

Mothering and Professing in the Ivory Tower: A Review of the Literature and a Call for a Research Agenda

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Although women outnumber men in receiving PhDs, the pipeline to tenure track positions leaks, particularly for mothers. In fact, the leak continues into the granting of tenure and the achievement of promotion. While having children increases a man's chances at attaining tenure and advancement, mothering decreasing a woman's chances. Implications for HRD academics to actively address this problem in their institutions of higher learning are discussed.

Keywords: Career Development, Diversity, Work/Life

Introduction

Numerous studies have documented gender inequality in academia, and the high cost to individuals of trying to combine families with academic careers (Armenti, 2004; Bailyn, 2003). Currently, more than 51% of doctorates are awarded to women, and while 38% of fulltime faculty are women (Baer & Van Ummerman, 2005), women are even more underrepresented in the advanced professorial ranks and often confined to the junior assistant professorships (Drago & Colbeck, 2003; DOE, 1999; Mason & Goulden, 2002). Moreover, at nearly every stage of careers, women leave academia at disproportionately higher rates than men (Mason & Gould, 2004). "Rather than blatant discrimination against women, it is the long work hours and the required travel, precisely at the time when most women with advanced degrees have children and begin families, that force women to leave the fast-track positions." (p.90). Having babies has far more negative implications for tenure achievement for women than for men and thus, tenured women are much less likely than tenured men to have children (Mason & Goulden, 2004). Only one-third of women in "fast-track" academic jobs ever become mothers (Mason & Goulden, 2004). University-wide policy changes have been proposed (Rhoads & Rhoads, 2003), the culture of academia criticized, and psychological tendencies analyzed (Williams, 2004), all in hopes of pointing out biases and paving the way for more family-friendly workplaces. This, in turn, would ideally allow more academics, both men and women, to successfully balance academia with family lives, the eventual goal being to increase gender equality in academia, as women (particularly mothers) would not be denied tenure nor self-select out of the academy. However, these structural inequities are slow to change, and in the interim, many women are still struggling with the issue of how (or if) to combine motherhood with a tenure-track job. This paper reviews the problem and the relevant literature in an effort to present the factors most necessary for change.

Problem Statement

According to a recently published report by the American Association of University Professors, "Women face more obstacles as faculty in higher education than they do as managers and directors in corporate America (West & Curtis, 2006, p. 4)." Because structural inequities are slow to change, in the interim many women are struggling with the issue of how (or if) to combine motherhood with a tenure-track job. Marschke, Laursen, Nielsen & Rankin, as cited in West & Curtis (2006) found that with current hiring and retention trends at one university, it would take 40 years to raise the percentage of fulltime tenure track faculty to 34% women. Even if hiring and retention rate were equal between men and women, it would take 57 years for women to equal 50% of full-time faculty. Clearly, women need strategies in the short-term in order to survive the long-term. This research reviews the factors leading to an underrepresentation of women and mothers in tenured faculty positions and provides the rationale for HRD academics to further study the career development of women, and particularly mothers, in universities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical construct for this study was first proposed by the Mapping Project (Drago & Colbeck, 2003), which is in turn based on the work of Williams (1999) in her groundbreaking book *Unbending Gender*. The “ideal worker” is a norm which persists in most organizations today. The ideal worker receives a credential, enters the profession, works hard and long hours and climbs the career ladder until retirement. This ideal worker’s main contribution to their family is financial, and time is not devoted to family life. Organizations are organized around ideal workers; therefore the assumption is that employees spend as much time on their career as is possible. Rewards, working time rules, and criteria for success are generated by ideal workers with the presumption that only ideal workers should be in the organization (Drago, Crouter, Wardell, & Willits, 1999). In academia, the ideal worker gets their PhD in their 20’s and then moves on to a postdoc, becomes an assistant professor on a tenure track, does some service, teaches, and produces publications, thereby achieving tenure, finally advancing to a full professor (Drago, et al., 1999). Motherhood challenges the ideal worker because mothers no longer can dedicate all their time to work (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006).

