

CHILDREN SUFFER TOO: EMOTIONAL SUFFERING IN CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CRIANÇAS TAMBÉM SOFREM: O SOFRIMENTO EMOCIONAL EM CRIANÇAS DURANTE A PANDEMIA COVID-19

LOS NIÑOS TAMBIÉN SUFREN: ANGUSTIA EMOCIONAL EN LOS NIÑOS DURANTE LA PANDEMIA COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: This research aimed to investigate how students in the Initial Years of Ensino Fundamental feel in the pandemic context. The objectives were to identify the frequency of situations in which there are signs of emotional distress in children and to verify whether there is a significant relationship between emotional distress and sociodemographic aspects (race, gender, own cell phone). A total of 1041 children from the 4th and 5th grades of Ensino Fundamental participated in the research. The instrument used for this verification was a questionnaire, containing sociodemographic aspects (ethnic-racial origin, gender, economic profile and access to communication resources) and situations related to emotional distress. The data found show that children have shown both feelings and behaviors that indicate emotional distress (fear, anxiety, loneliness, self-mutilation) and also that there are significant differences in emotional distress scores related to gender and ethnic-racial origin.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic. Emotional suffering. Children.

RESUMO: O problema desta pesquisa foi investigar como os estudantes dos Anos Iniciais do Ensino Fundamental apontam se sentem no contexto pandêmico. Os objetivos foram identificar a frequência de situações em que há indícios de sofrimento emocional em crianças e verificar se há relação significativa de sofrimento emocional com aspectos sociodemográficos (raça, gênero, celular próprio). Participaram da pesquisa 1041 crianças dos 4o e 5o anos do Ensino Fundamental. O instrumento utilizado para tal verificação foi um questionário, contendo aspectos sociodemográficos (origem étnico-racial, gênero, perfil

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econômico e acesso a recursos comunicacionais) e situações relacionadas ao sofrimento emocional. Os dados encontrados demonstram que as crianças têm apresentado tanto sentimentos quanto comportamentos que indicam sofrimento emocional (medo, ansiedade, solidão, automutilação) e também que há diferenças significativas nos scores de sofrimento emocional relacionados ao gênero e à origem étnico-racial.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Pandemia. Sofrimento emocional. Crianças.*

RESUMEN: *El problema de esta investigación fue indagar cómo los estudiantes de los dos primeros años de Enseñanza Fundamental - Años Iniciales, apuntaron sentirse en el contexto de la pandemia. Los objetivos específicos fueron identificar la frecuencia de situaciones en las que se presentan signos de malestar emocional en los niños y verificar si existe una relación significativa entre el malestar emocional y aspectos sociodemográficos (raza, género, celular propio). Participaron de la investigación un total de 1041 estudiantes de los grados 4° y 5° de Enseñanza Fundamental - Años Iniciales. El instrumento utilizado para esta verificación fue un cuestionario, que contenía aspectos sociodemográficos (origen étnico-racial, género, perfiles económicos y acceso a recursos de comunicación) y situaciones relacionadas con el malestar emocional. Los datos encontrados muestran que los niños tanto sentimientos como conductas indicativas de malestar emocional (miedo, ansiedad, solidaridad, automutilación) y también que existen diferencias significativas en las puntuaciones de malestar emocional relacionadas con el género y el origen étnico-racial.*

PALABRAS-CLAVE: *Pandemia. Sufrimiento emocional. Niños.*

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, caused by the Coronavirus that ravaged the world in the years 2020 and 2021, brought to the surface a very present issue in everyday life: human suffering.

First of all, it is necessary to justify why we chose to use the term "emotional suffering" and not to present the terminology "mental health" that has been so widely used nowadays.

The school cannot assume for itself the responsibility for treatment regarding mental health. However, if there is no mental health, there is the manifestation of such lack through pain or the conscious or unconscious feeling of suffering. Therefore, we understand "emotional suffering" as all psychic pain that expresses exhaustion, hopelessness manifested in the form of emotions or feelings of fear, sadness, anguish, irritability, anxiety, depression, and that generates indifference to self-care, mood swings, withdrawal, and risk behaviors such as self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, among others (TOGNETTA, 2022). The use of the term "emotional suffering" wishes to express the school's task, which is the work with emotions and feelings of their students, since their sufferings are commonly misunderstood in the school

environment as a kind of disqualification of children as "unwilling", "lazy", "inattentive" (CALDERARO; CARVALHO, 2005).

