
Family Experiences of Central American Refugees Who Overestimate Intergenerational Gaps

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to assess the role of perception in shaping family realities after immigration. Research participants included six Central American parent-adolescent dyads who perceived each other to be further apart in their acceptance of cultural change than indicated by their self-ratings of behavioural shifts toward Western norms. The parents and adolescents were interviewed individually about family relationships after migration. Three themes emerged from parents' interview responses: (a) the perceived erosion of familism, (b) parenting stress, and (c) taking back control. Adolescents' interview responses revealed two themes: (a) family conflict, and (b) attachment and dependency in family relationships. Implications for counselling are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Le but de la présente étude était d'évaluer le rôle de la perception dans le façonnement des réalités familiales après l'immigration. Les participants à cette recherche comptaient six dyades parent-adolescent de l'Amérique centrale dont les parents et les adolescents avaient la perception d'avoir des niveaux différents d'acceptation des changements culturels. Les différences perçues étaient plus grandes que celles indiquées par l'auto-évaluation effectuée par les dyades concernant leurs comportements orientés vers les normes occidentales. On a interrogé séparément les parents et les adolescents sur les relations familiales après la migration. Les réponses fournies par les parents lors de l'entrevue étaient centrées sur trois thèmes : (a) l'érosion perçue du familisme, (b) le stress associé au rôle parental et (c) l'affirmation de l'autorité parentale. Les réponses fournies par les adolescents lors de l'entrevue ont révélé deux thèmes : (a) le conflit familial et (b) les liens et la dépendance au sein des relations familiales. L'article en étudie les implications pour le counseling.

Central Americans are one of the five non-European immigrant groups most represented in Canadian society (Statistics Canada, 2001). The majority of them have come to Canada as refugees (Dona & Berry, 1994; Gleave & Manes, 1990; Sanchez, 2003), escaping from political violence in their countries of origin. Their Hispanic culture differs from North American culture in its emphasis on family-oriented versus individualistic values, the hierarchical nature of personal and family relationships, and norms for interaction and expression (Gleave & Manes; Hernandez, 1996; Sue & Sue, 2003). The cultural transition process in a new society has been found to be particularly challenging for refugee families from cultures distinct from the host culture (Roizblatt & Pilowsky, 1996). This has been attributed to a combination of the parents' heightened attachment to the ideals of their home countries after forced resettlement, along with the opposing

pressures that adolescents experience to assimilate in the school environment (Roizblatt & Pilowsky).

Discrepancies between parents' and adolescents' levels of behaviour change toward Western norms have been related to a variety of outcomes, including: (a) adolescents being subject to different behavioural demands in the home and school contexts which may interfere with the development of a consolidated identity (Pruegger, 1995); (b) declines in perceived parenting efficacy due to problems transmitting cultural values to children (Baptiste, 1993; Hernandez, 1996; Roizblatt & Pilowsky, 1996); and (c) a reduction in perceived family support and cohesion (Baptiste; Gil & Vega, 1996; Hernandez; Hovey & King, 1996).

It appears that family processes and outcomes may be shaped by the limited information that parents and adolescents have about each other. Hernandez (1996) identified a link between the premigration experiences of Central American refugees and their family communication patterns during the resettlement process. He reported that Central American refugee parents' attempts to conceal from their adolescents the adverse life events they experienced or witnessed in their countries of origin, and their associated psychological symptoms, often reduce the degree of parent-adolescent dialogue in the family system. This change in family interaction patterns can impair family members' abilities to form accurate judgements of each others' viewpoints, motivations, and behaviours. Misunderstandings and family conflicts may develop in these circumstances (Hernandez).

Two other factors may compound family members' difficulties in assessing each others' stance regarding cultural change. First, when compared to their second-generation peers, first-generation Hispanic immigrant adolescents have been found to be significantly less likely to openly disagree with their parents during family discussions (Fuligni & Tseng, 1999). This has been attributed to their lower acculturation status and greater tendency to adhere to cultural norms surrounding respect for parental authority. Second, the shift from parents to peers as the primary agents of socialization during the developmental stage of adolescence may decrease youths' frequency of attending to parental behaviour and affective states (Erikson, 1963; Muuss, 1988).

