A Free Response Test of Interpersonal Effectiveness

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Abstract: Development of the Interpersonal Problem Solving Assessment Technique (IPSAT), College form, is described. Guided by Rotter's Social Learning Theory, problem-solving, and assertiveness research, a semi-structured free response format was designed to assess components of interpersonal effectiveness. The instrument yields patterns of self-reported behaviors in six classes of problematic social situations. A detailed manual enabled reliable scoring of the following response categories: Effectiveness, avoidance, appropriateness, dependency and solution productivity. Scores were not materially affected by sex, verbal ability, or social desirability response sets. Correlations with the College Self-Expression Scale, the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule and the Lanyon Psychological Screening Inventory provided initial evidence of validity. Comparison of mean IPSAT scores of 23 psychotherapy clients with those of 78 normative subjects showed that clients report less interpersonal effectiveness and more avoidance than controls. Implications for utility of the IPSAT are discussed.

The proliferation of therapeutic programs directed toward the enhancement of social skills is aptly described by Hersen and Eisler (1976), this focus being particularly evident in the work of behavioral and social learning oriented clinicians. Although there is abundant clinical and empirical evidence that social competence is relevant to adjustment (Eisler, 1976) the precise role of interpersonal skill deficit in various psychological conditions needs further exploration. Progress has been made in identifying components of social competence (e.g., assertiveness, problem-solving), but these constructs have not been theoretically integrated in any systematic fashion and for the most part remain inadequately measured. Reviews by Rich and Schroeder (1976), Curran (1977), and Eisler (1976) substantiate the continuing paucity of sound technology for social skills assessment. We have been particularly interested in methods which are dependent on self-report because of their potential usefulness and convenience in a variety of research and clinical settings. However, criticisms of existing self-report measures of social skills include obsolete or inconsistent item content, limited generality, vagueness of stimulus referents, neglect of situational variables, and insufficient demonstrations of reliability and validity. With the apparent need for a well designed test of interpersonal effectiveness in mind, the Interpersonal Problem Solving Assessment Technique (IPSAT) was constructed. The IPSAT assesses individual styles of managing interpersonal conflict, yielding patterns of preferred behaviors in six categories of difficult social situations. Such information has clear utility for investigating important components of interpersonal effectiveness, particularly as they relate to psychopathology. IPSAT does not purport to measure every aspect of effective interpersonal problem solving; we recognize the relevance of such qualities as empathy, and nonverbal skills, which are not measured by this test. Clinically, when interpersonal functioning is of concern, the technique has potential use for diagnosis, treatment planning, screening for interpersonal skills training, and
program evaluation. The present article describes the construction of the IPSAT: Test characteristics and initial validity of the college form.

**Theoretical Framework**

Rotter's Social Learning Theory (SLT) provided the major conceptual basis for the IPSAT, offering a system for understanding a wide spectrum of complex social behaviors (Rotter, 1954; Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972). SLT contributions to personality measurement and its view of psychopathology have been particularly relevant to the development of the IPSAT, influencing the selection of the major scoring dimensions as well as the use of a taxonomy of situations.

Phares (1972) has outlined an SLT formulation of psychopathology from which the interpersonal styles representing the major scoring categories of the IPSAT were derived. Each item requires a goal-directed response involving the possibility of social conflict. An individual may respond effectively to the situation or alternatively engage in some form of maladaptive behavior. Effectiveness refers to goal attainment through socially appropriate means as reflected in current definitions of assertiveness (Alberti & Emmons, 1974; Lazarus, 1971). Avoidant behavior may occur if there is an expectancy that approach behavior will produce a negative or unpleasant outcome. Reliance on avoidant behavior may offer the individual immediate relief, but at the expense of long-term satisfaction. In SLT most neurotic behavior is thought of as avoidant. Dependent behavior is viewed as a special case of avoidance in which the individual has learned to rely on others rather than acting autonomously. Excessive and habitual dependency can clearly be maladaptive if helpers are not consistently available or if it leads to social rejection. Inappropriateness refers to a response which constitutes active seeking of the goal, but in a manner which unnecessarily invites negative reactions from others. It may result from learning deficit, inadequate discrimination, or need imbalance as described by Jessor, Liverant, and Opopinski (1963). A person who is characteristically inappropriate may experience an inordinate degree of social censure.

