

Chapter #14

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

We investigated if domestic violence affects the school performance of children who witness episodes of violence against their mothers. The data were collected through documentary research, analysing the information recorded in the files of the Center for Reference and Attendance to Women (CRAM, in Portuguese) and the Municipal Department of Education (SME). The records of 20 children regularly enrolled in public elementary schools were used, whose mothers sought the services of CRAM. The dependent variable was school grades, analysed according to a repeated measures design: during the occurrence of episodes of domestic violence and after these episodes had ceased. School attendance, family socioeconomic level, and mothers' education were analysed as well. The results showed that students had lower school performance after the cessation of the episodes of violence. No effects of other variables were observed. Factors related to the phenomenon are discussed as possible causes: separation from the father, change of address, change of custody, and others. Considering that the sample in this study was composed of students from low-income families, the results point to a kind of "Matthew effect", that is, a relationship between violence, poverty, and ignorance, forming a cycle that is very difficult to break.

Keywords: violence against women, school performance, elementary school, basic education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon that is not restricted by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, or religion. Although men, children, and the elderly can be victims of domestic violence directly or indirectly, the majority of victims are women, and the perpetrators are generally their marital partners. According to the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (Waiselfisz, 2015), in Brazil 27.1% of feminicides occur in the family context. The Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA, 2019) estimated that in 2017, 4,936 women were murdered, victims of this type of violence. The Brazilian state with the highest rate of female homicides is Roraima, followed by Rio Grande do Norte and Acre. The state with the lowest incidence of homicides against women is São Paulo: 2.2%. In the municipality where the present research was conducted, whose population is approximately 460,000 (see below), in the year 2019 four feminicides were recorded and 1,189 protective measures (a measure provided by law, which aims to safeguard women against further acts of violence) were granted.

In Brazil, violence against women was criminalized by Law 11,340 – known as the Maria da Penha Law – (Presidência da República, 2006). Its purpose is to inhibit the practice of domestic violence against women and to punish aggressors. In its Article 5, the law establishes that "[...] domestic and family violence against women is defined as any action or omission based on gender, which causes death, injury, physical, sexual or psychological suffering, and moral or property damage. It is a complex phenomenon, whose dynamics

constitute, according to Soares (2005), a cycle composed of three phases. The first is the "building of tension in the relationship", the second, the "explosion of violence", and the third, the "honeymoon" - the repentance of the aggressor (pp. 23-25). According to the author, this cycle would help explain some of the reasons why victims remain in abusive relationships. Breaking out of this cycle is no easy task. Among the difficulties faced by victimized women are the fear, the shame of seeking help, the hope that the partner will change his behaviour, the economic dependence on the partner, the inexistence of specialized services in some locations, among others (Soares, 2005).

The research reported here revealed some characteristics common to the environments where domestic violence was present. For the victimized women, violence was part of their routine since childhood, since they witnessed the father or stepfather's violence against their mother, and in some cases, besides witnessing it they were also its direct victims. The relapse into abusive relationships is another common characteristic. Some women, even when they break the cycle of violence, end up entering into a new abusive relationship or re-establish a relationship with the abusive ex-partner. Regarding the children of these women, most of them have witnessed episodes of violence and are subject to its possible consequences.

Another aspect observed, common to the cases that made up our sample, is that violence did not mean a break in the children's standard of living, but a standard to be broken. That is, they did not have a life without violence, and, at some point, it became part of their lives. On the contrary, they were born in a context where violence was an integral part of their daily lives. These children constitute a part of the young population that faces highly unfavorable conditions from birth, whose future is very uncertain and with little chance of being promising.

2. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Many factors contribute to success or failure in school. They are internal, such as cognition, temperament, personality traits, developmental changes; and external, such as social, cultural, pedagogical, and many others. Moreover, they interact with each other and influence each other. Intelligence Quotient (IQ), for example, is a strong predictor of academic achievement (Hegelund, Flensburg-Madsen, Dammeyer, & Mortensen, 2018), social class, in turn, influences it. It has been found that in standardized IQ tests, children from lower social classes score on average 10 to 15 points lower than children of the same age belonging to higher social classes (Shaffer, & Kipp, 2012, p. 409). Social class is also a strong determinant of school success, as demonstrated by Caprara (2017).

