

# The Impact of Family and Job Content on Swedish Seafarers' Occupational Commitment – A Gendered Issue?

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**ABSTRACT:** Ongoing research has indicated important effects on seafarers' occupational commitment due to gender and family situation. In this study, these findings have been elaborated further by controlling for the effect of perceived work content. Statistical analyses were employed, using a survey material of Swedish seafarers collected from a national register in 2010. The results showed that the effect on occupational commitment of having children at home is strongly positive and statistically significant for women. However, the significance was dependent on the level of satisfaction with the job content. It was suggested that the seafaring occupation could be viewed as a coping strategy, although only appropriate if the job content is agreeable. Another important family effect was, as expected, the positive effect of having a relative working, or having worked, at sea. This effect was, however, only significant for male seafarers in the age group below the early 40's. It was concluded that this effect is mainly emotionally driven and not particularly influenced by the actual job content. The results further showed that working in the catering department comes with a strong negative effect on commitment to the seafaring occupation for women. This effect, however, lost its significance after control for job content. It was concluded that the effect of satisfaction with job content on occupational commitment is generally important, with the exception of women, without children, working in the catering department.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 *Background to the study*

In recent years it has become increasingly difficult for Swedish Seafarers to find their first job at sea, although senior officers still enjoy a relatively secured future once employed (Arbetsförmedlingen 2015:12). At the same time, there seems to be a high turnover of onboard staff in the Swedish shipping industry. A common estimate has been that the averages time a Swedish ship's officer remains in the occupation is only eight years (SMA 2010:17, Arbetsförmedlingen 2010:10, 2014:15). According to a survey made in 2010, over 20% of seafarers aged 30

or younger, and close to 18% of those between 31-42 years of age, declared they were likely to leave their occupation within a few years (Hult 2012a). One possible reason for high turnover among seafarers may be traced to their long periods of time at sea, separated from home, family and friends.

The assumption of a connection between high staff turnover and long periods away from home, calls for an attempt to shed some light over the possible correlation between seafarer's family situation and their occupational commitment. Intuitively, these recurring separations from home may be emotionally harder for seafarers who have a spouse or partner, compared to those who are single;

and particularly difficult if they have young children at home. There may, however, be family circumstances which have the potential to strengthen commitment to the seafaring occupation. One such circumstance would be to have a close relative who works, or has worked, at sea and as such acts as a source of inspiration. However, one important factor for the decision whether to stay or leave an occupation would also be the perception of the job content at work. Thus, how the job content is experienced and valued may interact with the effects from family factors on seafarer's occupational commitment.

## 1.2 *The objectives of the study*

The purpose of the study presented in this paper is to investigate Swedish seafarer's occupational commitment. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to investigate (i) whether family situation have any net-effects on occupational commitment for Swedish seafarers, (ii) whether the patterns of effects are similar for both men and women, (iii) whether the effects are similar in deck, engine and catering departments, and (iv) whether the findings can be explained by how the job content is perceived.

## 2 THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE STUDY

### 2.1 *Earlier research on attitudes to work*

Quantitative research on seafarers' attitudes to work is not abundant. There are, however, a number of studies from different parts of the world (e.g. Guo et al. 2005, Guo et al. 2010, Pan et al. 2011, Sencila et al. 2010, Turker & Er 2007). A particular interest can be seen within the cruise sector, probably due to the link between employee job satisfaction and customer satisfaction in service occupations (e.g. Larsen et al. 2012, Testa 2001, Testa & Mueller 2009, Testa et al. 2003). Moreover, there are five attitude studies on Swedish seafarers with quantitative approaches. Two older studies that focus on job satisfaction on board merchant ships (Olofsson 1995, Werthén 1976), and three more recent studies that focus on commitment to work and occupation (Hult 2012b, Hult & Snöberg 2013, Hult & Österman 2015).

### 2.2 *Occupational commitment*

Succinctly, commitment to an occupation has to do with perceptions of the generalities for that occupation. In that respect, the prospect of a decent income is, of course, one important factor. More interestingly, there is a qualitative and emotional driver for this type of commitment, which has drawn most attention in earlier research (cf Lee et al. 2000). It is, for example, primarily within an occupation that people can develop a sense of social status and identity. For rather obvious reasons, research has shown that strong occupational commitment restrains decisions to leave a job (Hult 2012b, Nogueras 2006).