The suffering resulting from the pandemic affected everyone, including children. Jiao *et al.* (2020) in their research pointed out data regarding children during the pandemic, where 36% of them showed dependence on parents, 32% inattention, 29% worry, 21% sleep problems, 18% lack of appetite, 14% nightmares and 13% discomfort and agitation. But even though the pandemic context presents some situations that create or intensify suffering in children and adults, we must consider that the current society, under the view of some philosophers and sociologists, has peculiar characteristics that can - or not - generate suffering.

Bauman (2007), when using the concept of "Liquid Modernity" to refer to current society, points out the liquefaction of social forms that were once quite solid, such as family, love, friendship, work, and also identity itself. According to the author, this situation produces anguish, constant anxiety, and liquid fear, such as the fear of unemployment, violence, and of not "fitting in" in this world that is changing at a fast pace.

On the other hand, Lipovetsky, in a book published in the 1980s, entitled "The age of emptiness" (LIPOVETSKY, 1983/2005), already pointed out the emptiness as a result of the transition from Modernity to Post-Modernity. Interestingly, it is as if the author anticipated quite current issues, such as the impact of technology, individualism, and the consumer society. According to the author, it is as if traditional institutions were emptied of meaning, no longer offering the possibility of connection between people, but rather a certain freedom of choice without any restrictions. In another work, he presents the term "hypermodern" as one that overlaps Modernity. For him, hypermodern society focuses on the present and on individualism, on contemporary narcissism, in an eternal search for the new, driven by the Internet and globalization. This individual has in front of him an uncertain future that causes a certain uneasiness and fear, besides presenting him with a paradoxical path: the valorization of health and life principles, at the same time that leads him through the logic of "hyper", of excess, which materializes in several decisions and actions. According to him, this principle of "hyper", including hyper-consumption, is quite evident in the superficiality found in the expression of emotions and affections, in social and work relationships that are based on utilitarian needs and hedonism.

If, therefore, in the current society, relationships occur through ties that no longer last and identify, but through momentary ties, few secure and superficial (BAUMAN, 2001), or else, the certainty that this liquid modernity replaces collectivity and solidarity by individualism

(BAUMAN, 2001) and by hyper-consumerism (LIPOVETSKY, 2004), how are the relationships lived with the children and the experiences provided to them? Did this context, together with the pandemic, generate doubts, uncertainties and suffering to our children? Are there significant differences in the emotional distress index between boys and girls? And what about ethnic and racial origin, are the rates of emotional distress different among children who self-perceive as black, white, yellow, indigenous? Can the fact that they have their own cell phone be an important variable for more or less emotional distress in these children? Let's go to the investigation.

Material and method

Our research problem was to investigate how elementary school students (early years) report feeling in the pandemic context and, by objectives, to identify the frequency of situations in which there are signs of emotional distress in children and verify if there is a significant relationship of emotional distress with sociodemographic aspects (race, gender, own cell phone).

The questionnaire used was elaborated by members of the Study and Research Group on Moral Education (GEPEM), together with the master's research "The relationship between bullying, empathy and pro-sociality of students belonging to public schools in the state of São Paulo", registered in CAEE 42330421.6.0000.5400. It consists of 38 questions, eight closed questions about sociodemographic aspects (racial-ethnic origin, gender, economic profile, and access to communication resources), eight closed questions related to aspects of empathy (such as, "When I see someone crying, do I also feel like crying?"), eight closed questions related to aspects of pro-sociality (such as, "Do I offer to help classmates who need some help?")⁵ and 14 situations related to emotional distress during the pandemic (according to the Table of Emotional Distress Feeling and Behavior Categories). To achieve our objective, we used only this last part, which referred to the aspect of emotional distress, related to the variables of the sociodemographic aspect.

There were 1041 children from the early years - 4th and 5th grades - who participated as respondents, 502 boys and 539 girls, between nine and ten years old, of which 538 are fourth grade students and 503 are fifth grade students.

⁵ The items related to empathy and pro-sociality among children are part of another investigation conducted by GEPEM members.

