

Femininity, Masculinity and Fear of Crime within Heterosexual Relationships

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Introduction

Fear of crime, or concern about the likelihood of criminal victimisation, has constituted an area of criminological enquiry for over thirty years (Warr and Ellison, 2000, p.551).¹ Since the earliest victim surveys (McLaughlin, 2001, p.165), repeated studies have concluded that fear of crime, be it rational or irrational (Lupton and Tulloch, 1999, p.507), is an issue that must be taken seriously. Indeed, as Gilchrist *et al.* point out:

It is commonplace to assert that fear of crime has become a major social and political problem, perhaps bigger than crime itself (1998, p.283).

Moreover, commentators have also begun to argue that:

...the fear of crime is an ill-defined term that covers a variety of complex worries and anxieties...it also relates to a multitude of anxieties about the pace and nature of social and cultural change (McLaughlin, 2001, pp.118-119).

Thus fear of crime can, particularly in connection with post-September 11th concern about terrorism (Bunting, 2004), be understood as a metaphor for anxiety towards a changing world (Minton, 2004).

Much of the existing research on fear of crime has been gender specific and revolves around two related ironies: first, that men are less likely to experience personal fear of crime yet are statistically more likely to experience actual victimisation (Madriz, 1997, p.2); and, second, that women are more likely to fear stranger violence yet are statistically more likely to experience victimisation from a man already known to them (Segal,

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1996). This paper, based on a small piece of primary research, seeks to move beyond these ironies to consider altruistic fear of crime, or fear that a significant other will become victimised. Specifically, the research is concerned with altruistic fear of crime among heterosexual men for their female partners. It is posited that men's altruistic fear of crime is exacerbated by women's socialising and, in particular, their relationship with alcohol. This gives rise to a perceived need in men to protect 'their' women, indicating that altruistic fear of crime is a feature of hegemonic masculinity.

This research was itself initially inspired by the findings of an earlier research project, which uncovered personal fear of crime among its female participants together with details of the strategies those women employed to minimise both their fear of crime and the potential for victimisation. Significantly, the research also uncovered altruistic fear of crime among their male partners for the female participants. For instance, when the women were out socialising their partners insisted on phoning them, seemingly to check upon their safety. Similarly, partners frequently appeared compelled to collect the women by car after a night out. However, throughout the research process it became evident that, for some of the women, altruistic fear of crime acted as something of a 'smokescreen' for male domination and/or male insecurity. Comments such as 'Don't get me wrong, I know he's nervous, but it's more to do with his possessiveness than anything else' (Cheryl, research participant; cited in Kinsella, 2002, p.31) were indicative of the sentiments that began to emerge during the research process. Similar concerns were expressed by another respondent:

If I go out socialising with my friends, there's always an issue, like I feel sometimes he always tries to spoil my night out because his self-esteem isn't what it should be and he thinks I'm going to run off with some fella...I do feel sometimes like I've got an electric tag on me, like house arrest, can't go out without him phoning me up (Charlotte, research participant; cited in Kinsella, 2002, p.32).

It is this altruistic fear of crime among male partners, and the associated potential for obscuring other motives, that provide the initial rationale for the research detailed in this paper.

Contextualisation

Fear of crime has been succinctly defined by McLaughlin as ‘...a rational or irrational state of alarm or anxiety engendered by the belief that one is in danger of criminal victimisation’ (2001, p.118). Currently fear of crime has come to be considered a phenomenon in its own right, distinct from the reality of crime, and worthy of criminological attention (Gilchrist *et al.*, 1998, p.283). As it is something of an abstract concept and reliant on individual perception, fear of crime is inherently difficult to measure (Garofalo, 1981, p.841), victim surveys being the only viable means of estimating the extent and effects of fear (Goodey, 2005, p.51). Studies in the area of fear of crime have repeatedly found that fear of crime often outweighs actual risk of crime and bears little relation to the ‘reality’ of crime as disclosed through criminal statistics (Reid and Konrad, 2004, p.400; Silverman, 2004, p.761). Thus it is frequently argued that fear of crime is unfounded as it has no basis in statistical reality (Goodey, 2005, p.73).

