



Articles

Communal Strength Norms in the United States and Egypt

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Abstract

Two studies investigated norms related to communal strength in the United States and Egypt. Communal strength reflects the extent to which individuals feel responsible for meeting the needs of relationship partners, varies between relationships, and predicts caregiving. Participants indicated the communal strength marital partners should feel towards their spouse, mother, and best friend. In the United States, women reported wives should feel the most communal strength towards their husbands and mothers, but husbands should feel more towards their wives than mothers or best friends. American men reported both spouses should feel the highest communal strength towards their spouses and mothers. In Egypt, men and women agreed that wives should have the highest communal strength for their husbands and mothers, but husbands should have higher communal strength for their mothers than their wives or best friends. These findings reflect cultural variation in the perception of ideal communal strength following marriage, and highlight the ways in which expectations related to caregiving may differ between spouses.

Keywords: communal strength, cultural norms, interpersonal relationships, marriage

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Expanding relationship research globally is critical to explore the impact of cultural context on close relationships. By doing so, researchers may illuminate practical issues related to pedagogy, therapy, and marital counseling, as well as critical theoretical issues related to understanding the universality versus cultural specificity of interpersonal relationship processes (Burlison, 2003). To date, social psychological research on non-Western family relationships is limited (Mensch, Ibrahim, Lee, & Omaima, 2003; Sherif, 1999). This study examines links between culture and the perception of responsibility in close relationships by comparing norms related to ideal communal strength among young adults in the United States and young adults in Egypt. Specifically, we examined the extent to which spouses are expected to care for one another relative to other communal relationships including their relationship with their mother and a best friend.

Research on Communal Strength

Communal strength represents the degree to which individuals feel responsible for meeting the needs of relationship partners and is likely to vary from one communal relationship to another such that the needs of some relationship partners take priority over the needs of other relationship partners (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). For example, although individuals may feel some degree of responsibility for caring for members of both their immediate family (e.g. their spouse or child) and their extended family (e.g. an aunt or cousin), the needs of an immediate family member are likely to take precedence over the needs of an extended family member (Monin, Clark, &

Lemay, 2008). This means that people are likely to utilize more of their resources including time, money and effort in supporting some close relationship partners than others. It also means that in cases in which meeting the needs of one partner conflict with meeting the needs of the other, for instance, because a person cannot be in two places at the same time, supporting one partner will take precedence over supporting the other.

These differences may be conceptualized in terms of the communal strength an individual feels for each relationship such that some relationships are characterized by greater communal strength than others. Mills et al. (2004) suggest that differences in communal strength among relationship partners may be thought of in terms of a hierarchy in which relationships with greater communal strength are higher in the hierarchy than those with lower communal strength. Given that all people have a limited amount of resources and time available to help others, differences in communal strength are ideally (but not always) implicitly understood by both members of relationships and they enable individuals to prioritize the relationships in which to invest the most resources and allow them to negotiate multiple demands on their time, energy, and other resources. In their extensive interviews of married couples, Hochschild and Machung (2012) found that negotiating multiple demands related to caregiving, employment, and housework is one of the primary sources of strain facing American couples today. Expectations related to whose needs should take priority in the family and how well those needs are being met affect personal perceptions of being cared for, family members' sense of self-worth and gratitude, as well as the potential for marital conflict and tension in the family.

Although there is individual variability and differences in communal orientation (Clark & Finkel, 2005), norms related to communal strength are likely to be shared within a given culture. In Mills et al. (2004), undergraduate students in the United States reported the highest communal strength for a member of their immediate family in comparison to a distant relative. Lower communal strength was reported for a best friend than for immediate family members followed by the least communal strength for an acquaintance. As suggested by Mills et al. (2004), a cultural norm in the U.S. may be that, ideally, both members of romantic and marital relationships should feel equal communal strength toward one another such that partners feel equivalent, symmetrical, responsibilities to care for the other. When this norm is not met, differences in communal strength between partners may signal relationship difficulties, cause conflict, and ultimately lead to the dissolution of the relationship.

