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## **Aggression from a gender perspective and the development of a moral compass**

**ABSTRACT.** It is often claimed that the world in which we live is full of cruelty, ruthlessness and violence. Media reports on violence among students often paint a bleak picture of teachers and the school environment struggling to cope with manifestations of aggression among young people. We questioned whether the absence of the internalisation of moral norms or as this paper will refer to it a 'moral compass'. Numerous studies confirm associations between aggression and moral disengagement (Arsenio et al., 2006; Tisak, Tisak & Goldstein, 2006; Paciello et al. 2008; Krettenauer et al., 2008) and these media reports and research confirm that aggression is not just the domain of men (Krahe, 2005; Card et al., 2008; Bjorkqvist, 2017). Is there a difference between genders? Throughout the ages, there have been debates about gender differences in morality from Aristotle to Aquinas to Freud, but the study of female aggression as a phenomenon has only relatively recently begun to receive due attention (Bjorkqvist, 1994, p. 180). It should be noted that social patterns predispose women to the role of victims, while men act as perpetrators of violence.

**KEYWORDS:** aggression, gender, development, morality

### **Introduction (News story)**

Such a news story, which reported on an incident at the school in Poland recently (2017), prompted me to examine and reflect on this topic. In the incident, *two **girls** beat their schoolmate in front of other students outside the school building—interestingly, none of the students watching intervened, most observers cheered on the aggressive girls, while the rest*

*filmed the violence on their phones*. We deliberately use italics here to emphasise the point that acts of violent aggression, contrary to accepted views, are not solely restricted to the male domain.

Something we have discovered, through working at the Jubilee Centre, is that wilful aggression and the lack of a moral compass coexist with each other. Therefore, a question arises as to whether the girl's behaviour in the media report can be traced to the absence of an internalised moral compass. Aggression is in direct opposition to values such as building interpersonal relationships or respecting the natural right of everyone to self-determine. Interestingly, in recent years more attention has been devoted to examining the relationship between moral thinking, or in this case the development of a moral compass, and aggressive affirmation, raising the question for many scholars of whether a link exists between a tendency towards aggressive behaviour and an individual's level of moral development.

### **Aggressive behaviour**

A human being from birth to death is surrounded by other people, always interfering and arranging himself among others (Sztompka, 2007). From the theory of socialisation, the world that people share with others is what shapes and modifies their behaviours and personality properties at a time and in the future (Harris, 1998).

Nowadays we have many definitions of aggression. One of them has been defined as *a category of behaviour that causes or threatens physical harm to others* (Loeber & Hay, 1997, p. 373). Today, many theories attempt to explain aggressive behaviour. These can be reduced to three main theoretical assumptions:

- The theory of instinct, which presents aggression as an innate behaviour, determined by the biological need to unleash aggressive energy (Freud & Lorenz, 1966).
- The frustration-aggression theory, which maintains that all aggression is the result of frustration and that this frustration gives rise prone to aggression (Dollard et al., 1939; Buss, 1963; Harris, 1974; Leyens & Parke, 1975; Berkowitz, 1989).
- The social learning theory, which states that aggression is the result of learning through instrumental conditioning and modelling (Bandura, 1977; 2001).

Social learning theory is fascinating. That is, children learn social behaviour such as aggression through the process of observation learning—through watching the behaviour of another person. We can see this in the famous Bobo doll experiment (Bandura, 1961). This study has important implications for the effects of media violence on children. An important factor in the development of aggression may be the amount of violence that children and young people are exposed to on television, which acts as a model of behaviour. Unfortunately, even in many TV programmes, games and cartoons aimed at young children, there is already more aggression than positive examples and the constant exposure of the child to acts of beating and killing may lead to an indifference towards human suffering and a distortion of their moral compass

Moreover, in the case of aggressive young people, the problem may also lie within the family environment. For example, in one instance, where parents were asked by the media as to why their child behaved in a particular way, the father responded by giving them the ‘middle finger’. Such conduct is demonstrative of some parents’ attitude and lack of concern towards their child’s hostile behaviour.

