

Education as a Source for Transformative Agency: Theoretical and Practical Issues

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Abstract The issue of “transformative agency”, which proactively improves and transforms social structures, is relevant both for theoretical discussions and practical agenda. The field of education is of particular importance in terms of shaping the potential for agency. However, the dominant areas of research in education, including the sociology of education, focus, on the contrary, on the mechanisms and factors of reproduction of social structures and related activities. The authors propose to expand the research agenda by increasing attention to the conditions and mechanisms of the formation of “transformative agency” at different levels of education and in its various segments, with an account of the processes of de-structuration that weaken the forms of institutional coercion familiar to the 20th century. The article raises theoretical questions and suggests relevant empirical phenomena for further research.

Keywords structure-agency, social structures, social institutions, education, human capital, entrepreneurship, transformative agency.

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The structure/agency problem is historically one of the most debated issues in sociology and social theory in general. At the core of the problem is the relationship between the individual and the social environment. Of particular interest in this debate is the potential of agency to transform structures. The analysis of the theoretical debates of recent decades in general sociology reveals a contradiction between the dominant line of discussion, which emphasizes structure over agency, and the need to understand the

empirical reality, which, on the contrary, points to the decline of structures' stability [Sorokin, Mironenko, 2020; Сорокин, Фрумин, 2020; Сорокин, 2021].

The institutions of education have traditionally been of considerable interest to sociologists because of their important role in the reproduction of social structures. Today, given the objectively observed increase in structural volatility (associated, for example, with adaptation to distance modes of social interaction due to the global pandemic), there is an obvious need for a more detailed study of the conditions and mechanisms of agency development, especially the development of transformative agency. It refers to action that does not reproduce structures or respond to structural change in the way determined by these structures, but proactively influences them, sets the direction for their development, modifies them or creates new ones [Sorokin, Froumin 2022; Сорокин, Фрумин, 2020].

Although it would be inaccurate to say that transformative agency is completely ignored in current debates in education, most scholars and practitioners share a specific and rather narrow understanding of this concept and other closely related constructs, which is based on left-wing political ideology (see [Sorokin, Froumin, 2022] for details). Elaborating on the ideas of P. Freire [Freire, 2021], many authors see genuine agency solely as the ability to resist state and market pressures, focusing on the destructive rather than the constructive potential of agency in relation to structures [Haapasari, Engeström, Kerosuo, 2016]. For a long time, this idea has been quite actively developed in the critical theory of education, which sees transforming and even disrupting unjust social hierarchies as a central task [Haapasari, Engeström, Kerosuo, 2016; Фрумин, 1998]. It should be noted that the proponents of the critical theory implicitly assume the stability and rigidity of these structures.

The approach developed in this paper differs in that it asserts more than the importance of education in addressing defects in social structures. We build on the widely- and long-debated argument from the social theory that the stability of structures has been declining [Bauman, 2005]. We observe not just a loosely structured social environment, but one in which the life cycle of structures is getting shorter and change is becoming more frequent and drastic.

In this de-structured social reality, individual agency (proactive action) becomes an important component of social life [Сорокин, 2021]. In the labor market, for instance, not only is there a significant increase in the proportion of the population working outside the traditional corporate sector, including the self-employed and entrepreneurs, but also a growing need for everyone employed, among them company employees, to be proactive in enhancing business processes, forming working groups and teams, improving

products, and so forth. University employees are among those who feel nudged into innovative behavior [Namono, Kemboi, Chepkwony, 2021]. In the social sector, the importance of volunteering and grassroots initiatives of civil society, including young people in general and university students in particular, is increasing — the experience of the global pandemic has demonstrated their critical role in effective crisis management [Земцов, Яськов, 2021].

It should be emphasized that we do not suggest that the current mainstream approach in sociological research on education, which tends to focus on the reproduction of structures, is becoming any less relevant. However, the fact of de-structuration is likely to require a refinement of this research approach too. With this publication, we seek to encourage a debate on this issue.

This paper aims to critically examine and compare the research and practice agenda in education through the lens of the structure/agency problem, justify the need for research programs focused on developing the constructive potential of agency, and outline potential theoretical foundations for this research within and beyond the education debate.

