
Do Chinese Self-Enhance or Self-Efface? It's a Matter of Domain

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The assumption that Chinese tend to self-efface has mixed support in the scanty empirical literature. The conflicting findings may be attributable to measuring different domains in different studies. Therefore, we assessed self-enhancement across eight domains of person perception in a Hong Kong Chinese sample. Twenty-one groups of college students, after working together for 13 weeks on class projects, were asked to rate fellow group members on all eight domains. The degree of self-enhancement or self-effacement was determined by comparing self-ratings with mean peer ratings. Results showed an overall self-effacement effect, which was significant for five of eight personality dimensions. The exceptions were agentic traits such as Assertiveness, Openness to Experience, and Intellect. The overall rate of self-enhancers (43%) was substantially lower than the rate for a comparable North American sample (56%). Although those who self-enhanced most reported high self-esteem, they were not rated as better adjusted by their peers.

Taylor and Brown (1988) have been well cited for their proposition that positive illusions are common among normal individuals. This tendency was said to apply to all three types of positive illusions (overly positive views of the self, unrealistic optimism, and illusions of control). Taylor and Brown also proposed that individuals with positive illusions are better adjusted (see also Taylor, 1989). Using Western samples, they presented a range of empirical evidence for both propositions.¹

In the Chinese culture, self-effacement, rather than self-enhancement, is typically assumed to be the norm (Bond, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). The scanty empirical evidence, however, is mixed. Self-enhancement was found when self-ratings were compared with

supervisory ratings on job performance among Taiwanese employees (Fahr, Dobbins, & Cheng, 1991). In contrast, self-effacement was found in a replication of the Taiwanese study with mainland Chinese (Yu & Murphy, 1993). Finally, two studies of Chinese schoolchildren showed self-enhancement on perception of competence (Falbo, Poston, Triscari, & Zhang, 1997; Leung, 1996). It is difficult to know whether these studies truly conflict because they used unsystematic sets of personality and intellect items that were combined into a single evaluation score.

With regard to individual differences, research on Western samples has shown that the self-enhancement tendency is associated with high self-esteem and low levels of depression (e.g., Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Alloy & Ahrens, 1987; Lewinsohn, Mischel, Chaplin, & Barton, 1980; Paulhus, in press; Ruehlman, West, & Pasahow, 1985). On the other hand, evidence is accumulating that self-enhancers exhibit a variety of difficulties presumably due to narcissistic arrogance (Colvin, Block, & Funder 1995; Paulhus, in press; Robins & John, 1997). To the

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best of our knowledge, there are no comparable studies on Chinese samples.

The present study of a Chinese sample was designed to (a) determine the rates of self-enhancement for a full range of personality and intellect dimensions and (b) examine the association of self-enhancement with adjustment.

Measuring Interpersonal Self-Enhancement

To operationalize self-enhancement, a criterion is needed—a measure of reality against which self-perceptions can be compared. One of the five common criteria cited by Kenny (1994) is social consensus, for example, mean peer ratings (e.g., Funder, 1987). In one frequently cited study, Lewinsohn et al. (1980) had observers rate group interactions through a one-way mirror; corresponding ratings were obtained from the participants. They concluded that participants' self-reports of 17 desirable personality traits were significantly more positive than the observer ratings. Although their interpretation has been questioned (Campbell & Fehr, 1990; John & Robins, 1994), that operationalization of social consensus is now commonplace.

In interpersonal judgments, this criterion is preferable to the use of "normative criteria" where self-ratings are contrasted against those of a hypothetical other (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991a). The former provides a more concrete standard of comparison than the latter (John & Robins, 1994). A third method of indexing self-enhancement involves comparing how one rates one's self versus how one rates others (e.g., Brown, 1986; Falbo et al., 1997). This comparison of two intrapsychic attitudes is more difficult to interpret than a comparison of a self-perception with external reality. In sum, we prefer the social consensus criterion because (a) it is ideal as an anchor for interpersonal self-enhancement and (b) this method was used in the previous Chinese studies.