Drago & Colbeck (2003) later proposed that the primary cause of the lack of women, and particularly mothers, not only in academia but in private industry, was what they termed, a “bias against caregiving,” which follows logically from the departure from the ideal worker, who has no time for caregiving. A caregiver can not be an ideal worker, thus is considered a “substandard” academic; causing women to practice bias avoidance behaviors. Caregiving has such low status in our society that people (generally women) who take on this role end up in the lower echelons of pay, rank, and status (Drago & Colbeck, 2003). Caregiving is so disdained that even if a person has a possibility of becoming a caregiver, e.g. a woman of childbearing age, she is treated as a potential caregiver and given the requisite status. This bias results in a bias against mothers in academia, as the assumption is made that mothers are not fit to sit in the ivory tower, but that they must direct all their energies to take care of others. In fact, the possibility that caregiving might even enhance one’s performance, particularly as a scholar, is all but absent. The mother’s viewpoint in academia is sorely missing, and missing any perspective weakens the academy.

Drago & Colbeck (2003) extended their theory of bias avoidance which they first proposed in 1999 to include bias acceptance, daddy privilege, and bias resistance. Bias acceptance accepts the fact that putting family first will result in career repercussions; daddy privilege acknowledges that men are lauded for making time for family commitments, while the exhibition of the same behavior by women is career-limiting; and bias resistance are actions taken by women faculty to challenge the bias against caregiving, making caregiving explicit by putting family first publicly and advocating policies that recognize that commitments to both family and work are necessary in the academy. Since tenure track years coincide with child-rearing years for women, the ideal worker concept discriminates against women who wish to become mothers by structuring success in ways women can only achieve by remaining childless, either by choice or by waiting long enough until it is no longer an option (Hochschild, as cited in Drago & Colbeck, 2003).

Background

Balancing parenthood with an academic career is particularly challenging for women (Armenti, 2004; Drago & Colbeck, 2003; Mason, et.al, 2005). Many studies have outlined the barriers to achieving tenure during motherhood (Drago & Colbeck, 2003; Mason & Gould, 2002; Mason, et.al, 2005; Tenure Denied, 2004). “For each year after the Ph.D., married men with children under six are 50% more likely to enter a tenure track position than are married women with children under six (Mason, Stacy & Goulden, 2004). In the 1999-2000 academic year, only 21% of full professors were women (Tenure Denied). This number rises to 36% of female faculty at Title IV fulltime faculty were tenured vs 51% of male faculty (US DOE, as cited in Tenure Denied). Mason & Goulden (2004) quoted the National Center for Statistics as 29% of tenured faculty in 1999 were women. This discrepancy is across disciplines and is far worse for women of color (only 2.4 % of tenured faculty are women of color, vs 64% are men).

Perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that women are self-selecting out of a tenure-track career (Mason & Gould, 2002), opting instead for more flexible but lower pay and status contingent or adjunct employment. The academy may be losing some of the best and brightest women because they want to combine career and family and think it is easier in the private sector than academia. Moreover, a survey conducted in 2000 indicated that 59% of married women with children responded that they were considering leaving academia (Mason & Gould, 2002).

Research Question

The research question for this paper is “What are the causes of women, particularly mothers, leaking from the tenure and advancement pipeline and what individual or institutional solutions have been proposed in the literature to solve the problem?”

Methodology

This study was a comprehensive review of the literature using the keywords women, tenure, academia and mothers. Scholarly articles often referred to published studies and other sources for information such as *Academe* magazine, which were also obtained. Reports were available free of charge on the websites of universities actively researching this area. Data were collected from various business, sociological, and psychological databases. The material was analyzed using an inductive approach to develop themes around the phenomenon of the under representation of mothers in tenured faculty. It is interesting to note that no articles on this topic were found in HRD journals.

Findings

The following themes emerged as the factors affecting a woman’s ability to attain tenure.

Personality, fit, or being cut out for the job

Generally women who were willing to devote themselves to an academic career and forego having children were the most successful at attaining tenure, but not as successful as men with children. Those who were successful and had children never let their family lives intrude on their work lives, essentially hiding their family from view. Although this is frequently framed in the literature as fit or personality for the job, clearly for many women these are actually hard choices they are making in order to succeed. Fit is an often cited reason for denied tenure and is not well-defined.