In a study of Hispanic refugee families from Central and South America, Merali (2002) found that neither parents nor adolescents appraised each others' level of acceptance of cultural change correctly. When asked to rate the degree of acceptability of behavioural changes toward Western norms in the areas of individualism/autonomy, interaction patterns, friendship and dating preferences, language use, and style of dress from both their own perspective and the perceived perspective of the other family member, many parents and adolescents significantly overestimated the degree of intergenerational gaps. For example, some parents judged their adolescents to be more accepting than they were of behaviours such as interracial dating and moving out on one's own prior to marriage, when the adolescents' self-ratings of these behaviours matched the views of their parents.

The theory of acculturation (culture contact and change) posits that perception plays a mediating role in shaping how the cultural transition process is experienced

(Berry, 2003). It is proposed that when people perceive discrepancies between their own cultural status and that of others or the demands of their social environment, they are likely to experience the cultural transition process as particularly challenging or difficult. The family represents one's most immediate social context, making it extremely important to understand how family members' perceptions of each other relate to their family experiences during the resettlement phase.

The purpose of this study was to investigate, through the use of the multiple case study approach (Rosenwald, 1988), the family experiences of Central American refugee parents and adolescents who overestimate intergenerational gaps. This approach allows the researcher to develop a detailed understanding of each family member's perspective on the parent-adolescent relationship in cultural transition. The experiences of several parent-adolescent dyads are synthesized to identify common family interaction patterns, relationship characteristics, or coping strategies. Each parent's and adolescent's interview represents a case example. The guiding research question was: What are the refugees' family relationships and experiences like during the cultural transition process?

METHOD

Participants

Study participants were recruited through the screening process for a cultural integration program being offered by a settlement agency in a major Canadian city. Current and former agency clients were invited to participate in the program by becoming involved in parent and youth support groups that aimed to assist them with cultural adaptation issues.

The Behaviour Questionnaire (Merali & Violato, 2002) was administered to Hispanic refugee parents and adolescents from Central America during the screening process, under the guidance of a bilingual, Spanish-speaking settlement counsellor. Both English and Spanish versions of the instrument were made available to participants to account for variable levels of first- and second-language proficiency. The questionnaire consists of 24 items that solicit Likert ratings of the degree of acceptability of prototypical behavioural changes toward Western norms (1 = completely unacceptable, 5 = completely acceptable). Factor analysis has grouped the questionnaire items into four dimensions: Personal Autonomy (e.g., spending more time with friends than family and moving out of the family home), Interaction/Expression (e.g., interracial friendships, dating, and assertive behaviour), Western Cultural Participation (e.g., English language use, food choice, style of dress, and involvement in Western cultural festivals), and Western Cultural Entrenchment, reflecting deeper level cultural changes such as the adoption of materialistic behaviour (Merali, 1996). The Behaviour Questionnaire has high internal consistency; Cronbach's alphas of .91 and .93 for ratings of male and female adolescents' behaviours have been reported (Merali & Violato).

As in the Merali (2002) study, the Hispanic parents and adolescents were asked to rate the degree to which their parent or adolescent child views the behaviours to be acceptable and the degree to which they themselves view the behaviours as acceptable. This allows for the calculation of both an actual intergenerational difference score (obtained by subtracting parents' self-ratings of the behavioural changes from adolescents' self-ratings) and a perceived intergenerational difference score (obtained by subtracting each person's self-rating score from the perceived score for the other family member). Dyads where both the parent's and adolescent's perceived intergenerational difference score was a minimum of 15 points higher than the actual intergenerational difference score were invited to participate in this research. This was the mean difference found to be statistically significant in the Merali study. An overestimation of intergenerational differences reflected a judgement by the parent and adolescent that they are further apart in their acceptance of cultural change than both of their Behaviour Questionnaire self-ratings suggest.

Family demographic profiles. Six Hispanic parent-adolescent dyads participated in the research study (a total of 12 individual participants). All of them were self-reported refugees. The profiles of their families are presented below. Pseudonyms have been inserted in place of their real names.

Esperanza, a 31-year-old, divorced single mother, moved to Canada from El Salvador with her 13-year-old son, Hector, one year ago. Esperanza works in a grocery store deli to help support herself, Hector, and her mother, father, and 24-year-old brother, with whom they share a home.

