

SYMBIOSIS DURING EXAMINATION PREPARATION: THE PERCEIVED UTILITY OF GROUP DISCUSSIONS TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of examination preparation by university students is an aspect worth exploring especially in the world of academia. The main thrust of this empirical investigation was to scrutinise the utility of group discussions when university students prepare for their end of semester examinations. Theoretically the study was grounded in the field of Psychology of Education and was particularly based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the concept of African personality. The phenomenological research design was used and the chi-square test was also employed to determine if there is no association between university students' academic level and their perceptions regarding the utility of group discussions in examination preparation. As a form of instrumental triangulation, open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions were used as data gathering instruments. The stratified random sampling method was employed to select an assorted sample of 120 university students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The sample was composed of 82 undergraduate students and 38 postgraduate students. The generality of the research participants at both tiers of higher education conceded that group discussions play a crucial role in ensuring that they march towards examinations with a semblance of confidence. A significant proportion of the research participants revealed that group discussions make them mentally fit to write their end of semester examinations. Nevertheless, some students hinted that it is dicey to solely rely on group discussions when one is preparing for end of semester examinations. It was recommended that university students be accorded the opportunity to work collaboratively especially when doing coursework since a substantial proportion of them believe in intellectual symbiosis and interdependence.

Keywords: Interdependence, examination anxiety, psychological and emotional buttress, zone of proximal development, belonging needs

INTRODUCTION

Examination preparation at virtually all educational tiers tends to be an emotion laden exercise characterised by high levels of stress and anxiety (Okogu et al, 2016:01; Andrews & Wilding, 2004). This is backed by Cassady and Johnson (2002:271) who maintain that during evaluative situations, students are bound to exhibit high levels of emotionality which is evidenced by various physiological responses. Each examinee normally endeavours to practically do whatever has to be done to be ready for the impending examinations. As

argued by Okogu et al (2016:01), higher institution students tend to experience examination anxiety as a consequence of their enthusiasm to end a given semester on a successful note and begin a new one so as to ultimately graduate from the educational institutions. It is during times of examination preparation that some students resort to seeking the refuge in the comfort of their peers by preparing for examinations collaboratively in groups. The main thrust of this article is to explore the utility of group discussions for examination preparation as perceived by university students in Zimbabwe.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

One never stops to wonder why students demonstrate the acclivity to work in clusters when preparing for examinations. A look at the social nature of humanity can to some extent provide a persuasively credible explanation. According to Lahey (2009:529) human beings are social animals and human existence is primarily characterised by doing things in groups. Swartz et al (2011:329) and Bordens and Horowitz (2002) reiterate that groups serve as avenues where the social nature of human beings is expressed and collaborating in groups formed consciously or unconsciously usually gratifies numerous fundamental and intertwined human needs that can hardly be satisfied by each individual alone. In support of this perspective, Melgosa (2008:73) avers, “Sociability is a basic instinct, and each person impulsively searches for companionship with others like himself. Someone who is completely isolated cannot find complete self-fulfilment”. The argument by Melgosa (2008) is consistent with Maslow’s need theory in which he postulates that love and belonging needs come third on the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954).

Numerous scholarly authorities have presented their arguments in support of and against the use of group discussions in teaching and learning contexts at different educational levels. According to Borden and Horowitz (2002) and Swartz et al (2011:329) groups are a social phenomenon where individuals can pool their intellectual and material resources together to jointly and more effectively solve problems in a more fulfilling manner. According to Festinger (1954) groups are a vital source of social support which serve the purpose of giving people feedback about themselves as they compare themselves with other group members. By virtue of their nature, group discussions enhance the spirit of cooperation among students while simultaneously minimising egocentrism since each group member normally has the chance to make contributions and listen to other members’ perspectives (Berns, 2010:470). It has also been established empirically that small groups of people are normally more capable of solving intricate intellectual problems more effectively than they do when working in solitude (Lahey, 2009:543; Laughlin et al, 2006; Sorkin et al, 2001). Such a situation is called social facilitation which Lahey (2009:542) defines as a phenomenon in which being in a group boosts the performance of the individual group members. Based on her experience at university level, Johnson (2001) indicates that it is during group discussions that students tend to discuss not only the important concepts highlighted in literature, but the vital ideas which were overlooked by their lecturers. Cortright et al (2003) and Rao et al (2002) maintain that collaborative activities undertaken in groups normally enhance students’ learning and content retention.