The Mapping Project (Drago & Colbeck, 2003), funded by the Sloan Foundation, described productive and unproductive strategies to avoid the bias against caregiving in the academy. Productive strategies generally result in sacrificing family for career, such as staying single, staying childless, delaying childbirth, having fewer children, or using daycare more often than preferred. Non-productive strategies are ones that keep family commitments hidden to escape career penalties. Similarly, Tenure Denied (2004) listed such strategies as taking little or no maternity leave, timing childbirth during the summer, and relying on the personal generosity and flexibility of colleagues and supervisors.

Park & Nolen-Hoeksema (2004) gave this advice to academic women seeking tenure: be smart, positive, productive, creative, a leader, firm, confident, and a great collaborator. Attributes such as being cooperative, someone that can be counted on, kind, quietly competent, warm, and thoughtful may make you a good person, but will not get you tenure. You should not be insecure or worried about getting tenure, and self-deprecating comments are not advised. This is the heart of the matter most applicable to mothers in the academy:

Much has been written in recent years about how women have humanized the workplace, making it more acceptable for employees to discuss personal issues on the job and admit to their strengths and weaknesses. This is probably true to some extent, but the reality is that people who are frequently stressed out at work over personal matters and who in turn discuss their personal lives at length with others are often not viewed favorably in business or in academia. On the other hand, people who can cope with their personal and professional stresses and appear hardy and optimistic are seen as leaders and as attractive colleagues. Thus, when you are beset by personal or professional stresses—your baby is sick, your partner has become unemployed, you have three manuscripts rejected in one-week’s time—share these discreetly with your most trusted friends, but do not announce them publicly to anyone who will listen. (p. 313)

While well-meaning and probably accurate, this advice can be simply stated as, leave your heart at the door and hide your family from view, perpetuating an ivory tower viewpoint that heart and family are somehow detrimental to scholarship. Nevertheless, these suggestions are useful for mothers seeking tenure in hostile departments. This is also true in graduate school, as illustrated by the following true story. A class was structured by a student’s advisor, department chair and employer (she was his GRA) having no explicit requirements for evaluation, so each student needed to grade themselves and provide a rationale. The professor gave her a lower grade, stating that she seemed stressed by the recent birth of her child. Presumably this student spoke too openly about her baby in class, breaking the implicit rules described by Park and Nolen-Hoeksema (2004).

Another way that women seeking tenure fall into the trap of overcommitment is being too kind and compassionate. The detriment of this is that a woman can spend all her time counseling students and doing more than their share of service (actively encouraged by departments so that committees have token females), while ignoring scholarship. Teaching and scholarship are much more important than connecting with students or doing service.

Park and Nolen-Hoeksema (2004) continued in their advice to address the issue of parenting:

Being an academic means the work is never done; being conscientious means being chronically haunted by the fact that the work is never done. When you add in a partner and children into the brew, the line between a multi-faceted life and a fragmented, unbelievably stressed out existence becomes very thin. (p. 32).

And we would add, multiply times ten when you factor in mother guilt, the mommy wars (wars between stay-at-home and working moms), and the implicit assumption that as a woman you brought this stress on to yourself, because you chose to have children.

There are steps a woman can take both before she is hired and while seeking tenure to increase the odds of being denied tenure on the basis of “fit”. *Tenure Denied* (2001) offered these recommendations for female faculty

Before accepting the job, ask for written information on the university’s promotion and tenure policy, consider that your chair will probably change during your tenure track, and ask senior faculty what the requirements for tenure are in terms of service, teaching, and scholarship, and the weights of each. While on the job, pay attention to culture and politics at both the institutional and departmental level, keep one toe in the practitioner circles for support in case of disputes with your department, don’t expect to be rewarded for favors or flexibility, consider cutting your losses early when you find you are in a hostile environment, understand your rights as an employee and document any perceived discrimination. (pp. 81-83)

Following these recommendations is certainly not a guarantee, but it will guarantee that there will be no surprises before going up for tenure. In particular, cutting your losses when you see that your situation is untenable is perhaps the best strategy. Universities change at a glacial pace, and even though things are changing, a woman faculty member is better off looking for a better system rather than trying to change her current one.

