CONTENT ANALYSIS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS*

This article deals with gender stereotypes in popular children's books. I propose an exercise in which students use content analysis to uncover latent gender stereotypes present in such popular books as those by Dr. Seuss. Using a coding frame based on traditional gender-role stereotypes, I assign students to small groups who then undertake a close analysis of selected children's books to see whether or not traditional gender-role stereotypes are apparent. Students examine the text, symbols, characters, use of color, and major themes in each book. In this article, I briefly review the theoretical underpinnings of the exercise, offer a brief summary of content analysis, and outline the delivery of the exercise, its learning goals, and major discussion points. Through a take-home assignment, students are asked to articulate the manner in which gender stereotypes may be perpetuated by the media. Additionally, students are encouraged to think about the ways in which their own gender identities have been shaped by the media. Actual student comments are used throughout to highlight the major discussion points.

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One of the most difficult tasks we face when teaching introductory courses in sociology is convincing students that society plays a large role in directing their behavior and shaping their lives. Students steeped in the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy much prefer to view their behavior as a matter of choice and outcomes in life as congruent with their unique talents and skills. For instance, when it comes to gendered behavior, many students are inclined to believe that differential outcomes in life for women and men are due to natural or innate differences (particularly differences related to biology) rather than the processes of socialization and social forces which might be suggested by using their "sociological imagination" (Mills 1956).

Thus, students must learn to identify themselves as members of various social categories, including categories related to gender, social class, or race and ethnicity, and to think about the ways in which their lives have been shaped and influenced by membership in those groups. Perhaps the most basic social status is that related to gender. Society maintains a different set of normative roles for women and men, and requires of them different responsibilities and kinds of work. One's expected opportunities and outcomes in life correlate strongly with gender.

One method of helping students learn about gender stereotypes and getting them interested in sociology in general is to use the tools of qualitative analysis (Walzer 2001). The exercise described here consists of a content analysis of children's books which contain many common stereotypes related to gender. Almost any type of children's book can be used. Students perform a content analysis of gender messages in the books by using a coding frame specifically developed for the purpose. Using the techniques described here, students read and

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Editor’s note: The reviewers were, in alphabetical order, Linda M. Grant, Art Jipson, and J. Allen Williams.
examine the books and record their findings, paying particular attention to characters and themes that are stereotypical.

First I discuss theoretical background to the exercise in relation to language and gender codes. Next, I briefly review the literature related to gender stereotypes in children's books and review the learning objectives of the exercise and what previous learning students should have mastered in order for the exercise to be effective. This is followed by a brief review of content analysis. I then discuss the exercise delivery and some instructions on how to carry it out successfully. Finally, I bring up some useful points of discussion that can follow the exercise. This article contributes to the present literature on gender stereotypes by presenting actual student observations and reflections.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language sets the stage for the development of self-conscious behavior and thought. Through language and interaction, children acquire a social self (Mead 1934). Language allows humans to make sense of objects, events, and other people in our environment. Indeed, it is the mechanism through which humans perceive the world (Sapir 1929; 1949; Whorf 1956). As children learn how to read, they are exposed to the cultural symbols contained in books. Given the assumption that language shapes and conditions reality, then it might be useful to ask what children might be learning about gender when they learn how to read.

Children's books present a microcosm of ideologies, values, and beliefs from the dominant culture, including gender ideologies and scripts. In other words, when children learn how to read they are also learning about culture. Learning to read is part of the process of socialization and an important mechanism through which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. For example, children may use the gender scripts and ideologies in these books when they are role playing and forming an impression of the generalized other, and hence of femaleness and maleness (Bem 1981; 1983; Mead 1934).

By age seven, and perhaps as early as age four, children begin to understand gender as a basic component of self. The literature affirms that many masculine and feminine characteristics are not biological at all; they are acquired. Gender schema theory, for instance, suggests that youngsters develop a sense of femaleness and maleness based on gender stereotypes and organize their behavior around them (Bem 1981, 1983, 1984; Eagly and Wood 1999). Children's books may be an important source of gender stereotypes that children use to help organize gendered behavior.

