-related attributes such as attractiveness and intelligence (Campbell, Rudich, &

Sedikides, 2002; Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). Second, fueling these qualities are dogged ambitions at *being* the best, the most influential, and the center of attention. These motivations are reflected in an eagerness to assume leadership roles (Brunell et al., 2008; Watts et al., 2013), in fantasies of power and in willingness to adopt overly ambitious goals (Carroll, 1987; Fulford et al., 2008), and in sexualized, exhibitionistic, and attention-grabbing behavior such as wearing revealing clothes or recounting stories of conquest and brilliance (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Third, these cognitive and motivational qualities lead grandiose individuals to engage in exploitative, self-serving, and ultimately shorter-term social transactions that suit their ongoing desires (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Leckelt, Kunfer, Nestler, & Back, 2015). This "you're here for my pleasure" relationship mentality is revealed by higher promiscuity and lower level of commitment (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Reise & Wright, 1996), by sexual entitlement, aggression, and more self-oriented love styles (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012), and by less empathy and concern about the partner's wants and needs (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006).

Narcissistic Frustration and Conflict: Vulnerability as Reactivity

Whereas narcissistic grandiosity builds on an approach-dominant orientation, narcissistic vulnerability builds on a *reactive* orientation focused on avoidance and "fight-flight" responses. Emotional and behavioral reactivity can be described as a general functional orientation toward tracking obstacles, appraising setbacks, and combating threats, which trump concerns about missed rewards or opportunities (Gray, 1982). Critically, the construct of reactivity elegantly captures vulnerable individuals' (1) avoidance-dominant personality and emotional dysregulation and (2) a self-regulatory style overfocused on self-preservation and revealed in shy, dismissive, but ultimately volatile social behavior.

An Anxiety-Driven Personality First, reactivity characterizes core aspects of vulnerable individuals' temperament and personality. Closely related concepts include anxiety, inhibition, neuroticism, and emotional dysregulation (Ruocco, Amirthavasagam, Choi-Kain, & McMain, 2013; Scott et al., 2013). All these constructs share strong aversive and avoidance tendencies that interfere with approach goals. In terms of biobehavioral motivational systems governing the responses to rewards and punishments, this implies a strong behavioral *inhibition*, i.e., a strong vigilance for threats that overshadows concerns over missed opportunities for advancement (Carver et al., 2000; Depue & Collins, 1999; Gray, 1982; Gray & McNaughton, 2002). In terms of adult temperament and personality, this implies especially high negative emotionality, neuroticism, and anger, with only somewhat lower *positive* emotionality and extraversion (Clark & Watson, 2008).

Consistent with these premises, heightened narcissistic vulnerability is strongly and positively linked with avoidance-oriented constructs such as high neuroticism, distress, anxiety, and angry rumination. Specifically, vulnerability is strongly correlated with self-consciousness and depression, although it is broadly related to anxiety, anger, and personal distress (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller et al., 2010). Moreover, studies of both trait-level and daily affect show that vulnerable individuals have higher than average negative affect (with smaller differences in positive affect, Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010; Given-Wilson, McIlwain, & Warburton, 2011). Consistent with the conception of reactivity, this negative affect often reaches the level of clinically significant depression, anxiety, or rage (Meier, 2004; Ogrodniczuk, Piper, Joyce, Steinberg, & Duggal, 2009; Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008; Tritt, Ryder, Ring, & Pincus, 2010). Finally, vulnerability reflects a chronic propensity toward shy and anxiously-inhibited behavior such as not asserting one's true wishes,

dismissing opportunities, and passively resenting others from afar (Brown et al., 2016; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Krizan & Johar, 2012; Lannin, Guyll, Krizan, Madon, & Cornish, 2014). Whereas vulnerability is sometimes negatively linked with approach-oriented constructs such as extraversion, boldness, confidence, and positive affect, these links are weaker (Fossati et al., 2009; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Miller et al., 2010). In short, existing evidence clearly implicates a highly neurotic, frustration-prone, and typically inhibited personality as a key aspect of narcissistic vulnerability.