Considering that the phenomenon at hand is something that occurs within the family, one must look inside. The family is the child's first social nucleus, responsible for much of his or her initial formation in terms of behavioural, moral, intellectual, emotional, and developmental aspects, in general. Therefore, it is necessary to know some aspects of family dynamics in order to understand its determining role. The findings of Rohenkohl and Castro (2012) show that children of couples with high levels of conflict and low affectivity tend to present more behavioural and emotional problems compared to children of families whose parents have few conflicts and are more affectionate. Most of the studies in the literature on the subject have focused on understanding the violence that children and adolescents suffer directly (Jaffe, Hurley, & Wolfe, 1990; Martin, English, Clark, Cilenti, & Kupper 1996; Reichenheim, Hasselmann, & Moraes, 1999; Minayo, 2001; Araújo, 2002). Early research on the impact of simple exposure to domestic violence on children dates back to the 1970s and was conducted by North American researchers (Brancalhone,

Fogo, & Williams, 2004). In Brazil, the first study found on this subject is that of Corrêa and Williams (2000). These studies showed that children exposed to a violent environment are more likely to develop aggressive behaviour, depression, isolation, and low self-esteem, thus noting a range of highly detrimental and undesirable effects.

Depending on the type and intensity of domestic violence to which a child is exposed in his/her family environment, his/her behaviour will be affected in different ways. Exposure to severe physical and/or sexual domestic violence has been shown to be associated with problems in school (repetition, dropping out or discontinuation of studies), behaviour (nightmares, running away from home, thumb sucking), and aggression (Durand, Schraiber, Franca-Junior, & Barros, 2011). However, although troubled family relationships potentially trigger psychological and cognitive disorders that can affect school performance, research findings in the literature point that domestic violence alone does not negatively affect the school performance of children exposed to it (Brancalhone et al., 2004; Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Harold, Aitken, & Shelton, 2007). Therefore, the available data are inconclusive about the relationship between domestic violence against women and its possible effects on children's academic achievement. We hope, therefore, that the research reported here will shed some light on it.

3. METHODS AND RESULTS

3.1. Methods

The research was conducted in a city in the northwest of the State of São Paulo, with an estimated population of 460,671 inhabitants, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) (2019). Its realization had the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Biosciences, Modern Languages (Letters) and Exact Sciences of the São Paulo State University (Unesp), São José do Rio Preto Campus, Brazil. Our sources of information were the Center for Reference and Attendance to Women (CRAM) and the Municipal Department of Education (SME) whose responsible professionals signed an informed consent form authorizing data collection.

3.1.1. The sources of information

This was a record-based research. The sources of information are presented below.

Center for Reference and Assistance to Women (CRAM) is part of the Secretariat of Rights for Women, People with Disabilities, Race and Ethnicity. Its main services are psychological and legal assistance to victims. They can be accessed by spontaneous demand or by referral made by municipal authorities linked to the area of security or health. In cases in which the woman suffers a death threat, shelter is provided in a "*Casa Abrigo*" (Shelter House) – a secret location, where the victim and her dependents are sheltered. Other possible measures may be including the victim in government programs for income transfer, education, health, and employment.

Municipal Secretariat of Education (MSE) is an executive body managing the municipality's education policies. Among several other functions, it keeps records with information about the school life of all students enrolled in the municipal public education.

3.1.2. Casuistry and procedure

The inclusion criteria adopted for the composition of the study sample were: (I) The mother should have broken the cycle of domestic violence; (II) during the period covered by the research, the child had to be enrolled in the Elementary School in the municipal educational system.

It should be clarified that in Brazil, Basic Education is divided into Elementary School (ES), lasting nine years, and High School, lasting three years. Elementary school, in turn, is subdivided into two stages, the first (ES-I) comprising the first to the fifth school year, and the second (ES-II) from the sixth to the ninth grade.