The Present Study

The present study builds on and extends previous research by examining whether self-enhancement or self-effacement is predominant in a Hong Kong Chinese sample. We studied 21 groups of students working on class projects. Participants were asked to complete personality ratings of themselves and other group members on eight personality dimensions based solely on their group interactions. They had met once a week, for 13 weeks, to complete three group projects. Thus, the same kind of personality information was available to every member in a group (see Paulhus & Bruce, 1992).

To examine individual differences in self-enhancement, self-ratings of personality were compared with a social consensus criterion, namely, mean peer ratings. Finally, to determine the empirical linkage between self-

enhancement and psychological adjustment, respondents were asked to complete Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale.

To provide a comprehensive measure of person perception, we chose to use the Sino-American Person Perception Scale (SAPPS) developed by Yik and Bond (1993). It comprises the eight dimensions of personality and intellect necessary to capture the most socially relevant individual differences in the Chinese culture. Guided by the lexical approach in its development, the SAPPS was designed and refined on Hong Kong Chinese samples.

Predicting self-enhancement versus self-effacement. For various reasons, it is difficult to make predictions about self-enhancement and self-effacement in our Chinese sample. On one hand, the proposition that Chinese self-efface rather than self-enhance has been widely discussed and debated (Bond, 1991; Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b; Pye, 1982; C. F. Yang & Chiu, 1987; K. S. Yang, 1988). On the other hand, no apparent consensus has emerged and, as noted above, the empirical results are mixed.

Nor were the previous studies helpful in generating hypotheses regarding self-enhancement versus effacement on our specific personality and intellect dimensions. As noted earlier, the dependent measures in those studies contained an unknown combination of evaluative attributes. Therefore, we must take an exploratory approach.

It is also difficult to make predictions regarding the relationship between individual differences in self-enhancement and psychological well-being. Again, there is some theorizing on the topic (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991b), but no relevant research has been published on a Chinese sample. Accordingly, an exploratory tack is most prudent.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and thirty college students (47 males and 83 females) in an introductory course on social psychology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong participated in partial fulfillment of their course requirement. These participants, students from the liberal arts, business administration, science, and social science faculties, were in either their third or fourth year of undergraduate studies.

Measures

Among the questionnaires completed by the participants was Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale and the self-report version of the SAPPS. They also rated all their fellow group members on the peer-rating version of the SAPPS.

SAPPS. The Sino-American Person Perception Scale (SAPPS) is a reliable and valid measure of Chinese personality perception (Luk & Bond, 1992; Yik & Bond, 1993; Yik & Tang, 1996). It provides researchers with a comprehensive measure of eight personality and intellect dimensions, namely, Emotional Stability, Sociability, Assertiveness, Openness to Experience, Intellect, Helpfulness, Application, and Restraint.

The instrument consists of 32 bipolar items, with each of the eight independent dimensions measured by four items (see appendix for the English translation of items). The items of the eight dimensions were mixed randomly with half of the positive-keyed poles on the right and the other half on the left.² Participants were asked to respond on 9-point rating bipolar scales to indicate their perceptions of themselves (self-rating form) and of each of their group members (peer-rating form).

Self-esteem. The Chinese translation of Rosenberg's (1965) global self-esteem scale was used and has been shown to have high reliability and validity (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997; Lau, 1989). Participants indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement with 10 statements on 4-point rating scales. Half of the items were keyed negatively and half positively to control for any acquiescence response bias.

In the current sample, the Chinese Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale showed a mean of 3.03 ($SD = .40$) and an alpha of .84. These psychometric properties are comparable to those for North American college students (Rosenberg, 1965).

Procedure

In the first class, participants were asked to form groups of 5-7 to complete three group projects. Of 21 groups, there were five 5-member, seven 6-member, and nine 7-member groups. They worked together at least 1 hour a week for 13 consecutive weeks.

Packages containing rating forms were distributed in the last week of the semester. The package contained enough SAPPS rating forms to do a self-rating as well as rate each other group member. It also contained the Chinese self-esteem scale. Participants were required to complete the ratings privately and hand them in with their final group project. They were asked to make their ratings on the basis of their group interactions only.

