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Death Anxiety of Students and Teachers of High Schools in the Region of Thessaly, Greece

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Abstract: The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of the five personality factors such as religiosity, well-being and the central mechanism of self-evaluations on the overall performance in death anxiety. At the same time, other individual variables were also taken into account and formulated in order to investigate this specific issue. The relationship between the effect of personality factors to death anxiety was examined. As personality is a complex and multidimensional object, for this reason researchers attempt to create a systematic taxonomy in order to analyse it. The result of this research emerged both from the literature review that follows and from the survey that was conducted on a sample of 235 people (before adulthood students and teachers), between 17-63 years old of the region of Thessaly. The method of probability sampling and a specifically simple random sampling was used. The questionnaire was used for the needs of this quantitative research. Descriptive statistics was used in order to present the demographic data of the research and also to give the trend that arose from the answers to the research questions. Additionally, the methods of inductive statistics were focused on the question in order to rely on the findings of a sample observations. With the help of inductive statistics examination the confidence of the finding was proved. In the descriptive statistic the main characteristics of the individual variables were described. In the presented survey mainly the

descriptive statistic was used in order to present the data of research participants. These results were presented schematically. Consequently, no significant differences were found between people's well-being and gender. According to research men were slightly happier than women, however, this was a negligible difference. Despite the above finding, this study significantly contributed to the promotion of the research in the specific field.

Keywords: anxiety, death, religiosity, self-evaluation, well-being.

Introduction

Initially, the death anxiety, which is the dependent variable of this research, was treated by various researchers sometimes as a unidimensional and sometimes as a multidimensional issue each time using different scales (Conte et al., 1982; Ellis et al., 2013; Soleimani et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2023). For example, Collet and Lester (Conte et al., 1982; Cheong et al., 2020) have distinguished four dimensions of death anxiety: fear of the own death, fear of another person's death, fear of dying, and fear of others dying. More recent research (Spitzenstätter & Schnell, 2022; Testoni et al., 2019) distinguished three categories, the avoidance of death, the fear of death and the individual's disengagement from it.

Although there is much interest in the five-factor model, the self-esteem, neuroticism, and control could perhaps be characterised as the "Big Three" of recent organisational psychology and personality research. The self-esteem is the self-acceptance and the extent to which one sees oneself as "competent, important, successful, and worthwhile" (Judge et al., 2005). Particularly, the self-esteem appears to be the most broad and essential central mechanism of the self-evaluation and is thought to be the result of emotional influences such as personal success. The self-efficacy reflects the self-confidence and is defined as the ability to present appropriate behaviors in possible situations. Neuroticism is one of the five personality factors. Neuroticism manifests itself in at least two tendencies: one is related to worry and the other is directed towards euphoria.

As research proves, there is a significant correlation between the self-esteem and extroversion. Particularly, the self-esteem and neuroticism are correlated with extraversion and conscientiousness. Thus, the central mechanism of self-evaluations is correlated with extraversion and conscientiousness, but these correlations are not as strong in magnitude (Bono & Judge, 2003; Yan et al., 2018). Bleidorn et al. (2016), examined the relationship between the self-esteem and all five personality factors and found that the self-esteem was associated with emotional stability, extraversion, receptivity to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (Bono & Judge, 2003). Xu et al. (2016) also found a correlation (0.48) between job satisfaction and the central mechanism of self-evaluations

Very interesting are the correlations of researches between demographic characteristics and the fear of death. According to the findings of research carried out by (Conte et al., 1982) it was initially found that there was a little systematic relationship between age, sex, education, religiosity and death anxiety. Lester (Calvo et al., 2023; Dursun et al., 2022) observed that as more well organised were the studies, the smaller was the relationship that was found between demographic characteristics and the fear of death. From the other hand, the scientist considered that personality and life experiences were the most determining parameters about the fear of death. The research of Koocher et al. who used the same instruments, have found that students of high school with an average age of 16 years old had scored higher on scales of death anxiety, general anxiety, and depression than have done younger students of the same school grade or night school students (Cicirelli, 2002; Testoni et al., 2019). The researchers attributed the death anxiety of teenagers to their intense anxiety as they face new emotional and physical changes during their development (McNamara, 2000; Muris, 2007; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007).