Interestingly, Rita C. Ramos (2013, p. 442) has pointed out that ‘several empirical studies considered aggression to be of negative connotation. However, in one of them (Farmer, 2007) it has been categorised into good, bad and ordinary which suggests that aggression has a hierarchical implication. Often the word ‘aggression’ has been used to denote pessimistic behaviours’. Also, a comprehensive, integrative, framework for understanding aggression is The General Aggression Model (GAM) (DeWall & Anderson, 2011; Allen & Anderson, 2017). This Model considers the role of social, cognitive, developmental, and biological factors on aggression and includes many domain-specific theories of aggression, including cognitive neoassociation theory, social learning theory, script theory, excitation transfer theory, and social interaction theory (Allen et al. 2017, p. 75). However, as emphasised by its authors, there is a need for additional research to further develop GAM as a comprehensive model of human aggression and violence (Allen et al., 2017, p. 78)

In the context of gender issues, three different styles of aggressive behaviour have been identified: physical aggression, direct verbal aggression, and indirect aggression (Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Bjorkqvist, 1992). While the first two are easily understandable, it is worth men-

tioning the definition of indirect aggression which was conceptualised as social manipulation with the intention to harm the target person psychologically and socially (Bjorkqvist, 2017, p. 39).

Noel A. Card and his colleagues in 2008 conducted a meta-analytic review of 148 studies on gender differences in child and adolescent direct and indirect aggression. They found that gender differences were almost absent. Therefore, indirect aggression is not a 'female' aggression and asked themselves why the misperception that girls are more indirectly aggressive than boys is so pervasive. However, direct aggression has been confirmed to be more common in boys. Regardless of the proportions of total aggression scores in Bjorkqvist's studies, gender specific preferences were found: while boys used proportionally more physical aggressive than girls, girls used more indirect aggression. As the results of the above research shows, the problem of aggression in the gender perspective is the field of discussion. The analysis of the above results cannot be separated from the cultural context, the accepted methodology and the research group.

### **Gender perspective**

Having undertaken a literature review, we have found that the relationship between gender and aggression is still considered an open question despite lots of research having been conducted in this field (Krahe, 2005; Card et al., 2008; Cappele, 2013; Bjorkqvist, 2017). As stressed by Noel Card et al. (2008), historically speaking, the research on aggression among young people (but not exclusively) has been focused more on boys than on girls, because males are more aggressive than females. What Card observes (Card et al., 2008, p. 1185) is that in Bjorkqvist's analysis (1994) 'some studies have not included girls in their samples, and even studies that include boys and girls have not always analysed the potential for gender differences'. It was because 'women are so seldom aggressive, that female aggression is not worth the trouble to study' (Bjorkqvist, 1994, p. 177).

Social normalities predispose women to the role of victims and men to the role of perpetrators. The problem of violence against men raises extreme emotions because it contradicts the common stereotype of a man to whom attributes such as power and domination are accorded. You can say that there is some public tolerance of aggressive behaviours

in boys and men that testify to their strength, and similar behaviours are stigmatised and unacceptable in girls and women (Chylewska-Barakat, 2002). Furthermore, according to Luci and Baenninger, aggressive behaviour is interpreted differently by the public as signs of various internal states, depending on who shows them—aggressive behaviours in women are perceived as symptoms of hysteria, and mental breakdown, the same behaviour manifested by man is a display of strength. It is related to the perception of women's behaviour according to prevailing stereotypes and the underestimation of women's aggression potential (Luci & Baenninger, 1991). After analysing the media reports, it is evident that the journalists are reporting the events of violent cases in which women were involved more often than men, presenting them as persons with emotional problems or mental illness (Wozniakowska-Fajst, 2010). Desperak also noted that women are often 'monsterized' in the mass media. Female perpetrators are portrayed in the press as monsters, whose deeds are displayed as extremely pathological and impossible to explain or justify. According to the researcher, women engaged in murder are often referred to as cold manipulators, while men, in this case, are passive in their hands (Desperak, 2011).