Research on interpersonal problemsolving (Platt & Spivack, 1972; Shure & Spivack, 1972) has focused on the measurement of the generation of alternative courses of action, and has investigated the relationship of this cognitive behavior to psychological adjustment. This research has shown consistently that, among populations varying widely in age, persons labeled as maladjusted produce fewer alternative solutions than normals (Platt & Spivack, 1972; Platt, Altman, & Altman, Note 1).

IPSAT was designed to be an integrative measure, assessing two components of the overall problem-solving process: alternative generation and response selection. As such it provides a vehicle for the investigation of these two components of interpersonal functioning.

**The Interpersonal Problem-Solving Assessment Technique**

**Format**

The Interpersonal Problem-Solving Assessment Technique (IPSAT) is a semi-structured, free response test in which the respondent is presented with a series of 46 problematic interpersonal situations and is asked to imagine being in each at the present moment. Respondents are instructed to write alternative ways of handling each situation and indicate which of these generated solutions they would actually choose.

**Items**

Situations were designed so as to present a clear conflict and goal. They were generated from each of six classes of interpersonal situations, as follows:

1. Authority situations (4 items): represent interactions with persons having perceived power over the respondent.

   **Sample:** Your boss (or teacher) has just criticized a piece of work that you've done, and you think the criticism is unjustified and unfair. What do you do?
2. Socially Distant situations (6 items): represent interactions with persons perceived by the respondent to be markedly different from him/her in one or more significant social dimensions.

Sample: You are attending a community education class in which it happens that you are the only member of your age group. After each class the others tend to break off into groups in which you are not included. Though you would like to be included, you feel like an outsider and are becoming increasingly uncomfortable. What do you do?

3. Peer situations (10 items): represent nonsexual interactions with persons of similar social status to the respondent.

Sample: A good friend of yours has developed the habit lately of including a certain third party in your plans without asking how you feel about it. This person is someone you happen to dislike. What do you do?

4. Personal Request situations (9 items): represent interactions with persons-in-general wherein the aim is securing help.

Sample: You need a ride home from work. A fellow employee, who lives near you, is about to leave and you would like a lift. However, you have some work to finish (which you can't do at home) that will take another 10 minutes. What do you do?

5. Sexual situations (10 items): interactions with others wherein the aim is sexual/romantic contact.

Sample: You would like to have a sexual relationship with a person whom you have dated several times over the past several months. However, you're afraid the feeling is not mutual. What do you do?

6. Contractual situations (7 items): represent interactions with persons bearing perceived obligations toward the respondent.

Sample: Two weeks ago you purchased a new article of clothing in a neighborhood shop which you have patronized several times in the past. Upon wearing it for the second time, you discover that the zipper is broken. What do you do?

Scoring

Using a detailed scoring manual which provides instructions, definitions, and scoring examples, subject's responses are categorized using the following system:

Effective responses: An effective response is one which reflects recognition of the relevant situational conflict and which facilitates attainment of the goal in a reasonable, logical and assertive manner. Occasionally such a response will be at the risk of disapproval, inconvenience, or frustration of another person.

Avoidant responses: An avoidant response is one in which the respondent minimizes the risk of rejection, embarrassment or disapproval by adopting a strategy of inaction, or incomplete action, which is unlikely to lead to goal attainment. A frequent example is one in which the protagonist permits violation of his rights. Avoidance always involves the sacrifice of comforts or satisfaction which by cultural consensus the respondent has every reasonable right to expect.

Inappropriate responses: An inappropriate response to a situation is one which is unnecessarily abrasive, aggressive, intense, or bizarre. It may result in goal attainment or emotional release for the respondent, but it is also likely to result in negative consequences which could have been averted, without sacrifice of the goal, by more appropriate action. As opposed to effective solutions, inappropriate solutions are frequently illogical or needlessly roundabout. Assertiveness directed at an inappropriate target is also scored as inappropriate. Finally, goal attainment accomplished through lying is scored inappropriate.