An interesting aspect of ideology, and gender ideology in particular, is that people practice it (Taylor 1998). Ideological messages about gender are embedded throughout our culture, and when women and men use them as standards of comparison to make judgments about themselves or about others, we may say that they are "practicing" gender ideology. Gender ideology is internalized as a system of signs; in other words, a code. For example, when trying to emulate cultural standards of beauty, women may use cosmetics, certain styles of dress, and even certain colors in order to alter their appearance. The same may be said for men. People may not even be aware that their perceptions about reality and their place in it are constantly structured in an ideological manner (Heck 1980). This exercise attempts to help students uncover the gender code and think about the ways their lives have been structured by it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's pre-school books are an important cultural mechanism for teaching children gender roles. A 1972 study of award-winning children's books discovered that women and girls were almost invisible. Boys were portrayed as active and outdoors-oriented, while girls stayed indoors and behaved more passively; also, men were
leaders and women followers (Weitzman et al. 1972). This research was replicated in 1987, and the researchers concluded that although some improvements in roles for women had taken place, the characters in the books were portrayed in traditional gender roles (Williams et al. 1987). The 1987 research found a majority of the female characters shared no particular behavior, girls in the books failed to express any career goals, female role models were lacking, and male characters were still portrayed as more independent. More recent research, based on the same Caldecott Award-winning children’s books, found that women were still portrayed in traditional gender roles usually associated with the household and tools used during housework, whereas males were non-domestic and associated with production-oriented tools and artifacts (Crabb and Bielawski 1994). However, other research conducted in the 1990s suggests that the traditional portrayal of women in children’s books is giving way to a more egalitarian depiction for both women and men (Clark, Lennon, and Morris 1993). This certainly suggests that the issues are far from settled and require more research.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In order to successfully achieve the learning objectives of the exercise, some previous topics should have been fully addressed, including socialization, culture, and gender inequality. The following learning objectives are derived from the theoretical discussion of the importance of language in the process of socialization:

1. Demonstrate that gender ideology is embedded in popular children’s books.
2. Uncover the dimensions of gender ideology present in the books through the use of content analysis.
3. Connect the gender ideology in children’s books to gender inequalities related to work, occupation, income, and education.
4. Discuss whether the books are simple reflections of innate gender differences or whether they actually help produce gender stratification.
5. Facilitate a discussion on patriarchy and sexism.

CONTENT ANALYSIS AND EXERCISE DESIGN

The exercise relies on content analysis—a strategy for collecting and analyzing qualitative data through the use of an objective coding scheme (Berg 2001). This discussion is intended to assist instructors in carrying out a simple content analysis and is not meant to be a thorough analysis of methodology. The discussion will be restricted to the aspects of content analysis necessary to carry out the exercise in a meaningful fashion.

A content analysis examines the artifacts of material culture associated with social communication. These artifacts can include written documents or other forms of social communication such as children’s books, television programs, photographs, magazines, or music recordings. The methodology is useful for inferring manifest and latent content by systematically and objectively examining the messages contained in the artifact (Abrahamson 1983; Berg 2001; Holsti 1968; 1969; Sellitz et al. 1967).

Sampling Strategy

A number of standard sampling procedures can be adapted for use in a content analysis. However, purposive sampling is best suited for this exercise (Berg 2001). In a purposive sample, the researcher draws upon his or her expertise to select a sample that exemplifies certain characteristics of the population to be studied. Since the goal of the exercise is to demonstrate that cultural messages about gender are embedded in children’s books, a purposive sample based upon an ideal type is acceptable. In this case an “ideal type” is a genera of books in which gender stereotypes are known to exist. For example, some researchers have used Caldecott Award books for the obvious reason that if gender stereotypes are found
in award-winning children's books, progress toward gender equality is probably lacking throughout the genre of children's literature.