The psychological theories of two cognitive theorists, namely Piaget and Vygotsky can to some extent shed more light on the justification for using group discussions by learners at any academic level. Although Piaget and Vygotsky developed different theories, they somehow agreed that talking is important for enhance cognitive faculties. Piaget (1928) in Murphy et al (2009:741) maintains that social interaction can dominantly enhance an individual’s reasoning ability. This is backed by Benckert and Pettersson (2008) and Heller and Hollabaugh (1992) who contend that group discussions enable students to generate solutions

to intricate problems thereby enhancing their scholastic attainment. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory places emphasis on social and cultural interaction as means of enhancing cognitive functioning (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Scott and Palincsar (2007:05) Vygotsky's sociocultural theory espouses that learning takes place through dialogical activities such as negotiation, interaction and collaboration. It is in the current study that the researchers attempted to find out the extent to which the justifications for having group discussions tally with the theoretical explanations of Piaget and Vygotsky.

Apart from what has already been mentioned, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development can further offer a credible theoretical basis in support of the rampant use of group discussions in the teaching and learning set up. Vygotsky (1986) posits that learning is a culturally embedded and socially mediated exercise where verbal discussions play a vital role in the creation and acquisition of meaning (Murphy et al, 2009:742). According Mkhize (1999) the cognitive theorist, Vygotsky (1978) maintains that human social relations act as the foundation upon which all higher cognitive functions are laid. Group discussions can be viewed as rich social bureaus where students share their academic experiences, social and cultural values as well as prior knowledge and assumed knowledge (Murphy et al, 2009:742). The dialogical nature of group discussions enables members to intellectually interrogate not only their own individual ideas but the diverse and sometime conflicting ideas from their peers (Reznitskaya et al, 2001). Mkhize (1999:13) summarises the overall utility of group discussions by saying, "... groups provide a forum for asking questions, discussing ideas, making mistakes, learning to listen to others' ideas, offering constructive criticism, and summarising discoveries".

The concept of the zone of proximal development which was propounded by Vygotsky in his sociocultural theory can be handy in elaborating the utility of group discussions in examination preparation. Vygotsky (1978:85) defines the zone of proximal development as the gap or difference between what an individual can solve through collaborating with more competent peers and what an individual can solve independently. Consequently, it can be argued that group discussions help students to navigate their zones of proximal development. Vygotsky (1978) posits that it is during social interaction that people can utilise tools called semiotics to facilitate learning. Examples of such semiotics entail language, memory enhancing techniques such as mnemonics, diagrams and various symbols (Vygotsky, 1978). Scott and Palincsar (2007:02) indicate that other semiotics which can be used during group discussions include computers, calculators and allied devices which can facilitate knowledge construction and content mastery for immediate and future use during problem solving.

In a bid to understand the justification and usefulness of group discussions for examination preparation, one can employ the African concept of personality since the study scrutinised group discussions among African university students. Unlike the western and Eurocentric views of personality which places emphasis on individualism and independence, the African concept of personality places much premium on interconnectedness, inter-dependence, communalism and cooperation (Lassiter, 2000:05). According to Lassiter (2000) the African concept of personality is premised on the belief that the individual has practically no latitude for self-determination outside the context of the traditional African community and family. In support of this, Mbiti (1969:109) writes, "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: *'I am, because we are and since we are, therefore I am'*". In partial concurrence with Mbiti (1969), Senghor (1966:05) maintains that the African personality concept is anchored on the individual and the community where through dialogue and reciprocity, the group take precedence over the individual without necessarily preventing the individual from blossoming. According to Shuttle (1993:46-47) and Lassiter (2000:06) many

African languages and cultures share a proverb which claims that the personality of an individual can only be recognised and sanctioned through other people. In a rather radical view of the African personality, Nyasani (1997:60) claims that for the individual, “everything boils down to the ‘me’ in the ‘we’ or rather to the survival of the self through the enhancement and consolidation of the ‘we’ as a generic whole”. It is in the current study that the researchers endeavoured to establish, among other things, the extent to which the use of group discussions for examination preparation by university students is in any way linked to the symbiotic nature of the African personality concept.