In order to achieve the above aim, we will show below, first, that current educational research is dominated by a structure-oriented perspective that is not optimal for studying and understanding proactive action and individual agency; second, that this research agenda is at variance with several key practical challenges in educational management and education policy that have become urgent due to the pandemic; third, that in the rich body of educational research there are several clusters of ideas and findings relevant to the task of studying and developing agency, but they are not part of the main discourse in education sciences; fourth, that insights from allied sciences, such as economics, can also help to enhance the theoretical and methodological framework for research on corresponding issues in education. We hope that this article will contribute to broadening the debate on agency in educational research.

1. The structure/ agency problem in education

In contemporary social science, the whole coming-of-age period and the first stages of socialization are often seen as a preparation for an adult “journey”, which is assumed to be a succession of certain positions in the social structure. The investigation of the corresponding trajectories — “journeys” through educational and labor market structures — is what constitutes the main body of research in the sociology of education and studies of social mobility [Herbers et al., 2012; Cheng, Song, 2019; Sorokin, Mironenko, 2020].

The education system takes care of individuals until they take up their positions in the main, adult social structure, which includes

the labor market. However, the best known and most cited works in the sociology of education from the mid-twentieth century to the present day, while examining different empirical subjects from different theoretical positions, consistently reveal new dimensions of structure's dominance over agency and demonstrate how education reproduces structures and ensures intergenerational continuity of social positions [Collins, 2000; Coleman, 2019; Bourdieu, Passeron, 1990].

The underlying assumption of this line of research — which is usually confirmed, so that it sometimes seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy — is that structural effects are so much stronger than the potential of a conditionally free action that the latter can be neglected, especially when it comes to children. Those from deprived social groups are much less likely to apply to highly selective universities, even if they have good grades in school, and girls studying medicine at university submit to internal gender discrimination in the profession and willingly — as it might seem to outsiders — choose the less prestigious and less paid pediatrics over surgery or cardiology [Смелзер, 1992]. In recent decades, Russia has developed its own tradition of sociological analysis focused on the reproduction of structures through education. A group of researchers led by D.L. Konstantinovskiy, as well as their followers, have not only empirically shown the existence of a systemic problem of inequality in Russian education but also uncovered its specific features amidst the transition to market institutions [Бессуднов, Куракин, Малик, 2017; Константиновский, 1997; 2020]. Empirical studies of the inequality dynamics in Russian education, including its impact on the choice of profession and the value-motivational sphere, have been conducted by domestic authors since the late 1970s, meaning that these efforts had started long before the current surge of interest in cultural factors of inequality reproduction [Константиновский 1977; 1997]. These studies provide a comprehensive picture of Russian education as an environment for the reproduction of broader socio-economic and socio-cultural processes, which is grounded in rich empirical data and builds on the ideas of the same structure-oriented approach that has been dominant in Western sociology for at least the last three quarter-centuries [Константиновский 2014; Константиновский, Вахштайн, Куракин, 2013].

The above logic, implicit in the vast majority of contemporary sociological theories of education, inequality and culture, is in many respects productive. It helps not only to identify the areas with the most powerful mechanisms of structural discrimination, but also to draft a structural solution to address these areas of injustice. This often yields positive results. In particular, in many developed countries, largely due to governments' targeted efforts and sometimes under pressure from discriminated groups, female en-

rolment in higher education has long exceeded that of males [Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2019]. This can be considered a victory over structural defects and injustices. However, the confidence of many researchers, especially sociologists, in the total, unconditional and inescapable nature of inequality in the modern world often does not allow for adequate consideration of positive changes (see [Гофман, 2004] for details).

The new institutionalism as interpreted by J. Meyer [Meyer, 2010] stands out against the pessimistic approaches to the problem of inequality in the sociology of education. Meyer's theory builds on the assumption that education systems around the world are increasing their coverage and are fairly homogeneous (isomorphic) and introduces the concept of the so-called expanded actorhood. This type of agency is developed mainly through culture and education and transforms (expands) local social environments according to the models determined by the so-called world society. The proposed concept recognizes the important role of individual and group agency and, at the same time, emphasizes the need for a specific supporting socio-cultural context of expanded actorhood that legitimizes the relevant behavior of actors. J. Meyer's approach implies a special role of education systems in the progressive movement of national systems towards the standards of the world society, even when the immediate structural contexts, including the labor market and political systems, do not actually make a demand for expanded actorhood or even hinder its manifestation in students and graduates of tertiary education.

