
Gender Identity, Intergenerational Dynamics, and Educational Aspirations: Young Women's Hopes for the Future

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Abstract

This chapter examines intergenerational relations between mothers and daughters and the intersecting factors that shape gender as embodied subjectivity and as integral to the organization of social life. Its focus is young women and educational and social aspirations, and the discussion proceeds via two extended case studies drawn from Australian research projects that engage longitudinal, cross-generational, and comparative perspectives. Everyday and interpersonal dynamics are explored as sites for understanding gender relations and identity in the making. An account of identity is proposed that acknowledges psycho-social and intergenerational dynamics, and it is argued that the situated, sociological, and historical dimensions of gender relations need to be examined alongside the interplay of emotion and desire. Much youth studies scholarship addresses the structural and macrosociological contexts in which young people's lives take shape: this is undeniably important. Yet, it is argued that too often such approaches can obscure from view the salience of interpersonal and familial relations, the affective realm in which imagining and enacting the self unfolds.

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Identity is not a static project produced by discourse or shaped simply by either sociological or psychological imperatives. In the scenarios discussed in this chapter, identity is understood as situated, intersectional, and relational. Young women's social class, their school and residential location, and their family relations are highlighted, both as intersecting influences and as points of entry for a close-up look at the process of making gender and making futures.

The last half-century has witnessed striking shifts in gender relations in many parts of the world, reflecting remarkable social and educational changes. Young people's lives and expectations are commonly held up as key barometers of social change, and this is also the case when considering the scope, form, and reach of changes in gender identities and relations. It would be unwise, however, to overstate the extent of such changes or to ignore some of the equally potent ways in which gender-based inequalities and discriminations continue. Violence against women and girls persists, and there remain differential rates and patterns of educational participation and outcomes, between males and females and among nations and regions (UN Women 2014). Social changes are unevenly experienced, mediated by combinations of structural and identity categories, including the cross-cutting intersection of gender with class, location, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and disability/ability. Intergenerational relations are also important in the making of gender identities and in associated processes of continuities and changes in gender relations.

There are many ways to examine gender identity within youth studies scholarship. One direction is a policy pathway, identifying how social, education, and youth policy does or does not notice gender as a category warranting attention and reform. Another is to consider the gains and losses in gender reform. Yet another is to address large-scale databases and document the relative position of boys and girls or of girls and young women over time and to review progress towards equality. This chapter turns to the realm of everyday and interpersonal dynamics as sites for understanding gender relations and identity in the making. It examines intergenerational relations between mothers and daughters and the intersecting factors that shape gender as embodied subjectivity and as integral to the organization of social life. Its focus is young women and educational and social aspirations, and the discussion proceeds via two extended case studies drawn from Australian research projects that engage longitudinal, cross-generational, and comparative perspectives.

Gender equality as a formal aspiration is enshrined in policies in developed and developing countries and in the goals of international agencies such as the United Nations. The UN *Millennium Development Goals* include the target to "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015" (United Nations 2014). Such targets and monitoring of gender-based inequality remain fundamentally important. They position gender discrimination as a visible social problem and drive considerable reforms, many leading to demonstrable improvements in the lives and experiences of women and girls. This chapter, however, focuses on how gender is negotiated in the educational experiences and aspirations of young women.

A close-up focus on gender-identity work among young people can reveal how broader social patterns and transformations are lived and mediated biographically, highlighting points of contention and uncertainty as well as the daily and interpersonal practices through which gender identities are realized and enacted. In turn, this helps to illuminate the relationship between historical change and individual lives, revealing the interplay between past and present in understanding gender identities and relations; and it keeps gender identity in view as both a cultural and a biographical process and as situated and intersectional (Brah and Phoenix 2004). Robust understandings of gender identities in the present inevitably rely on comparative and historical perspectives. In documenting the specificities and contours of the present, one is often drawing temporal and spatial comparisons between “then” and “now” and between “there” and “here.” How does difference or change or continuity emerge and under what circumstances is it noticed?

The following section briefly considers influential approaches in youth and educational studies to understanding the formation of gender identity. A psycho-social account of identity is proposed that allows a focus on both biographical and historical influences and changes. It then presents two case studies of young women’s schooling experiences and future plans, drawing out sociological and intergenerational contexts alongside the interplay of emotion and desire.