Prior to conducting the exercise, I ask students to write out a list of children's books they are familiar with. Dr. Seuss is the most frequently mentioned children's book series. The Berenstain Bears and Disney series are also popular, along with a host of other children's books. Out of a population of 1,357 students at four separate institutions who completed the exercise in my classes over a five-year period of time, 88 percent indicated that they were familiar with the Dr. Seuss series and 71 percent were familiar with the Berenstain Bears.

This sample is, therefore, not a representative sample of books actually read by any particular group of students participating in the exercise. However, since the exercise seeks to demonstrate that gender stereotypes were actually present in the books many students report having read as children, it seems, on the face of it, that these books are acceptable for analysis. Rather than drawing a sample of books from each series, I purchased the entire collections. When I conduct the exercise, I ask each group of students to select a book they might read to their child. In fact, many students do report that their selection was based on a book they were familiar with as a child or, in the case of some nontraditional students, a book they had actually purchased and read to their children.

**Criteria of Selection**
The issue of exactly which elements from the books will be analyzed refers to the criteria of selection; in this exercise, the criteria are usually worked out in advance. The criteria should be exhaustive enough to account for variations in messages, explicit enough so that the analysis can be easily replicated, and should reflect the relevant aspects of the messages. Additionally, the criteria of selection should be applied consistently so that inclusion or exclusion of content is not arbitrary (Berg 2001). The criteria of selection can yield either quantitative or qualitative data; quantitatively, tally sheets can be used to determine the frequency of certain elements in the message. Qualitatively, the students can examine the ideologies, symbols, and themes embedded in the messages and write out summaries of their findings. In this exercise, the criteria for selection are based on traditional stereotypes about gender, usually presented as a gender dichotomy, and both quantitative and qualitative approaches will be used.

**Manifest and Latent Content**
Manifest content in an artifact of social communication refers to elements that are physically present and can be counted accurately. For example, students can count the number of male or female role models in the books. Additionally, the number of women in roles outside of the household can be counted or the number of women in leadership roles, and so forth.

Latent content, on the other hand, requires an interpretive reading by the researcher, who interrogates the symbolic meaning of the data in order to uncover its deep structural meaning (Berg 2001). Obviously, a content analysis of latent messages is more difficult to achieve. When employing a latent analysis, the researcher should use corroborative techniques, such as using independent coders or providing detailed excerpts from the data, which support the stated interpretations. A rich latent analysis may not be feasible in one class period, but students should be encouraged in the attempt. Also, a latent analysis may be appropriate for a take-home exercise, which the instructor can easily develop.

**What to Count**
A content analysis can proceed in either an inductive or a deductive manner or some mixture of both (Strauss 1987). If the instructor has the time to devote to an inductive approach, students start by examining the message in detail and seek to identify
The deductive approach, on the other hand, uses a coding scheme developed in advance of the analysis. The researcher develops a hypothesis from a theoretical framework and tests it using a coding scheme while performing the analysis. A coding scheme—in this example one based on the traditional gender dichotomy found in many introduction to sociology textbooks—is provided to the students in advance.

Although almost anything can be counted when performing a content analysis, seven major elements are usually emphasized. These elements include words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts, and semantics (Berg 2001). For this exercise, students should easily be able to identify words, themes, and characters related to the traditional gender dichotomy. Students should be instructed to look for these elements in the book's text, as well as the use of color, the storyline, phrases, pictures and anything else related to gender.

**Coding Frame**

This exercise employs a coding frame to organize the data and to help students identify findings while analyzing the books. I have used the coding frame presented here with great success, and instructors should find it easy to reproduce (see Appendix).

**Figure 1. Gender Themes Based on Traditional Gender Stereotypes**

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<tr>
<th>Feminine Traits</th>
<th>Masculine Traits</th>
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<td>Brave</td>
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<td>Content</td>
<td>Ambitious</td>
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<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active</td>
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<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>Insensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex object</td>
<td>Sexually aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive due to physical appearance</td>
<td>Attractive due to achievement</td>
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*Found in Macionis (2001).*
identify other behaviors associated with passivity. I instruct the students to write out their operational definitions so that they may refer to them while coding in step two.