The social science approaches considered, which posit the primacy of "adult" structure over the development of individual agency, do not take sufficient account of the theories and findings from such related science as psychology. In particular, these approaches ignore the data on the laws of child and adolescent development during their interaction with the social environment, obtained many decades ago, such as L. S. Vygotsky's concept of the social situation of development, and neglect dozens of recent papers on the development of autonomy in children and young people [Sutterlüty, Tisdall, 2019; Anderson et al., 2019].

Economics is another discipline with important insights related to the structure/agency problem that have been largely overlooked by educational researchers so far. While appreciating certain economic theories, such as human capital theory, researchers and practitioners in education have failed to consider the fact that in recent years the issue of national welfare factors has been approached not only from the perspective of institutional constraints but also from that of individual agency with a focus on the role of entrepreneurship [Acs et al., 2016].

**2. Practice
education
development
agenda through
the lens
of the structure/
agency problem**

The predominant focus on the mechanisms of structure's dominance over agency in current educational research is not in line with the practice agenda in educational management and education policy. Today, there is already an established and ever growing range of initiatives in the education system that focus on the development of personal characteristics relevant to agency. Of particular note is entrepreneurship education: the debate on it most clearly shows, firstly, that there is an objective mass demand from outside, including the state, for a new type of individual (in this case entrepreneurial) agency, and secondly, that the structure-oriented education system faces serious difficulties when trying to respond to this demand [Sorokin, Froumin, 2022].

Many innovative schools, colleges and universities have made it a priority to develop the entrepreneurial attitude and entrepreneurial skills in their students. Projects of this kind are also being implemented in supplementary education. In Russia, this approach has already resulted in initiatives to develop entrepreneurial ideas in schoolchildren, in business training projects for university students, as well as in the Federal Project "The Platform of University Technological Entrepreneurship". Similar initiatives have been launched in many countries, for example in China [Weiming, Chunyan, Xiaohua, 2016]. The current state of entrepreneurial education has become the subject of a World Bank review report [Valerio, Parton, Robb, 2014].

The expansion of entrepreneurial education can be seen as an adaptation of educational institutions to the new "de-structured" economy, in which even the corporate sector is becoming increasingly interested in employees with entrepreneurial spirit [Cascio, 2019]. At the same time, the actual growth of the informal economy in many countries around the world, including Russia, not only creates more space for agency, which brings about new institutions and structures (including new companies), but also objectively pushes for it. As already mentioned, these processes can be described by the notion of "de-structuration" [Сорокин, Фрумин, 2020].

An equally important trend in the transformation of education in recent years, aimed at helping people autonomously design their journey through the social world, has been the individualization of educational trajectories, when students and even schoolchildren are provided the opportunity to make choices within previously rigid and linear educational programs [Hart, 2016]. Increasing the number of elective elements in the bachelor's trajectory, as well as the introduction of applied bachelor's degree programs are being discussed [Лаврентьева, 2014]. Although the experiences of choice and goal-setting are becoming an important component of personal growth, there is clearly a lack of theoretical models for determining an individual educational trajectory as a result of conscious choice or even a strategy, which would take into account the objectively observed transformation of structures within and outside of education.

A powerful trigger that drew particular attention of researchers to the issue of building and strengthening agency was the pandemic, when traditional structures for managing the educational behavior of schoolchildren and university students — “rules, routines and regulations”, as F. Jackson puts it [Jackson, 1990], — ceased to exist or significantly weakened. Studies conducted in Russia and some other countries have found a positive correlation between engagement in forced remote learning and abilities for self-organization and proactive participation in informal student groups [Thiry, Hug, 2021; Земцов, Яськов, 2021].

The pandemic has revealed a deficit of both theoretical conceptualization of and empirical research into agency development. The dominant agenda of theoretical debate and research in education poorly meets this demand from practice. Its focus remains on the reproduction of social structures through education. Some researchers positively assess structural determinism and, for example, propose to train individuals based on corresponding cells in the matrix of labor market positions [Kuzminov, Sorokin, Froumin, 2019]. Others assess the dominance of structures critically and call for disrupting allegedly stable and unjust hierarchies [Sorokin, Froumin, 2022]. In both cases, however, an individual's agency aimed at determining his or her own trajectory and shaping new social structures and institutions is given little attention.