A Shy and Vindictive Self-regulatory Style How is reactivity embodied by social self-regulatory processes of those exhibiting narcissistic vulnerability? Vulnerable individuals should be intently oriented toward detecting threats, avoiding criticism and inferiority, and finding flaws in others or their intentions. Note that this social reticence, ruminative thinking, and distrust reflect a general frustration of narcissistic needs and expectations, as a narcissistically vulnerable person copes with the lack of admiration and success they so desperately fantasize about. Existing evidence on self-regulatory processes in those high on vulnerability is fully consistent with these assertions. In fact, existing theoretical perspectives on narcissistic vulnerability emphasize unmet fantasies of importance and proneness to a torrent of shame, anger, and anxiety over their frequently frustrated narcissistic needs (Pincus et al., 2009; Roche, Pincus, Lukowitsky, Ménard, & Conroy, 2013; Ronningstam, 2005). As illustrated below, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly indicates that vulnerability reflects (1) low self-esteem, pessimism, and inferiority; (2) avoidance of the social spotlight, indirect action, and distrust of others' intention; and (3) tumultuous relationships reflecting needy and obsessive tendencies.

First, narcissistically vulnerable individuals have very low self-esteem, uncertain self-views, and highly contingent beliefs about their competencies. This pervasive pattern extends to low feelings of self-worth (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009), a sense of uncertainty regarding one's self-concept that is contingent on a variety of external appraisals and supports (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008), and a sense of inferiority plagued by envy and resentment of others' riches (Krizan & Johar, 2012). Second, reflecting these doubts, are many social anxieties, concerns about being accepted and respected, and a resultant mistrust of others' intentions. These concerns are reflected in social reticence and introversion (Fossati et al., 2009; Lannin et al., 2014), in a sense of low relational evaluation and shame (Freis, Brown, Carroll, & Arkin, 2015; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2011), and in paranoid conclusion about the world and others' behavior (Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Krizan & Johar, 2015). Third, these cognitive and motivational qualities lead vulnerable individuals to get tangled in conflict-prone relationships with unclear boundaries that are ultimately unstable given their constant need for validation (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Miller et al., 2010). This "I may need you, but you should know when or why" relationship mentality is revealed by high anxiety about relationship intimacy and a fear of rejection (Pistole, 1995; Smolewska & Dion, 2005), by prioritizing one's own needs and having unrealistic expectations of support or intimacy (Zeigler-Hill, Green, Arnau, Sisemore, & Myers, 2011), and by engaging in passive-aggressive and retaliatory responses to relationship conflicts (Besser & Priel, 2009). In terms of person-environment transactions, such individuals thus tend to overreact to negative events, evoke abandonment and criticism from others by their obsessive behavior, and ultimately end up in more socially stressful situations that impede narcissistic need satisfaction.

Note that these features are *not* reducible to more general tendencies toward neuroticism or anxiety, as measures of narcissistic vulnerability predict signs of "narcissistic injury" such as envy, anger, and paranoia above and beyond measures of neuroticism or general distress (Krizan & Johar, 2012, 2015). Furthermore, it may appear that these vulnerable qualities are inconsistent with the notion of narcissism given concomitant *low* self-esteem and a sense of disadvantage.

However, recall that narcissistically vulnerable individuals nevertheless believe they are more *important* and *deserving* than others and also endorse *fantasies* of grandiosity and success (Krizan & Johar, 2012; Pincus et al., 2009; Table 2). In short, narcissistic vulnerability reflects entitled self-views that function within a reactive self-regulatory framework. Narcissistically vulnerable individuals are thus marred in the constant struggle for validation from others who are inevitably pushed away by their negativistic and volatile behavior driven by unrealistic self-aggrandizing goals and relationship demands.

Future Directions

We next consider the NSM's implications for understanding narcissism and guiding future empirical research.