Initially, data were collected from the records of 43 eligible children for the research, as well as their mothers and their spouses. Twenty-three of them, however, did not meet at least one of the inclusion criteria and were excluded from the study. We were, therefore, left with 20 students (9 girls) with ages ranging from 8 to 13 years old on the date the mother sought the services of CRAM. All were from low-income families, and all were children exposed to episodes of domestic violence committed against their mother by her marital partner, 16 as witnesses and four as direct victims, having suffered one or more of its modalities: physical, psychological, sexual and neglect.

While the episodes of violence lasted, the students were in the second to seventh grades. Data collection was conducted about one year after such episodes had ceased, when the students were through third to ninth grades. At the time, seven students had advanced from ES-I to ES-II.

The students are the children of 16 women, of whom eight are brown and the other eight are black (n = 4) or white (n = 4). As for the mothers' education, one has not completed college, 10 have complete (n = 4) or incomplete (n = 6) high school, and five have complete (n = 1) or incomplete (n = 4) elementary school. Their monthly family income was equal to or less than the equivalent of U\$ 219. The time these women have been involved in a violent relationship varied from one to 38 years, and for 13 of them the duration was from one to 12 years. Two women suffered only psychological violence, while the other 14 suffered a combination of several types, including physical, moral, psychological, sexual, and property violence. Nine women were experiencing a violent relationship for the first time. The others had already witnessed or experienced domestic violence in childhood or were repeat offenders in a violent relationship.

As for the profile of the perpetrators of domestic violence, 11 of them were the biological parents of the children, five were white and 11 were of African descent. Twelve of them used narcotic substances, such as alcohol and/or illicit drugs.

The dependent variables defined for the study were school grades and attendance for the years 2013 to 2018, obtained from the MSE records.

As described below, we adopted a repeated measures design. The temporal references for defining the moments "during" and "after" the episodes of violence are, respectively, the search for CRAM services by the mother and the interruption of violence after the couple's divorce.

3.1.3. Data analysis

The analysis of school performance was made in two different moments: during the occurrence of the episodes of domestic violence (T1) and after its cessation (T2). The annual averages of school grades in Portuguese, Mathematics, and Science were analysed, that is, the sum of the bimonthly grades divided by four. In the Brazilian educational system, this is the grade which determines whether the student will advance to the next grade or be retained in the same grade. In terms of measuring school performance, unlike

the scores produced by standardized tests, school grades are attributed through individual and idiosyncratic procedures, and are therefore subject to greater subjectivity and variability. As a way to check their consistency, we used the correlation analysis between the scores assigned by the teachers of the three subjects. At time T1, we observed a Spearman's ρ of .79 to .84 ($p < .0001$), and at time T2, the correlations were .88 to .94 ($p < .0001$). There is, therefore, a high degree of consistency in the teachers' assessment of their students' academic performance, which gives us some peace of mind to use the grades as the relevant data in this study. As for school attendance, the total number of absences in the analysed periods was considered.

Since the sample size is small and the data did not present a normal distribution, a non-parametric statistical test was used. The package used was BioEstat (5.0). The Wilcoxon test was applied to compare school grades between T1 and T2, and to compare school attendance at these two points in time. To analyse the possible influence of other factors on school performance, we considered only the grades at T1 and made comparisons between groups. The Median Test was applied to verify a possible effect of family socioeconomic status on students' school performance. In addition, the Mann-Whitney test was applied to verify the impact of the mother's schooling on the children's school performance (details in Alves, 2020).

3.2. Results

We analysed the possible effects of two independent variables on students' school performance: the mothers' level of education and the families' socioeconomic level. None of them had any influence on the dependent variable. Similarly, no significant correlations were found between school performance after the end of the domestic violence episodes (T2) and the time, in years, of exposure to them (Portuguese Language: $\rho = -.242$; $p = .30$; Mathematics: $\rho = -.113$; $p = .63$ and Science: $\rho = -.046$; $p = .84$). Finally, no significant differences were found between students' absences at T1 and T2 ($Z = .0991$; $p = .68$). Incidentally, there was also no difference in school grades due to the number of absences at T1 and T2 ($Z = 1.6$; $p = .12$).