Most existing research into women’s fear of crime has concluded that women are chiefly afraid of physical and sexual attack at the hands of a male stranger (Kelly, 1988; Stanko, 1990; Madriz, 1997), despite the statistical fact that it is actually more likely that women will experience physical and sexual attack at the hands of a man already known to them (Segal, 1996, p188). Nevertheless, this fear of public crime and the ‘dangerous stranger’ has led women to develop strategies to enable them to minimise fear and the possibility of becoming a victim (Kelly, 1988; Stanko, 1994, 1990). Here:

Whilst not all women live in constant fear, many of women's routine decisions and behaviours are almost automatic measures taken to protect themselves from potential sexual violence. (Kelly, 1988, p.32)

In this sense women become 'experts in their own safety' (Walklate, 2001, p.208). Further, women's skill and ingenuity in creating strategic responses to crime and fear of crime is reflected in official advice. The Home Office publication *Your Practical Guide to Crime Prevention* offers advice, often specifically gendered, on how to protect oneself and one's property. The document stresses the need for 'safe' men (i.e. men who are not 'strangers') to be chivalrous, for example:

Help female friends or family members by giving them a lift or walking them home when you can. If you do, make sure they are safely indoors before you leave. (Home Office, 2002, p.5)

The ideology here is explicit: women need men to protect them, and women who have men to protect them will experience less fear of crime (Stanko, 1990, p86). Consequently women are encouraged to rely on male family members, friends and acquaintances (*ibid.*). However this ideology reflects a further irony within women's fear of crime:

The assumption is that individual men will protect individual women from the dangers of other men. This assumption overlooks the fact that, if women are in danger, it is far more often from the hands of the 'protectors'. (*ibid.*, p.102)

To put it another way, '...the very people women turn to for protection are the ones who pose the greatest danger' (*ibid.*, p.86).

Perhaps the best way to understand these ironies within women's fear of crime is by locating them within the context of patriarchy and gendered power relations. Put simply, fear of crime is a means by which

gender inequalities can be maintained and male domination can persist. Madriz maintains that:

...fear of crime contributes to the social control of women by perpetuating the gender inequalities that maintain patriarchal relations and undermine women's power, rights and achievements. (1997, p.2)

Thus constructions of fear of crime which render women fearful, men fearless, and women in need of men's care and protection serve to perpetuate patriarchal ideology and the subordination of women. As McDermid puts it, '...whether consciously or subconsciously, it works to men's advantage to keep us scared' (2000, p.8).

Conversely, studies in men's fear of crime tend to be few and far between, as it is often assumed that men as a social group are largely unaffected by fear of crime (Sutton and Farrall, 2005). Yet recent studies have begun to uncover the possibility that low reporting rates of fear of crime among men might be a reflection of social pressures rather than actual levels of fear – that is, men may not wish to appear less masculine by admitting to a personal fear of crime (Goodey, 2005; Sutton and Farrall, 2005).

However, there is a form of fear of crime that it is perhaps more socially acceptable for men to express. Altruistic fear of crime (Warr and Ellison, 2000, p.552) refers to fear of crime on behalf of somebody else – usually a partner, family member or friend. Here concern that a significant other will become a victim of crime is recognised in itself as a form of fear of crime (*ibid.*). Warr and Ellison found that, within family units, men are most likely to experience altruistic fear of crime for their female partners whilst women are most likely to experience altruistic fear of crime for their children. Moreover, the social group most likely to be the subject of altruistic fear is young women. Further, it is argued that altruistic fear of crime leads to increased levels of fear of crime within the subject of

altruistic fear – a phenomenon referred to by Gilchrist *et al.* as ‘contagious fear’ (1998, p.294).

Within this ideology of fearful women and fearless men, it has become apparent to some feminist academics that fear of crime is actually an inherent component of femininity – that is, to be fearful of crime is to be feminine (Stanko, 1985, p.157; Madriz, 1997, p.11). Here the term ‘appropriate femininity’ has been used to describe attributes and characteristics which are deemed acceptable for women to display – these include such traits as dependence, vulnerability and innocence (Madriz, 1997, p.11). Conversely, characteristics such as independence, autonomy and self-determination are constructed as inappropriate for women (Madriz, 1997). In the eventuality of a woman becoming a victim of crime these ideas of appropriate femininity are mobilised to establish deserving or undeserving victim status (Goodey, 2005, p.11). Moreover, the development of these characteristics forms part of the socialisation process of women; Madriz (1997, p.11) for example describes how the ‘training’ of young girls involving such directions as ‘sit like a lady’, ‘keep your legs together’ and ‘keep your skirt down’ is designed to encourage fear of, and therefore avoidance of, rape. She further points out that, ‘Some suggest that the fear of rape may build up and “contaminate” many areas of women’s lives making women afraid in many social situations’ (*ibid.*, p.12). Thus fear of crime among women is inextricably linked to ideologies of femininity and inherent in what it means to be a woman.

