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All the Shifts: Mothering and Working in the Pandemic Era

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The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent stay-at-home order in the United States have caused families to create offices and classrooms in their homes. For many families, their children's age and school closures increased a need for parental guidance and academic aid. Recent research has investigated how families managed their children's education and adult work priorities, finding that, during the pandemic, mothers were often called upon as the primary academic aid (Miller 2020; Miller 2021; Marshall 2021;). To do so, many women had to leave positions or decrease their employment hours (Marshall 2021). While research speculates about the long-term effects of this trend that is being called the "shecession", it is also critical to explore the current challenges mothers are facing (Marshall 2021).

This research seeks to understand the current experiences of women as they navigate the workforce and occupational identity alongside pandemic-related at-home schooling. Based on interviews with 18 parents, researchers were able to hear directly about the experiences of being a parent during the pandemic. Mothers were more likely to become their children's primary academic aid and sometimes had to leave positions to do so. This employment shift often resulted in conflict with one's occupational identity and a sense of loss and disappointment. For mothers who retained their positions, managing the school work balance for their families took a significant toll on mothers' wellbeing. Alternatively, healthcare focused jobs and the duty of being essential to fighting the pandemic often prevented and/or protected mothers from leaving their position, while still creating new challenges for their families.

This research finds that three different types of work all created challenges for mothers during the pandemic through the process of managing work, family and identity. The experiences

of parents in this sample demonstrate how these conflicting priorities are exacerbated by the pandemic. This study grows the body of literature on pandemic-era motherhood as well as further explores the connections between working and identity that previous scholars have documented during other times of hardship (Norris 2021, Norris 2016). Understanding how the pandemic has impacted families and motherhood is crucial to understanding this time period as well as future periods of economic and world uncertainty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

All parenting comes with challenges. Johnston and Swanson's (2006) study details the different challenges that mothers face as they pursue employment options that align with their mothering ideologies. Using interview data from 95 American mothers, their work emphasizes the pervasiveness of Intensive Mothering Expectations (IME) in the United States (Johnston and Swanson 2006; Hays 1996). IME establishes a cultural family framework that centers children in mothers' lives and encourages intense and involved mothering (Johnston and Swanson 2006; Hays 1996). In explaining the ways different mothers fulfill their own versions of IME, Johnston and Swanson further detail the experiences of full-time working mothers, part-time working mothers and mothers with no paid employment, with particular focus on accessibility.

During a pandemic where children are always at home, accessibility becomes a more relevant issue than ever before. Johnston and Swanson then detail the unique challenges of each kind of accessibility. For stay-at-home mothers, they are perceived to be accessible to their children all of the time (Johnston and Swanson 2006:513). This constant accessibility often created difficulties for mothers as constant accessibility to children limited accessibility to other facets of one's life (Johnston and Swanson 2006:513). The feelings of limitation on other pursuits- whether for self-care or self-development- often resulted in a feeling of self-sacrifice

for stay-at-home mothers as their role prioritized the care of others and left little room for the care of themselves (Johnston and Swanson 2006:513).

Part-time working mothers felt that having boundaries around their accessibility improved their relationships with their children as well as their own feelings of patience toward children (Johnston and Swanson 2006:513). They reported that having the opportunity to work part-time provided them "a sense of balance" as well as social opportunities "'to mingle with people'" (Johnston and Swanson 2006:515). However, part-time working status did limit career progression and investment (Johnston and Swason 2006:516). Full-time working mothers struggled with wanting to be more accessible to their children and the stress of managing home and work responsibilities (Johnston and Swanson 2006:514). There is a significant burden on working mothers who also take on house care as they try to manage expectations of work, their children and home tasks (Johnston and Swanson 2006:514).

These findings mirror some experiences of the mothers in this study as they depict the familial sacrifices mothers make for their children and the ways mothers in different employment situations take responsibility for family. However, this study expands upon questions of motherhood accessibility during the pandemic era in which many schooling and workplace situations have shifted. Now, the focus is not just on the after-school hours mothers are available but also the time during the typical working day. This research provides an insight into how mothers have navigated accessibility in a new phase of work.

