USC Annenberg
Norman Lear Center

Shawn Van Valkenburgh, PhD
Erica Rosenthal, PhD
March 2021

STEREOTYPES OF POVERTY IN AMERICAN SITCOMS

Comparative analysis by socioeconomic status

BILL & MELINDA GATES *foundation*
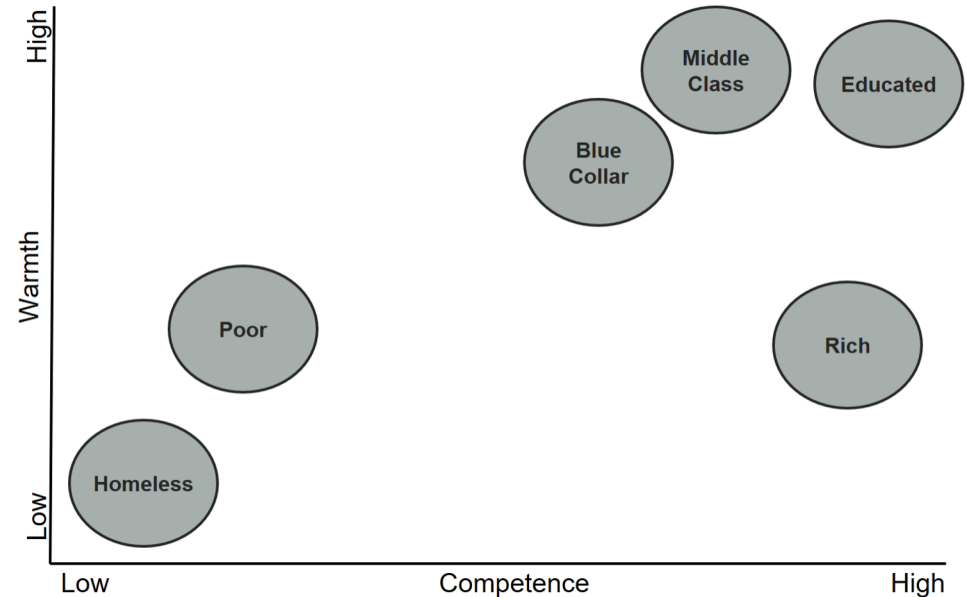
WEALTH INEQUALITY IN THE U.S.

- Wealth inequality in the U.S. has grown over the past 50 years (Piketty & Saez, 2013)

- But the proportion of Americans who self-identify as lower- or working-class has remained unchanged (GSS, 2021)

Piketty & Saez, 2013
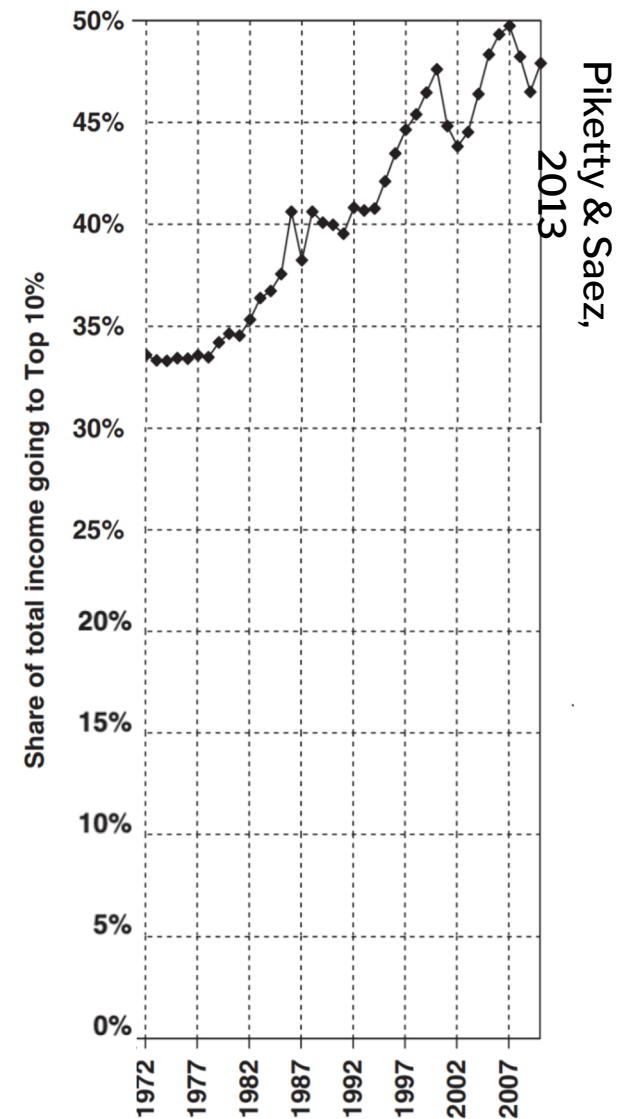
SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF CLASS

GOOD Inc., 2019

Fiske et al., 2003

- Lower-income Americans are often reluctant to think of themselves as poor or working class (Williams, 2009)

- This may be because poor people are stigmatized as lazy, unfriendly, and incompetent (Fiske et al., 2003; GOOD Inc., 2019)

CLASS IDENTIFICATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

March for the Poor People's Campaign, Washington DC, 1968. Credit: http://borgenproject.org.