It is unrealistic to assume that group discussions always yield positive outcomes. One of the major drawbacks of group discussions is social loafing. Lahey (2009:543) defines social loafing as the propensity by individual group members to exert less effort to solve a group problem than when solving the problems at individual level. Sorokin et al (2001) and Lahey (2009:543) concur that the predisposition by individual group members to exert less effort in group tasks increases as the group size increases. Murphy et al (2009:759) cautioned that increases in verbal interaction in groups do not necessarily translate to concomitant increases in understanding on the part of the students. However, Lahey (2009:543) remarks, “Even if the individual members of the group engage in some social loafing, it is true that, *“two heads are better than one”* and that the knowledge and skills of more than one person may be needed to solve a complex problem”.

As alluded to earlier, examination preparation exposes students to anxiety and stress (Okogu et al, 2016:01; Pritchard and Wilson, 2003; Valz and Laflamme, 2003; Andrews and Wildings, 2004). It has been confirmed through research that the anxiety which engulfs students when they are about to write examinations can negatively impinge upon their scholastic attainment due to decreased motivation and emotional distress (Segool et al, 2013; Okogu et al , 2016:01; Cizek and Burg, 2006). Such a phenomenon can offer a credible justification for the propensity by university students to cluster in groups as they prepare for examinations. According to Lahey (2009:549) groups can be therapeutic as they provide emotional buttress and comfort which go a long way towards diffusing the effects of examination related stress and anxiety. The empirical investigation undertaken in the current study attempted to verify the authenticity of the therapeutic role of group discussions.

One variable which can better explain the tendency by university students to work in groups is andragogy as it characteristically differs from pedagogy. According to Pew (2007:17) andragogy is essentially the art and science of assisting adults to learn. Knowles (1984:12) elaborates that there is a positive correlation between an individual’s chronological maturity and the level of his or her intrinsic motivation to learn independently and in a self-directed manner. This means adults are intrinsically motivated, self-directed and usually relate concepts to their own real life experiences (Pew, 2007:17; Rachal, 2002). It is during group discussions that university students can boost their content mastery by sharing their life experiences and linking them to concepts under discussion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study was theoretically anchored on psychological theories which endeavoured to shed more light on the utility of group discussions at university level. The study was dominantly based on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and the African concept of personality. Peripheral reference was also made to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Piaget’s theory of cognitive development. According to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, human cognitive development and functioning is mediated by social interaction in a culturally defined social context with language as a medium of interaction. It is during such social interaction that an

individual can benefit from the skills and knowledge of more competent significant others such as peers, teachers and parents. In the current study, the social interaction was exclusively situated in a university context where students used group discussions to prepare for end of semester examinations. It is also during social interaction that one can navigate the zone of proximal development after receiving scaffolding from more competent peers.

The African concept of personality as already highlighted is based on the idea that Africans are inherently predisposed to work collaboratively and demonstrate interdependence, empathy, selflessness, communalism and interconnectedness. Reference was also made to Maslow's hierarchy of needs as group discussions were seen as a platform for individuals to satisfy their belonging and love needs as well as self-esteem needs.

MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Zimbabwean university students justify their tendency to undertake group discussions as a means of examination preparation?
2. How effective are group discussions as a way of preparing for end of semester examinations as perceived by university students?
3. What are the perceived challenges associated with employing group discussions as a means of readying oneself for end of semester examinations?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed the phenomenological research design. According to Groenewald (2004:44) in Kufakunesu et al (2012), "the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of people involved". In support of this, Maypole and Davies (2001) indicate that in phenomenological research, the lived experiences of the individuals who are taking part or those who at one time participated in the situation or subject being explored are examined (Kufakunesu et al, 2012). Chilisa and Preece (2005:142) reiterate that the phenomenological research design delves on studying people's experiences in an attempt to garner the meticulous details of their social circumstances. The phenomenological research design was appropriate in the current study because it accorded the researchers the opportunity to explore the perceptions of university students regarding the utility of group discussions as a means of practically preparing for end of semester examinations.