In addition to describing mothering ideology, research can also illuminate the experiences of working mothers and how their families' manage home work. Arlie Russell Hochschild argues that although more women are entering the workforce, their home responsibilities remain relatively traditional (Hochschild 1989). Women then have to come home from their paid

employment to take care of their home and family (Hochschild 1989). Hochschild calls this a "second shift" as it refers to the paid and unpaid labor that women are expected to do (1989). This concept details the ways that even when women work outside the home, the social pressures to be a primary caretaker once they get home persist and add more working hours to their day (Hochschild 1989).

The "second shift" reinforces traditional gender norms about women doing housework even as women progress in their paid employment. This extra labor is something that is often taken for granted and normalized as part of being a working mother. For some of the mothers in our sample, their employment status did not create a more equalized division of labor at home. It merely added to their list of responsibilities, demonstrating that Hochschild's concept from the 80s is still relevant today. Furthermore, this research focuses on how the elimination of an outside workplace impacts the second shift mothers were already dealing with.

Understanding the emotional shifts of work transitions is also crucial to studying mothers' work outcomes during the pandemic. Norris' (2021) work on identity loss in job change originated during the 2008 recession and has become once again relevant as the pandemic impacted the economy. Norris argues that jobs are not only a source of income but make up a significant piece of adult identity (2021:29). Therefore, when jobs are lost, either due to recession related layoffs or, for many mothers in this study, childcare needs, there is an identity struggle. Norris outlines this struggle in three mismatches that she observes (2021:29). Feedback mismatches impact our sense of self, both in how others perceive us as well as our self-perception. When we cannot (act) in the role of our previous identity or connect with those relevant to that piece of our identity, we lose a sense of connection (Norris 2021:29). Whether one has experienced job loss, hour reduction or simply working from home, this shift in

particular impacts most workers as the previous cues for occupational identity have often been shifted (Norris 2021:29).

Furthermore, time mismatch explains the lack of preparatory time for transition (Norris 2021:29). What makes Covid job and identity shifts particularly difficult has been the lack of notice. The pandemic moved very rapidly and businesses and schools were forced to react immediately, creating identity changes that people were not prepared for (Norris 2021:29). Finally, Norris describes a status mismatch in which the new role one takes on does not align with the societal expectations for a certain level of status (2021:29). Norris mentions specifically educated people may have a difficult time accepting unemployment as the two are often viewed as correlated (2021:29). For mothers leaving the workforce, their new unemployment may cause a mismatch between their past educational and work history and their current occupation. Ultimately, Norris' work highlights the lesser discussed difficulties of rapid and unexpected job change that many people are currently facing. This research uses Norris' foundation on occupational identity loss to specifically address the shifts that mothers are navigating due to the pandemic.

METHODS

This study is part of a broader follow-up study on parents during Covid that began in June 2020. During Summer 2020 and Winter 2021, a team of researchers interviewed 52 parents. Parents were introduced to the project through social media, flyers or emails aimed at local youth and educational organizations. Furthermore, the PI used network-based sampling to expand the list of potential participants (Small 2009). All participants resided in Central New York and had children in third, fourth, or fifth grade at the time of the first round of interviews. For this study, the principal investigator contacted previously interviewed parents so they could indicate their

interest in a follow-up interview. This project focuses on the follow-up interviews conducted with 18 of the initial 52 parents.

17 interviewed participants were mothers with 1 father participating in the study. In terms of employment, 8 parents reported working part-time, 6 reported working full-time and 4 reported no paid employment. Based on income, educational background and employment type, each participant was designated as less or more advantaged. 10 participants were sorted into the less economically advantaged group while 8 were sorted into the more economically advantaged group. All except one participant identified as white.

Follow-up interviews were conducted by four researchers, all utilizing one interview guide that asked questions about schooling, employment, contact with family and friends as well as political affairs. Interviews were conducted either via the online program Zoom or over the phone. All the interviews were then transcribed and uploaded for researchers to code in the software Dedoose. Researchers utilized the deductive method and worked with a codebook developed for the project.