Marriage and Family Relationships in the U.S. and Egypt

This study was designed to compare cultural norms related to communal strength in the U.S. and Egypt. Gender roles in the U.S. tend to be more egalitarian than in Egypt. Most American women are employed outside of the home, including mothers of young children and even infants (Goldberg, Prause, Lucas-Thompson, & Himsel, 2008; Hochschild & Machung, 2012), and more fathers are taking on the role of the stay-at-home parent due to a recent economic recession and higher unemployment in the U.S. (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Rochlen, McKelley, & Whittaker, 2010).

Norms related to dating and marriage are also less traditional and conservative in the U.S. in comparison to Egypt. During adolescence, American youth are generally expected to begin dating and to develop romantic relationships. Parents and educators often discuss the importance of establishing healthy intimate relationships as well as safe sex practices and appropriate sexual activity in these relationships. Young adults are encouraged to form monogamous dating relationships and to become self-reliant and independent from their family (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995).

After making a long term commitment in an intimate romantic relationship, most Americans choose to cohabit with their romantic partner prior to marriage. Estimates are as high as 70% of all couples cohabitating prior to marriage (Hsueh, Morrison, & Doss, 2009; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Among young adults, cohabitation may be seen as an acceptable way to “try out” a marriage and the couple’s compatibility before a legal commitment is made (Kline et al., 2004), and parents tend to have little influence on the choice of dating and marital partners as well as the timing of marriage. Adult children generally are expected to live independently when they are financially able to do so, and the American norm is for nuclear families to live in separate households, often at great distances from one another (Conger, 1981).

In Egypt, men and women are more likely to adhere to traditional gender roles, and men are given significantly greater authority, respect, and freedom of choice than women (Sanders, 1986; Yount & Agree, 2004). Although the number of women completing secondary schooling and higher education has increased, getting married and having children are seen as the overriding goals for women (Amin & Al-Bassusi, 2004), and to a large extent, women’s education is valued because of its potential to enable women to find a more desirable spouse and to become a better wife and mother (Mensch, Ibrahim, Lee, & Omaima, 2003). Whereas men are expected to be the breadwinner for the family, women are expected to withdraw from paid employment once they are married, at least to the extent that this is economically feasible (Hattar-Pollara, Meleis, & Nagib, 2000). Women are expected to focus on meeting the needs of their spouse and family above all else, and their limited sphere of influence and decision making rests largely within the home (Amin & Al-Bassusi, 2004; Yount & Agree, 2004). Egyptian husbands may forbid their wife to work if her employment is believed to interfere with her responsibilities towards the family (Yount & Agree, 2004).

Based on interviews of 190 married and employed Egyptian women, Hattar-Pollara et al. (2000) reported that women engaged in employment outside the home were expected to meet the needs of both their spouse and their spouse’s extended families above all else. 47% of the women surveyed described how meeting the needs of their husband was their primary source of marital satisfaction and that their own happiness depended on their ability to do so. Similarly, El-Maghraby (2004) found that Egyptian wives’ marital adjustment was associated with their perceptions of the quality of their care for their home and their children.

In contrast to “free-choice” marriage and dating practices in the U.S., the extended family plays a significantly larger role in Egyptian families. Egyptian marriages are formally negotiated and arranged between families, and dating prior to marriage is forbidden based on the teachings of Islam (Sherif, 1999). Following betrothal, an engaged couple may spend chaperoned time together, and members of both families will begin to visit one another as well. Until recently, young couples were expected to live with their husband’s extended family following marriage. Today, many married couples continue to do so because of economic constraints (Fadel-Girgis, 1983; Sherif, 1999), or when their extended family can afford to build a house consisting of separate apartments as a way to keep the extended family living together following children’s marriages (Fadel-Girgis, 1983).

This current study enabled us to see how these cultural differences in gender roles and family interdependence may be related to different norms associated with ideal communal strength within different communal relationships following marriage. Specifically we chose to look at expectations for communal strength towards the spouse, the mother, and a best friend. We chose to look at maternal relationships instead of paternal relationships given evidence that people tend to feel a greater obligation and duty to care for females relative to males (Monin et al., 2008), and because mothers most likely have the unique status of being the participant’s primary caregiver since

birth. We chose to include the best friend relationship as a comparison condition. The best friend condition enabled us to compare a communal relationship that tends to be lower in communal strength than family relationships (Mills et al., 2004). We did not include questions about other types of relationships in order to reduce the possibility of demand characteristics and repetition of the same questions.