Earlier research show that the duration of education, age, and years invested in the occupation have positive effects on occupational commitment (Nogueras 2006). Returning to the high turnover among Swedish seafarers, it has been shown that time spent on the same ship has a negative effect for younger seafarers (Hult & Snöberg 2013). It has been reported that perceptions of social quality and leadership quality in the work organization influence occupational commitment (van der Heijden et al. 2009). A positive correlation between occupational commitment and perceived autonomy at work has also been reported (Giffords 2009).

### 2.3 *Occupational commitment and family situation*

The first assumption in this study is that some social circumstances may have negative effects on seafarers' occupational commitment. It is plausible that having to endure long periods of separation from home and family is emotionally harder for those seafarers who have a spouse or partner, compared to those who are single. The existence of problems related to family separation among seafarers also finds support in earlier research (e.g. Thomas et al., 2003). Moreover, it is likely that the separation would be particularly difficult if there are young children at home.

On the whole, this rather intuitive assumption concerning effects on occupational commitment strikes close to Becker's (1960) side bet theory which suggests that continuance in a job does not solely depend on the degree of affiliation with it. Rather, it is a result of a more holistic calculation including impacts on other aspects of life. In this case, this may assume a possible situation of conflicting commitments; one commitment directed towards the family and another towards the occupation. However, some of these assumptions have been challenged by recent research. Results suggest that the relationship between different commitments in life may be a matter of far more complexity, at least when it comes to seafarers (Hult & Österman 2015).

The next assumption is firmly anchored in the tradition of socialisation and social capital theory. Here, we assume that the existence of a relative who is, or has been, working at sea will have a positive effect on commitment to the seafaring occupation. The social relationship to the term 'capital' has been neatly explained by Portes (1998:7) as follows:

*Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage.*

Studies on social capital may deal with the effects of social contacts, social ties and social networks, on occupational choices; the likelihood of success on the labour market and on satisfaction with job related aspects (Bentolila et al. 2010, Flap & Völker 2001, Mouw 2003, Requena 2003, Seibert et al. 2001). Another strand of research, in the realm of social capital, focuses on family effects on people's career outcome (e.g. Egerton 1997). This effect has metaphorically been labelled *career inheritance*

(Goodale & Hall 1976, Inkson 2004). It has been suggested that this effect can arrive from parenting practise during childhood, from reinforcement of work values and vocational interests during adolescence, and from more tangible support later on (Aldrich & Kim 2007). According to Gottfredson (2002:139):

*...people tend to glean information about their options from people in close proximity and who thus populate their birth niche, which constitutes a recipe for minor adjustment rather than major change. It should come as no surprise, then, that people's adult niches tend to resemble their birth niches, that children re-create the society...*

Attempts to incorporate inheritance in a more genetic sense have also been made (Aldrich & Kim 2007, Gottfredson 2002). Here, it is argued that socialisation theory have difficulties explaining individual differences in career choices, especially for people originally from similar social niches. Instead, a combination of socialisation and individually driven search for a person-environment fit in the social world has been suggested. From the adolescent's perspective, the career formation may here be described as a struggle of circumscription and compromises of preferences on a socially chaired map of gender and prestige differences in occupations (Gottfredson 2002).

The debate of nurture *vs.* nature lingers on, however, astray from the topic of this study. In sum, the bulk of research gives us reason to believe that job relevant social capital is positive for individual perceptions and satisfaction within a specific occupation. When it comes to the maritime sector, however, it has been pointed out that the chances for post-adolescent building of sustainable social capital is increasingly challenged because of the world wide dispersion of shipping companies and frequent changes of crews (Grøn & Svendsen 2013, Sampson 2013). Thus, the parental or family related social capital may be of particular importance for seafarers' perceptions of the occupation. In fact, the assumption that those seafarers who have close relatives working, or having worked, at sea are likely to express greater commitment to their occupation than others finds some support from an earlier study (Hult 2012b). Thus, family situation entails social capital that matter for seafarers. However, the value of this capital seems to be higher for men than for women (Hult & Österman 2015).