FINDINGS

Navigation of Employment and Family Life

One of the most notable challenges for parents during Covid-19 has been the at-home learning models most schools in the United States put into place. As many white collar jobs moved from the office to home, most schools moved the classroom to home as well. Parents used different strategies to convert home beyond a living area, into an office and classroom. In our sample of 18 parents, mothers became the primary figures to spearhead this transition. In 88% of the families we interviewed, mothers were in charge of at-home learning with their children. While families with middle and high school aged children may be less needed for guidance,

elementary school parents were often needed to help acclimate their children to new technology and to serve as a secondary (or sometimes primary) teacher. We interviewed parents with children in this age range primarily because of the unique challenges posed and extra guidance needed in a younger remote learning environment.

Eliminated Shift

For the mothers in our study with young children who were in charge of childcare during the pandemic, sacrifices often had to be made. Several mothers had positions of employment that seemed flexible enough to balance work and home, without a global pandemic. These mothers often had roles in the education system such as substitute teacher, school lunch aid or part-time co-teacher. These jobs allowed mothers to work when their children were at school. These jobs were often coordinated around what worked best for the mother. However, during the pandemic, these seemingly flexible jobs often did not remain flexible in a remote environment or during the school day. To take care of their children, six moms in our sample either reduced their hours or stopped working in their role completely, while fathers remained steadily employed. While this was sometimes a welcome change, many mothers mourned the loss of their jobs and saw this choice as a sacrifice for their children. One mother, Barbara shared her experience, "I had three different jobs that I was doing part-time in between where the kids went to school and then the pandemic happened and it all went away and I became the stay at home mom again. And so I just kind of feel like my life, just whatever I do just completely hinges on what my kids need. Which I suppose is how it should be, but at the same time, as they get older, they get more little attitudes. And so it's not like they're particularly grateful for the sacrifices I make." For her, quitting the job felt necessary for her kid's education but also felt like a sacrifice that she, in her

parenting role, was the one who had to make it. While flexibility allowed her some career time (and socialization), the pandemic and her family set up ultimately limited her career options.

These in-person flexible roles also often did not offer remote flexibility or job security. Melissa had to resign from her position because the position was in-person. She recalled that "So I can't do my job and be home with my kids to school them at the same time. So, um, this month is actually my last month of employment." She would not be able to manage her family's remote learning while away from her young (and at-Covid risk) children. As Covid shifted her family's needs, her previously compatible employment no longer suited this mother's home responsibilities in remote learning. As other parents are looking to resume their flexible employment as children return to school, the lack of job security in flexible jobs looms. Another mother, Amy shared her concern that the position she had been working in might even be eliminated completely by the school. In response to whether she would be working in the Fall of 2021, she said, "You know what, I do not know, there is a lot of 'ifs' out there, I am not even sure if they will have my position." Similar to families, schools are also reevaluating their needs and some of the jobs that have provided mothers flexibility may no longer be available to them.

A further consideration of mother's ownership of at-home learning is what makes women become responsible for this task. Multiple mothers reported that their job was put to the side instead of their partners' because of the partner's higher income. Due to the financial significance of a partner's job, some mothers had to sacrifice the personal fulfillment they found in their occupation to care for their children. This often resulted in major change for one partner and not the other. Brenda described this, "And um, so nothing changed for him at all. And I'm not gonna lie, like I was resentful of that. It seems like everything stays the same for him. And, you know, I, I'm always the one that has to give up, you know, my job or whatever it is. That's

just how it works. He makes more money than me, and he'd been at this job way longer, so you know, it's me that has to make the sacrifice and I understand it and he understands it, but at the same time, we are a little bit resentful, and it's not fun, but, so his life has stayed the same." In this case, and as we heard from other respondents as well, the partner's income gave them more autonomy over their work choices whereas the other partner was seen as able to pause or stop their employment readily for their children.

Remote Work and the Second Shift

In addition to working, many mothers who remained employed took over the learning in their families. In our sample, seven mothers worked a "second shift" (Hochschild 1989). This was particularly salient for mothers' working remotely as all of their work moved to one physical location, which tested the boundaries of work and home that had previously existed. For example, Jennifer, a high school teacher ended up teaching her district students as well as spearheading her own children's educational experience at home. Despite her full-time employment, in an occupation that faced incredible challenges during the pandemic, her responsibilities extended beyond the paid workday to a second shift of family work. She explained that the classes were overwhelming, saying "It's so bad. Basically I do 28 classes a day...All day long, if I really multiply my kids and my own." Because of the excessive workload, Jennifer reported working for over 13 hours a day and limiting sleep to fit this schedule. Her full-time employment did not prevent her from taking on the burden of children's learning, as her partner worked full-time as well.