However, in most cases, gender stereotypes and traits attributed to femininity in our culture increase the risk of the stereotype of a woman as a victim and a perpetrator at the same time, or a perpetrator that has been shaped by the conditions of life (Kowalczyk & Summer, 2016). Such colloquial, stereotypical approaches make it difficult for a man—a victim exposing the violence. It under-estimates the statistics and reduces the problem in the eyes of the public. Violence against men is not well-researched, making it difficult to develop appropriate supportive and therapeutic programs (Makara-Studzińska & Madej, 2015). In the meantime, research has shown that women are equally inclined to aggression and violence (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015; Carmo, Grams & Magalhaes, 2011). The most commonly used forms of violence are physical (pushing, kicking, scratching, or punching), and psychological: name-calling, ignoring or harassment (Carmo, Grams & Magalhaes 2011; Drijber, Reijnders & Ceelen, 2013). Due to the way of socialisation, women have more advanced social competencies, and consequently, the violence they employ can take on a more sophisticated form. These include behaviours such as public mockery, humiliation, showing contempt, blame, where the emotional charge is hidden, and the level of damage depends on the context in which they are manifested (Korpolewska, 2014).

Some philosophers have pointed to the fact that there are things that women cannot perceive or achieve, and there are things that only men can see and attain. Conversely, Carol Gilligan (1982) reversed that perspective and asked whether it is women that notice something that man cannot see. She claimed men think abstractly and believe in logic and their strength, while women think more instinctively and intuitively. Women also concentrate less on understanding the laws and rules and attempt to understand responsibility for others in certain specific conditions. Whereas men feel responsible for stopping aggression and the will to dominate, women take a more caring approach, which is related to the belief that 'others are counting on you.'

Many people become aggressive or passive in the process of shaping their identity, among other things through parents, education, society, by existing patterns of sociocultural gender (Dziutok et al., 2010, p. 9), as referred in previous scientific theories. What's more, Barbara Krahe (2005, p. 540), citing Eagly and Wood (1999) notes that 'the social role model posits that gender differences in aggression are the result of an individual's social learning experiences. They are rooted in differential gender role socialisation, which rewards males for being assertive and dominant and females for being caring and submissive'.

### **An aggressive woman**

It would be wrong to say that aggression is a solely educated behaviour. Reasons for aggressive and violent behaviour in women can be ascribed to biological factors; however it is a relatively small number of women. For example temporal lobe epilepsy that causes an intermittent explosive disorder characterised by an inability to control anger and a definite mood change leading to acts of violence. Behavioural changes and violence are associated with electrical discharge in the temporal lobe. They make the limbic system unable to stop the sudden mood change that follows a series of releases. There are no seizures unlike in epilepsy. Changing attitude can take the form of a brutal attack of anger and aggression and even end with assault or rape (Bodzon, 2013).

In the theories of sociobiological determinants, aggression is also sought in changes of the hormonal system. In the case of women hormonal changes associated with Menstrual Syndrome (LLPDD) may become relevant. Estimated 3–4% of women are affected (Bodzon, 2013). LLPDD

is characterised by cyclical attacks of aggression, which can even take violent forms. Progesterone and oestrogen deficiency cause PMS. In addition to fluctuations in hormone levels; it has been observed that blood sugar changes just before the onset of menstruation. In combination with the decrease in progesterone, it results in an increase in adrenaline production in the body. It can lead to attacks of unbridled aggression (Bodzón, 2013). Menstruation, for instance, already in the nineteenth century became associated with behaviours such as delusions, quarrels, jealousy, nymphomania, binge drinking, pyromania, maniacal murder, or delirium. However, the strongest relationship with menstrual periods was with kleptomania. Dalton interviewed 156 prisoners and analysed prison reports and found that 49% of the crimes they committed had been committed before or during menstruation. These were mainly thefts (56%) and cases of prostitution (44%). Again Ellis and Austin, who also studied the prisoners, said that during the menstrual period participants in the study tended to be more aggressive towards the environment than on other days of the month. Psychologists believe that menstruation is stressful and reduces the psychophysical resistance of a woman's body and affecting the level of coping with a difficult situation (Dalton, 1990; Cabalski, 2014).

Another period in a woman's life when her hormonal balance undergoes an intense transformation is pregnancy and childbirth. The delivery of a child is described as something of a psychological crisis. Women are then more impulsive and self-absorbed, and their self-defence mechanisms are weakened (Wilkowska, 2015). Disorders in the emotional sphere are accompanied by changes in the sphere of consciousness, causing some pregnant women to be more prone to theft, child abuse and infanticide. It is reflected in the legislation of some countries i.e. Sweden and Estonia, where infanticide is a privileged type of offence. It is currently under discussion whether the impact of childbirth on the woman's psyche is so significant that killing the new-born should be treated in a different way, or whether it is a crime committed primarily for social reasons (difficult economic situation, lack of partner) (Grudzien, 2012).