Continuing with the term religiosity, it is referred to a person's positive attitude towards a supernatural principle that is of great importance to his existence and that has come beyond and outside of all experience. The term religiosity is a multidimensional "construct" that includes cognitive and affective behavioral characteristics, (Hardy et al., 2019; Villani et al., 2019). On one hand, there has been found a positive relationship, according to which a high degree of religiosity is associated with a strong feeling of fear of death, while on the other hand, an inverse relationship has been found between religiosity and death. The conflicting interpretations are likely due to the one-dimension measurement of the variables and the use of a single research instrument (Hardy et al., 2019; Pandya & Kathuria, 2021; Saleem & Saleem, 2020).

According to the research by Wittkowski (1988) it has been found that there was a positive correlation between the acceptance of death, either that who has happened or who that will happen having belief in god. At the same time, there are inverse relationships between the fear of the death of others and all aspects of religiosity. Regarding the female sample, the researchers concluded that those women who were identified with the moral principles of the Catholic Church, have a high fear of death either for themselves or for others. However, negative correlations were observed between individuals' religiosity and the fear of their own death, as well as those of women participating in religious activities (Koscielniak et al., 2022; Saleem & Saleem, 2020; Torres, 2023).

The personality and the way that people, through its characteristics evaluate the quality of their life and either or not they are afraid of death is the other variable. Although there are several definitions about it and each theorist interprets it based on a different theoretical framework, the model of the five-factor is undoubtedly an important revelation in the field of personality and is one of the most documented models that includes those characteristics that make people different from each other (Abood, 2019; Tsaousis & Kerpelis, 2004; Ypofanti et al., 2015). The first is the one developed by Costa and McCrae who used the New Personality Questionnaire as their main tool and the second is related to the lexical hypothesis, which uses lists of adjectives derived from dictionaries. According to Costa and McCrae's 5-factor model there are five personality dimensions: extroversion, agreeableness, consistency, neuroticism and receptivity to experience, while according to the lexical hypothesis the terms are assigned as follows: impulsiveness, agreeableness, consistency, emotional stability and culture or intelligence (Tsaousis et al., 2007).

Another variable is the well-being factor. The well-being is a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional judgments and overall assessments of life satisfaction. The well-being researchers (SWB) consider that only the social indicators do not determine the quality of life. They assume that people react differently to the same circumstances, and evaluate conditions based on their personal expectations, values, and past experiences. While crime statistics and income status are relevant to discussions of quality of life, the subjective element is essential (Anglim et al., 2020; De Kock et al., 2021; Diener et al., 1999). The well-being has many aspects that must be evaluated through overall assessments, moods, memory, psychology, and the individual's emotional state. It can also be assessed through social characteristics and behaviors (Diener, 2000; Lucas & Diener, 2009).

Regarding the relationship between health and well-being, it was found that it depends on the personal assessment of a situation. Especially, when a condition is bad it can negatively affect the well-being. A significant correlation exists between the well-being and religion. A number of studies prove that the well-being is significantly related to religious belief, prayer, the relationship that one develops with the religion element, while religion can give meaning to people's daily lives and serve social goals bringing together people who share common attitudes and values (Anglim et al., 2020; Diener, 2012).

The self-esteem, is the value that one person assigns to oneself as an individual. It is the most important and comprehensive indicator of our self-evaluation, an alternative parameter of positive self-evaluations. It is often the result of opportunistic influences such as happiness, which is why it is more prone than other personality traits to transitory effects which means it is also less stable compared to others. However, it has been found to be stable over time and, like the five personality traits, much of its variability is attributable to the factor of heredity (Erkmen & Esen, 2019; Filosa & Alessandri, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2006).

Research Problem

The purpose of the presented paper was to fill the research gap that exist in Greece concerning the death anxiety in male and female students as well as teachers and to represent the picture of its reality. The main research problem of this study was formulated in the investigation of the five personality factors: religiosity, the well-being and the central mechanism of self-evaluations in the overall performance of death anxiety of students and teachers in Greece.