Welma, a 49-year-old, married mother of three from Nicaragua, arrived in Canada with her family five years ago. She has one adolescent daughter (Karla, 14 years), and two young adult children, ages 23 and 21. Welma is currently a full-time graduate student in engineering. She lives in a nuclear family home.

Pablo, a 40-year-old, married father of two, moved to Canada from Guatemala six years ago with his family. He has two sons, one who is 8 years of age, and one adolescent who shares his name (Pablo, 16 years). He reported that he was a successful accountant in his country of origin, but is currently unemployed. Pablo's family lives in a nuclear family home.

Anna Maria, a 42-year-old, married mother of two moved to Canada from Guatemala four years ago. She lives with her husband, teenage daughter, Adella, 14, and 10-year-old son. She completed a social work degree in Guatemala, and is currently upgrading to gain recognition of her foreign credentials in Canada.

Ligia, a 46-year-old, married mother of three, left El Salvador to come to Canada with her family three years ago. She lives with her husband and stays home to care for her two daughters, ages 9 and 6. She has one adolescent son, Carlos, who is 17 years of age.

Conchita, a 36-year-old, separated, single mother of three, came to Canada from El Salvador five years ago. She currently lives with her mother, father, young daughter (age 7), son (age 9), and her adolescent daughter, Melissa (age 18). Conchita completed junior high in Guatemala. Currently, she is looking for work.

The Interview Process

Pernice (1994) reported that refugees are most receptive to participating in research studies when the studies occur in contexts that are familiar to them and involve members of their own cultural communities. This research was conducted on-site at the settlement agency offering the cultural integration program. The study was implemented with the assistance of a bilingual Hispanic settlement counsellor from El Salvador and a Canadian-born youth support worker, reflecting the two cultures that refugees attempt to balance in their adaptation to the new society. They jointly attended a three-hour training session facilitated by the researcher to discuss the interview process, the opening questions, follow-up inquiries, and participant confidentiality.

The parents were interviewed in Spanish by the Hispanic settlement counsellor, while the adolescents were simultaneously interviewed in English by the youth support worker in a different room. Each interview was one hour in length. The interviews were coordinated by the settlement counsellor and youth worker, who compared family members' availability with openings in their work schedules. The decision to interview parents in their first language and adolescents in English was based on the results of past research. Adolescents have been found to acquire the English language more rapidly than their parents (Baptiste, 1993). When Merali (1996) tracked the number of Hispanic participants who chose to respond to the English and Spanish versions of the Behaviour Questionnaire in her study, she found that almost all youth responded in English, whereas their parents preferred using their first language.

In the interviews, the parents and adolescents were asked three questions to generate rich descriptions of their family experiences and their responses to perceived changes in the parent-adolescent relationship after migration:

1. What is your relationship with your teenager/parent like?
2. How is your relationship the same or different from how it was in your country of origin?
3. How do you deal with any changes that have happened?

Follow-up questions were generated based on participants' responses to these initial inquiries. The follow-up questions dealt with family members' perceptions of each other, how they perceived the family's cultural transition process, and how they were affected by changes that had occurred within the family system.

Two bilingual Hispanic staff members at the settlement agency acted as recorders during the interview process. They documented the verbatim responses of the participants to each interview question by hand. One wrote down the parents' interview responses over the full one-hour period, while the other wrote down the adolescents' disclosures over the same time period. At the end of each interview, the transcript content was read aloud to verify its accuracy. The parents' interview responses were initially written in Spanish. After the interviews were completed, the bilingual assistant created English transcripts using the process of forward and backward translation (Larson, 1984); the Spanish transcripts were

first translated into English and then translated back to Spanish to check their accuracy against the original Spanish transcripts.

A tape recorder was not used in the interview process because previous research on refugee groups with premigration experiences similar to those of Central Americans has documented participants' concerns about having their disclosures linked to their personal identities. These concerns have stemmed from situations where assurances of confidentiality and anonymity have been violated by authorities in their countries of origin (Pernice, 1994). Handwritten transcripts of interviews would not contain any visual or auditory cues about the participants' identities.