Given greater gender role egalitarianism, the emphasis on the nuclear family, and less family interdependence in the U.S. (Conger, 1981; Gere & Helwig, 2012), we predicted that American participants would report higher ideal communal strength for spousal relationships than other relationships, and that the expectations for men and women would be relatively similar. In contrast, given greater emphasis on the extended family, collectivism (Barbopoulos, Fisharah, Clark, & El-Khatib, 2002), and the responsibility for children to care for elderly parents in Egypt (Fadel-Girgis, 1983; Yount & Agree, 2004), we predicted that Egyptian participants would report higher ideal communal strength for maternal relationships following marriage, and that women would be expected to provide greater caregiving within the family based on more traditional gender roles.

Study 1

Method

Participants — In the United States, 54 unmarried, undergraduate students (34 women, 20 men) completed the survey. The mean age of the American participants was 19.46 years, $SD = 1.15$. In Egypt, 40 unmarried, undergraduate students completed the survey (20 women, 20 men). The mean age of the Egyptian participants was 19.33 years, $SD = 1.14$. In both countries, participants were recruited from introductory courses or public areas on campus and asked to participate in a study on interpersonal relationships. All participants were volunteers and were not compensated for their participation.

Materials — Each survey consisted of three self-report measures of ideal communal strength for the relationship to the spouse, mother, and a best friend. To measure perceived ideal communal strength, we adapted five of the ten questions on the measure of communal strength previously developed by Mills et al. (2004) to measure the communal strength of an existing relationship. We selected a subset of the original ten questions to reduce the possibility of participant fatigue or disinterest given the need to repeat the same questions for three different relationship types.

The five questions were modified to ask about the ideals associated with communal strength in each relationship type following marriage. Specifically, participants were asked the extent to which someone: 1) should feel happy about doing something to help this person, 2) should make meeting the needs of this person a priority, 3) should be willing to give to benefit the other, 4) should give a large benefit to this person, and 5) should be willing to incur a large cost to meet a need of the other person. All questions were answered by circling a number on a ten point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). Participants were asked to answer these same five questions for the relationship with the spouse, the mother, and a best friend following marriage.

Two versions of the survey were used depending on the sex of the participants. For the questions related to spouses, men were asked questions about how a husband should respond to his wife, and females were asked questions about how a wife should respond to her husband. This was done to avoid the use of he/she and to ensure that each participant was responding to questions about the appropriate communal strength for someone of his or her own sex.

Using the process of back translation, all surveys were translated from English to Arabic by one translator and then from Arabic to English by another translator to ensure that the translation to Arabic was as close as possible in meaning to the English version. To minimize the potential for errors in translation and data entry all questions were kept in the same order for all participants in both countries. Both the English and Arabic versions of the survey are available upon request from the authors.

Procedure — In the United States, participants were recruited from a psychology course or from public areas on campus. In Egypt, participants were recruited from two psychology classes. Prior to being given the survey, the researcher informed the participants that their participation was voluntary, and that the survey questions were about their perceptions of interpersonal relationships with significant persons such as husbands and wives, mothers, and best friends. Participants were also told that they could freely ask any questions related to the survey at any time.

Results

To calculate our dependent measure of perceived ideal communal strength for each relationship type (spouse, mother, best friend), we calculated the mean score on the five questions designed to measure ideal communal strength in each relationship. In the United States, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the five items measuring communal strength were .85 for spouses, .92 for mothers, and .90 for best friends. In Egypt, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the same measure of communal strength were .82 for marriage, .54 for mothers, and .89 for best friends. Given the relatively low Cronbach alpha coefficient for mothers, we examined the overall pattern of correlations between the five questions asking about mothers. Only two correlations reached statistical significance; making the mother's needs a priority correlated with willingness to benefit the mother, $r(40) = .41, p = .008$ and giving a large benefit to the mother, $r(39) = .42, p = .008$. Future research is needed to determine whether this would be replicated in a larger sample of Egyptian participants and to enable researchers to do a factor analysis.