The third assumption for this study is that the perceived job content may alter the initial family related effects on occupational commitment. The assumption relates to a research tradition with focus on the importance of organizational and workplace characteristics for the development of individual attitudes at work. This approach has been applied in a multitude of studies on work related attitudes (e.g. Hackman and Lawler 1971, Mottaz, 1988, Hult 2005, 2012b).

#### 2.4 The study's rationale

If career choice largely is a compromise based on information from people in close proximity, and preferences towards positions on a socially chaired

map of gender and prestige in occupations, we may expect different patterns of commitment due to gender. The seafaring occupation has historically been a traditionally male occupation. A close relative at sea, often a man, may therefore work better as a role model. And as such, may be re-created with less effort by young men than by women. Thus, we expect that the positive effect from close relatives at sea on occupational commitment will be stronger for male seafarers than for female. Likewise, because the catering department traditionally has been relatively female dominated, we expect a lower positive effect here, than in deck and engine departments.

As pointed out earlier, the relationship between different commitments in life is a complex one. Nevertheless, we expect, as an initial effect, that occupational commitment will be lower for seafarers who have a spouse or partner, and for those having young children at home. Finally, we expect that individual evaluation and perception of the work content will alter these effects.

### 3 METHOD

#### 3.1 The sample

This study is based on a sample taken from the Swedish Register of Seafarers using unrestricted random selection of deck and engineering personnel for the men, and of catering personnel for both men and women. Because women still are strongly underrepresented among deck and engineering personnel, all women from these departments were drawn into the framework. The only effect of this decision would be that it gives more, of very few, women in these departments the opportunity to participate.

The data were collected via postal surveys during the period of March 8 to September 8 in 2010. The questionnaire as a whole was based on pre-existing questionnaires from the International Social Survey Programme, Work Orientations III study (ISSP 2005).

The final material consists of 1309 respondents with an answering rate of 54%, which must be considered adequate given the general trend of shrinking answering rates. More important, the control of different aspects, such as gender, age, onboard position, trade area, and type of ship, found the material representative for Swedish seafarers. Although sufficient demographic and work-related representativity, it is always difficult to estimate the likeliness of non-response effects on the attitudinal representativity. An educated guess would be that people who take great interest in their work may be more likely than others to complete this type of questionnaire and therefore be over-represented in the sample. If so, the attitudinal patterns found in the analysis would still be correct, but the levels of commitment would be slightly overestimated (e.g. Hult & Svallfors 2002).

### 3.2 Processing of data and analysis

The Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS) were used throughout the analysis. The dependent variable of occupational commitment was constructed as an index using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and internal reliability control. In order to control for the influence of different and competing variables, multiple regression analysis (OLS regression), allowing adjusted effects, were used in several steps of the analysis.

The dependent variable of occupational commitment was developed with theoretical connections to the Porter scale (Porter et al. 1974) and the three-component measurement (Meyer & Allen 1991) and carefully adapted to the specifics of the seafaring occupation. The variable is based on five attitude questions expressed as statements on which respondents were asked to take a position by selecting a fixed option on a five-point Likert Scale, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. After mapping the pattern of latent factors underlying a number of different indicators, using PCA, the appropriate indicators for occupational commitment came out as shown in Table 1.

The indicators were recoded so that 0 denotes the option that entails the lowest commitment and 4 the highest. The indicators were then summarized in the index of occupational commitment. To facilitate interpretation of the results, the index was divided by its maximum value and multiplied by 100. The index is thus permitted to vary between 0 and 100.

Table 1. Indicators of occupational commitment for seafarers

Please agree or disagree with the following:	
There are qualities to the seafaring occupation that I would miss in another occupation.	
The seafaring occupation is part of my identity.	
The seafaring occupation is not just a job, it is a lifestyle.	
I feel proud of my occupation as a seafarer.	
I would prefer to remain in the seafaring occupation even if I were offered a job with higher pay on land.	

Table 2 presents the mean value and standard deviation for the index. The high mean value and the low standard deviation indicates that seafarers are quite united in their high commitment to, and identification with, the seafaring occupation. Cronbach's Alpha is a test of the internal correlation among the indicators in each index – the higher the value (between 0 and 1), the more reliable the index. Table 2 shows that the index turn out very stable.