Qualitative Analysis

The interview transcripts were interpreted by the researcher through collaborative discussion with the interviewers. The researcher approached the interpretation process from a stance of intellectual curiosity about how family members' perceptions of each other relate to the family's experience of the cultural transition process. The transcripts from the parent and adolescent interviews were separately examined to identify experiences or processes that were common to each family member's perspective, using Smith's (1996) method of interpretive phenomenological analysis. This procedure involves excerpting salient or repeated ideas from each individual's interview transcript and generating organizational categories under which they can be subsumed. Subsequently, thematic constructions for each participant are examined together with those of other participants to detect patterns in the research data. These patterns are then labelled to reflect the shared ideas they represent. For example, the majority of the parents' interview transcripts included statements suggesting that they were finding it difficult to prevent their children from changing their behaviours toward Western norms. In the context of these statements, they reported experiencing negative emotions related to their struggles with the parenting process. These conceptually related statements were grouped together under a theme labelled "Parenting Stress."

The Spanish-speaking settlement counsellor and youth worker who conducted the interviews presented emerging themes to the participants for verification or modification in follow-up phone calls. Participants expressed that the themes accurately captured their family experiences. These themes are discussed in the results section, supported by excerpts from participants' interview responses.

RESULTS

Parents

Theme 1: The perceived erosion of family values. The Hispanic parents expressed their concerns about the negative impact of Canadian culture on their children. Their concerns focused on the emphasis on individualism rather than familism in the Canadian context. The parents strongly conveyed the perception that the

individual orientation of Canadian society results in a series of undesirable outcomes. These perceived outcomes included a lack of family unity, disrespect of parents, and an inappropriate level of personal freedom, which counteracts moral and culturally appropriate behaviour. Furthermore, the parents collectively identified the school system as the catalyst for promoting change away from traditional Hispanic values. The following statements attest to the parents' concerns:

In Canadian culture, [it] seems like there is no close relationship between parents and their children and that is one thing that we try to avoid in our family. The culture's and school influence is very different here because children do not respect their parents. (Ligia)

Customs are completely different and it is hard to prevent—[to] fight the daily pressure from others on our children in school. In the school, children are very influenced by their peers who are too liberal and disrespectful. Education in Canada is very permissive. Moral values and principles are very important to us, so this is a completely different style of life here. (Pablo)

Theme 2: Parenting stress. The parents used several descriptors to convey the emotional distress they experienced in the parent-adolescent relationship due to their adolescents' behavioural shifts toward Western norms. Specific emotion labels generated were "sadness," "agony," "fear," "craziness," and "desperation." Their disclosures suggested that the parenting process was a source of significant stress for them. Consistent with this interpretation, the words of the parents made it clear that they felt intensely challenged in the parenting role. The following statements elucidate the parents' negative affect:

It is an agony and fear in trying to look after the children and help them to look for a good way to live since they are already starting to lose their cultural roots. (Conchita)

It's very difficult on many occasions. The children always want to behave and do what other kids do in this country. Children here do not respect anyone, and it makes me very sad that my children are learning these bad things. (Welma)

Sometimes I feel like going crazy, desperate. It is hard to avoid the bad influences on our children—to resist takes all my energy and time. (Anna Maria)

Theme 3: Taking back control. The parents expressed that they were not willing to passively respond to the negative influences of Canadian culture on their children. They described the parenting strategies they used to actively exert their own influence on the family's cultural transition process. These strategies tended to involve increasing parental supervision and monitoring of child behaviour and countering the formal educational experiences of their adolescents with informal religious and cultural education at home. According to the Hispanic parents' interview responses, parental monitoring and supervision tended to involve one or both of two different actions: increasing the amount of time spent with adolescents in the home in order to gauge the degree of retention of Hispanic cultural values, and assuming a "chaperone" role in social activities pursued outside of the home. The parents' interview responses pointing to this coping strategy are:

We encourage our children to bring home their friends—in that way they can socialize and know better their friends. This lets us know who are their friends and what are they like and what do they do together ... We take our children everywhere and go with them—we bring them to go to the theatre, to go eat somewhere, and parties. (Anna Maria)

We have a good relationship but there are many problems. I would feel better if I had more time to share and see what my son is doing. I am trying to be less busy with work so I can do this and be with him as much as I can. It is important for him to know how to integrate into the society but to avoid conflicts with our culture and values. (Esperanza)