The instrument allowed the situations to be classified into two categories, which were organized after analyzing the answers, being Category 1: Behavior of emotional distress; and Category 2: Feeling of emotional distress. The latter pointed out situations in which the students could self-perceive their suffering, while the former brought situations with attitudes that would indicate emotional suffering. That is, while some questions verified perceptions about suffering, others investigated actions, reactions, and practices that indicated suffering, as shown in the chart below.

Chart 1 – Questionnaire categories: Feeling and Behavior of emotional distress

Category 1 - Emotional Distress Behavior	Category 2 - Feeling of Emotional Distress
Situation 4 - symptoms of shortness of breath	Situation 1 - sadness
Situation 6 - urge to cry	Situation 2 - doing things wrong
Situation 7 - like to be with family	Situation 3 - perceiving fun in situations
Situation 10 - school performance	Situation 5 - imagining bad things in the future
Scenario 11 - self-mutilation	Situation 8 - feeling alone
Situation 14 - participation in internet challenges	Situation 9 - having friends
	Situation 12 - perception about family members
	Situation 13 - Feeling important

Source: Devised by the authors

To analyze the data from the first objective, we verified the frequency of responses and, to analyze the data referring to the second objective, a quantile regression model was proposed (KOENKER, 2005), since it allows the comparison of median K between the different groups of interest without the assumption of normality. For all analyses a significance level of 5% was adopted. All analyses were performed using SAS 9.4 software.

Results and discussion

This study sought to investigate how elementary school students (early years) report feeling in the context of the pandemic. The results presented and discussed below represent an important contribution to the psychology of the pandemic in an age group that has been little studied and whose results come mainly from the perceptions of adults, caregivers and educators (MATIZ *et al.*, 2022). This study sought to overcome this limitation, obtaining data from the perspective of children and adolescents themselves.

Objective One: to identify the frequency of situations in which there is evidence of emotional distress in children

Analyzing the situations that comprise Category 2, which refers to the perception of emotional suffering, we verified indications of suffering regarding the feeling of sadness. It can be noted from the data that 18.6% of the children stated that they felt sad always or often. Similar results were found in the study by Saurabh and Ranjan (2020), being the feeling of sadness one of the most frequent in children and adolescents during the pandemic, especially in the context of quarantine as a protective measure against Covid-19.

Certainly, this sadness felt may bring indications of alienation and exclusion as we will see later on. The children also pointed out issues related to the mistake. It can be noticed that 19% said they don't do things right or do them wrong, which evidences the hypothesis of emotional suffering when they feel unable to do everything right. This little explored finding in a pandemic context, especially in childhood and adolescence, is fundamental, as it may indicate a low sense of self-efficacy, a capacity that has been pointed out as key to face adversity in a pandemic context (THARTORI *et al.*, 2021).

When answering the questionnaire, the children also brought data about how they have been having fun in times of pandemic: 44.1% pointed out that they do not have fun with many things and 2.5% declared not having fun with anything. Similar results were reported in other studies (LOURENÇO *et al.*, 2021): children reduced their play activities in the pandemic. This undoubtedly imposes the challenge of educating caregivers to develop strategies to encourage play activity and fun for infants in a pandemic, mainly because of the close relationship between play, health, and well-being.

The data also show the relation of a common feeling among people - fear - was present in 54% of the children's answers. Fear is also revealed as a feeling among them, not the fears related to childhood fantasies, but the real fears that plagued humanity during the pandemic context. In Matiz *et al.*'s (2022) study of Italian children, Covid-19 fear was compared before and after the first wave of infections, finding no differences in levels, suggesting that this emotion can change during the emergency phase, developing resilience when adequate family and school support is received.

When asked about the issue of loneliness, 22.5% of children say they feel lonely, if we add the responses "always" (4.0%) and "often" (18.5%). This loneliness becomes concrete when these boys and girls refer to their friends (item 9) in which 44.3% said they don't have many friends and would like to have more, and 3.5% said they have no friends. In a pandemic context,

isolation as a protective measure and feelings of loneliness increase the risk of developing anxiety and depression in children. About this, some studies show the alarming number of one-third of adolescents reporting high levels of anxiety in a pandemic (LOADES *et al.*, 2020).