Park and Nolen-Hoeksema (2004) noted that children do add a richness to your life, although guilt is constant when you are a mother. The key is to be committed to setting priorities and sticking to them—recognizing that time is a zero-sum game, we have all the time there is, yet we never have enough, so we have to prioritize. The ability to set limits and forgiving yourself for occasional lapses is also essential. Ojumu (2003) also stated that time management is the key to staying productive, and to make the choice not to do everything. However, discussing childcare and bringing the kids to work is not a good idea, again supporting the “hidden family” rule (Park and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). They pointed out that stopping the tenure track does not really help; the years you are on the track still count for expectations for publications. You may come up for tenure a year later, but the expectations have also increased by that year, hence defeating the whole purpose of stopping the clock (Gewin, 2005). Drago & Colbeck (2003) offered the opposite advice—they advocated making use of family leave, stopping the tenure clock as well as pressing for even more policies for reducing hours. Each woman must make her own choice about how to achieve balance. While these strategies are meant to be useful and informative to women, they certainly do not support a women’s desire to profess and mother. Clearly additional strategies are needed and broad changes at the administrative level is necessary. These changes are not simply necessary to support women in academic positions who wish to be mothers, it is also important to add the mother perspective as part of the voice of academia.

Institutional Support or Lack Thereof

Women who worked at institutions which actively supported women in academia were more successful at attaining tenure. However, most institutions had a bias against caregiving, punishing women who had children or even who were of childbearing age, by denying them tenure. Some institutions even discriminate against having a mother who has put her career ahead of her family as being the sort of person they did not want in the school. Often male dominated tenure committees do not feel comfortable with women at all, or do not understand why they would choose the rigors of academic life over family life (Drago & Colbeck, 2003; *Tenure Denied*, 2001).

Tenure Denied (2001) offered these recommendations for universities:

...design school policies that comply with sex discrimination laws and make sure they are understood by faculty and administrators, require written evaluations annually explicitly measuring tenure variables such as research, service and teaching (analogous to the performance review in private industry), recognize the power that senior faculty have over junior faculties and keep an eye out for abuses, take conflict of interest seriously in hiring and promotion, ameliorating the advantage of the old boys network, adopt a the “stop the tenure clock” policy, treat rejected tenure applicants respectfully, as is done in the private sector, offer placement help, and provide written tenure policies and procedures to all faculty, including defining the requirement of the notion of “fit”. (pp. 79-80)

Drago & Colbeck (2003) suggested that institutions should modify the tenure track requirement by making it more transparent, by really stopping the tenure clock, and by allowing part-time situations. Universities need to acknowledge that non-work commitments ebb and flow over the life span, and make accommodations for that. Van Anders (2004) also noted that increased quality childcare will also be beneficial, along with acceptance that mobility may not be an option for academic mothers. She further suggested that benefits begin in graduate school, so that fewer students who want families self-select out of academia. Hult et al. (2005) also suggested transitional support to maintain or restart research agendas after personal leaves and part-time or job-sharing tenure track positions. Smith & Waltman (2006) recommended reduced duties, such as reduction in class load or service requirements, without loss of pay. There should also be re-entry opportunities for mothers who chose to take time off for childrearing (Baer & Van Ummersen, 2005). To further confound the problem, Wolf-Wendel & Ward (2006) found that institutional support varied by type. Research institutions were very clear about publication expectations, where comprehensive up-and-coming institutions wanted their faculty to excel at everything and small liberal arts institutions valued teaching and service, which are easier to balance with family commitments.

Armenti (2004) summed it up this way: "The key to supporting childbearing and childrearing in academe is to begin to restructure academic work" (p.79). Varner's (2000) research "makes a case for restructuring university and college policies to provide faculty with a greater range of reproductive choices than exists at present" (p. 5) due to the high medical risks of late pregnancies.

Thirty years ago the solution to the problem was to increase the number of women in the pipeline. But now the pipeline leaks. Now, the solution seems to be creating a critical mass of women faculty, but the differentiation of female faculty means that they are isolated even when there are sufficient numbers (Etzkowitz, 2000).

Changing the System Through Legal Recourse

In *Tenure Denied* (2001) the American Association of University Women described cases of discrimination brought against universities by women faculty who had been denied tenure. In it, they have concluded that "the burden of proof for plaintiffs is onerous" (p.54). For example, when a woman faculty member on the tenure track rebuffed a senior professor's sexual advances, she was told that was "no way to get tenure". This woman was not able to prove sex discrimination and lost her case, and she has yet to find an academic appointment despite an excellent reputation as a scholar in her field.