RESULTS

First we examined the psychometric properties of the self- and peer ratings. Then we calculated the proportion of Chinese who self-enhance versus self-efface on each personality dimension. Finally, we examined the relation between individual differences in self-enhancement and levels of psychological adjustment.

The descriptive statistics for the self- and peer ratings are presented in Table 1. The eight dimensions of self-rated personality showed acceptable convergence with mean peer ratings, ranging from .17 to .63, with a mean of .38. For the self-ratings, the alpha reliabilities range from .61 to .86 (mean = .75). For the peer ratings, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was used to measure interrater agreement on peer ratings of the same individual.³ Each tabled value is the mean interrater agreement across 21 groups. The ICC figures indicate that there is a high level of consensus across the personality dimensions, ranging from .64 to .85 (mean = .74).⁴

Paired *t*-tests were performed to test for differences between self-ratings and mean peer ratings. For the mean of all 32 items, there is an overall tendency for Chinese to self-efface, $t(128) = -2.99$ ($p \leq .01$). However, the self-effacement tendency is significant for only five of eight subscales. Assertiveness and Intellect are nonsignificant, and Openness to Experience is actually significant in the opposite direction: that is, the latter domain exhibits self-enhancement.⁵

Another way to index the prevalence of self-enhancement or self-effacement is by calculating the percentage of participants who show each tendency. As noted in Table 2, on average, 55% of participants self-effaced, whereas only 43% self-enhanced. The percentage of self-enhancers ranges from 29% for Emotional Stability to 64% for Openness to Experience. Consistent with the pattern of mean differences, the majority (> 50%) of participants are self-effacing on five of eight dimensions. Furthermore, only Openness to Experience shows a clear majority of self-enhancers.

To provide an appropriate comparison to North American findings, we reanalyzed the self- and peer-rating data from a similar study published by Paulhus and Reynolds (1995). The latter study involved mutual ratings of discussion group members in a classroom setting. The context, the degree of familiarity, the rating dimensions, and the educational level were all similar to those in the present study. The percentage of self-enhancement for both samples is presented in Table 3. Given that in the North American sample, personality was assessed in terms of "the Big Five," we converted the SAPPS measures to the closest Big Five dimensions.⁶

Note first from Table 3 that the overall percentage of self-enhancers is higher in the North American than the Chinese sample (56% to 43%). It is also clear from Table 3 that the patterns of self-enhancement are different: North Americans showed a majority (> 50%) of self-enhancers on all but Emotional Stability, whereas Chinese showed a majority of self-enhancers on Surgency and Openness to Experience.

To index individual differences in self-enhancement, we calculated residual scores for each subject by regress-

TABLE 1: Psychometric Properties of the Self- and Peer Ratings

SAPPS Dimensions	Self-Peer Correlation	Self-Ratings			Peer Ratings			t
		M	SD	α	M	SD	ICC	
1. Emotional Stability	.42**	5.02	1.44	.80	5.61	.93	.69	-4.99**
2. Sociability	.63**	5.19	1.50	.82	5.60	1.23	.85	-3.90**
3. Assertiveness	.46**	5.44	1.22	.61	5.51	1.05	.84	-.64
4. Openness to Experience	.39**	5.68	1.52	.86	5.25	1.10	.82	3.31**
5. Intellect	.28**	6.12	1.18	.79	6.17	.73	.65	-.49
6. Helpfulness	.25**	5.83	1.13	.67	6.07	.74	.64	-2.32*
7. Application	.17*	5.96	1.17	.67	6.34	.78	.65	-3.38**
8. Restraint	.42**	5.68	1.46	.81	5.99	.88	.77	-2.66**
<i>M of all items</i>		5.61	.75	.86	5.82	.56	.79	-2.99**

NOTE. $N = 130$. Each subscale has four 9-point items. Possible mean scores range from 1 to 9.

* $p \leq .05$, two-tailed. ** $p \leq .01$, two-tailed.