One piece of data that seems positive to us is that for these children interviewed, living together at home does not seem to be so problematic when compared to the situation we have been living in. Different investigations (LAHR; TOGNETTA, 2021) have verified an increase in violent situations (such as domestic aggression) that were present in the context in which the instrument was applied. However, only 2.7% of the children said they experience situations in which people in the house are always nervous and fight with them. A positive data, despite the 28 children in which such frequency of answers represents that they suffer in the place where they should feel most welcome.

Another point that seems positive to us is that "only" 20.9% feel important to a few people. Could it be that the children are referring to family relationships? However, we still have children who do not feel important to anyone. If we move to absolute numbers, we have 20 children with the feeling of not feeling valuable and important to anyone. This low personal value could be explained by the disruption of roles and functions in pandemic periods. In this sense, Cuadra *et al.* (2020) points out that pandemic emergencies not only require the installation of physical health care measures, but also imply new psychosocial ways of living together, which disrupt life routines.

So far, we have analyzed the situations that point to emotions and feelings as indicative of emotional suffering. Now, let's move on to the situations that make up the category related to *Emotional Suffering Behavior*.

In Situation 4, the children had to answer about anxiety sensations. Although 72.9% of the respondents indicated that they do not feel short of breath, it is necessary to consider that 22.8% responded that they sometimes feel it, and that 4.4% pointed out that their heart always starts racing and they feel short of breath. Adding these last two percentages, there are 27.2% of children who have had anxiety symptoms. Such data coincides with the data found by Duan *et al.* (2020) and Zhous *et al.* (2020) who point out depressive and anxiety symptoms in students.

Another piece of data that catches our attention is about grief that is expressed in crying. Once again, although the vast majority - 88.6% - answered that they feel like crying only once in a while, 11.4% feel like crying frequently (7.0%) or every day (4.4%). Although the percentages may seem low to us, if the analysis is done in absolute numbers, there are 120

children who feel like crying at a high frequency, which may indicate suffering beyond normality. Banati, Jones, and Youssef (2020) explain that the increase in crying or the desire to cry in young people in a pandemic context may be related to the difficulty in having adequate supports, such as economic and health supports, to cope with the pandemic. Thus, young people who perceive fewer resources to cope with the emergency are likely to express their grief with more tears.

When we checked the children's enjoyment of living with and/or being with their families, the data endorsed results already pointed out previously (situation 12) which, apparently, seems to indicate that family coexistence does not present so many problems for the children in this investigation: 93.6% of the children answered that they enjoy being with their families, while 0.6% pointed out that they never enjoy being with them and 5.8% often do not enjoy being with their families. An interesting result that may explain the above is found in Markowska-Manista and Zakrzewska-Olędzka's (2020) study with parents in Poland, in which a positive aspect of the pandemic is that the health emergency allowed families to spend more time at home, have the opportunity to share many activities with their children, which may be an element associated with the generation of positive emotions in children and youth during the pandemic.

Some situations set us on alert. In Situation 11, the children were asked about self-harm, and although 88.6% pointed out that they have never thought about intentionally hurting themselves, 11.4% of the children have sometimes felt like hurting themselves (10.2%) or else have always thought about it (1.2%). Although this percentage is small only from a statistical point of view, but when considering such responses in absolute numbers, that's 120 children with thoughts of self-harm. A UK non-governmental organization, Youngminds⁶, in 2020, also found in their data increased anxiety, trouble sleeping, panic attacks, and, as in our larger research, a desire to self-harm.

Another item that alerted us was number 14, which checked the participation of children in challenges they see on the Internet: 16.9% of children indicated that they always participate in such challenges. This result seems quite serious to us, since it may indicate how much the adults responsible for the children have difficulty in monitoring and following the children who surf virtual environments. We must also consider, in addition to those who "always" participate in these challenges, that another 25.1% responded that they rarely participate, which points us

⁶ <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/?resourceType=for-school-staff#main-content>.
Access on: 20 Dec. 2021.

to at least one past experience, and when it comes to virtual environments, even a single challenge can be dangerous or fatal. According to Cyrulnik (2014), games proposed on the internet need to be considered as a danger for child suicides. According to the author, they are often understood as accidents. The causes, however, are despair, anguish, and a lack of dialogue with adults. Such situations generate in children dangerous and risky behaviors such as the games and challenges proposed in the virtual environment.

