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The development of the Dutch Family Monitor

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DUTCH FAMILY MONITOR

Summary: The Family Monitor, a follow-up survey on more than 2000 respondents of the Dutch Fertility Survey, investigates to what extent 'household' decisions (e.g. family planning or division of labor) can be seen as the result of an interaction process between partners. In the development of this survey, we used focus groups, cognitive interviews and small field tests.

First, we explored the possibility to observe actual interaction between partners; a video was made of two individual interviews followed by an interview where both partners were confronted with their conflicting opinions. This video was shown to a focus group. This method proved to be too confronting and (thus) too demanding for interviewers without an extensive additional training. After several pre-testing rounds we developed a less confronting design with two questionnaires, one for face-to-face (CAPI) interviewing and a paper-and-pencil questionnaire for self-completion (PAPI). While one partner is interviewed, the other fills out the questionnaire in another room and vice versa. The combination of the interviews and questionnaires of both partners yields information about the level of agreement on a limited number of topics, about a characterization of the decision processes with respect to these choices and about the actual outcome of the process. This method was first tested in the questionnaire laboratory and later in the field. The field tests resulted in some final adjustments to the questionnaire and the practical organization of the fieldwork. The fieldwork was completed in the autumn of 2000.

In this paper we describe the different test methods used for the development of the survey design and the questionnaire. The pros and cons of these methods will be discussed.

1. Introduction

This paper describes the development of the Dutch Family Monitor 2000. Devising the design as well as the questionnaire were challenging tasks because the subject matter is sensitive and information had to be collected on both partners in a household. Because we had to develop both a research design and a questionnaire we conducted different types of pre-tests which all yielded specific results.

The Family Monitor is a follow-up survey on 2289 Dutch couples that participated in the 1998 Fertility Survey of Statistics Netherlands. The aim of the Family Monitor is to investigate to what extent information on the decision making processes of married and cohabiting couples contributes to the understanding of how these couples choose to organize their household with respect to the legal formalization of their relationship, family planning and the division of labor.

The Dutch Fertility Survey is a survey with a five-year cycle concerning topics like the formation and dissolution of households, fertility decisions, and other aspects of the family life-course. Data are used for the population and household prognosis of Statistics Netherlands. The content and design of the survey have changed with demographic and theoretical developments¹. In the cycles where two eligible persons per household have been interviewed, in most cases data have been collected on both partners of a couple. In all cycles, interviews have been face-to-face and proxy interviews were not allowed. When two persons were interviewed, the interview should not take place in the presence of the other respondent.

In 2000, a new research topic emerged: can 'household' decisions like for example family planning or the division of labor, be better understood if they are seen as the

¹ During the first cycles, in the 1970s, the sample consisted of married women up to 37 years old. From 1982 on the sample included unmarried women as well, reflecting the rise of extra marital cohabitation and fertility. In the 1993 cycle the survey was further extended to collect data on both women and men between 18 and 42 years old. To save some of the extra costs of surveying men as well, the sampling design changed from individuals to households. In 1998, the age range of the sample was extended to 18-52.

result of a decision making process during which individual wishes are formed and in some way merged into a collective choice? The National Family Council in the Netherlands, in co-operation with Statistics Netherlands, decided to develop a follow-up study of the 1998 Fertility Survey to collect information on the decision making processes within households.

2. Development of method and instruments

How should the influence of couple interaction on household choices be investigated? In an ideal situation, we would probably choose a prospective research design, in which individual preferences of partners would be assessed over time using extensive interviewing. The actual discussions and interactions between partners would be observed in an unobtrusive way. The final outcomes of decisions would be measured with interviews or observation. In that way we would be able to make a clear distinction between actual behavior and verbal accounts of that behavior by the persons concerned. Just interviewing both partners would probably result in filtered and smoothed behavior accounts of doubtful validity. The ideal design would also reduce the confounding effects of psychological mechanisms like cognitive dissonance reduction, the 'fiction of consensus' and the inclination to present a favorable image of oneself and ones relationship. (Kirchler, Hahn a.o.). These effects are especially strong when interviews are about intimate and affective matters. However, as might be expected, there were many limiting conditions we could not ignore while developing our research design.