Lydia, a personal assistant who worked remotely, dealt with a similar double load of work as she was also the parent that her children came to with school questions. While facing a different type of workload than Jennifer, Lydia mentioned the conflicts between her mothering

and paid employment. As Lydia worked in one area of her home, her children would regularly come to her with questions. She describes, "So it would take me longer to do what I needed to do because it's constantly being interrupted." Lydia reported her and her husband's household labor as relatively equal. However, when it came to school questions, Lydia's children often went to her and did so during her work day. Lydia was managing not only her paid employment and mothering but doing so at the same time due to staying at home.

The extra burden of home work was not something only Lydia and Jennifer experienced. Megan, a leadership program coordinator, found that maintaining the balance in her home also fell on her shoulders. Her husband's employment in financial services was often prioritized and so she took on the responsibilities to manage the home. She recalls, "He had his job and then I had the rest. Keeping that balance was definitely on me." Despite having her own employment, Megan's workload increased to accommodate her husband's career. These additional responsibilities were difficult to manage, limited time mothers had for themselves and also made it difficult for mothers to do their own work.

Ultimately, mother's either had an eliminated shift or a second shift, both of which heavily relied on their time, attention and energy. Furthermore, both shift concepts frequently asked the mother's to sacrifice something. For the eliminated shift mothers, they gave up their autonomy outside of the home to be accessible as well as their personal investment in their career. For the second shift mothers, they took on the additional responsibility of their children's education as they navigated their competing paid and unpaid work.

Healthcare and Essential Work

Because of the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, healthcare workers were deemed essential as hospitals and medical centers were overwhelmed with Covid patients. In our sample

of 18 parents, two were healthcare workers- one a nurse and another an optometrist. As other mothers had to reduce their working hours, healthcare worker parents often had to greatly increase their working hours as they were on the front-lines. Regardless of income compared to a partner, these parents' jobs were particularly valued during this time period, both on a societal and familial level. Their work was seen as incredibly critical, even if the families found difficulty with childcare. The pandemic eliminated this career as a "backup" should the parents be needed for children's education. The necessity of work then led parents to find alternative solutions for childcare, even if it was not their optimal choice.

One such situation was Heather, a nurse with two children. Her husband worked as a carpentry instructor. Both her and her husband's jobs required in-person employment. Given her status as a nurse at a hospital during the pandemic, this was particularly salient. Her shifts were 12 hours and changed on a weekly basis. Given that her schedule was not set, it provided difficulty to plan in advance alongside shifting school schedules. While not ideal, Heather's children sometimes had to stay home by themselves during their hybrid and remote school schedules. She described the situation, "There were a couple days that the younger one was home alone all day because 'cause we just didn't have anybody else, we don't have family here, it's just us. So, we couldn't do anything else, but she got through it. We got through it." (5001B) Unlike the eliminated shift parents, Heather as a healthcare worker felt she had no alternative in the situation and viewed it as something that the family worked through together. For eliminated shift mothers, their interviews reflected feelings of being the only one to sacrifice and make change. For healthcare families, there was sacrifice on multiple ends as both parents and children had to deal with a lack of parental accessibility.

For healthcare workers deemed non-essential, their status similarly protected their access to work. One parent, Patricia, shared that her optometry office closed in-person from March 2020 to May 2020 as they implemented further safety precautions. Because of this, both Patricia and her husband were at home with payroll protection. While they both went back to work (with significant risk) upon their office reopening, their jobs were secured as they were provided some flexibility at home during a transitional period.

Ultimately, the status of health-care work eliminated the possibility of mothers being forced to reduce their work hours to provide childcare for their children. At the same time, these parents were taking on significant risk in order to help their communities. They also had to approach childcare with more flexibility, often relying on outside help or their children's independence while they worked in-person. These sacrifices were more shared through the family as both parents and children dealt with new difficulties around parent guidance.