Research Focus

Around the 1950s, psychology and other related disciplines became interested in death as an object of scientific inquiry (Anwer et al., 2020; Chan & Yap, 2009; Jong et al., 2019). A series of articles in newspapers and books were written around this topic, while, at the same time, it formed the content of courses and seminars for medical students, professionals and paraprofessionals who dealt with aging and death. However, the scientific community was concerned by is the fear of death or the anxiety that the fear of death causes in students and teachers as well as the various factors-variables that shape it.

The death anxiety may arise as a result of environmental influences such as death education programs or everything that is associated with other emotional associations such as general anxiety and depression (Jong et al., 2019). Studies have been done regarding the contribution of personality to increase or decrease well-being (Pyszkowska & Rönnlund, 2021). A happy person is one who is outgoing, optimistic and free from stress. Extraversion and neuroticism have been found to predispose individuals to experience positive and negative life events, respectively (Stoeber et al., 2020).

The self-esteem is closely related to the well-being, although research has found that the correlation was not universal and varied across cultures. The correlation was found to be high in Western societies, but not in cultures that prioritised the group over the individual (Kamushadze et al., 2021; Megawati et al., 2019).

Research Aim and Research Questions

The goal of this study was focused on the role of personality, religion, well-being and the central self-assessment mechanism in the death anxiety of students and teachers in Greece.

The research questions were the following:

- Does the attitude of the male and female students and teachers towards overall stress performance differ?
- Does the psychological health of male and female students and teachers correlates with the overall performance on death anxiety?
- Is there any difference between the three health levels of male and female students and teachers in the overall performance on death anxiety?

Research Methodology

General Background

In this quantitative research took part a sample of male and female students and teachers of high schools in Greece. This approach was favored due to its ability to uncover the underlying factors driving shifts in diverse social scenarios through objective quantification and numerical analysis. It aimed to verify the research questions through numerical data. Data were presented quantitatively with numbers, which were coded, analysed and interpreted with statistical figures, charts and statistical indicators. It highlighted general trends and through the simple random sampling it could be applied to a small sample of population having all the properties for applying the probabilities.

Sample / Participants / Group

In the region of Thessaly which is in the center of Greece there are 98 high schools. In Thessaly there are about 1000 teachers who teach in the last class of high school and about 700 students who are 17 years old. In this survey through the method of random sampling took part 235 students and their teachers. From 235 people, 94 of them were male students and teachers (40%) and 140 were female students/teachers (59.6%). In order to collect the data, the method of probability sampling and specifically the method of simple random sampling were used. In this way, the representativeness of the sample was ensured, in an attempt to gather the characteristics of the population the same probability for all members of the population was included. The questionnaire was sent to high schools of the province and urban centers so as to have a total picture of this topic. The participants were informed through a cover letter which was sent via email before the questionnaire about the anonymity of the research. Then, there was a phone call to remind the deadline of the questionnaire.

The age of the research population ranged from 17 to 63 with a mean age of 37 ($M = 37$, $SD = 10.8$).

Instrument and Procedures

In order to gather the data instruments that were designed to measure death anxiety, religiosity, personality, central mechanism of self-evaluations, and mental and physical health were used. These were numerical and verbal rating scales and questionnaires that included a series of statements to which subjects were asked to agree or disagree.

More specifically, the Death Anxiety Questionnaire (DAQ) developed by Conte et al. (1982) were given to participants. It consisted of 15 items that measured the individuals' attitudes and beliefs toward death. For each item respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they were bothered by choosing between three scales: not at all (score 0), almost (score 1), or very much (score 2). Scores ranged from 0 to 30. The 15 items that made up the DAQ are then summed to produce a composite score.

In order to measure the dimensions of religiosity, a five-item scale "The Duke Religion Index (DRI)" by Koenig which measure the organisational, non-organisational, and internal dimensions of religiosity were used. The responses for the first two personality dimensions were rated on a six-point frequency scale: 1) = never, (2) = once a year or less, (3) = a few times a year, (4) = a few times a month, (5) = once a week, (6) = several times a week, while responses for the internal aspect of religiosity are rated on a five-point frequency scale : (1) = definitely not true and (5) = definitely true.