Moreover, once tenure has been denied for any reason, an academic finds it difficult to find a position at any university. If a lawsuit is filed, a woman may be labeled as a troublemaker (AAUW, 2001). Other women, aware of their own tenuous positions, are unable to offer support, treating the litigant as a pariah. Under these conditions, it is no wonder that few woman faculty who have been denied tenure on gender discriminatory grounds ever choose to pursue legal judgments in the hope of changing the system. Nevertheless, publicizing the problem may have an impact on the university system by changing public opinion.

Occasionally the legal system does rule in favor of women who have been discriminated against. A UC Santa Barbara political scientist, who was denied tenure in 2003, won her case at the EEO Commission that she was discriminated against for following university policy and taking time out to have two children (Phillips & Garner, 2006).

Family Support

In order to succeed, women are frequently told they must have an equal partner. While this is certainly the goal in most healthy marriages, it is also still atypical in our society. Women continue to do the bulk of caregiving and domestic labor (Mason & Gould, 2004). For example, University of California faculty women with children worked more hours in the home and at work and experienced greater parental stress from work activities than faculty men, and report greater work/family conflict (Mason & Gould, 2004). While this is certainly changing, the realities of this are tough on women in professional careers. Generally spouses need to be willing and able to bear the brunt of caregiving, and to trail wherever the faculty member must go for employment. This is generally not descriptive of women faculty situations.

Often, successful female faculty juggle their professional lives with the professional lives of their husbands. In Rimm & Rimm-Kaufman (2001), a tenured professor shared how she and her husband took turns as breadwinners, each making career sacrifices so that there was time to raise their children.

Department Support

It has often been noted in the private sector that an organization is only as friendly as the immediate supervisor. In academia this translates to the department chair (Hult, Callister & Sullivan, 2005). The chair goes a long way in either demonstrating a bias against caregiving or taking a neutral stance, or even valuing the contribution a parental perspective can give. "Supportive supervisors are associated with reductions in reports of bias avoidance" (Drago et al., 2006, p.1222). In Rimm & Rimm-Kaufman (2001), an assistant professor described a gradual transition to work, working part-time until all her children were at school. Obviously, a department chair sympathetic to her

situation encouraged her part-time contribution until she could return to full time. As of this writing five years later, this professor has not yet attained tenure. Department biases can be unconscious; a chair may give more of a raise to a male professor if he is the family's sole source of support (Hult, Callister, & Sullivan, 2005).

"Happy departments in universities are happy in the same way, but all unhappy departments are unhappy in different ways," a paraphrase of Tolstoy noted in *Tenure Denied* (2004). Usually we manage by exception, in that we never hear about the "good" departments but only the ones that are discriminatory.

Gender Assumptions

One of the major sources of leakage in the pipeline is the assumption young female PhDs make when they first receive their doctorate that work and family do not mix in the academy. Many worry about the bias against caregiving, and wanting families someday, settle for adjunct or other low pay and status positions in order to have the flexibility they feel they will need (Baer & Van Ummersen, 2005; Mason & Gould, 2002). In fact, adjunct and junior faculty are similar to the "pink ghetto" in clerical offices. There is a much higher concentration of women in these low pay and status ranks.

Gender socialization shapes women's choices about what they can and cannot do, while universities socialize students as to what to expect for an academic career, resulting in a lack of choice for women (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). This leads women to opt out of academic careers, but it is not a real choice.

Gender stereotypes also hurt academic women. In a study by Miller & Chamberlin (2000) it was found that given lack of information about the educational level attained by an instructor, both male and female undergraduates were likely to assume that males had PhDs while women, even full professors, did not. Teaching was considered "female" while professing is "male."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Clearly the above strategies common in the literature such as remaining childless or hiding family are not only impractical for women but are demeaning to suggest at best, since men and fathers do not face the same set of impossible circumstances in order to succeed. Aspiring female faculty need institutional support in order to succeed. This support can come from a variety of places including department heads, deans, and policies. One of the most obvious places for support would come from the HRD function at higher learning institutions, if it even exists. HRD can be a leader in this area, yet the literature shows a lack of interest in this area; most notably no articles were found on this topic in the HRD journals. Topics covered at the last two conferences include one on diversity in faculty membership (Sims, 2006) and a study on female university presidents (Madsen, 2006), with five articles on diversity in the workplace (Banks, 2006; Collins & Walton, 2006; Kane-Sellers & Clark, 2006; Knorr, 2005; Simms, 2005). More emphasis is on women executives in the for profit sector; while academia is largely ignored by HRD.