Firstly, the Family Monitor had to be a follow-up study of the 1998 respondents. For analytical purposes the data collected in the Fertility survey were indispensable because they concerned many relevant aspects of family life and development.

Secondly, Statistics Netherlands would carry out the fieldwork. Its fieldwork department is specialized in large scale continuous surveys with questionnaires that are relatively easy to administer and contain for the most part factual questions. The regular interviewing staff is therefore not very experienced in conducting interviews on sensitive topics. Furthermore, in the late 1990's the interviewer corps had a large turnover because of developments on the labor market. Many interviewers did not have many years of experience. So the interview should be not too complicated or

hazardous to perform. Since each interviewer had to carry out only a limited number of interviews, extensive training was out of the question.

Thirdly, Statistics Netherlands, as a large governmental survey organization that maintains a longstanding relationship with the Dutch population, has to be extremely careful about the effects its questionnaires have on respondents. The topics discussed in the regular Fertility surveys are already rather sensitive and personal. Adding questions on the decision-making process and possible differences in preferences between partners might be even more sensitive and might actually be psychologically cumbersome for respondents. We did not want to jeopardize our relationship with the population.

Furthermore, the sample of the Family Monitor consisted of respondents who in 1998 had given their permission to be approached for a follow-up survey. These respondents had probably given their permission in the assumption that the follow-up would also be a 'traditional' face-to-face computer assisted interview.

Taken together this called for an as simple and as normal survey as possible, notwithstanding the special character of the subject matter and the fact that data on two persons had to be collected².

Three steps can be distinguished in the development of the Family Monitor. In the first step the topics of the questionnaire and the feasibility of a confrontational interview were explored with a focus group in the laboratory. The second step concerned the development and testing of versions of the questionnaire and fieldwork design, using interviews in the laboratory and in the field. Finally, a pilot field test was conducted followed by an interviewer debriefing and a review of the collected data. In the next paragraphs, the design and results of these steps will be described in detail.

² The National Family Council had a large research program encompassing a range of different topics and research forms, including qualitative research. The different investigations were carried out independently of each other by various institutes. The limitations of the large scale survey of Statistics Netherlands could partly be set off by these other investigations.

Step 1: Exploration of topics and feasibility of confrontational interview

In the first step, we explored the possibility of an interview format in which partners would be confronted with, and encouraged to discuss, differences in attitudes and preferences regarding topics addressed in the survey. We had two reasons for such a research strategy. Firstly, a crucial point of interest in this study was whether partners have or have had different preferences with respect to the choices studied. This means that it is extremely important to verify that differences in the way partners answer the questions do indeed reflect actual differences in opinion and are not artifacts due to differences in interpretation of the question or the answer categories. By having partners discuss the questions and their answers together a greater uniformity in the interpretation of the questions might be achieved.

A second reason for having a confrontational interview is that this would provide an opportunity to observe real interaction between partners. In psychological research marital interaction styles are often measured by coding observations of the actual interaction between partners. This is typically done in a laboratory setting, where a (couple specific) list of conflict topics is determined and the couple is observed while discussing a problem for 10 to 15 minutes (Heyman, Weiss & Eddy, 1995). For a survey of more than two thousand couples such a systematic laboratory observation of interaction styles would be too expensive, but a rough classification might be possible in an interview situation.

Before we embarked on the elaboration of such a classification or started formulating questions we organized a focus group. The problem of how to build a computer assisted questionnaire which could calculate agreements and disagreements during the interview and accordingly could route the questionnaire on topics to be discussed by both partners together, was postponed till after the focus group. How the interviewer should validly record and code the interactions in such a way that a data set would result which could be quantitatively analyzed, was a thing we didn't as yet dare to think about.