TABLE 2: Percentages of Self-Effacers and Self-Enhancers

SAPPS Dimensions	Self-Effacers	Self-Enhancers
1. Emotional Stability	70.8	29.2
2. Sociability	64.6	33.1
3. Assertiveness	47.7	51.5
4. Openness to Experience	34.6	63.8
5. Intellect	47.7	51.5
6. Helpfulness	56.2	41.5
7. Application	62.3	36.2
8. Restraint	57.7	42.3
<i>M</i>	55.2	42.6

NOTE: $N = 130$. The self-effacers column shows the percentage of participants whose self-rating was smaller than the mean rating received; the self-enhancers column is the percentage of participants whose self-rating was larger. On each dimension, 1-4 participants neither self-enhanced nor self-effaced (i.e., difference equals zero). Percentages greater than 50 are italicized.

TABLE 3: Percentages of Self-Enhancers in Chinese Versus North American Samples

Big Five Dimensions	Chinese Sample ($N = 130$)	North American Sample ($N = 175$)
I. Surgency	52	62
II. Agreeableness	37	55
III. Conscientiousness	39	54
IV. Emotional Stability	29	49
V. Openness to Experience	58	58
<i>M</i>	43	56

NOTE: The eight Sino-American Person Perception Scale (SAPPS) dimensions have been collapsed into the closest Big Five domain. In the Chinese sample, Surgency is represented by SAPPS Assertiveness, Agreeableness by the mean of SAPPS Sociability and Helpfulness, Conscientiousness by the mean of SAPPS Application and Restraint, Emotional Stability by SAPPS Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience by the mean of SAPPS Openness to Experience and Intellect. Respondents who neither self-enhanced nor self-effaced (i.e., discrepancy equals zero) were randomly assigned to one category or the other. This procedure was necessary to allow fair comparison of the Chinese and North American samples. Percentages greater than 50 are italicized.

ing the self-rating onto the corresponding mean peer rating and retaining the residual of the self-rating (see John & Robins, 1994). The resulting eight residualized scores represent the variance remaining in the self-ratings after the effect of the mean peer ratings has been removed. Higher values of these residuals indicate relative self-enhancement.⁷ These residualized scores were then used to evaluate the association of individual differences in self-enhancement with indicators of adjustment.

Table 4 presents the correlations between eight indicators of self-enhancement (one for each SAPPS dimension) and three indicators of adjustment: (a) Rosenberg's self-esteem, (b) self-rated Emotional Stability, and (c) peer-rated Emotional Stability. The latter two were operationalized as mean self- and peer rating of Emotional Stability from the SAPPS.⁸

Note that all correlations in the self-esteem column are positive and significant, ranging from .18 to .54 (mean = .33). That is, on all eight dimensions, self-enhancement tendencies are associated with self-reports of high self-esteem. A similar pattern of findings was found with self-rated Emotional Stability. In stark contrast, the peer-rated Emotional Stability column contains no significant correlations. That is, self-enhancement is not associated with peer-perceptions of adjustment as operationalized by Factor IV ratings.⁹

DISCUSSION

Although self-effacement is typically assumed in Asian samples, the only two previous studies on Chinese adults showed inconsistent results with regard to self-enhancement. Concerned that domain of measurement might play a moderator role, we attempted to bring some order to this confusion by assessing self-enhancement on all eight important dimensions of person perception. To ensure relevance to Chinese society, we used a measuring instru-

TABLE 4: Correlations Between Self-Enhancement and Three Indicators of Psychological Adjustment

SAPPS Dimensions	Adjustment Measures		
	Rosenberg's Self- Esteem	Self-Rated Emotional Stability	Peer-Rated Emotional Stability
1. Emotional Stability	.31**	— ^a	— ^b
2. Sociability	.18*	.24**	-.03
3. Assertiveness	.45**	.24**	.05
4. Openness to Experience	.24**	.08	-.08
5. Intellect	.54**	.29**	.04
6. Helpfulness	.35**	.48**	.01
7. Application	.39**	.10	-.10
8. Restraint	.20*	.23**	-.05
<i>M</i>	.33	.24	-.02

NOTE: $N = 130$. For each Sino-American Person Perception Scale dimension, self-enhancement was operationalized as the residual of the self-rating after partialing out the mean peer rating.

a. This value is missing because Emotional Stability was used as a criterion to operationalize self-rated adjustment.

b. This value is missing because Emotional Stability was used as a criterion to operationalize peer-rated adjustment.