The Hispanic parents described home-based cultural education as a necessary supplement to parental monitoring. They emphasized that the focus of family-based educational efforts should be on teaching respect for parents, peaceful coexistence, and biblical principles:

To maintain our place as parents, maintain respect and values as well as peace and tranquility in the home is hard. Overall, maintaining the kind of education we got from our parents at home about our cultural values is the most important way. (Welma)

Because we know more (than them), we are better able to guide our children to keep with our culture in what we teach them at home about respect for family and religion rather than what they see and learn at school. We need to maintain and teach them our biblical principles. (Pablo)

Adolescents

Theme 1: Family conflict. The Hispanic adolescents characterized the parent-adolescent relationship as conflictual. They described family conflicts beginning with the adolescent engaging in a behaviour disapproved of by the parent, followed by parental attempts to demand alternate behaviours. From their disclosures, the adolescents' responses to their parents' reactions to their behaviour seemed to take two forms: (a) talking back to parents to express disagreement with the demand for behaviour change, or (b) concealing specific behaviours engaged in outside of the home. The following statements by the adolescents describe their conflict experiences:

There is more tension (in the family) now since coming to Canada. Mom will demand me to do things like go and spend time with friends from our group (culture) when I want to be with my other friends and when I say no, she will say "Right Now" and we have a fight because I say "No." (Hector)

Things like dating and other things I do, I wouldn't share with her (my mom)—she would probably freak out if I told her about it—I know what her reaction would be. We are always fighting. (Melissa)

Things are going okay—sometimes conflict now, small fights. Like about talking English at home. This is a new thing since coming to Canada ... I just stand up for myself and do what I like to do or I just don't tell them (my parents) what I do. (Pablo)

The Hispanic adolescents shared that the limited behaviour changes made after moving to Canada became the source of family conflicts. These changes were precipitated by incidents of racism and social exclusion the adolescents experienced at school. Melissa, Hector, Carlos, Adella, and Pablo all described

situations where they were teased and left out by other youth because of their awkward speech when they were initially learning to speak English, and for being and hanging out with other “Spics” (the word they said others used to refer to Spanish-speaking Hispanics at school). The youth reported that behaviour changes helped them to gain social acceptance and strengthened their sense of self. The specific changes they mentioned were speaking English in the home to practice more, affiliating with Canadian peers, and interracial dating.

Theme 2: Dependency and attachment. Despite their reported experiences of family conflict, the adolescents expressed feelings of closeness in the parent-adolescent relationship. The adolescents’ interview responses corroborated the parents’ reported strategy of increased parental involvement in adolescents’ lives. Adolescents told the interviewers that they spend more time with their parents since they have come to Canada and that they depend on them more than they did in their country of origin. The adolescents did not seem to attach any negative valence to these changes; instead, they appeared to view their current relationships with their parents as better than the parent-adolescent relationship prior to migration:

Our family does more things together. I used to hang more with friends and spend all the time with them. Now I am more with and closer to my family. (Adella)

The relationship with my parents is better and has changed—didn’t have much communication with them before and depended more on friends. Now I am with them and need them more. (Carlos)

My relationship with my mom has improved now (after moving). She helped me to adapt to the change of coming here—I feel close to her. (Hector)

DISCUSSION

The parents’ and adolescents’ interview responses illuminate how their perceptions of each other relate to their emotional states, parenting and coping strategies, family relationships, and interaction patterns during the cultural transition process. The parents expressed strong concerns about their children’s exposure to individualistic rather than family-oriented values in the Canadian context. They identified the socialization experiences of their adolescents in the host society school system as the key factor instigating behaviour changes away from their traditional way of life.

Familism is a central value of the Hispanic culture (Chun & Akutsu, 2003; Hernandez, 1996; Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, VanOss Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Sue & Sue, 2003). It consists of three dimensions: (a) a perceived obligation to assist the family, (b) a belief that the family should be a source of social support, and (c) a belief that family members should be the primary referents for an individual’s values and behaviour (Sabogal et al.). The Hispanic parents who participated in this research appeared most distraught about their adolescents’ use of peers at school as referents for behaviour. They shared the view that their

children's Canadian peers model disrespectful behaviour toward parents, which they connected to a reduction in family unity.