- Because of these stereotypes, lower-income people may be less likely to collaborate in movements for systemic change and economic opportunity (Brewer & Silver, 2000; Klandermans, 2002; Williams, 2009)

ROLE OF POPULAR MEDIA

Shameless (Showtime) has been criticized for depicting stereotypes of working class people.

- Negative stereotypes discourage empathy and support for people living in poverty (Bullock, 2008; Fiske et al., 2003)

- It is important to know to what extent popular media perpetuate these stereotypes (Pimpare, 2017)

RESEARCH QUESTION

- Do popular sitcoms implicitly convey stereotypes of lower-income people in terms of

  - Lack of warmth?
  - Incompetence?
  - Laziness?

Warmth

Affectionate, friendly, grateful, laughing, loving, communal.

Competence

Intelligent, well-spoken, confident, articulate, skilled.

Laziness

Irresponsible, disorganized, unfocused, cutting corners.

WHY SITCOMS?

- Dialogue-heavy episodes means more data for linguistic analysis

- Standardized episode length and format enables more "apples-to-apples" comparisons

- Economic diversity among sitcom characters enables comparisons on the extent to which these characters convey stereotypes

- Emphasis on personal and social lives leads to richer portrayals of warmth, competence, and laziness
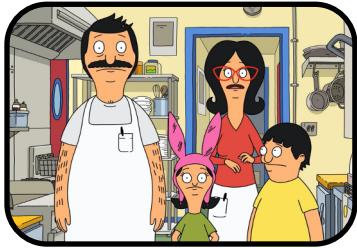
METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE

- 20 most-watched sitcom series in 2017-2018 season that aired for 3+ seasons

- Identified 5 most frequent characters from each show

- Series were segmented into 2 categories based on main characters' socioeconomic status (SES)

- Randomly selected 4 episodes from each series

LOWER SES SITCOMS

A.P. Bio
NBC

Bob's Burgers
FOX

Mom
CBS

Roseanne
ABC

Speechless
ABC

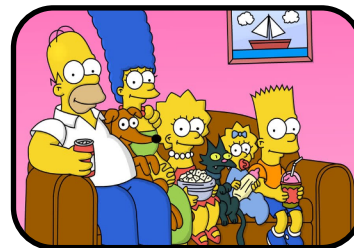*Superstore*
NBC

The Goldbergs
ABC

The Middle
ABC

The Simpsons
FOX

Young Sheldon
CBS

HIGHER SES
SITCOMS

American Housewife
ABC

Black-ish
ABC

Brooklyn Nine-Nine
NBC

Fresh Off the Boat
ABC

Last Man Standing
FOX

Man with a Plan
CBS

Modern Family
ABC

New Girl
FOX

The Big Bang Theory
CBS

Will & Grace
NBC

www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty

LINGUISTIC CODING PROCEDURE

- Episode transcripts from the Norman Lear Center Script Database

- Linguistic variables

  - Notable words—like "love" and "thank"—were counted in each script using Microsoft Word

  - Average syllables per word, words per sentence, vocabulary size, and reading level of each script were computed using free online software*

VISUAL CODING PROCEDURE

- Student coders were rigorously trained to identify behaviors and characteristics of the 5 main characters for each show

- Within each episode

  - Total number of hugs involving at least one main character

  - Was any main character seen doing homework, lying down somewhere other than a bed, or reading?