Next, we will consider educational research studies that take a different approach by focusing on the development of autonomy, agency and transformative action.

**3. Research
on transformative
agency
in education: from
Rousseau
to critical theories
of education**

J.J. Rousseau was one of the first to articulate the idea of educating a free individual who would build a society of free people, which was further developed by such influential thinkers as L. Tolstoy, D. Dewey, and many others. Due to the criticism of the formal education system by “free educators”, school practices transformed towards valuing learners' autonomy and initiative. However, these changes have been overlooked by educational researchers in recent decades.

School leavers and, above all, university graduates have been actively involved in social change, for instance, the university students in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries in Russia or the youth in Europe and the United States in the 1960s [Bowles, Gintis, 1976]. Over half a century ago, B. Clark and M. Trow described four student subcultures, one of which was “non-conformist” [Clark, Trow, 1966]. However, they viewed nonconformists more as a problem for universities than as a potential source for the positive transformation of both students and universities. The existence of two fundamentally different university “products” — conformists and entrepreneurs (reformers) — has not yet been suffi-

ciently explored in educational research. This may be partly due to the fact that universities usually do not consider raising entrepreneurs (reformers) as a positive outcome [Dahlum, Wig, 2019].

Within the long-standing debate on non-conformism in universities, authors who draw on the idea that universities in particular and education in general can be drivers of social transformation usually understand transformation firstly as revolutionary rather than evolutionary development, and secondly as a result not so much of individual efforts but rather of objective structural dynamics (e.g., as conceptualized in Marxism), for which the “material” is no longer proletariat but students [Klees, 2017; 2016].

Critical theories of education remain central to the debate on the transformative potential — both the potential of education to transform other institutions and the potential of individual agency to transform social structure [Мак-Ларен, 2007; Gottesman, 2016; Haapasaari, Engeström, Kerosuo, 2016]. Aiming to address injustice and discrimination, they explore the limits of resistance to systems of domination, as well as the possible contribution of education. These works feature an important concept of transformative agency [Haapasaari, Engeström, Kerosuo, 2016], along with some other concepts, such as relational agency, expansive agency [Ibid.], and transformational resistance [Bajaj, 2009]. According to contemporary sociologists of education, “the idea of transformative agency is akin to Freire’s assertion that education must heighten students’ critical consciousness as they come to analyze their place in an unequal world” [Bajaj, 2009. P. 553; Correa, Murphy-Graham, 2019].

Thus, the majority of contemporary researchers and practitioners who work in the framework of critical theory associate agency primarily with overcoming inequality and other structural problems through protest action. An important element here is the “enemy image”, where the enemy is understood as unjust structures — the state and the capitalist system (market) [Klees, 2017; 2016]. This perspective has an objective historical basis, in particular, the social movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, but is arguably narrow in the context of de-structuration, which is eroding previously rigid forms of social organization in both work and education.

3.1. New
approaches
to the study
of transformative
agency
in education
sciences

In recent decades, the sociology of education has produced a body of relevant work that goes beyond the traditional critical theories with their characteristic limitations, as described above. These works represent two relatively broad research directions: the study of agency in education that is not limited to the critical theory [Klemenčič, 2017], and the study of resilience [Wosnitza et al., 2018]. So far, the “non-critical” studies of agency are largely concerned with the relationship between the learner as an agent and the educa-

tional structure, as well as with resistance to structures in education. When examining the development of positive transformative agency, researchers working within this paradigm do not consider the application of agency outside of education. In this respect, their focus is considerably narrower than that of critical theorists. Their understanding of agency is also common for the international expert agenda, for instance, the current OECD's rhetoric on education [Сорокин, Зыкова, 2021].

At the same time, the trend towards individualization of education is gradually sparking researchers' interest in the positive aspects of agency. For instance, W. Fischman and H. Gardner identify in their new book a transformational type of educational behavior, recognizing its positive effects on the university and peers [Fischman, Gardner, 2022].