All statistical analyses were conducted within country to see if different patterns of expectations would emerge between the U.S. and Egypt. We did not do direct comparisons on measures between countries or treat country as a between subject variable due to potential differences in scale interpretation, response bias, or subtle differences in survey translation.

Within each country, a mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance was conducted to examine the effect of relationship type (spouse, mother, best friend) and participant sex on perceived ideal communal strength for each relationship type. The mean level of communal strength for each relationship type for males and females in each country is presented in [Table 1](#).

In the United States, the interaction between relationship type and participant sex was non-significant, however there was a significant main effect for relationship type, Wilks' Lambda = .86, $F(2,51) = 4.21, p = .02$, partial eta squared = .14. In the United States, both men and women reported higher perceived ideal communal strength towards spouses and mothers than towards best friends. Across both men and women, perceived ideal communal strength toward the spouse ($M = 7.70, SD = 1.28$) was significantly higher than toward best friends ($M = 7.15, SD = 1.44; t(53) = 2.75, p = .008$), and perceived communal strength toward mothers ($M = 7.50, SD = 1.61$) was also significantly higher than toward best friends, $t(53) = 2.13, p = .04$. There was not a significant difference in perceived ideal communal strength toward the spouse versus mothers, $t(53) = .88, p = .39$. Overall, across male and female

Table 1

Ideal Communal Strength for the Same Sex Spouse Across Relationship Types Following Marriage

Country	Sex	<i>n</i>	Spouse <i>M(SD)</i>	Mother <i>M(SD)</i>	Best friend <i>M(SD)</i>
United States	Women	34	7.69 (1.13)	7.41 (1.68)	7.08 (1.59)
	Men	20	7.70 (1.54)	7.65 (1.51)	7.28 (1.19)
Egypt	Women	20	8.82 (.92)	8.62 (.94)	7.51 (1.81)
	Men	19	7.19 (1.82)	8.51 (1.09)	7.19 (1.74)

Note. Scores could range from 0 to 10. Higher numbers indicate higher ideal communal strength.

participants, 42.6% of American participants ranked spouses as the top priority (as indicated by the highest mean communal strength) versus 33.3% who ranked mothers as the top priority.

In Egypt, there was a significant interaction between relationship type and participant sex, Wilks' Lambda = .75, $F(2, 36) = 6.13$, $p = .005$, partial eta squared = .25, such that whereas women reported similar ideals for communal strength towards spouses and mothers and less towards best friends, men reported lower communal strength towards spouses and best friends than toward mothers. Overall, across male and female participants, 25% of Egyptian participants ranked spouses as the top priority (as indicated by the highest mean communal strength) versus 50% who ranked mothers as the top priority. Paired samples t -tests confirmed that although women rated mothers and spouses equally, $t(19) = .79$, $p = .44$, men rated communal strength toward mothers higher than communal strength toward spouses, $t(18) = -3.77$, $p = .001$.

Although the mean level of ideal communal strength for each relationship type in the U.S. did not show a significant difference between mean level of ideal communal strength for spouses versus mothers, the findings for Egyptian men and the overall ranking of communal strength for mothers across male and female participants was consistent with our hypothesis that maternal relationships would take priority over marital relationships in Egypt.

Study 2

Given the interesting sex differences between the Egyptian participants identified in Study 1, we decided to conduct a second study to see if the expectations participants had for their own sex would match the expectations participants held for the opposite sex. In other words, we wanted to see if women's expectations for women following marriage would match men's expectations for women following marriage, and similarly, whether men's expectations for men would match women's expectations for men following marriage. If not, these areas of disagreement would highlight the potential for conflict when one spouse's expectations differ from the other.

Method

To determine whether or not we would see similar expectations for husbands versus wives regardless of participant sex, we replicated the materials and procedure of Study 1, but reversed the surveys so that women answered questions about how men should respond following marriage, and men answered questions about how women should respond following marriage. Study 2 was conducted during a different academic semester using the same procedure, and included all new participants who had not participated in Study 1.

Participants — In the United States, 45 unmarried undergraduate students (27 women, 18 men) completed the survey. The mean age of the American participants was 18.56 years, $SD = 0.99$.