The focus group was organized to explore opinions on the method of a confrontational interview and on the topics in the questionnaire (Dehue and

Akkerboom 1998). For this purpose the 1998 Fertility Survey questionnaire was extended with questions with respect to the combination of family obligations and paid work, family planning, attitudes towards children and reasons for separation or divorce. Also, some general questions on decision making processes of the couple were included. With this prototype of the Family Monitor a demonstration video was made, showing (parts of) two individual interviews of a couple, followed by an interview where both partners were confronted with their contrasting opinions. The video was not based on a scenario or played by actors but was a registration of real interviews, as was the confrontation.³

Four couples with different backgrounds and characteristics were selected to participate in the focus group. To familiarize the test respondents with the content of the interview, one partner of each couple was administered the prototype questionnaire. This interview took place in the presence of the other partner. In this way both partners knew the questionnaire and got some idea about hearing each other's opinions or displaying them in the presence of the partner. Of course, this set-up saved time as well. After the interview the four couples watched the demonstration video together. Immediately afterwards a group discussion led by a moderator took place.

In the discussion both the interview method and the topics of the questionnaire were dealt with.

The members of the focus group were concerned about the proposed method. Especially the part in which both partners were confronted with each other's opinions was considered problematic. It was generally feared that this confrontation would cause problems between partners, especially if their relationship was not perfect. One focus group member reacted spontaneously that professional marriage counseling might be necessary after the interview. In spite of the obvious negative judgment on this interview method the focus group members said that they personally would be willing to participate in a confrontational interview. Furthermore, they generally thought that it would be important to inform respondents beforehand that partners would be confronted with each other's opinions. They acknowledged the obvious drawback that respondents would be less honest, knowing their partner would hear their opinions. Respondents did not expect

³ A staff member of the Questionnaire Laboratory and her partner volunteered to participate.

any practical troubles with respect to the lay-out of their home or the availability of a baby-sitter.

Many valuable remarks were made on the topics to be discussed in the questionnaire and the formulation of specific questions. One important outcome was that questions about family planning decisions should be reformulated to be less painful for involuntarily childless couples. This was brought forward by a couple who were involuntarily childless. Another conclusion of the focus group discussion was that more questions should be asked about the background of the choices made with respect to the combination of (part-time) paid work and family life. In this focus group it was emphasized that an important reason for having a (part-time) job was a desire to participate in society.

After analyzing the focus group results, we concluded that a confrontational interview would not be feasible. We were foremost afraid of painful confrontations and embarrassing situations. The focus group had not taken away our misgivings in that respect. In the second place, we agreed with the participants in the focus group that it would be recommendable to inform respondents beforehand about the confrontation. This would, however, annihilate the advantage of the confrontation because people would anticipate their partner's answers and adjust their own accordingly. So by informing beforehand we would only create more agreement than in reality existed. Only when people are misinformed about their partner's opinion they will maybe adjust their answers in a mistaken way and the result will be a 'false' disagreement. Validity would therefore not benefit at all by confrontations.

Step 2 : Development and lab-testing of Family Monitor

In the next step we developed a new format and new questions for the Family Monitor (Beukenhorst & Giesen, 1999). We made two questionnaires, one for face-to-face interviewing and one paper-and-pencil for self-completion. The format of the interview was such that while one respondent is interviewed his or her partner is

asked to fill out the questionnaire in another room and vice versa. Prerequisite of this design is that both partners are at home when the interviewer visits the couple⁴. One advantage of this approach is that much time is saved because both partners are occupied during the whole visit of the interviewer, filling out the paper-and-pencil questionnaire or answering the questions by the interviewer. Another advantage lies in the fact that it is easier, and more 'natural', to ask one respondent to leave the room when (s)he has an own task to accomplish.

In the questionnaire five areas of couple decisions are discussed:

1. the formal arrangement of the relationship (marriage, other legal arrangements)
2. having children
3. the raising of children
4. the division of paid labor
5. the division of household tasks.

Of each decision area we wanted to assess:

1. the level of agreement between partners on a limited number of household choices
2. a characterization of the decision processes with respect to these choices
3. the actual outcome of the process
4. their satisfaction with these outcomes.

Not every topic can be presented to every respondent: for example, questions on the upbringing of children are not relevant for childless couples. We wanted to discuss only recent decisions or decisions that were relevant for couples at the time of the interview, since the ease of answering and the reliability of the answers diminishes when talking about the past. For that reason we decided only to ask unmarried or recently married couples about decisions about legal arrangements. The major exception is the choice to have a first child. All couples with children are asked

⁴ The experience of Statistics Netherlands with two interviews during the same visit has been rather positive.

questions about this decision, regardless of how long ago they had their first child. The timing of the first child was a main interest for the researchers and we expected that for such an important decision memory effects are less prominent. This expectation was to some extent based on the discussions in the focus group.