Another example is a menopause. A menstrual cessation begins on average in women around the age of 50. This results in a decrease in oestrogen levels, causing changes in the neuroendocrine system, regulating the brain functions responsible for mood and behaviour. The excessive excitability of menopause causes some women to behave aggressively or defensively in contact with other people (Cabalski, 2014).

When looking at the biological basis of aggression, genes influence was also analysed. The genes of antisocial behaviour in twins raised separately show that it is not possible to talk about the inheritance of individual attitudes and behaviours (i.e. criminal behaviour). Although, according to Harris, hostile parents are more likely to have aggressive children due to inheriting aggression in genes. Genetic research has not shown any difference between women and men in this regard (Cabalski, 2014).

It should be noted that aggressive behaviours associated with menstruation, pregnancy or menopause affect a relatively small number of women; however, the perception of the effects of physiological cycles on women's tendency to be aggressive and violent has inspired criminologists to study the effects of periodic hormonal changes in women.

It is interesting that in many former legal systems these concepts were reflected, and a woman, who, at the time of committing the crime, for example, was menstruating, could count on acquittal or leniency by the court (Dalton, 1990). Her biology gave her a privileged position in this respect. Similar justice practices have never been observed about male hormone disorders. Although the results of many studies confirm that there is a cause and effect relationship between biological factors and the aggression of women, the effect of hormones on behaviour was, however, considered relatively weak. Social or psychological factors were more important. However, the physiological basis of aggression in the body was not entirely excluded.

### **Evolutionary concepts explaining aggressive behaviour in women**

Evolutionary psychology suggests an interesting understanding of aggression. It is believed that the psyche of man, biologically defined, can be understood by reference to the process of adaptation. Psychological mechanisms responsible for aggressive behaviour are triggered by a particular adaptive problem and are dependent on the cost-benefit analysis.

Here are two hypotheses that explain the aggressive behaviour of women in an interesting way. The first is *Hypothesis of raising rivals' costs*. It refers to cases of aggression of women against other women. Aggression is linked to rivalry for sexual partners. Acts directed against



another woman are the result of competing for the most valuable male—the future or current sexual partner. Aggressive behaviours are designed to bring rivalries; these are the most common triggers: mockery, gossip, deprecation, avoidance, revenge by making contacts and friendship with others, and fighting.

Many factors increase women's aggression towards women and condition it. Firstly, the age. Young women fight more often than older ones. Men's preferences for youth determine the tendency of women to behave aggressively; the chances of finding a partner are closely related to their age. The woman is most attractive to a man between the ages of 15 and 25. The second factor is the ratio of the number of women to men in each area. There is a higher rivalry, where the number of women per man is greater. If there are few men in a 'field', they become desirable, and women are fighting for a temporary affair with their resources at that time. Another reason for the aggression of women towards women is the envy of more physically attractive competitors or girls who have already matured, who have a better chance of choosing an attractive partner and longer reproductive careers. The macro structural factor is unemployment and poverty, which causes women from lower classes to seek out social partners from the higher levels, which generates rivalry with elite women. In this concept, aggressive behaviour of women promotes reproductive success and increases the chances of gene transfer to future generations. The two most common tactics of deprecating a competitor are attributing her promiscuity and indicating defects in beauty. Both ways are beneficial, as they strike a sensitive point of male expectations towards a constant partner (Buss, 2003).

The second theory concerns aggression used by women in a fight for a place in the hierarchy and the deterrence of potential aggressors. The acts of aggression or aggressive behaviour can be a tool to achieve a better position in a given group, respect or authority. The background of aggression is thus related to power and influence. Until now, such behaviour has been attributed primarily to men; but in current society, social prestige is increasingly becoming a value for women. Aggression serves an adaptive function of improving social position, especially in those areas of social life that are still dominated by men. In this situation, the competition between women is even more intense. Aggressive behaviours also act as a deterrent to potential competitors competing for our goods. Aggression can be used to maintain the status quo—reputation or access to resources. In many societies, men earn more

than females and therefore women carefully watch their “territory” (Stadnik, 2014).