The personality was measured with the Greek Personality Adjective Checklist (GPAC) created by Tsousis and Georgiadis (2009), which consists of 94 adjectives that have emerged from the study of the Greek vocabulary. This psychometric test includes six scales that are corresponded to the six

personality dimensions. These six dimensions are Negative Valence/Honesty, Agreeableness/Positive Affect, Prowess/Heroism, Introversion/Melancholia, Even Temper and Conscientiousness. GPAC uses a 5-point response scale for the extent to which each adjective is representative (or not) of the persons' personality ("1" not at all representative and "5" very representative).

To measure the core mechanism of self-evaluations, the Core Self-Evaluations Scale (CSES), constructed by Judge et al. (2002) was used. In Greek language, it was adapted to Greek by Tsousis et al. (2007). It includes 12 total questions that activate the central mechanism of self-ratings and ask sample participants to agree or disagree for each statement by completing a 5-point scale (1, strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither disagree/neither agree, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree). Through the answers that constitute the advantage of the specific questionnaire, characteristics, such as neuroticism, self-esteem, general self-sufficiency, control of facts, are estimated. These characteristics are not usually examined together.

Finally, the measurement of physical and psychological health was done with the Cartwright and Cooper (2002) ASSET scale. It is a professional diagnostic tool through which conclusions about physical and psychological health were drawn. The physical health scale includes six items, while the psychological one has 11. Individuals filling in a scale from 1 (= never) to 4 (= very often) are asked to answer how often they experience such situations. High scores on this scale indicate poor mental or psychological health.

All the above scales used to measure the variables of our research were considered reliable and valid tools.

The survey took part in Greece in High schools of secondary education. The ten tools were sent via e mail to students and teachers of high school. Tools were previously classified in the following order: Death Anxiety Scale, Duke Religiosity Scale (DRI), Central Mechanism of Self-Evaluation Scale (CSES), Greek Personality Test, Mental and Psychological Health Scale (Asset). To complete the questionnaires, there were clear instructions at the beginning of each page, while the students and teachers in the sample were informed from the beginning about the purpose and process of the research. In this way, the necessary codes of ethics were respected, ensuring the consent of the participants, but also the observance of their anonymity, as they were not asked to fill in their name but only the demographic characteristics of gender and age.

This survey took place in Greece covering the period from September until December 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

The completion of the questionnaires needed approximately 45 minutes, they were numbered from 1 to 10. After the data were introduced into the SPSS statistical program for further processing and drawing conclusions. Finally, the analysis of the data was done.

Research Results

- Does the attitude of the male and female students and teachers towards overall stress performance differ?

To test this research question in the presence of a categorical variable, such as gender, we proceeded to apply a t-test statistical criterion for independent samples (table 1).

Table 1

Male and female students and teachers towards overall stress performance T- test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t- test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Differences	95% Confidence Lower Upper
Overall performance on death anxiety	Equal variances assumed	,576	,449	-2,922	232	,004	-2,573	,881	-4,308 - ,838
	Equal variances not assumed			-2,881	189,932	,004	-2,573	,893	-4,334 - ,812

Initially, the Levene test for the equality of variances shows that they are equal because the p-value of 0.576 is not statistically significant ($p=0.449$). Therefore, the Equal variances assumed line was used. From the results of the table it was found that the t value (-2.922) was statistically significant ($p=0.004$), since it was less than the lower limit of acceptance ($p=0.05$). Therefore, the male and female students and teachers difference in overall performance on death anxiety was accepted. From the comparison of the averages shown in the first table found that female students as teachers ($M = 28.8$) were more prone to death anxiety than males ($M = 26.2$). The results in a statistical manner are presented as follows: $t(232) = -2,922$, $p = 0,0$

- Does the psychological health of male and female students and teachers correlates with the overall performance on death anxiety?