Identity Consequences of Pandemic Induced Shifts in Employment

Working provides a source of income that allows increased financial stability and the ability to use money to take care of oneself and family. According to a study on American perception of jobs, just under half of employed Americans view their job simply as a source of providing money (Pew Research Center 2016). However, that leaves a significant portion of employed Americans who view their job beyond just money. Given this population and how much of our lives are dedicated to work, it is important to understand what makes people inclined to work beyond the financial benefits. Within this particular study, understanding why work is meaningful also sheds light on the sacrifice and feeling behind so many women reducing their working hours to help their children with school. Identity and socialization were two major themes of the conversations with mothers who had to leave their employment due to pandemic

school closures. However, working parents also experienced identity shifts due to physical work location or a new sense of urgency.

Eliminated Shift Identity Struggles

Leaving employment to stay home with children during the pandemic created a financial strain for some parents. However, even mothers whose reduced employment did not pose significant financial repercussions felt conflicted about their employment shift. Mothers Melissa and Brenda both expressed their disappointment with not being able to work. Melissa described her family's decision, "So I guess I feel grateful that we, our family, is in a position where I can resign from my job, and we're still able to pay a mortgage and put food on the table. So I recognize my privilege in that and that not everyone has that… those same… those same privileges. But, it stinks [laughs]." For Melissa, while she did feel lucky that her partner was able to financially support the family without her income, she also experienced disappointment about losing the meaningful work she was doing in helping others.

Losing this work provided a transition in not only work routine but also in identity. The disappointment expressed when Melissa said "it stinks" indicates her negative emotions around the job she's leaving behind. As she acknowledges, this is not a financial issue but a loss of something she cares about. Because she was committed to and interested in her job, an identity associated with that job forms. It is also something that makes it difficult for her to leave.

A primary way this sense of identity around work seems to form is through the outside purpose that working provides. Jobs offer a chance to do something new and to directly impact others beyond one's own family. So, the feeling of being needed and useful in a new environment can be very formative to one's identity. For Brenda, a mother who had to give up her employment, she felt like she was losing part of her purpose. She describes, "I was excited about it because I just was looking for something else to do. Like, I just felt like, you know, I like

felt kind of like I didn't really have a purpose. Like obviously as a mom, you know, you have a purpose, but like, I just wanted something more than that like it needs my brain and help me feel like useful." For Brenda, her job represented an opportunity to utilize her skills in a different way than parenting and to feel included in a broader effort. As Brenda says, this was exciting to her and so transitioning her employment meant giving up something beyond a job. It meant giving up a unique sense of purpose and identity.

Therefore, when mothers are forced by extenuating circumstances to leave their positions, there is an often unacknowledged layer of meaning they've associated with their job. They leave behind a piece of their identity and something they find purposeful and meaningful. This is also sometimes a piece of their transition that is not understood by their partner, who is able to continue their employment and preserve their work-related identity and purpose. Ultimately, the sense of purpose and identity that women invest in their jobs and that many have sacrificed due to Covid represents a significant change and often disappointment for mothers.

Socialization.

In addition to providing parents with a new sense of identity and purpose, working also offered new opportunities for connection. For stay-at-home mothers in particular, much of their day is spent with their children. Those relationships are extremely important and so are friendships and relationships with adults. The difference between socializing with children and adults is significant and it is something different that a workplace provides. Because employees are collaborating and sharing a common interest, work can create friendships and will create interaction with new people.

For Barbara, a pandemic era stay-at-home mom who had previously been employed, the connections at work were a loss when she paused working. She recalls, "And so it

was nice to actually have some coworkers that didn't revolve around the ages of their kids being the same age as my kids. So, yeah." Previously, Barbara and her children would spend time with other mothers and their children in their community. However, she described that these social events would only occur based on the children's schedules. Work provided Barbara a social opportunity that she did not have before. She could connect with adults about a shared interest and experience in their work environment.

Other parents shared similar feelings about leaving behind not only their job responsibilities, but their coworkers as well. Melissa shared that part of her disappointment in leaving her position was leaving her community at work. She shares that, "I enjoy the people I work with." Whether it is leaving friends or just adult interaction, leaving a position is not only a logistical but a social transition that affects parents. This is particularly relevant when parents are leaving positions during a pandemic when socializing was more difficult than ever. Understanding the bonds and ties that make work meaningful and collaborative also contributes to the fuller picture of what many mothers have given up during the pandemic.