**Step Two**

Once everything has been handed out and the instructions given, the instructor acts as a facilitator. Some groups will need more encouragement than others, and in my experience with the exercise, students asking for help will adopt an instructor’s interpretation verbatim if they can. The instructor should make every effort to avoid projecting his or her interpretations onto the group if asked for help. One idea for limiting the instructor’s influence in the coding process is to reserve a book to which he or she can refer when answering questions and providing examples.

The goal is to get the students to do the coding. Instruct them to be consistent and encourage them to analyze the data minutely, pointing out, for instance, that certain colors are frequently associated with gender and that this fact should be part of their observations. Likewise, students should examine the text, and even certain words, for gender stereotypes. The nature, type, and number of characters, characters’ body size, behaviors, and even the title of the book should all be examined by the students to uncover manifest and latent gender stereotypes.

All the members of the groups should participate in the coding process, and they should enter data on the coding sheet only when they are generally in agreement about whether or not a stereotype is present. In this part of the exercise, students should be allowed to disagree and discuss their disagreements because this helps them develop a deeper understanding of the process (Stalp and Grant 2001). Additionally, encourage them to jot down their thoughts on a separate sheet of paper to refer to later during the discussion and to help them write the reflection paper. Students can code in both a qualitative and quantitative manner: they can write out explanations of the stereotypes they find and they can count and tally examples for each operational definition.

**Step Three**

When the students are finished coding their books, ask two or three groups to share their findings and observations with the class. Ask each group presenting to explain their operational definitions and how they coded examples of gender stereotypes. Generally, students explain their operational definitions and then point out pictures from their book or read text from their particular book that they feel exemplifies their definitions of gender stereotypes. While each group is presenting its findings, the instructor writes summaries on the board that will help students draw conclusions from the exercise and facilitate the discussion.

**Step Four**

Students will take the exercise more seriously if they know there will be some assessment of their work. To that end, I ask students to write a short (1-2 pages) reflection paper in which they discuss what they learned from the exercise. Instructors who wish to give students more time to conduct a latent analysis can do so during this step by allowing them to take the book home. I perform another content analysis of the reflection papers and then present that data to the class at a later date. The comments and remarks reported in the discussion section come from the student reflection papers.

**DISCUSSION**

Over several years of conducting the exercise, I have discovered that the discussion portion of the exercise tends to gravitate toward some fairly predictable issues and themes. While a variety of issues emerge, students repeatedly invoke three general conclusions: 1) the book is only a book and we are reading too much into it—children are not affected by the ideologies in the books; 2) things have changed and more recent children’s books no longer reflect attitudes about gender, especially for
women; and 3) the books simply reflect reality.

Regarding the claim that the analysis reads too much into the books, it is important to point out to students that children are just beginning to acquire self and personality at the very time they are reading these books. In other words, they are beginning to learn how to organize their behavior along the patriarchal, gendered codes embedded in such books. It can also be pointed out that children will face similar messages from the broader cultural milieu. Aside from the messages they contain, the books are themselves social artifacts that do not exist in a vacuum, but in relationship to other artifacts and social relations. Gender ideologies apparent in the books are also embedded in children's toys, the mass media, and even clothing. It is therefore important that students learn to see these books as only one component of patriarchal gender codes. If language does shape and condition our perceptions of reality, then parents who desire equality for their daughters or egalitarianism for their sons ought to look more closely at what their children are reading. Students who expect to be parents, or perhaps already are, can gain a great deal of insight from the exercise.

I have kept student summaries of the exercise for several years and present here some of their more interesting observations. In relation to whether or not gender ideologies and stereotypes are present in the books, two female students make the following comments:

I have never thought of these ideas as I have read these books to my children. I am quite offended by the messages that are so craftily hidden by the authors.

I never realized how children's books could have such stereotypical views within them. However, now that I am aware of these underlying views, I will be more observant.

From these observations it seems clear that the exercise helps students understand that children's books can actually influence children's perspectives about gender, as gender schema theory suggests. Moreover, it is apparent that these women had not previously given much thought to the gender roles actually portrayed in the books.