The main data gathering instruments were questionnaires and focus group discussions. According to Chimedza et al (2003) and Kufakunesu (2011:34) a questionnaire is a document which contains relevant questions that the researcher intends to pose to the research participants. A questionnaire is a list of methodically and carefully structured questions prepared by the researcher to elicit responses from research participants for the sake of data collection (Swartz et al, 2011:29; Shumbayaonda, 2011; Saunders et al, 2009). The researchers decided to use questionnaires because the respondents were literate by virtue of being university students. A focus group discussion is a version of interviews conducted in small and manageable groups which explore a specific issue chosen by a researcher (Swartz et al, 2011:29).

From a population of more than 1000 university students, a sample of 120 research participants was selected using the stratified random sampling method. According to Swartz et al (2011:29) and Munzara (2016:12) stratified random sampling is when the population is divided into distinct layers before members of each stratum are selected in proportion of the

size of the layer relative to the entire population. Stratification was done according degree programme, degree tier and gender. Of the 120 respondents who took part in the study, 58 were females while 62 were males. Eighty-two undergraduate students constituted the sample while 38 were post graduate students. The students who constituted the sample hailed from different faculties which include the Faculty of Commerce, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Faculty of Social Science, Faculty of Law and Faculty of Arts.

FINDINGS

In broad terms, the following are the research findings which emerged from the current study outlined in conjunction with the guiding research questions:

1. More than 80% of the research participants attributed their tendency to cluster in groups when preparing for end of semester examinations to the fact that group discussions offered them emotional and psychological buttress which they desperately needed during stressful times.
2. According to the generality of the university students who took part in the current study, group discussions are a bureau where students can collate and synthesise the module content into understandable components, iron out misconceptions and get clarification from their peers.
3. A significant proportion of the respondents justified the use of group discussions to socio-cultural variables which characterise them as Africans.
4. Ninety-seven out of the 120 research participants, that is, 80.8% confirmed that group discussions are an effective way of preparing for end of semester examinations.
5. Although the majority of the research participants agreed that group discussions are a crucial way of preparing for end of semester examinations at tertiary level, the same respondents conceded that there were some attendant challenges associated with using group discussions for examination preparation.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The research participants were honest enough to concede that they are normally engulfed by stress, anxiety and uncertainty when examinations are near. The respondents pointed out that the anxiety, distress and the fear of failure, which characterise examination preparation naturally coerce them to use group discussions as a way of strengthening one another psychologically and emotionally. Precisely, 98 research participants, comprising 69 undergraduate students and 29 postgraduate students concurred that participating in group discussions withered examination anxiety which tends to accumulate in the examinees' minds when examinations are nearing. The findings of the current study were consistent with the views of Okogu, et al (2016:01), Andrews and Wilding (2004), Cassady and Johnson (2002:271) and (Segool, et al (2013) who postulated that stress and anxiety normally inundate university students when examinations are near. The university students who participated in the study revealed that group discussions provide the desperately needed psycho-emotional and social safety zone. The claim by Lahey (2009:549) that working in groups can be a form of therapy was also strongly backed by the research participants of the present study. In support of this, one postgraduate student remarked:

We employ group discussions as a means to prepare for examinations because group discussions enable us to be focused and organised while simultaneously elevating our levels of confidence to take the bull by the horns. It is through collaborating in group discussions that one can be emotionally and cognitively fit to tackle examination questions.

Apart from being an avenue for psychological and emotional invigoration, group discussions were also rated by the research informants as serving a cognitive scholastic function. Both undergraduate and postgraduate university students indicated that it is in group discussions that they digest the taught module subject matter, discuss past examination questions and iron out misconceptions. They also pointed out that it is during group discussions that they practice answering practice questions they would have received from their lecturers during the course of the semester. Moreover, some research participants reported that taking part in group discussions normally enables students to ascertain their respective levels of content mastery relative to their peers. During one of the focus group discussions, one undergraduate student gave the following contribution:

It is during group discussions that one can identify relationships, differences, contradictions, dilemmas and similarities between concepts before being able to ultimately prepare one's own brief notes on each module. The short notes usually serve as cognitive maps which facilitate the tackling of examination questions.