As Drago and colleagues (2005) pointed out, there is an ideal worker in the academy, and it is not a mother. As with many workplaces, the academy is set up for a worker who has no outside commitments and can devote themselves entirely to scholarly work. It neglects members who wish to have families as well, and therefore the mother viewpoint in the academy is completely ignored (Atkinson, 2003; Johnston & Swanson, 2003).

We recommend that mothers in the academy be studied and supported so that they do not become an endangered species, having their voices lost completely in the academy. We acknowledge that families in general seem to be unwelcome in the academy, and surely fathers who wish to become more involved parents have difficulty doing so. However, having a family is beneficial for men seeking tenure, while it is detrimental to women (Mason & Gould, 2002). As Mason, Stacy & Gould (2004) reported, there are leaks in the pipeline to tenure. Married men with children are as likely as single women without children to have a tenure track position one year after receiving their Ph.D. (16%). The percentage falls to 13% for married women without children, and even further (10%) for married women with children. Moreover, Van Anders (2004) found that women self-select away from academia because they perceive that there are too many systemic barriers related to parenthood and the constraints of mobility caused by parenting.

Van Anders (2004) noted areas for further research: do superior parenting policies at universities result in more graduates pursuing academic careers; do positive parenting policies lead to a better representation of women in applicant pools; and whether hypermobility is an unnecessary barrier. A longitudinal study translating intention to profess be contrasted with actual faculty appointments achieved.

Leading universities such as Penn State, Cal Berkeley, and the University of Michigan, some funded by the Sloan Foundation, have begun studying this problem and taking corrective action (Blackburn & Hollenshead, 1999; Drago et al., 1999). Prestigious universities such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford have achieved placement in Working Mother Magazine's top 100 list of family-friendly employers, exploding the myth that high workloads at

top universities excludes family commitments (Drago & Colbeck, 2003). Harvard is adding 100 new daycare slots, spending \$2 million on scholarships for childcare for faculty and staff, providing funds for researchers for childcare during field work, and allowing faculty a semester of paid leave after the birth of a child (Wilson, 2006). As noted by Mason & Gould (2004), “scholars have failed to acknowledge that the gap between the family outcomes of men and women, as measured by marriage, children, and divorce, is as wide as the gap in employment.” The field of HRD can support these efforts by supporting more research into this workforce career development issue.

How Research Contributes to New Knowledge in HRD

The HRD community needs to look squarely at this problem in its own backyard. While females are overrepresented as training practitioners, they are not very well represented within the senior ranks of HRD faculty. These statistics need to be collected and analyzed, and initiatives created to resolve the problem. In our field especially, humans ought to be able to live up to their full potential without worrying about a bias against caregiving. Our field ought to celebrate caregiving as a HRD competence. If not enough women and mothers are achieving tenure, we need to understand why our pipeline leaks.

Focus in the literature has generally been on biases and barriers; little attention has been given to strategies for success that do not sacrifice family or career. Perhaps this is the gap that HRD scholars and practitioners can fill in the coming decade. Too little research focus exists in this area at all.

Moreover, HRD does not seem to be well represented at universities. How is it that HRD is perceived as a needed function in for profit organizations but not in higher education, including our own departments?

Drago, Colbeck & Bardoel (2005) pointed out that, by excluding from the workplace individuals who have delayed careers because of family responsibilities, some of the best talent is being ignored. The experiences of parenting may have a beneficial, not detrimental, affect on both the academy and the private sector. Crittenden (2004) wrote a book entitled, *If You've Raised Kids, you can Manage Anything*—and that includes classes, departments, and universities. The mother viewpoint is sorely needed both in our field, in academia, and in the world of work. Crittenden (2004) wrote about a Sr. VP at Texas Instruments who defined leadership as not being about power and delegation, but about people development. Parents have a lot of practice doing what leaders and HRD professionals do.

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