  - All other variables coded by degree of portrayal

WARMTH VARIABLES

VISUAL

- Hugging
- Sharing meals

LINGUISTIC

- Laughing
- Saying "thanks"
- Saying "love"

Modern Family (ABC)

New Girl (FOX)

COMPETENCE VARIABLES

VISUAL

- Shown reading book or newspaper

The Big Bang Theory (CBS)

LINGUISTIC

- Linguistic complexity
- Size of vocabulary
- Syllables per word
- Words per sentence
- Correct grammar

LAZINESS VARIABLES

VISUAL

- Eating unhealthy foods
- Drinking alcohol
- Doing drugs
- Lying down (not in bed)
- Committing crimes
- Exercising*
- Doing homework*

The Simpsons (FOX)

ANALYSIS

- Lower- and higher-SES shows were compared based on frequencies of behaviors and qualities associated with warmth, competence, and laziness

- 20% of episodes double-coded for inter-rater reliability

KEY FINDINGS

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- Characters in higher-SES sitcoms are generally depicted as warmer (more laughing and hugging)

  - Characters in lower-SES sitcoms are more likely to be seen sharing meals

- Characters in higher-SES sitcoms are depicted as more competent (larger vocabulary and correct grammar)

WARMTH

Higher-SES sitcom characters are depicted as warmer (more laughing and hugging), although lower-SES sitcom characters are more likely to be seen sharing meals.
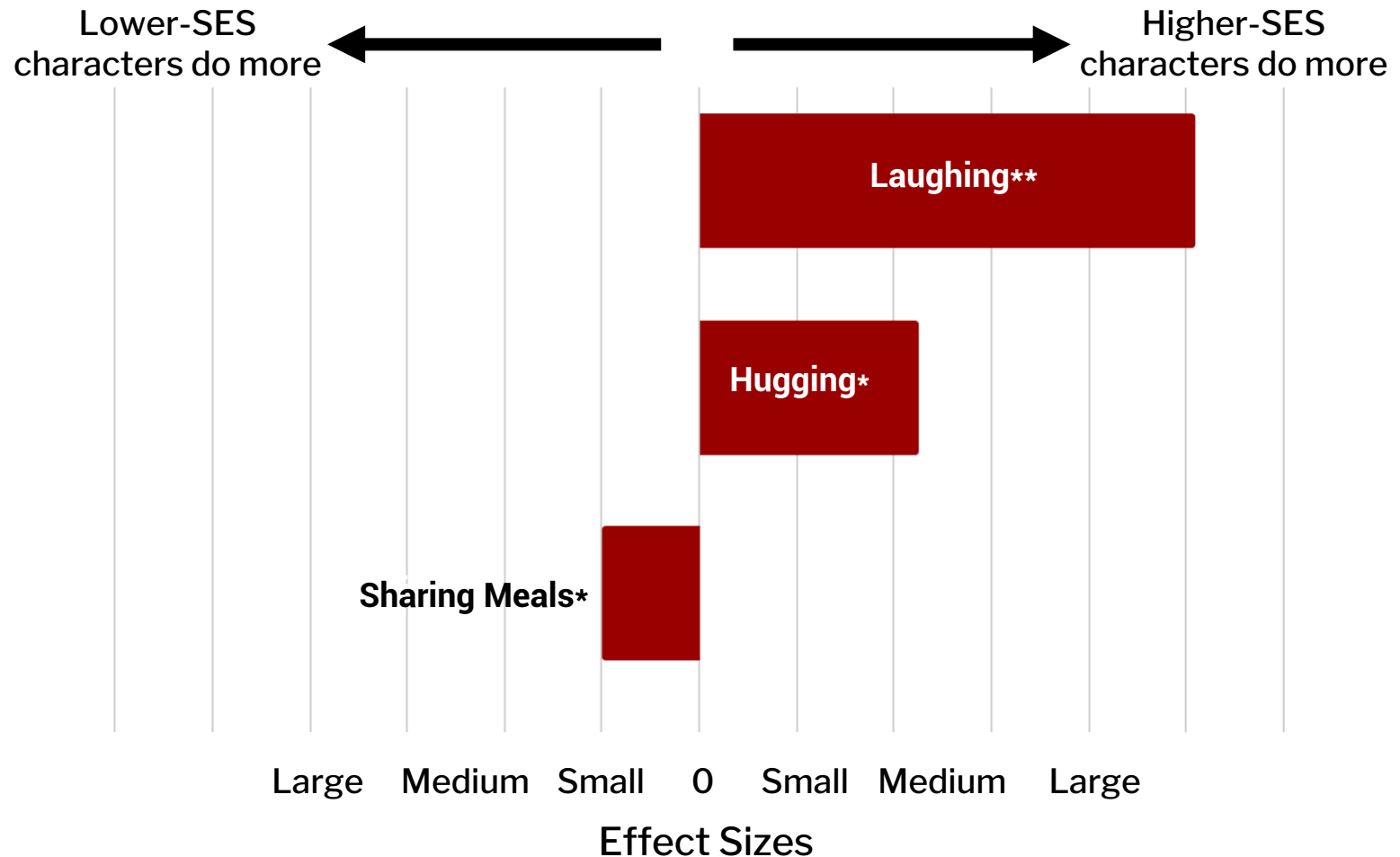
COMPETENCE