* $p \leq .05$, two-tailed. ** $p \leq .01$, two-tailed.

ment that was specifically developed and refined on Chinese samples.

Cross-Cultural Mean Differences

Our Hong Kong Chinese data showed substantially less self-enhancement than a comparable North American sample (43% vs. 56%). That is, when rating their own personalities, our sample of Hong Kong Chinese students showed an overall tendency to rate themselves more negatively than their peers did. Thus, our data indicate a kernel of truth to the cultural stereotype of self-effacement among Chinese (Bond, 1991; Tseng, 1972).

A breakdown of personality ratings by dimension, however, suggested some inconsistency in the degree of self-effacement. The latter was found clearly on five of the eight subscales: Emotional Stability, Sociability, Helpfulness, Application, and Restraint. The only clear exception was Openness to Experience, where the general trend reversed and a significant self-enhancement was observed. It seems more than coincidence that the three dimensions that failed to show self-effacement (Assertiveness, Openness to Experience, and Intellect) are all associated with the broad interpersonal axis of Agency; In contrast, the five dimensions that exhibited self-effacement are linked to the traditional axis of Communion (Paulhaus & John, in press).

Self-Enhancement and Adjustment

With respect to the association between individual differences in self-enhancement and adjustment, our

findings were similar across the full range of personality dimensions. In all cases, the positive relation between self-enhancement tendency and self-rated self-esteem held true in our Chinese sample. This result is consistent with the Taylor and Brown (1988) claim for the beneficial effects of self-enhancement on adjustment.

On the other hand, the results with peer-rated adjustment provide a very different picture. There was no indication of any relation at all between self-enhancement and adjustment. This result is consistent with writers who have criticized the Taylor-Brown position (e.g., Colvin & Block, 1994; Robins & John, 1997).

It is not entirely obvious, however, which of the two indicators of adjustment is more credible. Self-rated adjustment certainly has face-validity. And Taylor and Armor (1996) go further to suggest high self-esteem as a legitimate criterion for adjustment. However, some critics might interpret the link with self-rated adjustment as artifactual because of shared method variance. They could point out that the link with peer-rated adjustment is not inflated with method variance and therefore provides a more appropriate indicator of relation. Finally, some recent work has demonstrated that self-enhancement can have both adaptive and maladaptive aspects, thereby disputing any commentators who insist that self-enhancement must be either adaptive or maladaptive (Beer & Robins, 1996; Paulhus, in press).

To sum up, our data provide little support for the adaptive value of self-enhancement. Although individuals who rate themselves more highly than do their peers tend to report high self-esteem and emotional stability, their peers do not sustain these perceptions of good adjustment.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Overall, Hong Kong Chinese exhibit less self-enhancement than comparable North American samples.
2. Self-effacement is clearer on communal than agentic dimensions.
3. The link between self-enhancement and adjustment holds only for self-rated adjustment.

Although these conclusions are justified by our data, we feel it is important to point out several limitations to our arguments and data. First, our operationalization of adjustment is neither comprehensive nor definitive. Of course, there is no definitive instrument for evaluating mental health, even the more narrow notion of adjustment. Nonetheless, Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale has been directly criticized as inadequate for capturing psychological adjustment in Asian societies (see Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Our inclusion of self- and peer ratings of emotional stability clarified the significance of the self-esteem correlations, but

we hesitate to make a strong claim regarding the enhancement-adjustment link. After all, little is known about the correspondence between North American measures of adjustment and Chinese constructs.

The subdivision of self-esteem into personal and collective (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994) is one obvious candidate for extending the research reported here. Another example is the Kwan et al. (1997) distinction between self-esteem and relationship harmony as measures of psychological adjustment among Chinese. It seems reasonable to predict that among Chinese respondents, self-effacement may very well enhance the collective and harmony facets of adjustment.