Dependent responses: A dependent response is one in which the respondent chooses to rely on another person for goal attainment or seeks advice in order to reduce responsibility for actions undertaken.

Unscorable responses: The unscorable category is applied to responses of the following three types: those which represent incomplete or nonsensical thoughts; those which are clearly off the point, i.e., irrelevant to the situa-
tion as described and/or the instructions of the test; and conditional responses, i.e., responses which add conditions not stated in the description of the situation.

The number of chosen solutions scored as Effective, Avoidant, Inappropriate and Dependent is counted, providing a profile of the types of behaviors reported by the subject on the IPSAT. The grand total of responses generated is also computed, yielding an index of the subject’s ability to think of alternative courses of action.

**Study 1**

**Method**

**Subjects.** Subjects were 78 University of Connecticut undergraduates whose participation fulfilled a partial requirement of the introductory psychology course. There were 38 males and 40 females, having a mean age of 18.5 years with a range of 17 to 26. They were recruited for a study described as an effort to collect normative data.

**Procedure for scoring reliability.** To assess scoring reliability, four scorers were used, two males and two females. All were advanced undergraduate psychology majors with grade averages of B+ or better, who received research course credit for participation. Coaching, as well as prior practice in scoring, were moderate. Before being asked to score actual protocols, all scorers were given the most recently revised manual and asked to familiarize themselves with it. A one-hour question and answer session was held, following which scorers began to score the collected protocols. At all times each scorer was blind as to the scorings of the others.

**Procedure for data collection.** The IPSAT plus a battery of other measures was administered to small groups of subjects in counterbalanced order in two sessions. The average intersessions interval was one week. The battery consisted of: the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule or EPPS (Edwards, 1959), the College Self-Expression Scale or CSES (Galassi, DeLo, Galassi, & Bastien, 1974), and the Psychological Screening Inventory or PSI (Lanyon, 1973). In addition, subjects’ scores on the verbal portion of Scholastic Aptitude Test or SAT (Angoff, 1968) were taken as an estimate of their verbal intelligence.

The CSES is a self-report measure of assertiveness, while the EPPS operationalizes 15 needs, several of which overlap in definition with various IPSAT scoring categories. The PSI consists of scales measuring subjective states of alienation and discomfort, plus tendencies toward social nonconformity and extraversion. The Social Desirability Scale, the Defensiveness Scale of the PSI, and the SAT represent variables which were expected to be independent of IPSAT scores.

**Results**

**Characteristics of the IPSAT.** Average reliability among the four scorers was .99 for the total number of solutions, .93 for the Effective scoring category, .97 for the Avoidant, .86 for the Dependent, and .82 for the Unscoreable responses. These are high, except for the latter two, which may be a function of their low frequency of occurrence.

Male and female subjects were not found to differ significantly on any scoring index.

Correlations with the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, the Defensiveness Scale of the Psychiatric Screening Inventory, and Verbal Scale of the Scholastic Aptitude Test are presented in Table 1. Neither social desir-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Social Desirability</th>
<th>Defensiveness</th>
<th>Verbal Aptitude</th>
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<tr>
<td>Effective</td>
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<td>-.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
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<td>.05</td>
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* p < .05.
Table 2
Correlation of IPSAT Scores with College Self-Expression Scale and Edwards Personal Preference Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Inappropriate</th>
<th>Dependent</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
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<td>-.06</td>
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<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Order</td>
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<td>.36**</td>
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<td>-.09</td>
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<td>-.33**</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.18</td>
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<td>-.22*</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<td>.12</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>-.26*</td>
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<td>-.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.
** p < .01.

ability nor defensiveness correlated significantly with any IPSAT scoring index. Subjects’ verbal aptitude correlated significantly only with the number of chosen Dependent solutions (r = .23, p < .05). The IPSAT was independent of dissimulative response sets and, with one exception, scores were not a function of general verbal ability.