In turn, this female student's reflection handily demonstrates her ability to find gender scripts and themes in children's books:

There was a part in the book where a female dog asked a male dog if he liked her hat. Every time he said no, until in the end he finally said yes when she had on the most fancy hat. The last picture showed them going off together. This was a symbol of power of looks. Showing how the male dog wouldn't take her until he liked her hat, and that the girl dog got a new hat each time to impress him.

This observation certainly illustrates the connection between gender scripts in the media and the continuing importance of personal attractiveness for women. Thus, women in the classroom begin to understand that they may have internalized certain behaviors and attitudes with respect to their appearance when they were very young. Conversely, the same is true of the men, who begin to see that they have learned to see women, partly, as sexual objects.

Another common theme that tends to surface during the discussion is the claim that gender inequality is a thing of the past. While it is true that significant social, educational, and occupational gains have been made by women, there is still a long way to go before gender equality is reached. Gender stratification remains apparent in the family, in education, in the mass media, in the labor force, in housework, in the distribution of income and wealth, and even in politics (Bernard 1981; Bianchi and Spain 1996; Charles 1992; Davis 1993; Pear 1987; Fuller and Schoenberger 1991; Ollbunburger and Moore 1992; Tulafogel 1997). Even when women are in the work force they often encounter a glass ceiling which prevents their rising much beyond middle-level management (Benokraitis and Feagin 1995; Yamagata et al. 1997). Women still face a considerable amount of violence in
the home (Gelles and Cornell 1990; Schwartz 1987; Smolowe 1994; Straus and Gelles 1986) and unwanted sexual attention outside the home (Loy and Stewart 1984; Paul 1991). As part of their previous learning in the course, students should be well aware that gender stratification still exists. Therefore, in considering their findings from this exercise, students should be pressed to think about the ways certain children's books support and help reproduce gender stratification.

While considering whether or not negative gender stereotypes for women are a thing of the past, two male students contributed the following comments:

Until someone actually sits down and reads a book and analyzes every picture and word, you don't see the hidden messages or problems with inequality that kids are being exposed to. It wasn't just in one or two of the books. There were cases of inequality and different cultural messages in every book.

Gender plays a large role in these books. For instance, in these books it is very rare that you will see the male being shorter than the female, or the female protecting the male in a dangerous situation. The female is almost always portrayed as the follower and the leader is more likely the male. The mothers in these books are usually housewives who stay home cleaning and cooking all day. While the father goes to a job everyday and comes home and roughhouses with the children, or relaxes after a hard day's work. Some of these things may have been true at the time, but in today's society most women work everyday to help earn a living.

The observations address the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes in the books as well as the dissonance between women's stereotyped domestic roles and the contemporary reality of working women. Both men admitted that they had, as a matter of fact, read the books when they were children. Thus, students are able to understand that when the books were actually published is a moot point if parents are still buying them for their children.

A third interpretation often voiced during discussion is that the books simply reflect reality. With a little effort, students can be spurred into thinking of lots of women and men they have known or know who do not fall into the traditional definitions of "feminine" and "masculine." In other words, not all men are dominant and independent, nor are all women submissive, passive, and dependent, as suggested by gender stereotypes. If the books do not accurately reflect reality for boys, they do a worse job of reflecting reality for girls, who are nearly invisible in them. Moreover, research suggests that most children do not develop consistently feminine or masculine personalities (Bem 1983; Bernard 1981).

Several female students commented on how accurately the books reflect reality:

Not all boys are bad, not all girls are prissy. Not all mothers are housewives, not all fathers are doing all the work. There were just a lot of wrong messages in the books.

Living in the world as a female I would like to believe that none of that was true, but from all the facts and learning everything that we have in class I believe otherwise.

These comments clearly draw attention to the lack of accuracy, let alone diversity, in some children's books. One of the advantages of the exercise is that students are clearly able, with a little prodding, to realize that these children's books do not accurately reflect the actual behavior of either gender. All in all, I think most instructors who decide to try the exercise will be pleasantly surprised by the level of sophistication students are able to achieve using the student-friendly method of content analysis.