Respect for parental authority is emphasized in the traditional Hispanic family. When parents talk, children are expected to listen (Sue & Sue, 2003). Since the assertive behaviour of talking back to parents represents a cultural change toward Western norms, it is not surprising that when the adolescents reported engaging in this behaviour, they noted the development of family conflicts. Although the adolescents shared that they changed some of their behaviours as a strategy for responding to racism and social exclusion, these limited behavioural changes and their manner of interacting with their parents seemed to colour the parents' overall view that the youth were departing from their cultural heritage.

The Hispanic parents involved in this study described the parenting strategies they employed in attempting to control the impact of Canadian culture on their children and to re-establish their role as behavioural referents. The primary strategy they discussed involved increasing their level of supervision and monitoring of adolescent behaviour. However, the adolescents' revelation that they sometimes conceal certain behaviours from their parents to avoid family conflicts raises questions about the effectiveness of this parenting strategy. The Hispanic parents also shared their attempts to counter the formal education their adolescents were receiving at school with informal cultural and religious education in the home. The educative role of parents is an integral aspect of healthy family leadership (Santisteban & Mitrani, 2003). Their integration of religious and cultural teachings is consistent with the strong reliance on the Catholic religion for guidance in daily living among members of the Hispanic community (Sue & Sue, 2003). Despite their attempts to control the family's cultural change process, the parents reported discontent about their children still being influenced by Western culture.

Although parents reported an erosion of familism, from the adolescent perspective the social support element of familism appeared to be enhanced after moving to Canada. All of the Hispanic youth shared their view that they feel closer to their parents than they felt before moving to Canada. Adolescents also noted a higher level of dependency on their parents for support and assistance subsequent to migration. Paired with their parents' reports of stress, the youths' simultaneous disclosures of family conflicts revealed a marked instability in the family unit.

Implications for Counselling

Parenting stress and family conflict related to the cultural transition process were key family experiences emerging from the interviews. These problems lend themselves well to the use of a systemic approach to counselling, which is consistent with the family orientation in the Hispanic culture (Sue & Sue, 2003). The increased amount of time family members were spending together and the family support and closeness the adolescents reported represents a solid foundation for family problem-solving.

Sanchez (2001) recommends beginning the process of multicultural family counselling by reframing individual problems as family problems. The perception of the parents in this study that their children's adoption of host society behaviours was the source of the adults' distress and the perception of youth that their parents react negatively to the youth's cultural changes suggest that family members would consider each other to be the "identified patients." Since both family members overestimated the intergenerational gap in acceptance of cultural change, the conceptualization of the cultural adaptation process as a challenge facing the entire family system could help them to recognize their own contributions to their affective states and family interaction patterns. Normalization of the challenges and intergenerational conflicts that emerge during this process, as well as the misunderstandings that may cause the conflicts, can assist the parents and adolescents to better understand their family situation (Sanchez, 2001).

A process labelled "cultural brokering" can allow family members to explore each others' true stance regarding cultural change and to manage related family conflicts (Speigal, 1982). This process involves facilitating a family dialogue about the ways in which adolescents identify with their parents and share important cultural values and behaviours. Areas of discrepancy between parents and adolescents can also be identified and targeted for family negotiation. Parents and adolescents can collaboratively address strategies to deal with differing perspectives on specific cultural changes in order to promote family adaptation (Speigal). In the context of this discussion, the ways in which adolescents respond to parenting strategies used to influence their behaviour can be examined. Alternative parenting strategies can be considered if needed. The cultural brokering process would address parents' concerns about their children losing their culture, their coping attempts, and emerging family conflicts.

Study Evaluation

Like all qualitative studies, the results of this research are limited by the small number of participants. The study met four key criteria for quality control in qualitative research outlined by Stiles (1993): (a) it identified family processes that represented the collective experiences of the Hispanic parents and adolescents (uncovering), (b) the researcher's collaboration with the bicultural settlement counsellor and youth worker in generating themes incorporated the multiplicity of perspectives required to establish interpersonal agreement in the data analysis process (consensual validity), (c) the emerging themes resonated with participants' own perspectives on their family experiences (testimonial validity), and (d) the study results enhanced the researcher's understanding of the experiences of family members who overestimate intergenerational gaps (reflexive validity). Future research should assess the helpfulness of counselling strategies that aim to assist family members to better understand each others' stance regarding cultural change in facilitating positive family adaptation.

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