In Egypt, 40 undergraduate students completed the survey (20 women, 20 men). The mean age of the Egyptian participants was 19.85 years, $SD = 1.23$.

Procedure — We replicated the procedure of Study 1 and used the same surveys. The only change was that women were asked to answer the questions regarding communal strength following marriage for a husband, and men were asked to answer questions regarding communal strength following marriage for a wife.

Results

To calculate our dependent measure of perceived ideal communal strength for each relationship type (spouse, mother, best friend), we calculated the mean score on the five questions designed to measure ideal communal strength in each relationship. In the United States, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the five items measuring communal strength were .84 for spouses, .92 for mothers, and .91 for best friends. In Egypt, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the same communal strength measures were .71 for marriage, .88 for mothers, and .91 for best friends. Based on the same rationale given in Study 1, all statistical analyses were conducted within country to see if different patterns of expectations would emerge between the U.S. and Egypt. We did not do direct comparisons of measures between countries or treat country as a between subject variable.

Within each country, a mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance was conducted to examine the effect of relationship type (spouse, mother, best friend) and participant sex on perceived ideal communal strength for each relationship. The mean level of communal strength for each relationship type for males and females in each country is presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Ideal Communal Strength for the Opposite Sex Spouse Across Relationship Types Following Marriage

Country	Sex	<i>n</i>	Spouse <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Mother <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Best friend <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
United States	Women	27	8.11 (.94)	6.73 (1.54)	6.19 (1.36)
	Men	18	7.11 (1.50)	7.23 (2.13)	6.11 (1.71)
Egypt	Women	20	6.52 (1.69)	7.58 (1.88)	6.90 (2.07)
	Men	19	7.01 (1.16)	7.76 (1.29)	5.96 (1.47)

Note. Scores could range from 0 to 10. Higher numbers indicate higher ideal communal strength.

In the United States, the interaction between relationship type and participant sex was significant, Wilks' Lambda = .77, $F(2, 42) = 6.12$, $p = .005$, partial eta squared = .23, such that women expected men to have more communal strength to their wives than to their mothers, $t(26) = 6.36$, $p = .000$, whereas men did not expect women to have more communal strength to their husbands than to their mothers, $t(17) = -.29$, $p = .76$. Both expected lower communal strength towards best friends. Overall, across male and female participants, 57.8% of American participants ranked spouses as the top priority (as indicated by the highest mean communal strength) versus only 22.2% who ranked mothers as the top priority.

In Egypt, the interaction between relationship type and participant sex was not statistically significant, however there was a significant main effect for relationship type, Wilks' Lambda = .67, $F(2, 36) = 8.90$, $p = .001$, partial eta squared = .33, such that both women and men expected opposite sex spouses to have less communal strength for their spouse following marriage than for their mothers. Across both men and women, perceived ideal communal strength toward the mother, $M = 7.67$, $SD = 1.60$, was significantly higher than toward the spouse, $M = 6.76$, SD

= 1.46, $t(38) = -3.40$, $p = .002$. Interestingly, although men expected wives to have more communal strength toward their spouse than toward their best friends, $t(18) = 3.35$, $p = .004$, women did not expect husbands to have more communal strength towards their spouses than towards their best friends, $t(19) = -.76$, $p = .46$. Overall, across male and female participants, only 20% of Egyptian participants ranked spouses as the top priority (as indicated by the highest mean communal strength) versus 50% who ranked mothers as the top priority.

Based on the mean level of ideal communal strength and rankings for each relationship type, evidence in both the U.S. and Egypt was consistent with our hypothesis that marital relationships would take precedence over maternal relationships in the U.S., and maternal relationships would take precedence over marital relationships in Egypt. In the U.S., American women reported that husbands should have higher communal strength for their wife than for their mother, however, all other comparisons weighted these two relationship types equally. In Egypt, both women and men reported that both husbands and wives should have higher communal strength for their mother than for their spouse.