Table 1 presents an overview of the routing and topics of the Family Monitor Questionnaire

Table 1: Routing of topics Family Monitor

	TOPIC	GROUP
1	Formal arrangements of relationship (marriage, other legal arrangements)	Couples who were not married in 1998
2	Children First Child Next Child Children at all	Couples with children Couples with children at time of interview Couples without children
3	Division of labor Child care by others Care for children in the house Housework / chores around the house	Couples with children up to 15 years Couples with children in 2000 All couples
4	Raising of children General goals in raising children Actual behavior in raising children	All couples Couples with children at time of interview
5	Paid work	All couples

On all those topics we wanted to know to what extent partners hold the same opinions and whether they know the opinions of the other. Also we wanted to know

whether people know if their partner is aware of disagreements. This ended with questions like “does your partner know that you know that you don’t agree on the number of children you would like?” If these data are collected on both partners it is possible to pinpoint to examples of ‘fictitious consensus’ and ‘fictitious disagreements’ and to relate these to ways of interaction and decision processes. To characterize the interaction patterns in a uniform way a set of questions was developed to be used for all areas of interest.

In a first series of in-depth interviews it turned out that the combination of these two tasks (telling your own opinion and the one of your partner) can sometimes be rather difficult for respondents. Besides, doubts arose about the honesty of some of the answers. Furthermore, the test interviews showed - as was to be expected - that questions on the awareness of possible (dis)agreements did not work at all.

In a second series of test interviews we scaled down our ambitions and presented questions on the partner’s opinion only for some topics. The follow-up questions on the interaction patterns had to be adapted and shortened because the original question set was too repetitive. After these improvements the questionnaire functioned satisfactorily in the Questionnaire Laboratory.

In the laboratory setting we did a try-out of the fieldwork design as well. Making appointments for both partners posed no problems, and the filling out of the paper questionnaire took only slightly less time than the face-to-face interview. If all meta-questions and cognitive probing questions were left out, about the same amount of time was needed for both questionnaires. In debriefings of the paper questionnaire we found that respondents were not sure about how to express their agreement or disagreement with the propositions: should they answer *in general* or thinking of *their own situation*? We made some adjustments. Another part of the paper questionnaire needed much simplification.

During the lab testing an observer behind a oneway-screen made notes and tried to compare the responses of both partners. Even without conducting the interview himself, this turned out to be too difficult to do reliably during the interview itself. This exercise showed that any type of comparison or confrontation between the partners’ answers had to be computer assisted. The observations, though,

demonstrated that the questions brought to light patterns of agreement and disagreement and in that sense fulfilled their scope.

After the test interviews we brought the partners informally together for a cup of coffee and a furtive debriefing. They all were curious about each other's answers and started to compare them, just like students after an examination. Only in a few cases we suspected some hidden unsolved conflicts.

This laboratory pre-test was carried out with volunteer respondents who received a participation fee. Before bringing a pilot into the field, we approached on a few former respondents of the Fertility Survey. We used one highly qualified interviewer of the Questionnaire Laboratory and a senior supervising field interviewer. They both interviewed around five couples of the Fertility Survey. They used extra probing, careful observation of the reactions of the respondents and debriefing of both partners afterwards as techniques to assess the quality of the questionnaire and the design. The first interviewer found out, to his astonishment, that in the Fertility Survey the interviewer never had mentioned the necessity of separate interviewing. These respondents resented to be taken by surprise now.⁵ We decided therefore to mention in the letter the second interviewer would send announcing the interview, the need for separate interviewing and the need of doing both interviews without a break in between. This worked out well and all respondents agreed to be interviewed separately. Respondents felt it was necessary to inform respondents beforehand. They thought that more honest answers are given if the partner is not present.