Identity as Intersectional and Psycho-social

A large body of scholarship has explored the making of young people’s gender identity. This flourished from the 1980s onward, much of it bearing the influence of poststructuralism and addressing the social and discursive production of subjectivity (Davies 1989; Francis and Skelton 2001; MacLure 2003). Subjectivity was examined as “constructed” not natural, as multiple not singular, and as fluid not fixed. These theoretical moves generated many important insights, emphasizing the processual nature of subjectivity and showing how it might be contested and open to change, underscoring gender identity as shaped in particular historical and cultural settings. Yet these valuable perspectives also gave rise to some rather formulaic and one-dimensional accounts of identity, accounts that often became stuck repeating claims that discourse constructs identity (a kind of “discourse determinism”), without illuminating much about the nuances of that process or the many factors that combine to shape gender identity. The complex biographical, historical, sociological, and psychological process of subjectivity is not adequately captured in gestures to the constitutive power of discourse to construct identity. There was a tendency to slip analytically from discourses to subjectivities as if they were the same thing, with individual subjects principally understood as relatively passive bearers of or effects of discourse. Yet, subjectivity is not coterminous with discourses, and it can exceed or disrupt dominant cultural discourses. Subjectivity is not simply a sociological or discursive category, and psychological aspects and unconscious processes also demand attention. In response to such matters, the notion of the psycho-social subject has become influential in exploring the interplay of social and psychic dimensions of

identity (Hollway and Jefferson 2001; Wetherell 2008). From a psychological or psychoanalytic perspective, a psycho-social approach underlines that the “the social and societal parts of analysis should be inextricable from the psychoanalytic” (Hollway 2008, p. 137). Conversely, from a sociological perspective, it seeks to avoid bracketing psychological and emotional processes as separate or additional concerns, positioning them as central in understanding the relationships between subjectivity and the social realm, that is how people live in and interact with the world around them (Walkerdine et al. 2001).

Freud’s metaphor of the self as a “magic writing pad” in which the subject is understood as a kind of palimpsest is useful for thinking about gender identity as psycho-social and for understanding its formation in biographical time and over historical time. The magic writing pad “consists of two layers: a soft wax slate and over it a thin, transparent leaf of paper”: it “receives new inscriptions upon it without having the old ones erased” (Nielsen 1996, p. 7). According to Bjerrum Nielsen, sometimes the earlier marks might not be readily visible, but their effects can linger, remaining as traces of the past underneath the newer marks (Nielsen 1996, p. 7). The metaphor of the self as a magic writing pad invites a view of gender identity formation as a recursive process, one that is neither characterized simply by psychological developmental imperatives nor by discursive constructions. It offers a way of thinking about the intersections between life histories, narratives of the self, social practices, institutional effects, and so on, and the relative impact of these “inscriptions” at different ages and stages; it does not mean that the past determines the present in any straightforward or inevitable sense or that subjectivity is not open to remaking. While still analyzing subjectivity as produced and discourses as constitutive, it suggests a way of understanding how sociological and cultural practices, in conjunction with psychological and emotional dynamics, shape the formation of subjectivity over time. It is possible to see how at different times some discursive traces are more pronounced than at others and that their influence is not neatly predictable and their markings never completely erased (McLeod and Thomson 2009, p. 9). In summary, this metaphor invites attention to cultural and biographical processes and fosters a historical sensibility regarding the shifting meanings and manifestations of gender in interaction with other social categories. Intergenerational dynamics are also part of the shadow and light of historical processes shaping who we are and how we are becoming.

The benefits of historical and comparative perspectives are particularly evident when considering gender identity formation over biographical time, as is illustrated in the following discussion drawn from a qualitative longitudinal study of young people aged 12 to 18 (McLeod and Yates 2006). First, the study is described, then a closer look is taken at the aspirations of one young woman, in light of intergenerational dynamics and psycho-social processes. The time and setting provide a point of comparison for considering gender identities in the present, and the longitudinal design offers insight into the nuances of gender identity in the making, during a life stage – adolescence – typically understood as a time of significant personal change and upheaval in the journey from childhood to adulthood.