In order to investigate the above research question, two variables were measured on equally spaced scales and Pearson correlation index was used.

Table 2

Overall performance on death anxiety

		overall performance death anxiety	Psychological Health
overall performance death anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	.325**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	235	235
Psychological Health	Pearson Correlation	.325**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	235	235

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

From the results of the table 2, it is found that the correlation index between overall performance in psychological health and overall performance in death anxiety is $r=0.325$. It is statistically significant and it means that the result is not due to random factors but psychological health is correlated with overall performance in death anxiety. Its direction is positive and the correlation between the two variables is low. The results according to the APA are as follows:

Psychological health and overall performance on death anxiety: $r(235) = 0.325$ $p = 0.000$

- Is there any difference between the three health levels of male and female students and teachers in the overall performance on death anxiety?

In order to study the above research question, the One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used. The following table 3 presents the results of the analysis.

Table 3

Total effect on death anxiety

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
.00	2	30.5000	2.12132	1.50000	11.4407	49.5593	29.00	32.00
Bad	13	29.0000	8.28654	2.29827	23.9925	34.0075	15.00	39.00
Ok	88	29.0455	6.44857	.68742	27.6791	30.4118	15.00	44.00
Good	132	26.7955	6.66967	.58052	25.6470	27.9439	15.00	43.00
Total	235	27.7915	6.72309	.43857	26.9274	28.6555	15.00	44.00

Table 4

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
1.008	3	231	.390

Table 5

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	302.988	3	100.996	2.271	.081
Within Groups	10273.795	231	44.475		
Total	10576.783	234			

From the results of the table 4 “Test of Homogeneity of Variance” it is found that the Levene's Test which examines the similarity of variances is not statistically significant ($p = 0.390$). So the fluctuations are similar or homogeneous. From the results of the table 5 Anova, it is found that the Fhealth value ($= 2.271$) is statistically insignificant ($p = 0.081$) as it is greater than the minimum acceptance limit. According to the APA, the results are presented as follows:

$$F(3, 231) = 2.271, n.s.$$

This means that the averages of the three levels of health, as can be seen from the first table (Descriptives), do not differ significantly from each other. The averages of the three levels of health are as follows:

Bad: M.O.= 29, SD.=8.28, OK: M.O.: 29, SD= 6.44, Good: M.O.: 26.7, SD= 6.66.

It is therefore concluded that the age do not affect the overall performance in death anxiety of male and female students and teachers.

Discussion

The primary objective of this research was to examine a number of variables, such as personality, the central mechanism of self-evaluations, well-being, but also gender, age and other factors for which data were collected, such as anxiety, health, productivity in the overall performance in death anxiety.

More specifically, based on the first question research, it was found that the attitudes of male and female students and teachers differ regarding the overall performance in death anxiety, which means that gender plays a role in the formation of attitudes towards it. The female participants in this survey, particularly, seem to be more prone to the fear of death. However, this result contradicts to those research findings that found that demographic characteristics play a negligible role in death anxiety (Diener et al., 1999; Guo et al., 2022; Megawati et al., 2019; Stoeber et al., 2020; Waugh, 2023).

An exception is the research of Wittkowski (1988) which was carried out on a sample of Catholic women and men, taking into account, however, the variable of religiosity in addition to the gender factor in their perceptions of death. In this research was found that women who had accepted the principles of the Roman Catholic church experienced a stronger fear of their own death and that of others.

Regarding the variable of religiosity, the more researches have reached to unclear and contradictory conclusions as there are many aspects of religiosity that must be taken into account (Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2009; Çavuşoğlu et al., 2023; Neimeyer et al., 2004). However, because the religiosity is taken as one of the traits of a tender and sensitive person who is characterised by psychological stability it may contribute to a comparatively weak treatment of the fear of death and help understanding and forming one's degree of religiosity whether are we afraid of death or not. Therefore, people who have a high sense of religiosity, whether this means belief in God, or participation in religious organisations, prayers, or any other events, have a reduced fear of death. Regarding the variable of psychological health it was found that there is a statistically significant predictive effect on death anxiety. Taking into account that the psychological health consists a series of positive emotions, such as optimism, extroversion, optimistic and positive mood, life satisfaction, emotional stability, it is possible for those people who are psychologically healthy to have reduced fear of death.