Table 2. Occupational commitment index – Swedish seafarers in 2010

	Occupational commitment
Mean value (0-100)	71.7
Standard deviation	16.78
Cronbach's Alpha	0.82

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 The full sample

In Figure 1, the effects of the family situation on occupational commitment are presented. It is apparent that having family with connection to the seafaring occupation is the only family aspect that is significantly positive for commitment.

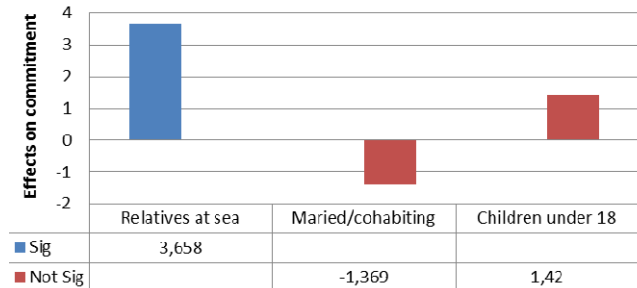


Figure 1. Occupational commitment and family situation

Figure 2 illustrates how the main strength of this effect originates from the two youngest age categories, which understandably indicates that older relatives inspire occupational identification among younger seafarers.

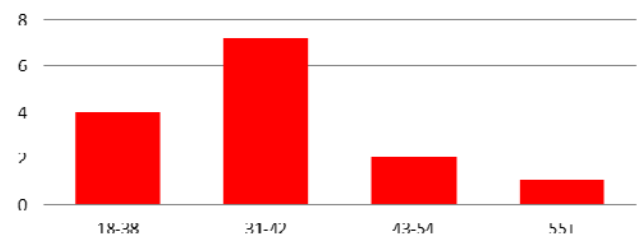


Figure 2. Effects of a relative at sea on commitment by age group

Moreover, the older the respondents are, the more likely they are having a younger relative in mind when answering the question. Thus, for the remainder of the study we will concentrate on seafarers not older than 42 years of age.

### 4.2 Seafarers aged 19-42

Table 3 and 4 display the effects of family situation on occupational commitment for men and women separately. Both tables display the results of multiple analyses in four steps (I-IV). New variables and their effects are entered into a stepwise increasing model. The mean value of the total comparison group is displayed for each step at the top of the table. Statistical significance is denoted in bold type. Three asterisks (\*\*\*) denote the strongest significance and one asterisk (\*) the weakest. Numbers shown in bold with no asterisk indicate that the effect is close to the lowest significant level.

Table 3 displays the effects on commitment for men. Step I shows the effects from having relatives at sea compared to having no such relatives. In step II to IV, the effects of being married or cohabiting, having younger children, and finally a control for onboard department are stepwise introduced to the

model. Here we can see that these variables do not alter the significant effect from having relatives at sea. The effect from having children is positive and close to significant. The effect from being married or cohabiting is negative and close to significant in step III. The effect of working in the catering department is not significant.

Table 3. Occupational commitment and family situation, male, age 19-42

	I	II	III	IV
Mean values for the comparison group, no relatives at sea, not married/partnered, and no children under 18	67,79	69,01	68,66	69,01
Having a relative at sea (compared to not having one)	7,41 ***	7,35 ***	7,29 ***	7,41 ***
Being married/partnered (compared to being single)	-	-1,90	<b>-3,17</b>	-3,07
Having children under 18 in the household (compared to having none)	-	-	<b>3,21</b>	<b>3,31</b>
Catering (compared to other departments)	-	-	-	-3,80
Explained variance (%)	0,05	0,06	0,06	0,7
Number of respondents	360	360	359	358

Significance levels: **Bold** and \*\*\* = 0.001 level, \*\* = 0.01 level, \* = 0.05 level, **bold** only = 0.1 level.

In Table 4 the effects on commitment for women are displayed in the same stepwise manner as in Table 3. Here, the attitudinal pattern for women is shown to be totally different from that of men. Having relatives at sea has no impact at all on occupational commitment for women. The effect from having children is positive, strong and significant, when department is controlled for. The effect of working in the catering department is however negative, strong and significant. The only effect resembling the male pattern is that from being married or cohabiting, which is negative and rather weak.