Correlations with related measures.

The CSES: As indicated in Table 2, Effective choices correlated positively with self-reported assertiveness (r = .29, p < .01); Avoidant solutions correlated negatively with assertiveness (r = -.42, p < .01).

The EPPS: Table 2 shows the following statistically significant correlation between EPPS needs and IPSAT scores. The number of Effective solutions correlated positively with self-reported Aggression (r = .29, p < .01), and negatively with Order (r = -.25, p < .05) and Succorance (r = -.22, p < .05). The correlation between Effective solutions and Aggression might at face value seem inconsistent with the definition of effectiveness. However, EPPS Aggression is defined by behaviors such as attacking contrary points of view, stating one’s opinion, and disagreeing. We believe that this definition corresponds more closely to IPSAT effectiveness than to “aggression”.

Subjects’ self-reported avoidance of conflict, as reflected in the number of Avoidant solutions, correlated negatively with Exhibition (r = -.33, p < .01), Autonomy (r = -.22, p < .05), Dominance (r = -.23, p < .05), Heterosexuality (r = -.42, p < .01), and Aggression (r = -.26, p < .05). Positive correlations were obtained between Avoidants and Deference (r = .24, p < .05), Abasement (r = .29, p < .01), Endurance (r = .32, p < .01), and Order (r = .36, p < .01). Of all IPSAT indices, the Avoidant score was the most powerful in terms of the number of meaningful and significant relationships with other EPPS variables. With regard to the negative correlation between Avoidance and Heterosexuality, it should be noted that the latter is not a measure of sexual preference, but rather refers to activities such as seeking dates and initiating con-
A Free Response Test of Interpersonal Effectiveness

Table 3
Correlation of IPSAT Scores with Psychological Screening Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSI Scale</th>
<th>IPSAT Index</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Avoidant</th>
<th>Inappropriate</th>
<th>Dependent</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
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<td>.25*</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.20</td>
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<td>Nonconformity</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.16</td>
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<td>Discomfort</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.
** p < .01.

Table 4
Comparison of IPSAT Means for Normal and Clinical Groups

<table>
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<tr>
<th>IPSAT Index</th>
<th>Group</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Clinical Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Normal Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
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<td>29.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>4.00*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>3.89*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>124.3</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>124.4</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .001.

Inappropriate solutions were found to correlate negatively with Nurturance ($r = -.35, p < .01$), and positively with Exhibition ($r = .25, p < .05$) and Heterosexuality ($r = .23, p < .05$). The definition of “Heterosexuality” as used in the EPPS has already been discussed. Exhibition approximates what is generally understood as social extraversion.

Least powerful among the IPSAT indices was the number of Dependent solutions. The low incidence of this category, discussed earlier, undoubtedly contributes to its attenuated predictivity. Dependents correlated positively with Succorance ($r = .22, p < .05$), with which it overlaps considerably in definition, and negatively with Endurance ($r = -.22, p < .05$).

The PSI: Alienation, an indication of more serious emotional dissatisfaction, was negatively related to the number of Effective solutions ($r = -.24, p < .05$), and positively to the number of Avoidant solutions ($r = .25, p < .05$). These data are consistent with definitions, effectiveness implying active goal pursuit and attainment, while avoidance suggests the opposite. Table 3 shows no significant relationships between Discomfort, or overt anxiety, and IPSAT scores although the positive relationship between Avoidance and Discomfort as well as the negative relationship between Effectiveness and Discomfort are directionally as expected. Contrary to expectations, Discomfort was associated with the generation of more solutions ($r = .24, p < .05$).

Study 2

Method

Subjects and procedure. To investigate validity of the IPSAT through the method of known group differences, the normal college student sample of 38 males and 40 females ($n = 78$) for Study 1 was compared to a clinical sample of 23 University of Connecticut students who were currently in psychotherapy at the University Mental Health Service. Client subjects included 14 females and 9 males, approximating the proportion of females to males attending that clinic. Mean age was 21.9 ranging from 18 years to 28 years.
Clients participated voluntarily and were asked by their therapist to complete the IPSAT in two sessions and return it to the clinic within one week. They were informed that the protocols were to be used for research and confidentiality was assured.