The above sentiments are to some extent consistent with the views of Murphy (2009:742), Mkhize (1999) and Vygotsky (1978) who maintain that human social relations are a platform upon which all higher cognitive functions are laid and group discussions are virtually social bureaus where students share their academic experiences, social and cultural values as well as previous knowledge. Group discussions enable students to navigate their zone of proximal development as theorised by Vygotsky in his sociocultural theory. The assertion by Reznitskaya et al (2001) that group discussions are characterised by scholarly dialogues where members intellectually interrogate not only their own individual ideas but the assorted and sometime controversial ideas from their peers was also supported by the research participants.

The views expressed by Lassiter (2000:05), Mbiti (1969:109), Nyasani (1997:60), Senghor (1966:05) and Shuttle (1993:46-47) concerning the interconnectedness, interdependence, communalism and cooperation of Africans in various facets of human existence were to some extent partially echoed by some university students who took part in the study as a justification for the prominence of group discussions when preparing for end of semester examinations. In response to the questionnaire items pertaining to the extent to which the tendency by university students to collaborate in examination preparation can be attributed to the concept of African personality, 61.8% of the respondents ascribed that tendency to the African attributes inherently embedded in their blood. They claimed that wherever Africans are, the tendency to collaborate is undeniably apparent in numerous facets of human existence and examination preparation is not an exception. One female postgraduate research participant wrote the following statement as her questionnaire response:

The fact that Africans normally convene in large numbers at social functions such as weddings, funerals, kitchen parties, baby showers and allied ceremonies acts as evidence that the concept of African personality at least holds a grain of truth and its permeation into academic issues should not come as a surprise.

Akin to the above remark, one male undergraduate student from the Faculty of Arts responded:

We are Africans who have always been known to work collaboratively since pre-historic times. It runs in our deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) to work together in virtually all facets of human existence and academic issues are not an exception.

Ninety-three university students out of the 120 who took part in the study maintained that the most credible reason for working in groups was that groups meet the social belonging needs of human beings as postulated by Maslow in his hierarchy of needs. They insisted that working in groups not only for academic purposes but for any purpose generally goes a long way towards satisfying the participants' belonging needs as an interactive and gregarious species. The contention by Lahey (2009:529, 542) that human beings are social animals and human existence is primarily characterised by operating in groups was supported by contributions made by the research participants. The outcomes of the empirical investigation agreed with Swartz, et al (2011:329), Melgosa (2008:73) and Bordens and Horowitz (2002) proclamation that groups serve as avenues the social nature of human beings is expressed and collaborating in groups formed consciously or unconsciously usually gratify numerous fundamental and intertwined human needs that can hardly be satisfied by individual alone. It was interesting to note that 70% of the respondents, that is 84 out of 120, theorised that the concept of African personality and the need to satisfy human social needs jointly explain the university students' acclivity to work in groups when preparing for impending end of semester examinations.

As already pointed out, 97 out of 120 respondents, that is 80.8% concurred that group discussions are virtually an effective means of readying oneself for end of semester examinations. Of the 82 undergraduate students who took part in the study, 68, that is, 82.9% rated group discussions as a fruitful survival technique for preparing for examinations especially when time is limited. More than three quarters, that is, 29 out of the 38 postgraduate students reiterated that group discussions practically give university students a lifeline with regard to preparing for end of semester examinations. Students who were studying on block release basis fervently defended the use of group discussions when one is preparing for examinations. They argued that group discussions enabled them to sufficiently concentrate on the content which was hurriedly delivered to them by their lecturers as their lecturers grappled with the limited contact time. The fact that block release students spent most of their time at their different work places or homes which are geographically scattered made it imperative that they meet and share ideas before writing examinations. As already pointed out, the students confirmed that cognitive functioning could be enhanced by social interaction as premised by Vygotsky' socio-historic theory. In defence of this perspective, one block release student averred:

Group discussions are actually a necessity for block release students given that they have limited contact time with their lecturers and some of them reside in areas with neither internet connectivity nor library facilities. For us, abolition of group discussions signifies intellectual doom.