As for resilience, this personal characteristic is usually seen as derived from other social environments and structures, rather than intentionally developed within the education system [Wosnitza et al., 2018]. This is understandable: researchers of resilience focus on learners and organizations in difficult circumstances that are often regarded as potential targets of support interventions, especially in the non-Russian literature. This research perspective allows for an in-depth analysis of the structural barriers that these learners and organizations have to overcome on their way to success, interpreted primarily as the achievement of formal educational outcomes [Wosnitza et al., 2018]. At the same time, it also limits the possibility to consider factors other than structural social policy interventions that contribute to resilience development.

Thus, the participants in the debate on transformative agency in education include, on the one hand, representatives of classical critical theories who see education as a means of confronting the injustices of dominant macrostructures, and, on the other hand, authors of a growing segment of research on agency and resilience who overlook events outside educational institutions, as well as the potential of education to develop corresponding types of agency as stable personality traits.

The processes of de-structuration both within and outside of education are increasing the need for new theoretical and practical insights. Under current conditions, we need to explore not only the mechanisms of social reproduction or individual mobility through education, but also the prospects of increasing the contribution of education to structural transformations at the meso- and macro-level, with a focus not on destructive revolutionary transformations that disrupt social order, but on constructive evolutionary ones. New practices and forms of constructive interaction based on grassroots, primarily individual initiative can be a powerful response to the de-structured social reality. In order to understand

the prospects of theoretical and applied research on constructive transformative agency (and the possible contribution of education to its development), it is advisable to refer to an allied discipline — economics.

4. Economic theory approaches relevant to research on transformative agency in education

The allied sciences offer promising insights for responding to the challenge posed to educational research by a new, de-structured social reality. Due to the limited scope of this article, we will focus on the potential of integrating some ideas from economics into educational research, leaving psychology and other sciences aside.

One of the concepts that could contribute to the debate in educational research is that of the entrepreneurial aspect of human capital proposed by T. Schultz [Schultz 1975]. His approach differs from other interpretations of human capital better known to education specialists in that it rejects the idea that human capital automatically and unambiguously responds to the labor market situation and other institutional incentives [Becker, 2009]. Even when there is direct market demand, far from everyone is willing to relocate to another city, retrain for a new profession, and change jobs in search of a better life. T. Schultz suggested that the education system develops the “allocative ability” (the ability to proactively use one’s resources) and thus increases human efficiency in times of rapid change, uncertainty and risk [Piazza-Georgi, 2002].

Economics offers a perspective on the relationship between structure and agency that differs from that dominating the educational studies, discussed above and associated primarily with the sociological tradition. For example, J. Schumpeter’s concept of creative destruction focuses on innovation and entrepreneurship. According to this concept, the transformation and even destruction of existing economic standards and practices is a prerequisite for progress. However, in J. Schumpeter’s logic, the education system cannot be a source of transformative agency, for he believed that the capacity for creative destruction as a personal characteristic is exogenous to the social system, including education [Piazza-Georgi, 2002]. His approach implies that, at best, the education system will not get in the way of innovative individuals. (Unfortunately, in practice the opposite is sometimes true.)

Over the last 30 years, there has been a lively debate in economic science about the causes of economic growth. Based on the work of modern economist Zoltan Acs and his colleagues [Acs et al., 2016; 2018], we can conclude that the point of contention in this debate is the relationship between the historically established institutional environment (consisting of companies, universities, research centers, the state, as well as the connections between them and the corresponding “rules of the game”, such as laws and infor-

mal traditions) and the entrepreneurial activity of individual actors in this system. The similarities between this issue and the structure/agency problem in sociology are easy to see. However, while sociological theoretical models still give priority to structures, economists tend to consider individual agency as a central phenomenon of socio-economic development [Ibid.]. When explaining macroeconomic dynamics, the increasingly popular theory of national systems of entrepreneurship [Acs et al., 2016] distances itself from earlier theories, such as the theory of national systems of innovation, offering a new understanding of the role of individual agency. For instance, Z. Acs notes that according to the once influential theory of systems of innovation, the institutions that determine a country's innovation performance are inherited from the past, rather than constructed in the present [Ibid., P. 529].