Constructions of masculinity and expectations of heterosexual men can also have implications for fear of crime. Specifically, if personal fear of crime is a component of appropriate femininity (Stanko, 1985), it may also follow that altruistic fear of crime is a component of hegemonic masculinity. Feminist research in the area of fear of crime has focussed on understanding personal fear of crime among women as a means by which patriarchal social control can be maintained (Stanko, 1990; Madriz, 1997). However, the

author contends that the relationship between masculinities, femininities, social control and fear of crime may actually be much more complex. More explicitly, it is possible that altruistic fear of crime among men can constitute both a benefit to them, in terms of control of their partners, and a cost, in terms of pressure to protect.

Research Methods

The primary research conducted for the original project was qualitative in nature and underpinned by a critical and feminist research methodology. Semi-structured interviews were used as this method allowed the researcher to pose direct questions and manage the overall direction of the interview whilst at the same time leaving the interviewees free to decline or elaborate on questions as they deemed appropriate. This flexible structure meant that the length of each interview ranged from just over an hour to just under two hours. Prior to agreeing to take part in the research, the respondents were briefed as to the nature of the research and informed that they would be asked to discuss their feelings regarding crime in relation to their families. Respondents were given the choice from a range of possible venues as to which they would find the most convenient for them. As such, three of the men chose to be interviewed at the researcher's place of work whilst the fourth preferred to be interviewed in his own home.

The research participants were four men who knew each other as they were associates in the same field of work: they were all disc jockeys/karaoke hosts in the Merseyside area. This was significant as the men's shared occupation meant they all experienced a specific, similar relationship with both crime and the fear of crime. Through informal discussions with an associate who has extensive experience of the night-time economy, it became apparent to the researcher that disc jockeys/karaoke hosts constituted a population with a unique perspective

and vantage point in terms of fear of crime. It was through this associate that contact was made with the research participants.

The men all identified as heterosexual and, at the time the research was conducted, were in, or had recently been in, heterosexual relationships. These similarities were important as they allowed the researcher to draw comparisons as well as differences between the men in terms of personal and altruistic fear of crime. A table detailing demographic information on the research participants can be found below:²

NAME	AGE	RELATIONSHIP STATUS	PARTNER	PREVIOUS PARTNER(S)	CHILDREN
Ian	29	Recently begun relationship with current female partner	Vanessa	Michelle	2 sons with previous partner: Mark aged 8; Toby aged 6. 1 step daughter: Natalie aged 4.
Jimmy	44	Single		2 previous partners discussed: Sandra and Denise	1 daughter and 1 son with Denise: Sarah aged 16 and Joshua aged 12
Ben	24	Current female partner	Joanne	None discussed	Currently expecting first baby with Joanne

² The respondents chose to be known by their own name; however the names of partners, previous partners and children that appear in Table 1 are pseudonyms.

Mick	28	Current female partner	Patricia	None discussed	1 son with Patricia: Sean aged 1; 1 step son: Tim aged 9
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Table 1: The Research Participants

Key Research Findings

All of the research participants expressed altruistic fear for at least one other person within their immediate circle. For example, Ben stated that he was fearful for his seventeen year old sister, who had recently started going out to pubs and clubs, adding ‘You can’t stop her, can you?’ Similarly, Jimmy expressed altruistic fear for his sixteen-year-old daughter Sarah for the same reason. Ian also stated that he experienced altruistic fear of crime for his mother, his sister, and his friends (both male and female), adding that ‘You’re more concerned about people that you care about than yourself... it’s more a caring thing than anything else’. He also experienced altruistic fear of crime for his sons. However, he stated that if his relationship with Vanessa was to develop and he assumed a more parental role with Natalie, he anticipated that:

I’d be more concerned about Natalie than I would the boys, as she got older...it’s more a question of the likes of rape and things like that, the likes of rape would scar a woman more emotionally for the rest of her life.