Finally, the result of the third research question found that the health and all its levels does not affect the death anxiety agrees to a certain extent with research findings that did not find a relationship between the mental disorder of individuals and the fear of death, but mainly they find relationship in the subjective sense of the well-being (Iverach et al., 2014; Özgüç et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2022). The interpretation of this result, of course, largely depends on the physical health of the patients.

The findings of this research differ a lot from previous surveys despite the fact that this is the first one that took place in Greece and it is about the death anxiety of students and teachers. The main cause of this is related to geographical and cultural factors as well as from social reasons between two sexes that exist in Greek society.

Conclusions and Implications

Thus, it can be concluded that male and female students and teachers differ in their attitude towards death. Female tend to fear the death more than the male. This may happen as female from their nature are more sensitive and anxious. In addition, those male or female who can't control the events that are happening around them have the tend to be more affected from the death of anxiety. Male of female students or teachers who have a high index of self-esteem and a sense of control over events believe that they can resist the fear of death. The anxiety and not the health affects overall performance on death anxiety.

Based on researches that have been done, it was found that there are contradictory and not significant relationships between the fear of death between individuals and the different aspects of religiosity. A significant positive relationship is evident between death acceptance and belief in God. But there are inverse relationships between the fear of death of other people and religiosity. Thus, there is an inverse relationship between religiosity and specific aspects of fear of death (Malik et al., 2015).

In a study conducted by Wittkowski (2016) on a sample of 186 West German Catholics (93 men and 93 women) it was found that there are no significant correlations between fear of one's own death and religiosity for men aged 45-55 years, while on the contrary there were significant correlations between religiosity and faith in God, communication with other believers and participation in religious organisations. Apparently a positive correlation was found between the acceptance of death, either that which has happened or that which will happen with belief in god. At the same time, there are inverse relationships between fear of the death of others and all aspects of religiosity. Regarding the female sample, the researchers concluded that women who were identified with the moral principles of the Catholic church had a high fear of death for themselves and others, however, negative correlations were observed between individuals' religiosity and fear of their own death, but also of those women who participate in religious activities (Wittkowski, 2016).

Regarding the death anxiety, it is observed that healthy, energetic members of an urban center show an optimistic attitude towards their age and life situation, while old, sick people do not show the fear of death. In general, the idea of death appears to be related to personality and subjective sense of well-being as well as life experiences (Fortner, 2018; Neimeyer & VanBrunt, 2018).

The above research is the first one that took place in Greece and especially, is the first one that is concerned with the male and female students and teachers. This survey is referred to correlations. This age group as well as the teachers of high schools haven't been examined in Greek literature For this purpose, this survey aimed to fill the gaps existing in Greece in this field. This survey indicates areas for further research which are needed to solve this topic. Consequently, there are restrictions that should be taken into consideration in future research. The most crucial restriction is the fact that this research used only the quantitative method as well as there was no distinction between students of high schools and their teachers.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the limitations of this research was the small amount of the participants. The participants were people only from the region of Thessaly when Greece has 13 regions. The samples is small and so the finding of significant associations in the data is difficult, as statistical tests usually require a larger sample size to ensure a fair representation. In addition, it is mentioned only to students of 17 years old

and not below this age group. Furthermore, despite the adequacy of the variety of variables that were investigated, the inhomogeneous, mainly, geographical distribution of this sample population was the most important limitation of this survey. The educational level of teachers wasn't examined. These limitations can affect the results. The results of this specific research showed the need and desire of teachers and students for further investigation of this subject. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that there is little previous research on this topic.

Therefore, future research which could include other factors, such as the place of residence of the individuals (city-village) or their educational level, which shape attitudes towards the fear of death could be made. In addition, it could be useful to make a similar research after the end of COVID-19 in order to investigate the attitudes of students and teachers after the pandemic. Last but not least, future researchers should use both qualitative and quantitative methods so as to investigate this controversial issue.

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