We also ask, in this investigation, in face of these indicators of suffering: How do these boys and girls perceive their learning or the lack of it in social isolation? The results found point out that they perceive they have lost their learning during this period, and also that they have not reached the previous levels experienced. Among the participants, 9.5% of the children said that they did badly in subjects that they had previously done well in, and 26.4% said that their school work is not as good as it used to be. If these percentages are added up, 35.9% of the children verified a drop in their performance. Costin and Coutinho (2022) point out that Brazil is one of the countries with the greatest difficulty in facing the emergence of Covid-19, and education in particular has been hit hard, the result of low government support to deal with the crisis.

Objective Two: to verify whether there is a significant relationship between emotional distress and sociodemographic aspects (race, gender, own cell phone).

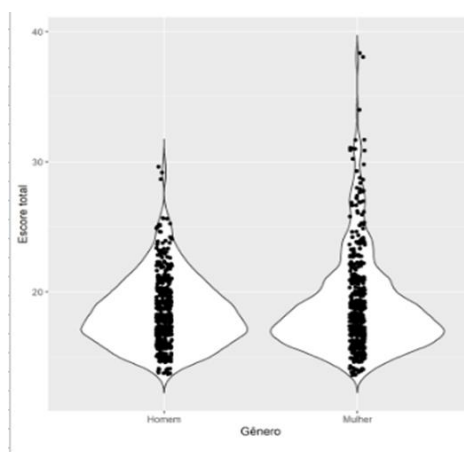
In this descriptive research, 14 items were presented for the children to answer about situations of emotional distress with four response points: never, a few times, many times, and always. The data were analyzed from a total score adding the answers to the items, considering the following score: never equals one point, a few times equals two points, many times equals three points, and always equals four points. Thus, the score reached in the answers of each subject can range from 14 to 42 points, so that the higher the score, the greater the emotional distress.

How are our children doing based on these analyses? To answer these questions we will now present what we found in our investigation. When we observe the results found, we see that if we consider the emotional distress score, ranging from 14 to 42 points, we notice that the average reached by the male participants is 18.46 and among the females, 18.95. Girls reached higher scores reaching 38 points while boys reached 30. Other works (WANG *et al.*, 2021) confirm that women have higher levels of stress, worry, and fear during the Covid-19 pandemic, associated with their educational process and family status. The above highlights the higher

psychosocial risk of women during a pandemic and the need to consider these differences when planning psychosocial support measures.

The following figure may contribute to a better visualization of such differences by observing the drawing that is formed around the dispersion of the data: boys' scores are more distributed and reach lower scores compared to girls.

Figure 1 – Dispersion of data on emotional distress in children by gender



Source: Devised by the authors

Investigating the variable race, the data pointed out that the lowest mean emotional distress was found in that group of children who self-declared as white (18.42 points), followed by the self-declared browns (18.59 points), Indians (18.75 points) and, finally, by the two groups that presented means above 19 points, being the oriental yellow ones with 19.25 points and the self-declared black ones reaching 19.93 points of mean referring to emotional distress.

Despite this average score, the following table helps to verify if the differences found are significant.

Table 1 – Analysis of emotional distress in children by racial/ethnic origin statement