Scenario: "Taking It as It Comes"

In the "Making Modern Lives" study, 26 students attending four contrasting Australian secondary schools during the 1990s and early 2000s were followed from the start to the end of their secondary schooling and into their first year post-school, and interviewed twice a year over 8 years (McLeod and Yates 2006). Changing patterns over time among students from different types of schools (metropolitan and rural, private and government, elite, middle class, and working class) and developments within individuals over the course of their secondary schooling were examined. Key themes were the shaping of gendered subjectivity, young people's changing engagements with and attitudes to school, and students' thinking about their futures. Comparisons were synchronic – across different groups of students at the same age level – and diachronic – developments and changes in individuals over time, allowing for historical, cohort, and biographical comparisons. Differences between girls and boys (what's changing, what's staying much the same) were explored as well as the production of individual students as gendered and classed subjects. Researching gender identity in this way looked at patterns of overt self-description and self-conscious ascriptions of gender as well as more indirect expressions and representations of gendered conduct and attitudes.

The experiences and future thinking of one of the participants, Keren, illustrate nuances in how place, gender, and class intersect and how generational dynamics, and in the cases discussed here, relations between mothers and daughters, are central to understanding the making and remaking of gender identities and aspirations (McLeod 2000). Keren lived in a small country town with her mother and sisters and, at the end of primary school, seemed happy at school, smiling a lot, and said that she would like to be a teacher and was excited about going to high school. She talked often about helping out at home, cooking, and looking after her siblings. By early high school, she was not so happy and enthusiastic about school, indicated that she was being bullied, said she liked "technical subjects" but was not any good at mathematics, and was seeing a specialist teacher for extra help. She did not like the way she looked and she was less bouncy and positive. Instead of wanting to be a teacher, she now saw herself becoming a cook or a childcare worker. When she talked about the future, she said she would "just take it as it comes." She wanted enough money to have "a car that works," and she dreamt of having a nice house, but that was "imaginary, very very imaginary." The kind of future that would make her really happy was one characterized by conventional fantasies of wealth and modest expectations: "If I get the job I want, I win Tattsлото [the lottery], basically just to have a good life . . . Well, I don't want to be a millionaire, but good wealth, a house, a car that runs." At the end of school, a happy future for her would be a "stable one," "not too rich, just comfortable." In almost all her interviews, when asked what she thinks about the future, Keren replied in matter-of-fact way: "just take it as it comes" and this remained a prominent theme in her thoughts about herself and her future. She attended a school where the majority of students left before the end of school, but Keren stayed on and passed her final exams and

enrolled in a one-year training certificate to become a nursing assistant and was saving to move into an apartment of her own.

At one level, this summary could be another story about the reproduction of class and gender identities – nursing for a country working-class girl, alienation from the culture of the school, a modest and circumscribed view of future possibilities, and a constrained sense of agency and capacity to act on the world. In terms of influential accounts of social reproduction, Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) points to how certain dispositions and orientations to the world take shape, suggesting that class and gender relations remain relatively stable. But changes are taking place in gender and class identities, for Keren and for young women like her, and other interpretations are also possible. This is suggested in two recurring themes in Keren's narratives: her relationship with her mother and her perception of work.

While the repeated phrase, "just take it as it comes," might suggest resignation to a curtailed future, Keren does not simply do that. She effects changes, plans strategically, envisages, and works towards an independent future, outside immediate familial responsibilities. Keren is shaped by both relatively traditional, rural, working-class expectations for girls, and a newer set of discourses and possibilities afforded by, among other changes, the expansion in school retention, by the growth of tertiary education (especially the further education sector), and by feminism and its legacy of greater possibilities for the economic and emotional independence of women. These are important for both Keren and her mother. In interviews, Keren seemed close to her mother, and Keren appeared to have a strong identification with the organizational responsibilities of being a mother. In other ways too, her activities and plans develop in relation to her mother's work and study. As a single parent, her mother manages to care for five children, undertake paid and voluntary work, and study part time in a welfare course at a local technical college. Around this time, Keren starts to focus more on school and study and shows a strong determination to complete school. She also begins voluntary work at an agency providing food and housing assistance. In year 12, she decides she wants to do nursing, and we hear then that her mother is very happy about this decision as she too had initially trained as a nurse.