Table 4. Occupational commitment and family situation, female, age 19-42

	I	II	III	IV
Mean values for the comparison group, no relatives at sea, not married/partnered, and no children under 18	69,36	70,47	70,40	73,12
Having a relative at sea (compared to not having one)	1,34	2,36	1,93	2,03
Being married/partnered (compared to being single)	-	-3,37	-4,42	-4,40
Having children under 18 in the household (compared to having none)	-	-	6,66	<b>8,81</b> *
Catering (compared to other departments)	-	-	-	<b>-7,95</b> **
Explained variance (%)	0,002	0,01	0,03	0,09
Number of respondents	135	134	134	134

Significance levels: **Bold** and \*\*\* = 0.001 level, \*\* = 0.01 level, \* = 0.05 level, **bold** only = 0.1 level.

### 4.3 The effects of job content

The material used in this study contains several statements concerning the importance and perceived satisfaction with various aspects of the job. After mapping the pattern of latent factors, four appropriate aspects, concerning dimension of job content, appeared. Each aspect included indications of the importance of and satisfaction with the aspect. In Table 5 the four aspects are presented together with their internal correlation regarding both the importance of and satisfaction with the aspect.

Table 5. Job content on board

	Importance of the aspects	Satisfaction with the aspects
<i>Aspects of job content</i>		
Good career opportunity		
Interesting tasks		
Work autonomy		
Skill development		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha:</i>	0.66	0.75

The indicators were summarized within two separate indices; one for the *importance* placed on the aspects, and one for the *satisfaction* with the aspects. The indices were then divided by their maximum values and multiplied by 20 so that the explanatory variables can vary between 0 *not important* (the importance of the aspect) and *not satisfied* (the satisfaction with the aspect), to 20 *very important* respectively *completely satisfied*. In Table 6 and 7 these two variables are used as control on the results in Table 3 and 4.

Table 6. Occupational commitment, family situation and work content male, age 19-42

	I	II
Mean values for the comparison group	69,01	43,0
Having a relative at sea (compared to not having one)	<b>7,41</b> ***	<b>5,93</b> ***
Being married/partnered (compared to being single)	-3,07	<b>-3,99</b> *
Having children under 18 in the household (compared to having none)	<b>3,31</b>	<b>3,04</b>
Catering (compared to other departments)	-3,80	-3,32
Importance of job content (0-20)	-	0,45
Satisfaction with job content (0-20)	-	<b>1,46</b> ***
Explained variance (%)	0,7	16,4
Number of respondents	358	352

Significance levels: **Bold** and \*\*\* = 0.001 level, \*\* = 0.01 level, \* = 0.05 level, **bold** only = 0.1 level.

In Table 6, step I, the previous result for men are presented. In step II, the effects of job content are introduced. We can see that satisfaction with the job content increases commitment with 1.46 for each step on its scale between 0-20. Since the positive effect of having a relative at sea is decreasing in step II we may conclude some sort of correlation between the experiences of a relative at sea and the perception of work content. However, the net effect of having a relative at sea is still significant at the highest level. The only effect displaying change in significance is

that of being married or partnered, where the previous negative effect now becomes significant. Thus, controlling for satisfaction with job content extracts some of the positive effects in previous step which moves the already negative effect even further in negative direction. This indicates that having a partner does not influence occupational commitment for male seafarers significantly insofar that they are satisfied with their job content.

Table 7, step I display the previous result for women. In step II, the effects of job content are introduced. In this case, the satisfaction with job content increases commitment with 1.0 for each step. Also here we can see that satisfaction with the job content extracts some of the positive effects in previous step. In this case the positive effect of having young children at home is no longer significant. This indicates that the positive effect on occupational commitment from having children among female seafarers depends to an important degree on their level of satisfaction with the job content.

Moreover, the negative effect of working in the catering department is also losing its significance in step II. This indicates that the effect of perceived job content on occupational commitment is much weaker in the catering department than in the comparison group of deck and engine departments.