As for school performance, the Wilcoxon test showed significant differences between T1 and T2 in Math ($Z = 2.542$; $p = 0.01$) and Science ($Z = 2.131$; $p = 0.03$), and a marginal difference in Portuguese Language ($Z = 1.757$; $p = 0.07$). Since this test only indicates whether or not there are differences between the measured variables, we resorted to an analysis of the medians to verify the direction of these differences. The result is presented in Figure 1. It can be seen that the median of the grades in the three subjects is lower at T2 than at T1 and that in the three subjects, the reduction of the median is accompanied by a reduction of the lower limit, as well as an increase in the dispersion of its values.

Figure 1.

Box plot representing grades by subject matter during and after episodes of violence. The lower and upper lines of the boxes represent the first and third quartiles respectively, while the middle line (thicker) represents the median. Vertical lines represent the higher and lower grades.

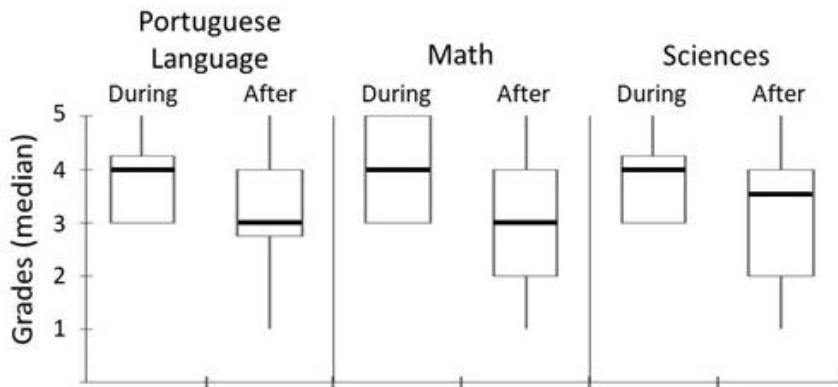
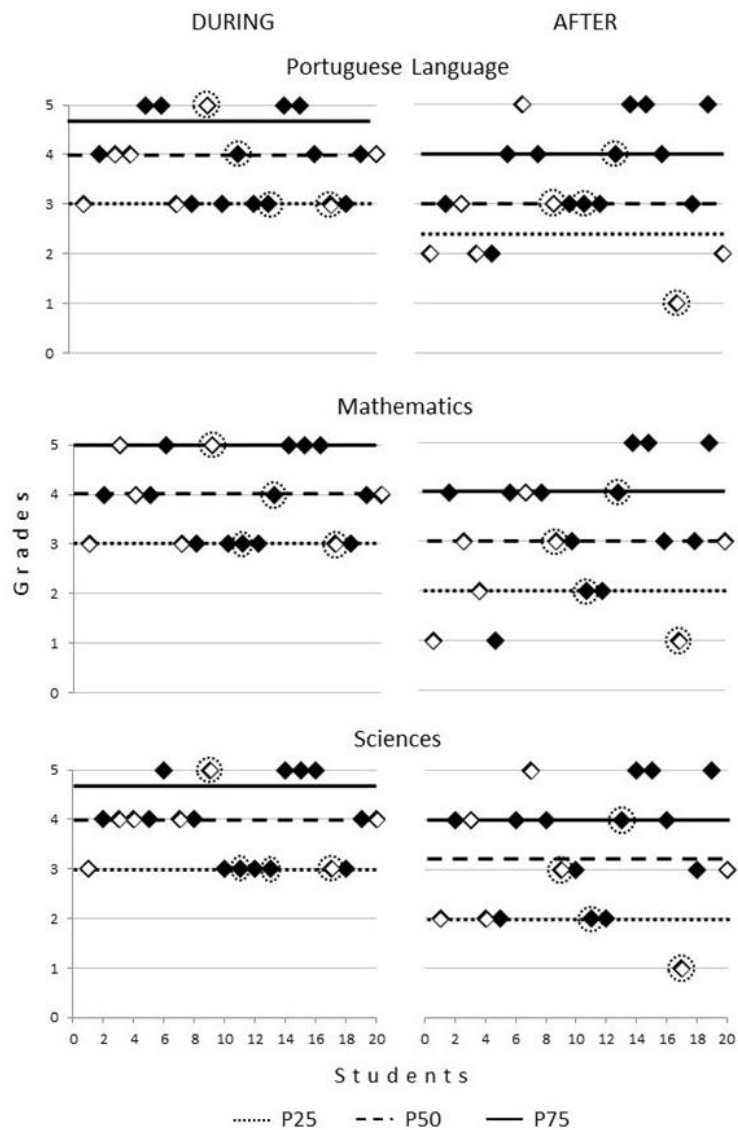