Table 1. Contingency table showing perceptions of university students regarding the utility of group discussions relative to degree level: n=120

Perceived utility of group work in examination preparation				
Tier of students	Useful	Undecided	Not useful	TOTAL
Undergraduates	64 (62.18)	10 (10.25)	8 (9.57)	82
Postgraduates	27 (28.82)	5 (4.75)	6 (4.43)	38
Total	91	15	14	120

In a bid to ascertain if there is an association between students' academic tier and their perceptions regarding the utility of group discussions in examination preparation, a chi-square test was conducted with a 2x3 contingency table as shown in Table 1. The chi-square test revealed that there was no association between university students' academic level and their perceptions towards the usefulness of group discussions for examination preparation. This implies that university students generally hold group discussions in high esteem regardless of being at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

Although numerous respondents expressed positive perceptions regarding the use of group discussions for examination preparation, some of them expressed some reservations. The university students acknowledged that group discussions were not a panacea to all the challenges associated with examination preparation. Twenty-three out of the 120 research participants, that is, 19.2%, remarked that the use of group discussions for examination preparation is sometimes affected by logistical problems. The students stressed that when groups are too large, some members may not have the opportunity to contribute and the probability of digression remained substantially high. Moreover, the likelihood of retrogressive arguments were reported to be high in large groups thereby fostering group discontentment and polarisation.

A proportion of the 23 students who expressed negative sentiments regarding the utility of group discussions for examination preparation also pointed out that some group members sometimes deliberately refrain from making contributions. Such members join group discussions solely to gain intellectual ideas from others without making any input. Lahey (2009:543) defines social loafing as the propensity by individual group members to exert less effort to solve a group problem than when solving the problems at individual level. Sorkin, et al (2001) and Lahey (2009:543) concur that the predisposition by individual group members to exert less effort in group tasks increases as the group size increases. Murphy et al (2009:759) cautioned that increases in verbal interaction in groups do not necessarily translate to concomitant increases in understanding on the part of the students. Furthermore, some respondents claimed that group discussions tend to be beneficial to extroverts who are characteristically charged by being in the company of other people. They posited that the same could not be said for introverts who tend to flourish when they engage in lengthy solo efforts. Lastly, 68 out the 120 university students generally concurred that although group discussions were beneficial to the group members, one still needs time to individually digest the content and put one's house in order since examinations are written individually.

CONCLUSION

The quest to establish the rationale for the prevalent and seemingly perennial use of group discussions by university students revealed that an array of variables can account for such a phenomenon. Group discussions were found to be a safe haven where university students can bask in the psychological and affective warmth and become relatively insulated from examination anxiety. The inherent need to belong and the symbiotic and collaborative nature of the African personality were cited as credible justifications for working in groups. It was also empirically confirmed that group discussions enable university students to perfect their knowledge and boost the way they synthesise concepts before writing their end of semester examinations. In general, the respondents agreed that group discussions were a vital way of preparing for examinations although there were a few militating factors associated with their use.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outcomes of the current study, it was recommended that university students be given collaborative assignments which they will jointly work for the purpose of satisfying their psychosocial and emotional needs. If the sentiments expressed by the respondents are to be considered, educational institutions, particularly in Africa and its diaspora should cherish the African attributes such as interconnectedness, interdependence and collaboration by adopting interactive pedagogical and andragogic practices as much as possible. To other researchers, it is hereby recommended that the current study be replicated in other African countries as well as other continents to establish if similar results would be obtained. It is also recommended that other interested researchers can conduct similar studies with primary and secondary school learners as research participants. Such studies might generate results which can be juxtaposed with the results of the current study to ascertain if the perceptions regarding the utility of group discussions for examination preparation are homogeneous across educational tiers. Other enthusiastic researchers can also explore the suitability and acceptability of other examination preparation techniques apart from group discussions.

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