Table 7. Occupational commitment, family situation and work content female, age 19-42

	I	II
Mean values for the comparison group	73,12	51,35
Having a relative at sea (compared to not having one)	2,03	3,16
Being married/partnered (compared to being single)	-4,4	-3,06
Having children under 18 in the household (compared to having none)	<b>8,81</b> *	<b>6,59</b>
Catering (compared to other departments)	<b>-7,95</b> **	<b>-5,12</b>
Importance of job content (0-20)	-	0.50
Satisfaction with job content (0-20)	-	<b>1.0</b> **
<i>Explained variance (%)</i>	0,9	15,4
<i>Number of respondents</i>	134	126

Significance levels: **Bold** and \*\*\* = 0.001 level, \*\* = 0.01 level, \* = 0.05 level, **bold** only = 0.1 level.

## 5 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

### 5.1 The results

The results from this study picture an intricate trade-off in the relationship between different commitments in life. Contrary to the intuitive assumption that having children at home would be negative on commitment to seafaring occupation, the effect was found to be positive and initially statistically significant for women and close to significant for men.

Does this finding indicate that the seafaring occupation in some ways liberates people from the

everyday attempt to solve the life puzzles of work and home? Does the fact that women's occupational commitment is more strongly positively affected by having young children at home, indicate that the occupation works as some sort of coping strategy for otherwise being caught in a double work role at home? The role of strategies has recently been highlighted concerning countries where policies promoting the dual-earner families and 'have-it-all' aspirations (e.g. Grönlund & Javornik 2014).

However, this significantly positive effect from having children among female seafarers was also found to be dependent on the level of satisfaction with the job content. Thus, following the trade-off argument, we would say that only if the job content is agreeable, the seafaring occupation is appropriate as coping strategy. It takes more research, however, to know whether this line of thoughts could offer valid explanations to our findings.

Another important family effect was, as expected, the positive effect of having a relative working, or having worked, at sea. This effect was however, only significant for male seafarers in the age group below the early 40s, indicating that it is the older relatives that convey and encourage occupational identification among younger seafarers. The gender difference can be explained by the male dominant occupation and that a relative at sea often is a man and therefore work better as a role model for young men than for women. The significance of this effect was not changed by control for perceived job content, which tells us that the original effect is mainly emotionally driven and not much influenced by actual job content.

The results further show that working in the catering department comes with a strong negative effect on commitment to the seafaring occupation, compared to work in other departments, but only so for women. However, this negative effect lost its significance after control for job content. This indicates that the effect of perceived job content on occupational commitment is much weaker for women, without children, working in the catering department than for those working in the deck and engine departments. This finding may be explained by that employees in the catering department are, most likely, also the people on the ship that are less dependent on the seafaring occupation for practicing their occupational skills.

A final finding is that the effect of satisfaction with job content on occupational commitment is generally important, with the exception of women, without children, working in the catering department. But here we have to keep in mind that this does not say that they are not positively affected by good job content, it only says that it does not affect their commitment to the seafaring occupation. On the whole, the results suggest that the trade-off between commitments in life is very much a gendered issue.

### 5.2 Future work and recommendations

The findings in this study give rise to further questions that calls for future research. The main

recommendation at this point is that offering satisfactory job content would definitely help reducing labour turnover. Particular strategies are needed to strengthen occupational commitment for the personnel working in the catering department and here more research are needed. It is reasonable to believe that any efforts in that respect would be met with reduced turnover, increased job satisfaction, and thus most likely increased customer satisfaction on passenger ships. That would in turn have a positive effect on overall business performance as well as employee health and wellbeing.

As a rule, statistical results can only be generalized to the population from which the sample is drawn. Given the large differences in working and living conditions for seafarers worldwide, as well as the diverse institutional and cultural settings of their backgrounds, that rule indeed counts for this study.

However, this diversity calls for future cross national comparative research, studying the correlation of family situation, job content and commitment to seafaring life over time. Such an approach would make it possible to continuously evaluate the effects of a developing global and uniform compliance and enforcement of international conventions, such as the Maritime Labour Convention (ILO 2006) and the STCW convention regarding training, certification and watch-keeping (IMO 2011).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We like to thank all the Swedish seafarers who completed their questionnaires, one anonymous reviewer, participants at TransNav conference for helpful comments, and the Swedish Mercantile Marine Foundation for funding the data collection.

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