Discussion

Our overall findings are consistent with the prediction that different countries may have different cultural norms related to communal strength in family relationships, and this is the first study to demonstrate such differences. Taken together, these two studies highlight the ways in which American and Egyptian cultures differ in terms of the normative expectations related to who should take priority in family relationships following marriage, and we believe these patterns likely reflect different cultural values related to gender, family interdependence, and the role of the extended family. Interestingly, these findings also highlight different perspectives of men and women, and therefore potential areas of interpersonal conflict due to differing expectations between marital partners both within and across cultures.

In the U.S., both men and women agreed that for wives, the importance of meeting the needs of her husband and mother should be relatively equal and take priority over meeting the needs of a best friend. Interestingly however, whereas men also felt that husbands should prioritize both their wife and their mother relatively equally, women did not share this belief. In contrast, American women indicated that husbands should have significantly more concern and interest in meeting the needs of his wife than his mother. The expectation that men should prioritize their marriage over their mother, at least from women's perspective, is consistent with our prediction that the nuclear family would take precedence following marriage in the United States. In terms of the potential for marital conflict, differing expectations between spouses related to the relative importance of the husband meeting the needs of his wife versus the needs of his mother may be one area of potential friction.

In Egypt, both men and women agreed in their perceptions of ideal communal strength, however there was no evidence that they expected communal strength to be equivalent between spouses. In contrast, both men and women indicated that although women should prioritize meeting the needs of both their husband and their mother, men should prioritize their mother over their wife. Interestingly, Egyptian women also indicated that men were not even expected to prioritize their wife over their best friend. The finding that Egyptian women were not expected to prioritize mothers over spouses and that American women were not expected to prioritize spouses over mothers but were expected to care for both equally, may reflect a strong emphasis on caregiving across family relationships for women in both countries.

Differing views of ideal communal strength following marriage have a number of interesting implications for understanding interpersonal relationships and families in a cross-cultural context. In terms of communal relationships across cultures, these findings highlight an area of potential friction in relationships between American women, who based on cultural norms are likely to perceive themselves to be the top priority of their husband, versus Egyptian men, who based on different cultural norms are likely to perceive their mother's needs to take precedence over those of their wife.

Another interesting implication relates to the view that equality in communal strength is the normative ideal for romantic and marital relationships (Mills et al., 2004). Whereas this may be the case within American and other Western cultures, this may be less true in others. One possibility may be that rather than equality in communal strength, agreement in expectations related to communal strength may be a more important determinant of marital harmony. In Egypt, men and women did not indicate that husbands and wives should have relatively equal communal strength toward one another; however they both shared the view that women should have more communal strength to their husbands than vice-versa. This difference may reflect more traditional gender roles and the emphasis on caregiving and relationships for women in Egyptian culture.

Based on our limited sample, we do not wish to generalize these findings to entire countries however, these findings do indicate that within an equivalent age group of university students, different patterns of relationship expectations emerged in each country. Hochschild and Machung (2012) found that normative expectations related to marital responsibilities and caregiving are likely to differ based on education, social class, ethnicity, and family background in the United States, and we would expect this same variability in Egypt as well. Additionally, the relatively young ages of our participants limit the generalizability of our findings to other age groups within each country however, young adulthood is a particularly interesting and important stage of life in which to examine expectations related to marriage and family (Gere & Helwig, 2012). Our participants' responses reflect young adults' relationship ideals prior to marriage, at a point in which they likely are beginning to think about long term commitments and life goals, and when their expectations have not yet been influenced by actual experiences in a marriage.

Future cross-cultural research should investigate the link between actual communal strength and marital satisfaction within marriages, as well as the potential for marital distress when one spouse does not meet the other's expectations. Another critical relationship type to investigate in terms of relative communal strength is the parent-child relationship and communal strength norms for mothers versus fathers. Additionally, researchers need to examine the expectations related to whose needs should take priority and by whom following the transition to parenthood within marriage as this is likely to be a time in which personal resources related to caregiving and one spouse's availability to care for the other spouse are strained.

This study supports our belief and is consistent with other research (Gere & Helwig, 2012) indicating that Western and non-Western cultures may have different expectations related to gender, communal strength, and caregiving among the extended family. We also found evidence that expectations may differ between husbands and wives, and we believe these differences may create a potential area of marital friction. Future research is needed to identify those factors most likely to predict caregiving expectations both within and between cultures, as well as the impact of mismatched beliefs.

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