Results

Comparisons were made on each of the IPSAT scoring indices. These are presented in Table 4. Consistent with the hypothesized relationship between IPSAT scores and adjustment, it was expected that clinical subjects would score lower in the Effective category and higher on the non-effective indices than control subjects. Study I suggested that the Avoidant score would be particularly discriminating. It was also expected that clients would generate fewer responses than normals.

Table 4 shows that clinical and normal samples of college students yielded patterns of IPSAT means which were significantly different in ways that are clinically meaningful. Normal subjects reported more Effective responses in interpersonal situations while subjects accepted for psychotherapy reportedly are more avoidant of interpersonal conflict and less assertive in pursuing goals. Contrary to expectations, the groups did not differ on the Inappropriate and Dependent scoring categories, nor did they generate significantly different numbers of responses.

Discussion

Because of the free-response format of the IPSAT, investigation of validity was contingent upon adequate inter-scorer reliability. Following three preliminary studies and revisions of the scoring manual, high agreement among scorers was reported in the current investigation. Furthermore, the relative means of all scoring categories reported here have been consistent across the three independent test development samples. Considering that some changes were made in the item content and scoring manual between samples, this lends confidence that IPSAT scoring categories represent reliably quantifiable phenomena.

Initial assessment of validity was based on correlations with other self-report measures of assertiveness (CSES), relevant needs (EPPS), and psychopathology (PSI). This was followed by an investigation of differences between normal and clinical college student samples. These data yielded a pattern of relationships which consistently followed from IPSAT category definitions and its SLT-based view of psychopathology.

The tendency to choose effective action was associated with more assertive and aggressive styles and was counter to alienation. Effectiveness was found to be more prevalent among normal subjects than in the clinical sample. Avoidance was evidently the most powerful scoring category. Avoidant behavior choice was negatively associated with a more extraverted style of responding, including assertiveness and expressiveness, as well as needs for exhibition, autonomy, dominance, heterosexual success, and aggression. Avoidance correlated positively with indications of diminished confidence (alienation, abasement, and deference) and seems related to a more compulsive personal style (order and endurance). The students in Study 2, who were receiving psychotherapy, were clearly more avoidant in their self-reported manner of coping with interpersonal obstacles than were non-clinical subjects. This finding was predictable from the SLT conception of neurosis, which views most behavior labeled neurotic as attempts to avoid conflict and failure.

The support for the Inappropriate and Dependent categories was weak in these samples. Only on the EPPS did they yield some expected relationships with other variables. Inappropriateness correlated with higher exhibitionistic and heterosexual success needs, and was negatively related to nurturance. Dependency was positively related to succorance, negatively to endurance. Total responses, or the ability to generate alternative solutions to problem situations, did not relate meaningfully to any
of the criterion measures and, contrary to expectation, did not differentiate clinical and normal subjects.

There is substantial early evidence of construct validity for the IPSAT Effective and Avoidant categories. The remaining indices are of clinical interest and may yet prove to have utility for more heterogeneous populations such as nonstudent adults and hospitalized patients. None of the scores are materially affected by sex differences nor are they subject to the undue influence of social desirability response sets. IPSAT scores, in the current sample, were found to be independent of subjects’ verbal ability.

The findings in Study 2 support the theoretical link between social effectiveness and adjustment, the present data suggesting that the IPSAT has potential as an instrument for clinical screening and assessment. Providing diagnostic information about interpersonal behavior in a variety of situations, the technique may enhance the planning of treatment strategies for individual clients.

Currently in progress is the development of a form for use with noncollege adult populations as well as validity studies using external behavioral ratings. Evaluation of the meaning of the situational sub-scales is also being studied. These efforts are consistent with the recent recommendations regarding self-report measures of assertiveness offered by Rich and Schroeder (1976).

Reference Note


References


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