Higher-SES sitcom characters are depicted as more competent (larger vocabulary and correct grammar).
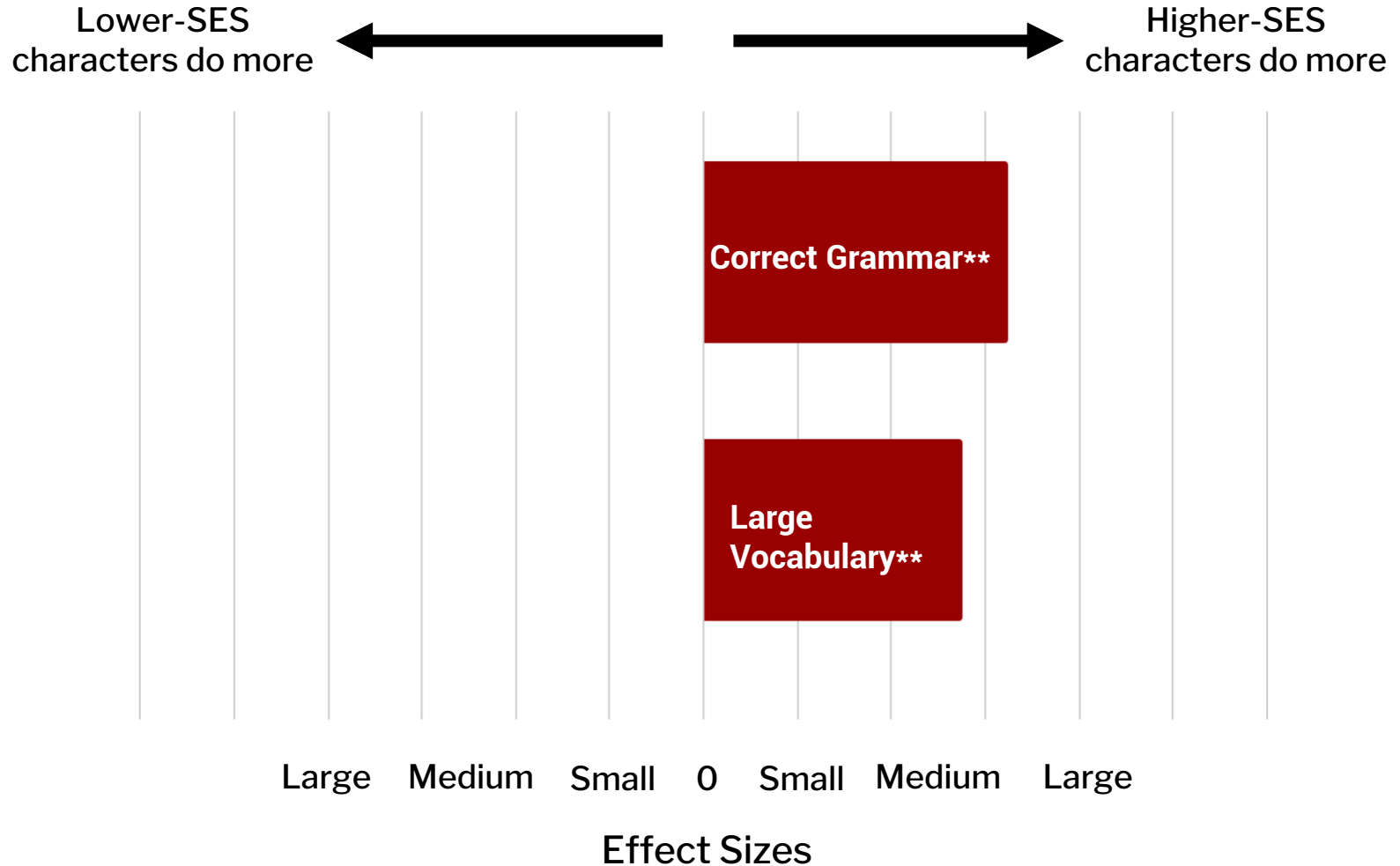
QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- How do depictions of lower- and higher-SES characters intersect with *race/ethnicity, gender,* and *sexual orientation*?

- How do lower-SES sitcom characters compare to higher-SES sitcom characters on other dimensions like *happiness* or *satisfaction*?

- How might lower-SES characters from sitcoms compare to their counterparts on *dramas*?