Keren's path through school is negotiated in dialogue with changes in her mother's life. Her choices and plans are not simply the result of conscious imitation, but they do suggest the complexity of that psychodynamic relation, one that had some productive effects for Keren. For both mother and daughter, going to school, staying at school, and finishing and returning to school are recurring themes. So, too, is managing the demands of family and domestic responsibilities and working at building a life away from that sphere. Expressions of resignation towards the future coexist with Keren's experience of success and evidence of strategic planning and hard work. These two orientations point to patterns of continuity and change in her gender and class identity which cannot be adequately explained by reference to the impact of "dominant gender discourses" or to developmental patterns and crises in growing up, or as signs of identity as multiple, simply comprising shifting subject positions. Taking a longitudinal view on

Keren's narratives and identity work reveals traces of psychodynamic relations (between her mother and herself), the formation of particular orientations to the world (her habitus to use sociological language), and the effects of specific cultural and historical changes. Returning to the metaphor of the magic writing pad, certain inscriptions persist, and new ones also appear, but they do not completely erase the old.

This research scenario, from a longitudinal study of young people at the turn of the twentieth century, offers a vantage point for reflecting on contemporary gender identities. On the one hand, Keren's dreams of the future underscore some continuities in gendered aspirations, particularly in interaction with class and location. On the other hand, her actions hint at the opening up of new possibilities and ways of being for young women. While evidence abounds on the persistence of gender-based differentials, particularly in post-school pathways for young women and men, it is equally important to recognize when such patterns begin to unsettle, even in modest ways, and small seeds of change take root. Glimpses of change are evident too in the following scenario, drawn from a study undertaken of young women and schooling in the mid-2000s, a midpoint between the time of Keren's experience of schooling and circumstances today. Another parallel is the force of intergenerational dynamics and the relational worlds of young women, again underlining the value of psycho-social perspectives on gender identity. Themes of making the most in difficult circumstances echo through the second scenario, which continues a focus on gender, class, and place but turns to highlight emotional and affective responses (Wetherell 2012) and especially the emotional resources of hope and longing in how mothers and daughters negotiated their immediate lives and looked to future possibilities.

Scenario: "I Just Want Her to Be Happy"

Studies of young peoples' transition from school to work continue to document significant differences in pathways and outcomes according to social categories of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and location (FYA 2013). Young women who leave school early are more likely than their male counterparts to remain disadvantaged in the labor market and to undertake part-time work. A recent Australian survey found that young women not in employment, education, or training are "occupied with childcare or domestic duties, while males are more likely to be travelling or on holidays" (FYA 2013, p.7). While data on such patterns are essential, so too are the experiences and aspirations of at-risk young women. These are considered in the following example from a cross-generational study of at-risk young women and their mothers. Two themes are relevant to the focus on generational change and concepts of identity as psycho-social and intersectional: desires for happiness and openness and mother-daughter dynamics and processes of identification and differentiation.

The larger cross-generational project investigated the educational, social, work, and biographical experiences of young women and their mothers who were living in

socially stigmatized areas: the daughters attended schools with poor reputations, facing concerns about low rates of school completions and students' post-school pathways (Allard 2005; McLeod and Wright 2009; Bullen and Kenway 2005). Many were living in difficult circumstances, with some of the young women having already left school early and others identified as at risk of not completing secondary school. Interviews and focus group discussions were held with more than 60 participants – young women, their mothers, teachers, and youth workers – in two communities. Both were located on the urban–rural fringe of major cities, with poor economic and social infrastructure, and a significant number of families on low incomes or social welfare benefits. Jobs were in short supply or poorly paid, public transport was minimal, and public housing estates existed but did not meet local demand. Key social services and post-school education and training institutions were located some distance by bus, and the young women saw the towns as places where “not much is happening.”

This brief description of the location points to some of the challenges facing the young women as they imagined their futures, yet that is only part of the picture. Their future imaginings were also shaped by interpersonal dynamics and histories. The concepts of *habitus* and the “magic writing pad,” introduced above, are also relevant here, illuminating how hopes and longings take shape in particular socio-spatial and economic settings and bear the traces of biographical histories, in this case those of the daughters as well as those of their mothers (McLeod 2007).