In conclusion, aggression in women can be used to solve an adaptive problem of optimising partner selection and access to resources. On the other hand, it could also evolve as a defence mechanism against attacks by others. Of particular note is that the evolutionary paradigm as a theoretical construct envisages various styles of aggression based on sex and concerning the role played by the sex. It also works regarding applicability to understand aggression in situations related to the realisation of sexual and reproductive needs. However, it seems that with the increase in employment and the independence of women, these hypotheses may lose its importance. It is impossible to consider the significance of specific behaviours only in the context of biological evolution, in isolation from intensively changing cultural changes, especially within the social roles of women.

### **Character Education and Morality**

When returning to the fascinating relationship between morality and aggressive behaviour, it's particularly noteworthy to mention those theories explaining aggression as a result of specific characteristics in the processing of social information—which is related to the development of moral thinking or as outlined in this paper the formation of an a moral compass. It is believed that experiencing unfriendly relationships in the social and family environment during childhood may lead to the elaboration of a perception of the world as hostile and threatening to the individual (Krahe, 2005), which, in turn, can result in aggressive behaviour. As Emma Palmer and Asia Begum (2006) point out, moral reasoning can be one of the elements in which to understand aggressive behaviours, and a lack of moral understanding would undoubtedly contribute to a dam of ubiquitous aggression among the adolescent.

Reverting to the previously-posed question about whether a lack of internalised moral compass may allow for aggression against another person, there is certainly evidence to support the claim that a link exists between the tendency for aggressive behaviour and level of moral development. However, we do need to be cautious here; as Stanislaw Wojtowicz emphasises, ‘It is not always easy to distinguish situations in

which morality makes us not choose aggression from the situations when we refrain from using it for economic reasons’.

It is worth mentioning the latest *Framework for Character Education in Schools* by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2017)<sup>1</sup> at the University of Birmingham. The revised Framework explains the Jubilee Centre’s outline of character education from an Aristotelian viewpoint. It contains a comprehensive breakdown of what character education is and what it is not whilst highlighting the ‘Components of Virtue’—which if cultivated successfully will likely lead to an individual mastering that specific character virtue. The Components of Virtue consist of:

- A—Virtue Perception
- B—Virtue Knowledge and Understanding
- C—Virtue Emotion
- D—Virtue Identity
- E—Virtue Motivation
- F—Virtue Reasoning
- G—Virtue Action and Practice

It is very rare for all of these components to align perfectly and individuals may be stronger in different components for different virtues but ultimately the aim is for one to act virtuously. This can be seen most commonly in component G—Virtue Action and Practice. Virtue Action and Practice is defined as doing the right thing in the right way.

The Framework contains a Neo-Aristotelian Model of Moral Development which attempts to demonstrate the pathways to Virtue Action and Practice. The Model foregrounds the importance of early family upbringing, although it does not exclude the adjustment of negative moral traits formed in early childhood. To continue down the path of moral development via internalised virtuous habits and full autonomous virtue, one must have been exposed to and have begun developing moral habits during their upbringing which, subsequently, with the aid of Virtue Knowledge and Understanding, will lead to moral habituation and

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<sup>1</sup> Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2017) *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, [Online]. Available from: <http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Framework%20for%20Character%20Education.pdf>. [Accessed: 20.08.2017]. The *Framework for Character Education in Schools* sets out the Jubilee Centre’s position on character education and calls for all schools to be explicit about how they develop the character virtues of their students. It has been disseminated to over 9000 UK schools and worldwide.

critical reflection. This is not to say that an individual who is not exposed to positive moral habits cannot progress to Virtue Action and Practice, they can but their path will take a different route consisting of more practical habituation and self-regulation.

This Aristotelian model further explains that the flourishing of an individual and society is the ultimate aim of life. By developing a series of intellectual, civic, performance and importantly moral character virtues an individual can begin to develop practical wisdom—an intellectual virtue the ancient Greeks called *phronesis*. This enables the individual to know what to do and what to want when one or more of the virtues collide and to therefore put this knowledge into an acceptable course of action. Practical wisdom, often referred to as the meta-virtue, forms part of all of the other virtues and enables deliberation, well founded judgement, open-mindedness, foresight and the ability to learn from experiences.