Step 3: Pilot in the field

As the final stage of the development of the survey, the fieldwork department organized a regular field test. Only couples who were both interviewed in the Fertility Survey and who were still together, were eligible for this follow-up study. Addresses of the former respondents had to be checked in the Central Population Register which also contained information on (formal) separation or divorce. We needed, however, an estimate of how many people had separated without registering this, in order to determine the gross sample. Before fielding some adjustments were

made to simplify large scale implementation. The ten interviewers were for example allowed, contrary to normal practice at Statistics Netherlands, to make appointment by telephone and use that opportunity to check if the couple was still together.

This pilot produced a data set of fifty records showing that the questionnaire did indeed show differences and similarities in opinions and attitudes between both partners. The paper questionnaire also worked: the extreme answer categories were used, only a few missing values occurred, and not many routing errors were made. The fieldwork strategy worked well, although some couples which were newly formed and therefore not eligible, were interviewed, and some partners were interviewed at different moments. An interviewer debriefing using a kind of cognitive mapping gave many valuable suggestions for improvements in the questionnaire and routing. After the pilot final adjustments were made in both the questionnaire and the practical organization of the fieldwork. The fieldwork was completed in the autumn of 2000.

3. Fieldwork evaluation

There has been no formal evaluation after the fieldwork. However, there are two sources of valuable information on how the survey worked in the field. Interviewers have always the possibility to make comments in the CAPI questionnaires. Respondents had the option to make comments on the paper questionnaire. A comment often made by interviewers was that the questionnaire was not very relevant for older respondents.

4. Discussion

From the foregoing description one can easily deduct that we spend during the development of our survey quite a lot of time and money on different forms of pre-testing.⁶ Because we were not sure, how a survey with such a difficult subject should look like, we took the opportunity to deploy any test method that promised some

⁵ We don't know if this was an exception or that more than one interviewer did not dare to ask for separate interviewing.

⁶ It was unusual to have so much time. The first ruminations about how and what to investigate started in 1998, the survey was fielded in the autumn of 2000. Maybe not

empirical base for the difficult choices we had to make. Looking back now, we are in a position to assess critically all these efforts, taking into account the normally prevailing restrictions in time and money. How efficient were the different techniques, and could we have left out some steps?

In table 2 we summarize the different steps.

Table 2 Summary of development steps

Date	Step	Test technique	Results
1998	Orientation on themes and methods	4 individual interviews with prototype, demonstration video, focus group with 4 couples	Confrontational interview rejected, topics confirmed and enlarged
May 1999	Test draft questionnaire and method	Two rounds of 5 cognitive double interviews with couples in Questionnaire Lab, informal pair wise debriefing of respondents	Rejection confrontational interview confirmed, method of double interviews and paper questionnaire accepted, draft questionnaire improved and simplified, data set promising
Dec 1999	Test method and draft questionnaire	8 double interviews in the field with former Fertility Survey responding couples, debriefing of respondents, observations by interviewers	Method fine-tuned, questionnaire improved, logistic problems explored
March 2000	Medium scale test method and questionnaire	Pilot test, 10 interviewers, 50 responses, interviewer evaluation	CAPI questionnaire refined, logistic problems better investigated, method accepted by interviewers, interviewer instructions, data set interesting
Autumn 2000	1.1 Fieldwork	2 000 couples in sample	Interviewer remarks in records, respondent remarks on paper questionnaire, data set

In the first orientation phase the focus group proved very useful. On that basis it was decided 1) not to do confrontational interviews, and 2) be very prudent about involuntary childlessness, and 3) broaden the topics. However, we should make some reservations about these conclusions.⁷ Analyzing the video registration of the focus group we find many justifications for that decision, but on the other hand most

coincidentally there was a high turnover in staff members, some got pregnant, others got different jobs.