Dimension vs. People Critically, personality dimensions do not by themselves fully describe an individual. Researchers must avoid equating dimensions with people. Although it is easier to discuss a "grandiose narcissist" rather than a person "high on narcissistic grandiosity," these are *not* interchangeable. Both describe a person with elevated grandiosity features, but the former typically implies a "type" of person marked by grandiosity at the exclusion of other features (e.g., when contrasting grandiose with vulnerable narcissists). However, as elucidated by the spectrum, those who score high on entitlement will have both elevated grandiosity and vulnerability, but combinations of these levels will drastically vary across individuals. This renders people with a particular standing on a specific dimension (e.g., entitlement) as *functionally diverse* and reveals the need to represent narcissistic personality in terms of the multiple axes stressed by the present model. This view also fits well with clinical experience which reveals individuals with varying combinations of grandiosity—vs. vulnerability—based problems (Ronningstam, 2005; Russ et al., 2008). As a result, it is important for researchers to assess the entire spectrum of narcissism features when identifying correlates and consequences of narcissism (see Siedor, Maples-Keller, Miller, & Campbell, 2016 for a similar argument).

Intensive Measurement Third, there is a need for new forms of data that confidently speak to classic controversies and to questions raised by the present model. The most fascinating aspects of narcissism involve apparent incongruities, such as ideas that a bloated self-concept "masks" self-doubt or mood instability (Bosson et al., 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). However, empirically addressing these possibilities is extremely challenging. Confidently addressing the narcissists' presumed vacillation in mood or self-esteem requires longitudinal designs that track short-term experiences (e.g., mood and state self-esteem) as a function of context and self-relevant events, assess all axes of narcissism, and are ideally combined with other sources of data (e.g., behavioral observation). The data examining whether narcissism is associated with more self-esteem and mood instability are mixed (Bosson et al. 2008; Rhodewalt et al., 1998; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2013; Zeigler-Hill, Myers, & Clark, 2010), so a focused assessment of all cardinal narcissistic features stressed by the present model is vital to identifying which aspects of narcissism (or combination thereof) are the most critical. The NSM clearly suggests that narcissistic vulnerability should be the most indicative of instability, revealed in labile mood and strong affective reactions to self-relevant events. A promising direction involves examining narcissism itself as a *state*, given narcissistic thoughts and emotions also vacillate over time (Giacomin & Jordan, 2016a, 2016b). This research also suggests that narcissistic states themselves are multifaceted and differentially indicative of narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability (Giacomin & Jordan, 2016b). In this vein, the NSM should be helpful in providing a clear nomenclature for assessing distinct state aspects of narcissism as well as a starting point for assessing the structure of narcissistic states.

Development of Narcissism Similarly, appropriately addressing developmental puzzles about the role of caregivers in creating healthy or inflated egos (Kohut, 1971; Millon, 1969) requires large longitudinal designs that tie childhood events and parental context to adolescent or adult personality features. Narcissistic qualities indicative of adult narcissism (e.g., histrionic tendencies, antagonism) appear relatively early in childhood, so tracing their development is crucial (e.g., Carlson & Gjerde, 2009). To this end, Wetzel and Robbins (2016) recently identified that negative parental behaviors (e.g., hostility) in a sample of Latino youth contributed to higher exploitativeness (indicative of entitlement) 2 years later, but did not contribute to higher superiority (indicative of grandiosity). Grandiosity, as suggested by another longitudinal investigation of adolescents, appears more strongly linked to parental overvaluation (Brummelman et al., 2015). Critically, the proposed model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how distinct factors shape distinct aspects of narcissism, helping transcend debates mainly driven by definitional or semantic concerns (e.g., Kealy, Hadjipavlou, & Ogrodniczuk, 2015.

Conclusion

The construct of narcissism shows no signs of fading away. It is one of the oldest personality constructs, it continues to fascinate psychologists, and it has infiltrated popular culture. Empirical evidence reveals that narcissism is a complex construct, with scholars continuing to disagree about how to best define and measure it. The narcissism spectrum model can help build common terminology, a shared set of observations about the empirical structure of narcissism, and provide a novel and comprehensive framework for integrating scholarship of narcissism with that of psychopathology more broadly.

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