We can already begin to see a correlation between the character of an individual and their development of a moral compass. Research suggests that children and adults live and learn better with good moral character (Arthur et al., 2015a; 2015b). There is a growing consensus that virtues which contribute to good moral character are part of the solution to many of the challenges facing society today (Arthur et al., 2015a). The development of such moral virtues as, courage, honesty, humility, integrity, justice and respect will contribute towards aggression or the lack of and the meta-virtue of practical wisdom will equally have a large role to play on how an individual perceives and acts in situations where aggression may be a possible consequence. Therefore a moral education in the form of character education is a vital element when discussing one's development of a moral compass and therefore their tendency of aggression.

In regards to character education in the UK, a survey conducted by the Jubilee Centre has shown that 84% of UK parents believe that teachers should encourage good morals and values in their students (Jubilee Centre, 2013). Throughout Jubilee Centre teaching resources, such as *Knightly Virtues* (Arthur et al., 2014) and *Teaching Character Through the Primary Curriculum* (Fullard, 2016)—which have been extensively and successfully trialled with pupils in the UK—we can see how 'Virtue Literacy' (which consists of three inter-related components) is greatly important in the development of a morally virtuous individual and may be connected to aggression. Virtue Literacy consists of:

- a) Virtue Perception—Noticing situations involving or standing in need of the virtues
- b) Virtue Knowledge & Understanding—Understanding the meaning of the virtue term and why the virtue is necessary, individually and as part of a well-rounded, flourishing life of overall virtue, and being able to apply this attribute to episodes of one's own and others' lives
- c) Virtue Reasoning—Discernment and deliberative action about virtues, including in situations where they conflict or collide.

The first component is concerned with noticing situations standing in need of virtues. The second part involves acquiring a sophisticated virtue language usage through familiarity with virtue terms. However, knowledge of the virtues themselves will not necessarily change behaviour. The third component concerns making reasoned judgements which include the ability to explain differences in moral situations. All are key components of one's moral compass.

The need for character education has been supported by the UK government with former Secretary of Education Nicky Morgan MP (2014) stating 'that for too long there's has been a false choice between academic standards and activities that build character and resilience' and with the UK Department of Education (2015) providing grants for the development of character within schools and other youth organisations. Character education's strong links to morality and aggression can be highlighted during the August 2011 riots which took place in several major UK cities. A large proportion of the rioters were self-reported disillusioned or disfranchised youths but the question of where this sudden act of overwhelming aggression, in the form of vandalism, looting and violence to others appeared from was widely asked. Prime Minister David Cameron (2011) claimed that the riots were caused by people 'showing indifference to right and wrong' and having 'a twisted moral code'.

In response the UK government formed the Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012) to answer such questions and give recommendations for future action. One such recommendation was that parents and schools ensure children develop the values, skills and character to make the right choices at crucial moments. The Panel also proposed that there should be a new requirement for schools to develop and publish their policies on building character. This would raise the profile of this issue and ensure that schools engage in a review of their approaches to nur-

turing character attributes among their pupils. Therefore this report made links between the aggressive nature of the riots and the morality of the rioters and that of character education.

## Conclusion

Gender differences in aggressive behaviour and morality do exist (Bjorkqvist, 1994; 2017; Card et al., 2008). But apart from that, the world in which we live creates the need to provide a moral backbone to young people through both formal and informal teaching so that they can internally and externally develop their own moral compass. In other words, educators are to demonstrate and explain, through proper instruction and example, what is right and what is wrong. It does not mean that they must be experts on moral development, but through their well-methodically chosen methods of conduct, the student should be able to develop the ability to exercise individual attitudes and moral values. Moreover, the teacher should be competent in this vision of building and be articulating an ethos in a school where confidence, respect and empathy are the key prerequisites for stimulating moral development. Moral compass, in this perspective, constitutes the core building block of human development, which is capable of counteracting wilful aggression. Moreover, in the Jubilee Centre, we work on the Aristotelian assumption that the ideal moral development should do with the cultivation of a virtuous character.

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