Figure 2 allows an individualized analysis of student performance at the two points in time. The scores are grouped in percentiles. If we take as reference P25, which is where the grades that lead to school retention are located, we observe that, specifically at T2, the majority of students who concentrate at this level are direct victims of domestic violence and/or those who advanced from ES-I to ES-II (see Discussion).

Figure 2.

Students' grades in the subject matters during the occurrence of episodes of domestic violence (T1) and after its cessation (T2). Students are numbered from 1 to 20 on the horizontal axis. The grades are grouped in percentiles. Diamonds represent the students and their placement on the lines corresponds to their respective individual grade. Black diamonds represent students who between T1 and T2 remained at the same school level, while empty diamonds represent students who advanced from level I to level II of Elementary School. Diamonds surrounded by a circle with dotted line represent students who not only witnessed episodes of domestic violence, but also directly suffered it.



4. DISCUSSION

Despite the ambiguity in the literature, we suspected that an end to episodes of domestic violence would be followed by progress in students' school performance. What we observed, however, was just the opposite. How can this be interpreted? Several aspects must be considered. We will address some of them.

4.1. The dependent variable

School grades may not be the only or the best measure of academic performance for scientific purposes. However, it cannot be ignored that they determine events of fundamental importance in the lives of students, including possibilities and even the impossibility of continuing their studies, with lasting effects on their self-esteem, employability, salary level, and standard of well-being.

4.2. Research design and scope of the method

The repeated measures design takes each individual of the sample as his or her own control, so that all variables are hypothetically controlled, including intra-subject variables. However, the present case is obviously not like a situation in which the independent variable can be experimentally manipulated to check its effects on the dependent variable. This is a complex natural situation, involving a multi-determined phenomenon with numerous variables interacting with and influencing each other. The design adopted may be a viable alternative but doing it through documentary research restricts the research to the information available in its original sources. Longitudinal studies with this type of design and application of standardized tests would also be subject to limitations, since the information about the families in which violence occurs is confidential and of restricted access, which would make it difficult to identify and recruit the possible participants.

For a more rigorous and sophisticated statistical control to be possible, a much larger data set would be required than we could access. The use of large samples is the best option to determine the weight of each of the multiple independent variables. On the other hand, it is a methodological option that makes research more expensive. Small samples make research cheaper, but the data thus generated are less generalizable. In view of these considerations, between-group designs emerge as a viable alternative, obviously not exclusive, with the possibility of using standardized tests and other instruments that allow obtaining detailed information about the participants and making comparisons.

Considering the scope of our methodological option, we emphasize that we have no information that allows us to assure that there was, in fact, an end to violence in the students' lives, be it domestic violence or any other of its several modalities. We only know that the couples separated and that, therefore, the episodes of violence between those specific marital partners ceased. However, we have no information about eventual new relationships contracted by the mothers, or about the pattern of relationship between them and their children, between the latter and their siblings and other inhabitants of their homes (grandparents, uncles, aggregates, etc.), or between the students and their schoolmates and friends in the neighbourhood. It cannot even be ignored that at least part of these same students may later have become protagonists of violence, as pointed out by literature, so that violence may continue to be part of their lives.

4.3. Social class

As indicated in the Introduction, one determinant of school success is social class. The small number of cases included in the present study and the fact that they all belonged to low-income social strata prevented effects of socioeconomic level from being observed. However, there is robust evidence that students from higher social classes perform better than those from lower classes. Caprara (2017) demonstrated this through extensive research conducted on the nationwide database of the System for the Evaluation of Basic Education (SAEB). The results show that the effects of social class on academic achievement are persistent, even though they coexist with the impact of other variables, such as schooling, individual trajectory, and of pedagogical nature ones.