Like Ian, Mick expressed altruistic fear of crime for family members and friends, including his sons. He displayed particular concerns about his parents, especially his mother, as she does not drive and relies on public transport.

Of the three men who were involved in relationships at the time the research was conducted, both Ian and Mick expressed explicit concern about

the safety of their female partners. Further, Mick displayed specific anxiety that, given that the majority of his work is at night, his partner Patricia and the two children were at home for lengthy periods without him at the time he considered them and the house to be most vulnerable. He also stated that he experienced altruistic fear of crime for Patricia, Tim and Sean 'because they're my responsibility.' On the subject of altruistic fear for partners, Ian said:

I'm not a jealous type but I like to give them a call to make sure they're fine. I wouldn't like them walking home on their own, I wouldn't like them getting taxis and things on their own, I like to be there to pick them up and things, I've always offered that...

Ben was the only man currently involved in a relationship who reported no altruistic fear of crime in this regard. When asked if he was fearful for his partner Joanne he said; 'I don't know, do I sound shallow if I say no?' He then elaborated on his answer:

Not really because, she's very like, got a head on her shoulders sort of person really, like set in her ways sort of thing, if a situation arose she'd just like walk away, she's very sensible like that, if someone confronted her she'd air her opinion and just walk away, that's what she's like, she's not a confrontational person, she wouldn't argue back with someone else, you know what I mean?

Jimmy, Ian and Mick all pointed out that their awareness of crime, and subsequent fear of crime, was heightened as a result of the nature of their work:

I worry about our Sarah more, seeing some of the sights you see, the way these young fellas behave. (Jimmy)

We see quite a lot of lechy fellas in the places that we do. (Ian)

I've seen that many fights while I've been working... (Mick)

The only respondent not to mention the nature of his work was Ben. When the researcher, prompted by the comments made by the other respondents, asked if his levels of fear were increased as a result of work-related experiences, Ben replied:

I know what fellas are like, but I know what women are like!
So, you know, it's a two-way thing.

A specific finding of the research was the influence of alcohol. All of the men expressed concern about the use of alcohol and how it heightens the potential for crime. Comments on this issue were sometimes related to the job: '...the line of work we're in, we see how people are when they've had a drink' (Ian). At times the issue of alcohol was considered in the context of a cause of crime, particularly with relation to men:

When alcohol's involved, its different...probably fellas get Dutch courage and don't take no for an answer, maybe cause a scene, maybe cause an argument. (Ben)

Once drink's on the playing field as well, especially drugs out there as well. (Ian)

However alcohol was also discussed as a factor exacerbating the likelihood of victimisation, particularly in terms of 'stranger' crime and notably with relation to women:

Sandra was like I was years ago, starts drinking in the afternoon before she goes out, three of those big bottles of WKD she'd have then she'd drive over here...loads of times she ended up in a kick off over it, I was terrified of her getting a smack, you know, someone being violent...it was embarrassing to be honest. (Jimmy)

Similarly Ian referenced the affect that alcohol can have on the senses: ‘We all know that you have a couple of drinks and you lose track of all time anyway.’ Moreover, three of the men spoke of making a conscious decision not to drink in an attempt to minimise risk:

If I know Sarah’s gone to town I won’t have a drink just in case. (Jimmy)

I will actually not have a drink, I’ve done it for years now... I do actually like doing it, it saves the hassle, for practical reasons as well as peace of mind. (Ian)

If I go on a night out now I’d sooner drive, for two reasons really, one, I’ve walked home from town in the rain that many times, looking for a taxi, and two, I know that I and everyone with me will get home safe. (Mick)

All of the men spoke specifically about the impact of their partners socialising. Ian explained how he ‘tops up’ the credit on Vanessa’s mobile phone before she goes out, and also ensures that he has cash in the house to pay a taxi fare if she runs out of money. Describing the situation before Patricia goes for a night out, Mick stated:

Before she goes I always say to her, don’t take your credit cards, is your phone charged, be careful where you get your money out...