APPENDIX:
LIST OF ANALYZED EPISODES

- The following tables list the shows and episodes included in the sample

LIST OF ANALYZED EPISODES

Series Name (2017-2018)	Season: Episode Number	Episode Title
A.P. Bio	S1: E2	"Teacher Jail"
	S1: E3	"Burning Miles"
	S1: E5	"Dating Toledoans"
	S1: E12	"Walleye"
American Housewife	S2: E1	"Back to School"
	S2: E6	"Boo-Who?"
	S2: E8	"Gala Auction"
	S2: E21	"It's Not You, It's Me"
Big Bang Theory	S11: E5	"The Collaboration Contamination"
	S11: E14	"The Separation Triangulation"
	S11: E16	"The Neonatal Nomenclature"
	S11: E17	"The Athenaeum Allocation"
Black-ish	S4: E1	"Juneteenth"
	S4: E10	"Working Girl"
	S4: E13	"Unkept Woman"
	S4: E20	"Fifty-Three Percent"

LIST OF ANALYZED EPISODES

Series Name (2017-2018)	Season: Episode Number	Episode Title
Bob's Burgers	S8: E3	"The Wolf of Wharf Street"
	S8: E7	"The Bleakening"
	S8: E8	"V for Valentine-detta"
	S8: E10	"The Secret Ceramics Room of Secrets"
Brooklyn Nine-Nine	S5: E5	"Bad Beat"
	S5: E9	"Return to Skyfire"
	S5: E10	"Game Night"
	S5: E16	"NutriBoom"
Fresh off the Boat	S4: E1	"B as in Best Friends"
	S4: E3	"Kids"
	S4: E12	"Liar Liar"
	S4: E14	"A Man to Share the Night With"
Last Man Standing (2018-2019)	S7: E2	"Man vs. Myth"
	S7: E4	"Bride of Pranksenstein"
	S7: E10	"Three for the Road"
	S7: E20	"Yass Queen"

LIST OF ANALYZED EPISODES

Series Name (2017-2018)	Season: Episode Number	Episode Title
Man with a Plan	S2: E7	"We Can Be Heroes"
	S2: E11	"Guess Who's Coming to Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner"
	S2: E19	"We Hate Money"
	S2: E20	"We Got a Girl"
Modern Family	S9: E2	"The Long Goodbye"
	S9: E15	"Spanks for the Memories"
	S9: E18	"Daddy Issues"
	S9: E22	"Clash of Swords"
Mom	S5: E4	"Fancy Crackers and Giant Women"
	S5: E8	"An Epi-Pen and a Security Cat"
	S5: E9	"Teenage Vampires and a White Russian"
	S5: E16	"Eight Cats and the Hat Show"
New Girl	S7: E2	"Tuesday Meeting"
	S7: E5	"Godparents"
	S7: E6	"Mario"
	S7: E8	"Engram Pattersky"

LIST OF ANALYZED EPISODES

Series Name (2017-2018)	Season: Episode Number	Episode Title
Roseanne	S10: E3	"Roseanne Gets the Chair"
	S10: E5	"Darlene v. David"
	S10: E6	"No Country for Old Women"
	S10: E8	"Netflix & Pill"
Speechless	S2: E6	"S-h-Shipping"
	S2: E7	"B-r-i-British I-n-v-Invasion"
	S2: E14	"E-i-Eighteen"
	S2: E16	"One A-n-Angry M-Maya"
Superstore	S3: E1	"Grand Re-Opening"
	S3: E17	"District Manager"
	S3: E18	"Local Vendors Day"
	S3: E22	"Town Hall"
The Goldbergs	S5: E1	"Weird Science"
	S5: E8	"The Circle of Driving Again"
	S5: E15	"Adam Spielberg"
	S5: E21	"Spaceballs"

LIST OF ANALYZED EPISODES

Series Name (2017-2018)	Season: Episode Number	Episode Title
The Middle	S9: E6	"The Setup"
	S9: E11	"New Year's Revelations"
	S9: E14	"Guess Who's Coming to Frozen Dinner"
	S9: E21	"The Royal Flush"
The Simpsons	S29: E14	"Fears of a Clown"
	S29: E17	"Lisa Gets the Blues"
	S29: E19	"Left Behind"
	S29: E20	"Throw Grampa from the Dane"
Will and Grace	S9: E2	"Who's Your Daddy"
	S9: E4	"Grandpa Jack"
	S9: E5	"How to Succeed in Business Without Really Crying"
	S9: E10	"The Wedding"
Young Sheldon	S1: E2	"Rockets, Communists, and the Dewey Decimal System"
	S1: E14	"Potato Salad, a Broomstick, and Dad's Whiskey"
	S1: E20	"A Dog, A Squirrel, and a Fish Named Fish"
	S1: E22	"Vanilla Ice Cream, Gentleman Callers, and a Dinette Set"

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