4.4. Adolescence and change of school level

In the latter part of the period covered by the present research, students were approaching adolescence or had already reached this stage of development. This is a phase which is characterized by profound transformations, marked by significant advances in cognition and morality, accompanied by hormonal changes, changes in body and self-image, engagement in risky behaviours such as driving at high speed, the awakening of sexual interest, the risk of alcohol and drug abuse, and, among young people from less advantaged social classes, entry into the labour market (Belsky, 2010). All of this may, to some extent, compete with interest in school and interfere with school performance.

At this point, the presentation, even if partial and summarized of the results of a large-scale student evaluation periodically conducted by the System of School Performance Evaluation of the State of São Paulo (SARESP) (Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo, 2019) may be enlightening. It evaluates the knowledge of students of Basic Education in Portuguese and Mathematics, enrolled in state and municipal public schools and in private schools of the State.

In the latest assessment (Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo, 2019), approximately 90% of elementary school students from municipal networks participated, including that of the municipality where the research was conducted. According to the score obtained by the students, their performance is categorized into four levels: below basic, basic, adequate, and advanced. The results show that between the third and ninth grades, in both subjects matters there was an increase in the percentage of students with performance below the basic and basic levels. In the adequate and advanced levels, the trend is reversed, with a reduction in the percentage of students throughout the school years. In all cases, the percentages for the fifth and seventh grades show some variation of these two general trends (Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo, 2019, pp. 74-77).

Incidentally, students from private schools show higher results than those from public networks. In Brazil, public schools are attended by students who, for the most part, come from low-income families, while private school students come from families with higher purchasing power, with financial conditions to afford the high tuition fees, generally unaffordable for the majority of the Brazilian population. This corroborates the findings by Caprara (2017).

4.5. Psychological problems

In addition to the above considerations, there is evidence that domestic violence is associated with psychological problems, such as depression, low self-esteem, fear, and aggression, already documented in the literature, as pointed out by Corrêa and Williams (2000), which can negatively interfere with school performance. Therefore, although the

students who took part in this research were developing cognitively, which, theoretically, would enable them to learn the increasingly more complex contents of the more advanced school years and/or levels, they experienced extremely unfavorable existential and situational conditions.

5. CONCLUSION

The results and the discussion generated by the research reported here lead us to the conclusion that, as pointed out by part of the literature, domestic violence cannot be taken as an isolated cause of school performance. Further research should produce further clarifications about this relationship, including the weight of this factor in determining the dependent variable, which, in turn, is multi-determined. As we have seen, the students who participated in this research belong to low-income social classes, which has a strong determining power over their IQ, and both social class and IQ have a great influence over school performance. More than that, we saw that these students were in a very disturbed phase of development in itself, and on top of that, they witnessed scenes of domestic violence or even were victims of it. We also saw that, as some research suggests, there are chances that these same students will become protagonists of violent behavior, so that violence may become a constant in their lives. All these factors or some combination of them, and possibly others not addressed here, may be the cause of low school performance, a phenomenon that affects a significant portion of our students and of which we have a picture exemplified in the results of Secretaria da Educação do Estado de São Paulo (2019).

Although breaking the cycle of violence was not enough to positively influence students' academic performance, the results obtained by this study and the reflections motivated by it can be useful for families facing this type of problem. They may also be useful for teachers, helping them to avoid assigning students derogatory and stigmatizing labels and instead take their poor performance as a possible indicator of family problems in the absence of other limiting factors, such as learning disorders, developmental delay, etc. Above all, the phenomenon in question must be taken into consideration in the development of public policies that seek communication and integration between the educational and women's protection systems.

Finally, special care must be taken to develop teaching methods based on scientific evidence, capable of maximizing the learning potential of students, regardless of their social class or any other condition. Otherwise, a kind of "Matthew effect" (see endnote) will be produced, feeding violence, since children who grow up in violent homes tend to reproduce it in their future relationships, either as perpetrators or victims (Miranda, Paula, & Bordin, 2010), and promoting the perpetuation of social inequalities (Caprara, 2017).

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KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Matthew effect: is an expression based on a Bible passage, which reads: "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath." (Matthew, 13:12),

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