All of the men also spoke about picking up their partners and/or family members after a night out. Three of the men considered this to be an appropriate measure, and for them it was a common occurrence:

There’s times when I’ve been in bed and the phone’s gone, come and get me, I’d sooner have it that way. (Ian)

I will always try to get her, but if I can’t cos I’m working I’ll ask a friend or someone in the family, me dad’s picked her up, you know. (Mick)

Ben was the only one of the men who doesn't pick his partner up, stating that:

She'd probably prefer me to go and pick her up but I don't, bit stubborn like that! Not for safety, just because she doesn't wanna pay the taxi fare! She wouldn't pick me up, its equal rights innit?

Another issue that arose during the interviews concerned insecurity within relationships. Both Ben and Jimmy spoke of the impact that insecurity had had on previous relationships:

I've been through that in the past, you're in a relationship and you're dead possessive, she's me world and all stuff like that, and it all comes back and slaps you in the face...I look at that relationship in the past, and think maybe I was trying to control her. (Ben)

I have been like that with girls in the past, but it just used to wear me out, you'd be sick, you wouldn't sleep, you'd be up all night, at the end of the day she says I stayed in me mate's, so what was...because you can't prove anything, I've got to the stage where...it's no good saying you've got a good relationship if you never let them go out, you've gotta let them go out. (Jimmy)

Critical Evaluation

Warr and Ellison (2000) and Gilchrist *et al.* (1998) both identified in their research a 'hierarchy of worry' whereby men experience altruistic fear of crime for their (female) partners and women experience altruistic fear of crime for their children. However, the responses of Jimmy, Ian and Mick indicate that their relationship with fear may be more nuanced, as they reported fear of crime for their female partners, their children, and, in the cases of Ian and Mick, their parents. Yet although Jimmy reported fear of crime for both his children, he expressed gender-specific fear for his daughter; similarly Ben and Ian both expressed concern for their younger

sisters, and Ian anticipated becoming more fearful for his partner's daughter as she grew older. This supports Warr and Ellison's (2000, p.554) contention that the social group who are the subject of the most altruistic fear are young women. Moreover, as both Ian and Mick expressed particular concern for their mothers, it can be argued that altruistic fear of crime among the research participants is largely gendered. This gendered nature of altruistic fear of crime among the participants was always implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, linked to the possibility of sexual attack. Consequently it can be argued that women's heightened fear of sexual attack (Stanko, 1990, p.108; Madriz, 1997, p.2) is mirrored in men's altruistic fear of crime.

The men raised the issue of alcohol in several different contexts: as a factor leading individuals (usually men) to commit crime in the form of violence; as a factor leading individuals (usually women) to become victims of crime; and in terms of avoiding alcohol to prevent victimisation of partners, e.g. by staying sober to be able to collect partners by car. Canaan (1996, p.116) discusses the role that alcohol plays in exacerbating male violence; however much of the current literature on alcohol focuses on women's drinking and how 'binge' drinking can increase women's likelihood of victimisation (see Malloch, 2004). It is possible here to draw comparisons between media debates on women's 'binge' drinking and the phenomenon of drug-assisted rape (*ibid.*) – in both cases fear is deflected from the perpetrator of the criminal act onto the means by which the act is achieved. As Stanko notes:

...there's been a lot of discussion about it...much of it focuses on the evilness of the drug, which is very strange because it's not the drug that's evil. It's another variation, a new technology that assists men to commit sexual violence. There will always be new technologies that will do that. (2000, cited in Weale, 2000, p.3)

In this sense altruistic fear crime which is based on excessive alcohol use in women can be described as misplaced.

Women's drinking was also discussed within the broader context of appropriate femininity and what constitutes acceptable behaviour for women. Specifically, Jimmy spoke of his ex-partner Sandra's use of alcohol and how this was 'embarrassing'. This ties in with cultural understandings of the troubled relationship between women and alcohol, summed up by Brooks thus:

...women who drink in public still face society's medieval desire for them to moderate their behaviour. The woman who drinks is too loud, too brazen, too obvious...and a bad woman. (2000, p.1)

Moreover, Malloch (2004) details how women's behaviour and demeanour, particularly in connection with alcohol and drug use, is central to establishing deserving or non-deserving victim status in the event of criminal victimisation. Within this, women '...are assumed to have the ability to calculate potential risks and to mitigate those risks accordingly' (Malloch, 2004, p.121). Given the findings of this research, it could also be argued that appropriate femininity can determine not only a woman's victim status but also her entitlement to be the subject of altruistic fear of crime.