Reviewing the earlier economic science literature, Z. Acs [Ibid, P. 529] criticizes the Austrian school of economics for devoting insufficient attention to how individual agency and institutions are related. The second half of the 20th century saw the popularity of Israel Kirzner's understanding of entrepreneurship. In contrast to the earlier ideas of J. Schumpeter, for I. Kirzner, the role of the entrepreneur was not so much in proactively disturbing the economic equilibrium, as in being the first to "discover that there is no equilibrium" (as cited in [Ibid, P. 529]). Thus, the actual engine of development is not agency as the primary source of transformation, but the understanding and usage of "natural" dynamics of the market and related structures.

The theory of national systems of entrepreneurship tries to address this limitation by placing individual agency represented by entrepreneurial activity at the center of models that explain macroeconomic dynamics (e.g., [Lafuente et al., 2019]), while also acknowledging the role of the institutional environment. Proponents of this theory argue that it is not so much the number of "formal" entrepreneurs that matters, but rather the qualitative characteristics of their activities, such as orientation towards global markets and the use of innovative technologies.

The theory of national systems of entrepreneurship is in its formative stage and is as yet far from being dominant in economic science. Moreover, from a sociological point of view, its understanding of agency is too narrow. It is true for both the content of agency (the theory focuses exclusively on entrepreneurial activity) and its effects (the focus is on traditional macroeconomic indicators). At the same time, as shown in our analysis (see also [Сорокин, Фрумин, 2020; Сорокин, 2021]), sociology in general and sociology of education in particular are at an even earlier stage in recognizing the role of agency. We hope that the present work will stimulate the development of new conceptual models and empirical research that will

contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of individual transformative agency in societal development and the role of education in supporting this agency.

Fostering interdisciplinary dialogue can help not only to develop agency theories in sociology and education sciences but also to advance economic research. In particular, the sociological understanding of structures and systems of stratification is significantly more comprehensive and complete than the economic categories of the market and market equilibrium. In its turn, T. Schulz's idea of the entrepreneurial aspect of human capital as an ability to act proactively in a rapidly changing environment can be further developed by sociologists who examine various domains (not only economic) as a space where transformative agency manifests itself. Probably, the most valuable contribution that the sociology of education can make is to help identify specific indicators and mechanisms of transformative agency development. In particular, these insights may prove useful in actively developing research on entrepreneurship education, which, considering the above-mentioned insights of Z. Acs, plays an important role in ensuring success at the individual level, as well as economic growth at the macro-level [Nabi, 2017].

5. Conclusion The analysis provided above demonstrates the need for an expanded understanding of education's role in socio-economic dynamics: education can not only support individual mobility across the levels of the "social building", but also develop the individual's capacity to transform this building, leading among other to improved welfare at the aggregate level. This understanding of the functions of education creates a demand for research not only into the mechanisms of structural domination but also into agency aimed at improving, rebuilding or replacing these structures.

A deeper understanding of education's role in socio-economic dynamics also implies the need to revise the content of education: next to the acquisition of specific specialized knowledge and competencies required to function successfully in the present-day structure, it should also ensure the development of agency and entrepreneurial skills in their broadest sense (the entrepreneurial aspect of human capital), which are especially important in times of rapid structural change.

Unfortunately, both in Russia and globally, there is currently a lack of consensus on effective practices for developing these skills, as well as on corresponding measurement tools. Reaching a consensus on this is another goal of research in the sociology of education and related disciplines that is of high practical relevance. We argue that there are three interrelated characteristics of transformative agency that should be considered in these efforts.

First, transformative agency is of complex nature: it can be represented by attributes (indicators) of different kinds and levels. In particular, the ability to resist negative influences of the environment may be considered as one dimension (or stage) of transformative agency, while the ability to proactively create new structures may represent another (see [Сорокин, Зыкова, 2021] for details).

Secondly, the development of the capacity for transformative agency is a dynamic process. Different stages of personality development through the education system may require not only different metrics to assess the dimensions of agency, but also different approaches to their development in practice. These tasks require contributions from psychologists, including the followers of L. S. Vygotsky's ideas (see [Mironenko, Sorokin, 2020]).

Thirdly, the effects of transformative agency are also complex, and indirect effects that are evident over time (e.g., changes in labor market behavior of young people as a result of the mass acquisition of basic skills related to business planning) may be more important than immediate results (e.g., number of business projects launched as a result of a specific educational initiative).

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