In discussing future plans and daydreams, the mothers readily turned to thinking of their relationship with their own mother and then onto what they wanted for their daughter: happiness, respect, staying on at school, feeling and being safe, and having good relationships. Reflecting on her hopes for her daughter, Louise replied:

I want her to be happy, I want her to, I want us to be friends, which I think we are, I want her to be able to talk to me about anything. I want her to be safe and hopefully still at school, still learning to be something and do something good.

In the context of growing pressure on young people to become visible high achievers, these might seem to be modest ambitions. The pressures middle-class young women now face, or place themselves under, to become successful and seek out opportunities, have been well documented (Walkerdine et al. 2001; McLeod and Yates 2006). This is linked in part to the impact of “girls can do anything” feminism, in part to middle-class insecurities about class mobility and status positioning and in part to girls scrutinizing themselves through the eyes of others and taking on discourses that girls and women can never be good enough. For the girls and their mothers here, however, success or looking to the future meant something quite different; it was not about stellar success and individual hyper-achievement. Rather, hoping for a good future was more commonly linked to having good relationships, to getting by and “hanging in,” and to being happy and free from gripping worries. Repeated expression of desires to be happy resonates with other research on the experiences of working-class girls navigating educational success (Lucey et al. 2003).

The mothers spoke of their desire for closer relations with their daughters than they had experienced with their own mothers and emphasized the value to them of open communication and support (McLeod and Wright 2009). One mother recalled that she had never really had a close relationship with her own mother: “she sort of shut down the emotional side.” She was determined to have a more open relationship with her daughter: “just trying to be there if they want to talk to you and just – I always wanted my girls to feel secure and happy in their life.” As with the other mothers, dreams for her daughter were cut through with memories of her relationship with her own mother – pointing to the overlaying of past memories, present experiences, as well as future hopes, which the idea of the magic writing pad seeks to capture.

For the daughters, imagining their future was implicated in a biographical project of differentiating themselves from their mother, escaping both her future and the local area. “I don’t want to be like my mum” was a common refrain. For some, staying at school was a strategy to ensure that they did not become “like mum” (McLeod 2007). Most of the mothers interviewed for the study had left school early (aged 15 or younger), mainly to work in low-paid, low-status jobs before marrying and having children, often by age 19 or 20. At least for some of the daughters, school and a qualification were a means to escape from what they saw as the drudgery of their own mothers’ lives. Their mothers, they felt, lacked freedom, economic independence, and personal choice. Sarah, aged 15, reflected: “I don’t reckon my life is going to be like my Mum’s because she had kids early and she married early. . . and she’s just been like a housewife all that time . . . Whereas, I want to do something with my life.”

The desire for differentiation from the mother figured across the generations, linked to dreams of escape – from the family, from the local area, and from emotional and social confinement. The daughters (like their mothers) wanted a better kind of life and wanted to make something of their lives. The mothers, too, wanted their daughters to have an adulthood that was fundamentally different in emotional and practical terms from their own. They wished for them security and happiness and wanted to avoid any generational repetition of poverty, job insecurity, or emotional distress. Again, such expressions of differentiation and identification express the complexity and poignancy of intergenerational dynamics in the work of making futures as well as constructing narratives about the past. In important ways, the daughters inherit some of their mother’s own memories, taking traces of them into their sense of who they are and who they would like to become.

Hopefulness for the future can be understood as a strategy for dealing with difficulties in the present, by looking to better times ahead. For the mothers and daughters here, it is also about mobility, but not in the sense of ruthlessly climbing the class ladder or of achieving extreme wealth and mega success. Rather, they express desires to avoid trouble and unhappiness and to be secure and safe, and for the mothers and daughters, the quality of relationships – at school, in the labor market, and among family and friends – was vital to their sense of what mattered in life.