Women's use of alcohol can also impact on their entitlement to protection, in quite complex ways. Malloch argues that:

...women are expected to conform to often-vague standards of conduct and presentation in order to attain protection from the state and its agencies. (2004, p.111)

On a micro-level this equates to women attaining a required standard of appropriate femininity before being eligible for male protection (Malloch, 2004, p.111). In this sense, women who "binge" drink would be denied protection; yet Otto (1981, p.163) notes that a common response to women who are considered alcoholic is to protect, often to the point of infantilisation. Among the research participants in this study, with the

exception of Jimmy's response to Sandra's drinking, it appeared that the instinct to protect women who had been drinking was stronger than any instinct to condemn. This manifested itself most commonly in the desire to pick female partners and relatives up after a night out, which frequently means that the men refrain from drinking alcohol themselves. This could be construed as evidence of men considering their partners to develop a child-like status after drinking alcohol (MacInnes, 1999, p.125); in this sense Ben's statement that 'it's equal rights, innit?' may actually reflect a recognition of equality within the relationship rather than being an indication of lack of care.

The desire to protect female partners and family members can, therefore, be understood as an attribute of hegemonic masculinity. This was particularly evident in Mick's perceived responsibility of protecting his family within the defensible space of their home. However, the research amply demonstrated how masculinity can be understood in terms of vulnerability as well as strength and superiority (Campbell, 1984, cited in Messerschmidt, 1994). Interestingly, without prompting from the researcher, three of the men equated altruistic fear of crime with sexual jealousy – they understood questions on altruistic fear of crime for female partners to be questions on infidelity and fear that they would be sexually unfaithful. Here it would appear that on some level the men identify a relationship between altruistic fear of crime and fear of loss of their partner; in other words, loss of a partner through extreme crime (i.e. murder) and loss of a partner to another man result in the same outcome. This is in keeping with Jefferson's (1994, p.12) argument that, for a man, to be in a sexual and emotional relationship is to be in a perpetual state of insecurity. Given McDermid's contention that 'women's fear does, it seems, have benefits for both men and women' (2000, p.8), it could further be argued that perceptions of women as fearful of crime and in need of male protection go some way to assuaging this masculine insecurity.

The research also uncovered a further tension within masculinities in terms of shifting masculine status and the transition between hegemonic masculinity and marginalised masculinity. Mick described himself as experiencing altruistic fear for his father, although he noted that ‘he thinks he can, or he can, look after himself.’ This can be understood as a role reversal within the masculine hierarchy of Mick’s family: just as Mick currently assumes responsibility for his son and stepson, it is likely that his father assumed responsibility for him as a child and could potentially feel some resentment at this shift in masculine roles. In this sense it could be argued that the determining context of age is central to hegemonic male status and determines the extent to which a man is subject to, or the subject of, altruistic fear of crime.

Conclusion

At the outset of this piece of research, I anticipated that the primary research would uncover example after example of male domination of women, rationalised within a context of care, concern, and altruistic fear. What the author actually encountered was far more complex. Although it is undeniable that altruistic fear of crime can act as a justification for patriarchal control of women at both structural and individual levels, male altruistic fear of crime for women has its roots in an intricate tangle of patriarchal ideology, notions of appropriate femininity, and ideals of masculinity which result in pressures and tensions for individual men.

Given the relatively small scope of this research project, the author was unable to explore areas of interest that emerged during the research process on this occasion. However the author has identified several areas of potential further enquiry. The author feels that it would be interesting to execute empirical research on what Gilchrist *et al.* (1998, p.283) term ‘contagious fear’, to establish the extent to which being the subject of a significant other’s altruistic fear can heighten personal fear. Similarly, as

altruistic fear of crime is an under-researched area, empirical research with heterosexual women to establish levels of fear for male partners, and similar research among gay and lesbian couples, would uncover important findings. Finally, given the significance of the role of alcohol that emerged during this study, dedicated research on the relationship between alcohol and fear of crime would both expand the existing body of knowledge in this area and provide the basis for political action.

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