Another limitation of the present report is the possible impact of the SAPPs instrument on encouraging a self-effacement rather than self-enhancement effect in our sample. Could the use of a Chinese-language instrument explain the tendency toward self-effacement? When personality items are represented in Chinese characters, they may not draw self-enhancement from questionnaire respondents. Had the items been administered to the same sample in English, we might have found the same degree of self-enhancement seen in Western samples.¹⁰ However, a recent study of translating personality scales found no difference in the elevation of self-ratings for English and Chinese versions in a Chinese sample (McCrae, Yik, Trapnell, Bond, & Paulhus, in press, Study 1). Even better would be a study of self- and peer ratings of the same instrument (in both English and Chinese versions) in a bilingual sample. Such a study would assure us that our observed differences in self-effacement were not language-dependent.

Finally, we doubt that our sample can be assumed to represent all Chinese cultures. Apart from the usual questions about the representativeness of student samples, we readily concede that other Chinese samples may exhibit self-enhancement dynamics that differ from those of Hong Kong Chinese. Indeed, Smith and Bond (1994) have documented a variety of other differences among Asian samples, in particular, when Hong Kong Chinese are compared to mainland or Taiwanese Chinese. Clearly, this article is just a beginning. We hope that others will follow up with similar research on other Chinese samples.

APPENDIX

Sino-American Person Perception Scale (SAPPs) (English translation of items)

Emotional Stability
Unhurried and unworried—Tense and doubtful
Relaxed—Tense
At ease—Nervous
Even-tempered—Temperamental
Sociability
Sociable—Unsociable
Passionate—Cold
Talkative—Quiet
Extraverted—Introverted
Assertiveness
Determined—Hesitant
Independent—Dependent
Forceful—Submissive
Individualistic—Conforming
Openness to Experience
Prefer variety—Prefer regularity
Adventurous—Conservative
Prefer novel ways—Follow routine
Eager to change—Satisfied with status quo
Intellect
Intelligent—Unintelligent
Analytical—Unanalytical
Refined—Vulgar in taste
Perceptive—Imperceptive
Helpfulness
Generous—Stingy
Unselfish—Selfish
Kind—Unkind
Quick to admit own errors—Inclined to defend own errors
Application
Hardworking—Lazy
Promising and diligent in work—Dispirited
Work hard without drawing attention—Talk without taking action
Practical—Impractical
Restraint
Thorough—Careless
Cautious—Rash
Conscientious—Negligent
Dignified—Casual

NOTES

1. For critical views of both propositions, see Colvin and Block (1994) as well as John and Robins (1994).

2. Cheung (1994) showed that high scores are more desirable than low scores on all eight dimensions among Hong Kong Chinese.

3. Unfortunately, we could not use the social relations model on these data because we did not have the information necessary to identify who rated whom.

4. The Type I intraclass correlation (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) was used here. Type I is actually an underestimate of the interrater agreement in our data. This index is appropriate for cases in which each ratee is rated by a different set of raters. Here, participants in the same group are rated by the same set of raters. Because raters differ across groups, however, we opted for the conservative estimate of this parameter (see also Paulhus & Bruce, 1992). We have three sizes of groups (4,

5, 6): Hence, intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were calculated for each personality dimension within each group type. The figures in the ICC column are the weighted average across different group types.

5. We also investigated the possibility of sex differences on the self-peer discrepancy for each of the eight personality dimensions. A significant Sex \times Discrepancy interaction would indicate that a self-peer discrepancy varied as a function of sex. None of the eight interactions was significant. Hence, we decided to pool males and females for further analyses.

6. Several experts in personality structure were consulted to ensure consensus on the mapping of the SAPPS dimensions onto the Big Five.

7. Note that the residual term is calculated the same way for variables on which the overall tendency was self-effacement as for variables on which self-enhancement was predominant. As long as the criterion for self-reports is the peer-ratings, the latter should always be the component that is partialled.

8. Factor IV of the Big Five corresponds to the first factor of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), often used to represent general psychological adjustment (John, 1990).

9. To consider possible curvilinear effects, we examined the scatterplots of self-enhancement versus peer-rated adjustment. We saw no patterns, curvilinear or otherwise, for any of the eight SAPPS dimensions.

10. Note that, even in Western samples, two distinct forms of self-enhancement (egoistic and moralistic) have been identified (Paulhus & John, in press; Paulhus, Yik, & Lysy, 1995).

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