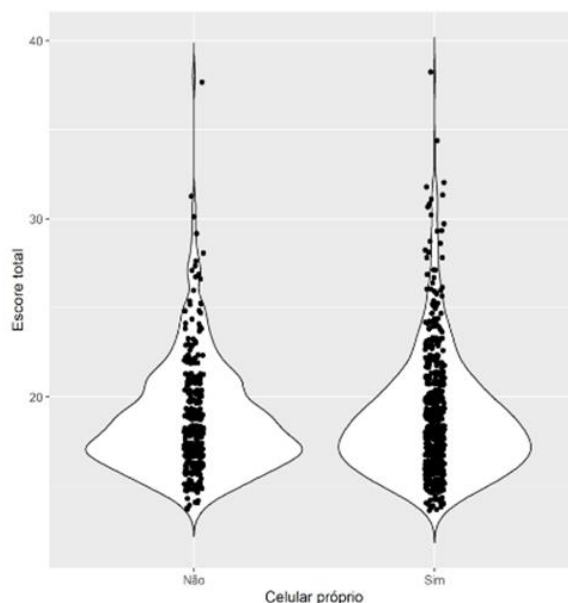
Comparison	Difference dear	Confidence interval (95%)		P-value
Sex (Male vs Female)	0,00	-0,21	0,21	0,99
Race (yellow vs White)	1,18	-5,63	7,98	0,73
Race (yellow vs Indigenous)	1,18	-6,73	9,08	0,77
Race (yellow vs Brown)	1,18	-5,64	7,99	0,74
Race (yellow vs Black)	0,18	-6,71	7,06	0,96
Race (white vs Indian)	0,00	-3,08	3,08	0,99
Race (white vs Brown)	0,00	-0,29	0,29	0,99
Race (white vs Black)	-1,00	-1,45	-0,55	<0,01
Race (Indigenous vs Brown)	0,00	-3,11	3,11	0,99
Race (Indigenous vs Black)	-1,00	-4,21	2,21	0,54
Race (Brown vs Black)	-1,00	-1,46	-0,54	<0,01

Source: Devised by the authors

The previous table shows us that, with the significance level being P-value < 0.05, there are significant differences in emotional distress when there is a comparison between children who self-perceive as white or black. In other work, the variable ethnicity/race has been associated with differences in levels of stress, distress, and psychological distress in a pandemic, with a greater presence of these being found in racial minority groups (MCKNIGHT-EILY *et al.*, 2021). In the systematic review by Cuadra *et al.* (2020), the psychological impact of the pandemic varies by ethnicity, being greater in minority groups who perceive greater risk in the face of a pandemic. In our study, those who self-declare as black show significantly higher emotional distress scores when compared to self-declared white students.

Another question we set out to investigate was whether or not having a cell phone was an important variable in understanding the problems of emotional distress in children. In this regard, the literature has not provided conclusive evidence, finding that the use of cell phones in a pandemic may be a positive measure to reduce social isolation and stay informed, which could reduce distress; however, it may also constitute problematic and even addictive use, which increases distress (ZHANG *et al.*, 2021). In our work we found no significant differences in this regard. Figure 2 aids us in this finding by noting that the shape of the figure representing the dispersion of the scores is similar. Further research is needed to provide evidence to clarify this problem, especially in children and adolescents.

Figure 2 – Dispersion of data Emotional distress x own cell phone



Source: Devised by the authors

Final remarks

The problem that guided this research was to investigate how students of the 4th and 5th years of Elementary School - Early Years feel in the pandemic context. There were two main objectives: the first was to identify the frequency of situations in which there is evidence of emotional distress in children and, the second was to verify whether there is a significant relationship between emotional distress and sociodemographic aspects, such as race, gender and having one's own cell phone.

In relation to the first objective, in the category that verified the feelings that indicate emotional suffering, the data pointed out that the children investigated during the pandemic have shown fear, loneliness, sadness, and anxiety. Despite this, positive data were found regarding living with their families and feeling important to other people. In the second category, which verified the observable behavior related to emotional distress, the data pointed out that self-mutilation, participation in Internet challenges, and crying have been present among the children, especially if we consider the absolute numbers. And we also found that students perceived a drop in their school performance.

As to the second objective, we verified that as to gender, girls present higher scores of suffering in relation to boys. When establishing the relationship of suffering with race, we identified that blacks, when compared to whites, also present significant differences in the

scores of suffering indicated and, as for the last variable investigated, having their own cell phone, we did not find significant differences.

Caring for the well-being of our children is a task for all of society, which, despite a context of "liquid relationships," needs to ensure that they have physical and emotional safety in the spaces they frequent and in the relationships they establish with the world and with other people.

The school, by excellence, is a place where human beings who are permanently in the process of development live together. The school is responsible for creating dialogic spaces so that both students and educators can express their feelings and elaborate their conflicts, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, because learning is not only restricted to scientific concepts, but also to social coexistence. Therefore, taking care of children and supporting them in their personal problems and in situations of emotional distress is the role of educators, the states and their institutions, and of all the employees assigned to this.

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