TAKE-HOME ASSIGNMENT

One of the central issues this exercise raises is the question of whether or not the gender stereotypes embedded in children's books simply reflect innate differences between the sexes or whether they are, in fact, reproducing and reinforcing culturally-based
gender stereotypes. Although this exercise cannot directly determine the extent to which any particular student’s gender identity was influenced by children’s books, it is an issue students should be asked to consider. To that end, instructors may find it useful to assign students a take-home project in which they conduct further analysis of gender in the media.

These take-home assignments can take a variety of forms, but I have found two strategies to be particularly effective. The first strategy asks students to reexamine media they were familiar with as children. In this case, students are directed to recall their childhood and to identify their favorite children’s books, cartoons, storybooks, textbooks, and even games. They are then instructed to locate samples of that particular media and conduct a latent analysis for gender stereotypes in a manner similar to the class exercise. The second strategy asks students to conduct a broader latent analysis using current media. This analysis can focus on advertisements, commercials, magazines, and television programs such as situation comedies, or movies. For example, certain, if not all, Disney movies (including The Lion King, The Little Mermaid, and Aladdin) lend themselves quite well to a latent analysis of gender stereotypes.

Ask students to write a three to five page essay based on their choice of strategies and one (or some combination of) suggested topics. In order to complement the in-class exercise, their essays should address the following issues:

- identifiable gender stereotypes
- similarity of sample to those gender stereotypes found in the class exercise
- what role the media plays in transmitting gender stereotypes to future generations
- how accurately students believe the gender stereotypes describe themselves or other women and men they know
- to what extent students have incorporated gender stereotypes as part of their gender identity
- to what extent students’ gender role-performances approximate the gender stereotypes and in what social settings

The take-home assignment, therefore, should not only be fun and interesting, but also help students address and think about the extent to which the media perpetuates gender stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

Gender is perhaps the basic dimension through which individuals perceive the social world and their place in it. Gender shapes social organization and influences how we interact with each other and even how we evaluate ourselves. Additionally, gender shapes our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors from birth to death. Children learn early on that society has different expectations and standards for girls and boys. However, before children can learn what the standards are and thereby apply gendered standards to themselves, they must learn the gender code. This code is clearly embedded in the children’s books used in the exercise. Since children begin to understand gender and apply gender stereotypes to themselves at an early age, we can reasonably ask what such books are teaching children about gender.

This female student's reflection, I think, aptly summarizes the exercise:

To see how these books were meant to encourage little boys and degrade little girls, was just shocking. During the class discussion, it seemed that most of the books had almost all male characters doing everything important and female characters, if any, were always in secondary roles. Male characters were strong and showed lots of imagination. While female characters were weaker and usually more subdued, with their pink bows and clothing. If a mother figure appeared in a book she was always cleaning or cooking. Father figures worked hard and were more of the authority figure. All the characters seemed white and middle to upper class. All the troublemakers
or everything that was evil or bad was colored in black, while everything good and happy was colored in primary colors. Thinking about all these messages reminded me of how when I was younger my father once said to me, “You hammer like a girl,” to which I replied, “What the hell does that mean?” He had no answer.

From these remarks it seems clear that the exercise is one that does indeed help students recognize gender stereotypes in popular children’s books. Indeed, the exercise is easily adapted to other media and other ideologies and stereotypes. I conclude with a comment from one of the male students, who had a somewhat broader view of the exercise:

I realized that children are introduced to racism, social class, and sexual roles at a very young age and they don’t even know it. I think the reason we did this exercise was to prove the point that we, as children, are unable to avoid these biases we grow up with. They are everywhere, even in children’s books.

I often hear colleagues despair over whether or not their students are “getting the message” when the message is related to gender or some other form of inequality. Content analysis is, in my estimation, a useful tool which can be added to one’s inventory of teaching strategies.

APPENDIX.

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<th>Coding Frame: Male Gender Stereotypes</th>
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REFERENCES


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