The hopes mothers hold for their daughters are part of a longer historical and cultural narrative of maternal love. Equally, expressions of hope are a response to one's present circumstances, formed in particular social, spatial, local, and historical contexts (Hage 2001), in this case, those of inequality, of poverty, and of changes in the labor market and growing job insecurity. Hope is not only a subjective emotion that is idiosyncratically and intensely experienced. Of importance are the social and place-based conditions that make possible and sustain hopefulness, the spatialized and different ways in which hope (or lack of hope) is generated: having or mobilizing hope is usefully understood as both a biographical and social project. The concept of *habitus* is helpful here, as it accounts for the structured ways in which social, economic, and family circumstances shape personal dispositions, including orientations to the future. With regard to the experience of hopefulness and the conditions of possibility for generating hope, McNay (2003) has argued that there is a widening gap between objective circumstances and subjective longing. Drawing on Bourdieu (2000), McNay argues that "power relations overdetermine the experience of hope and anticipation through the shaping of the agent's expectations and orientations to the future" (McNay 2003, p. 14). In the current era, she proposes that there are "systemic tendencies towards social complexity and uncertainty, such as increasing occupational insecurity and social fluidity [leading to]... progressively more mismatches between expectations and objective chances" (*ibid.*).

The daughters' uncertain hopes for their futures emerged in a social climate in which not to stay at school is increasingly experienced as risking a precarious life and in which opportunities for security are severely constrained. This produces pressure to stay on at school, hoping to be successful and to counteract the fear of future insecurity or downward mobility. As with Keren's story, a complex intersection of sociological, place-based, psychological, emotional, and intergenerational factors shapes how these young women see themselves in the present and anticipate their future. For some it is a sense of a resigned destiny contradicted by self-making, for others, a sense of navigating uncertainly towards who they hope to become, or not be like, in the future. Emotions, as Sara Ahmed argues, are not merely a "private matter": "emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without' but [...] they define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects" (Ahmed 2004, p. 25; Wetherell 2012). Taking account of emotions of longing, hope, uncertainty, or resignation and ambition (in the case of Keren) in relation to socially situated intergenerational dynamics is essential for understanding the nuances in how changes and continuities in gender identities are unfolding in everyday ways.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Much youth studies scholarship addresses the structural and macrosociological contexts in which young people's lives take shape: this is undeniably important. Yet too often such approaches can obscure from view the salience of interpersonal

and familial relations, the affective realm in which imagining and enacting the self unfolds. Identity is not a static project produced by discourse or shaped simply by either sociological or psychological imperatives. In the scenarios discussed in this chapter, identity has been understood as situated and intersectional, and as also arising from within psycho-social and intergenerational dynamics. Young women's social class, their school and residential location, and their family relations were highlighted, both as intersecting influences and as points of entry for a close-up look at the process of making gender and making futures. Other factors are also relevant, such as sexuality, religion, and race and ethnicity – the girls and their families were predominantly white and Anglo-European – but it has not been possible to address these in a meaningful way in this short chapter. Nevertheless, the overall focus on exploring the intersectional, place-based, and psycho-social dimensions of identity underscores the formation of identity over (historical, generational, biographical) time and in specific social, class, educational, and family settings. Of course, this identity work happens in relation to broader social and political trends – nationally, transnationally, via media, popular culture, policy mandates, and so forth. The aim of this chapter has not been to dismiss these influential realms but to show gender identity as relational and as tied to orientations to the future, not only to enactments in the present. Intergenerational dynamics are especially revealing for understanding this because they mediate between past and present, in both everyday encounters and flash points of change, conflict, and constancy, and in doing so presage the multilayered ways in which these might be carried into the future.

For youth studies, there are both opportunities and challenges in developing intergenerational studies of identity and gender relations, with some important comparative and longitudinal studies of young people's pathways offering helpful directions for investigating patterns of generational change (Andres and Wyn 2010; Thomson 2009). Further research is needed that develops analyses of the emotional and affective dimensions of young people's socially situated negotiations of gender, alongside research that expands the historical gaze, keeping an eye on the present but bringing forward a critical focus on temporality and movements between past, present, and future.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Bodies: Corporeality and Embodiment in Childhood and Youth Studies](#)
- ▶ [Bodies In and Out of Place: Schooling and the Production of Gender Identities Through Embodied Experience](#)
- ▶ [Critical Moments? The Importance of Timing in Young People's Narratives of Transition](#)
- ▶ [The Promises of Empowered Girls](#)
- ▶ [Theorizing Subjectivity and Feminine Embodiment: Feminist Approaches and Debates](#)

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