Stay-at-home parents reported that even when connecting with adults, those connections were often formed from their children's schooling and activities. Social lives were just another aspect that the children heavily influenced. Work may not seem like the ideal environment for socialization, however, connection is a human desire and it can provide an outlet for parents to interact with other adults who don't know their children. Furthermore, this type of removal from family socialization may also contribute to the sense of identity people feel at work as they interact with people in a new role that gives them an identity other than parent.

Remote Workers

For second shift mothers, their struggles with managing home and work were often normalized as part of their working mother identity. Despite reports of little sleep, regular interruption and prioritization of others, there was not significant complaint about this lifestyle. The lack of explanation about extensive working and long hours indicates that this is not abnormal for these mothers. They have normalized the amount of work they contribute to their families and the balancing act of work and home have become a central part of their working mother identity. However, for the second shift remote workers, work and home are now one location which blurs any previous physical indicators of paid and unpaid work, normalizing the challenges of balance further.

Healthcare Workers

While some mothers had to alter their jobs for their families, others were called on more than ever. For essential and healthcare workers, their work experience during covid differed from the mothers we interviewed who had to reduce their work hours in order to provide at-home learning for their children. Contrasting with the experience of eliminated shift parents, who worried about their job security or return, healthcare parents were deemed essential, providing them with a sense of duty at work and an identity with urgency. That sense of duty caused front-line workers to take health risks as they worked with patients and faced potential exposure to Covid-19, for the benefit of society. Their dedication to helping their community through the pandemic demonstrates how important willingness to help is for healthcare workers' occupational identity. It may even be this purpose that helped healthcare workers through the challenges of being away from home.

Discussion

With mothers at the forefront of family life during the pandemic, it is necessary to share and understand their experiences of employment, family life and identity during this ever-changing time (Miller 2020). While research has been able to document mothers' reduced employment and increased responsibility, there is not yet much literature on the day to day experiences of this population (Miller 2020; Marshall 2021). Similarly, while research on mothering expectations and the second shift has illuminated the realities of motherhood, they cannot fully encapsulate the changing circumstances of the pandemic era (Hays 1996; Hochschild 1989; Johnston and Swanson 2006). This study seeks to combine the circumstances of pandemic and stay-at-home orders with the gendered nature of paid and unpaid employment for mothers. The research teams' interviews provided a window into the inner workings of 18 family lives.

While each family managed this time period differently, this research finds that mothers primarily take on their family's challenges, albeit in different ways based on their employment. For mothers whose jobs were eliminated, either due to recession or need for childcare, their work as primary academic aid often was seen as a sacrifice. These mothers gave up a new purpose and an identity that their outside work provided them and created a sense of loss that their families may not fully understand. For mothers working remotely, at-home schooling caused extra responsibility during the working day as mothers had to manage children and often the household's function to support an employed spouse. This prioritization of family and other's success in school and work left little time for these mothers to take care of themselves. Finally, essential healthcare workers had to navigate working outside the home and manage childcare as a family responsibility due to a sense of duty to one's community. Regardless, the normalization

of work as part of identity was present throughout each mother's experience and all mothers had difficult decisions to make about their family lives.

These findings expand upon earlier works regarding motherhood and employment. The differing priorities of mothers based on employment echoes the challenges Johnston and Swanson explored, although during an era of particular and new challenge in America (2006). Even as most people worked from home, the devotion of mothers to family did not waiver and being at home did not eliminate gender variations in family responsibility (Hochschild 1989; Johnston and Swanson 2006). Furthermore, Norris' work on occupational identity focused on all employees whereas this study examines the challenges of occupational identity specifically within mothers (2021). How non-working, remote working and essential working mothers all created and either maintained or shifted their occupational identities creates new insights on how occupational identity affects the lives and decisions of adults.

Ultimately, this study provides new insight into past works and furthers current research on mothering experiences during covid. This sample is geographically based and future research could increase generalizability by researching the experiences of mothers nationwide and even internationally. In addition, research could compare mothers of different age ranges to better understand how age and need might impact mothers' employment outcomes. Finally, given that the pandemic is continuing to evolve, further follow-up research should be conducted to understand new situations and the lasting impacts of Covid-19 on how mothers navigate work and family. The pandemic has introduced what many are calling a "new normal" and understanding as many parenting experiences as possible can help construct what this future looks like as well as how we can shape it for better gender equality.

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