⁷During that phase none of the authors were involved in the project. They both started immediately after the focus group step. So maybe we are in some ways biased.

couples declared themselves willing to participate in a confrontational interview. Looking at the group processes taking place this can be explained as an artifact: early in the group interview people say that if your relationship is not good, a confrontation could end in terrible quarrels. When asked later in the interview if they personally would take part in such an interview, they probably feel that they would admit having a bad relationship if they would refuse to participate. The conclusion not to do confrontational interviews seems, looking at the video registration, only justified if you accept the artifact-hypothesis. Our second reservation relates also to group processes. While discussing important topics of couple decisions like the combination of work and family during the focus group it was stressed that partners want to have a paid job 'to remain in contact with the society at large'. During the individual interviews, however, it was more often than not stressed that both partners work because of pure economic necessity. The participation argument was sometimes mentioned too, but most of the time as a secondary motive. We suspect that also in this respect a 'group effect' biases the outcome of the discussion, in the sense that people in a group are reluctant to admit economic adversity. These 'group effects' are a drawback of focus groups which sometimes prevent unequivocal interpretation and so call for more empirical foundation.⁸

Because of these 'group effects' we took the research method along in the Lab tests of the questionnaire. So we simulated the real situation in the Lab, having both partners visit our office at the same time, interviewing one while the other filled out the paper questionnaire, and asked the respondents their opinion on this procedure, mentioning sometimes as well the possibility of a confrontational interview. We concluded that separate interviewing was no problem. Apart from this, the Lab test was – as always – very illuminating on the shortcomings of questions and in that sense an indispensable step in the development of the survey. However, we still did not trust our conclusions completely. An obvious weakness of Lab testing is that it is by definition an artificial situation. For the test of a questionnaire this is no great disadvantage, which is offset by the rich possibilities of recording techniques. For the testing of an interview method, however, it is a serious disadvantage. In the second place we were used to inviting our volunteer respondents quite a few times to participate and paying them for every interview. Some respondents get all too quickly 'professionalized', speaking not for themselves but for what they think are

⁸ The second conclusion of the focus group is based on the coincidence that of the four couples one was involuntarily childless. The chance of this being the case is of course slight

‘normal’ respondents. Besides that, the interviewers of the Questionnaire Lab are not ‘normal’ interviewers either.

Thinking of this artificiality we decided to precede the pilot by the qualitative pre-field-test with two interviewers. During that test we already found out that we had to adapt the fieldwork strategy. This very small field test resulted in many small improvements in the questionnaire. Above that, it was a trial for the logistic process of retracing the former respondents of the Fertility Survey and finding out if they were eligible. This very small-scale test removed quite a lot minor faults and eased the implementation of the pilot. The decision to alter the advance letter was, however, based on a rather small number of respondents which were all interviewed by only one interviewer.

The necessity of a pilot to test the whole logistic process is self-evident, but all those other forms of pre-testing we launched, were they really indispensable? Of course, every bit of empirical proof is always welcome, and especially in small-scale qualitative tests triangulation is desirable. Statistics Netherlands, and certainly so the Questionnaire Lab, normally have to operate in efficient and pragmatic ways, doing many things in a short time. The question of how efficient we executed the development of this survey is therefore justified.

A pilot, as said before, is indispensable. The very small qualitative pre-field test seems not always necessary, but in this case where the interview method constituted a risk we could not have done without it. Without extensive Lab-testing we would have brought in the field a horrendous questionnaire treating the wrong topics in the wrong way. The focus group was important to explore the subject and lend at the onset empirical foundations to our misgivings about confrontational interviews. If forced to economize on the development, we would have probably left out the focus group. This would, however, not have saved much time or money because a focus group is quickly organized, held and analyzed.

Case studies do not prove anything, they can only suggest ways of doing things, in this case ways of pre-testing. As with most methodological research, like

with such a small number of respondents.

measurement error research, it is rather difficult to generalize the results of different pre-test techniques. Much depends on where in a survey measurement risks manifest themselves. Depending on the mix of risks one should choose to put extra energy in pre-testing in the Lab or in the field, to use ordinary interviewers or specialized ones, to use quantitative methods or qualitative ones. In this case both the method and the questionnaire offered specific kinds of risk.

Testing a survey design in a lab situation, be it in the form of focus groups or in individual interviews, even when using realistic videos, is not sufficient. In such cases some field tests seem indispensable. If there is no time for both lab and field testing, one should in our opinion choose for the field test and try to gather as much qualitative information as possible on the questionnaire as well. The use of recordings, of audit trails, of structured meta-questions programmed in the CAPI questionnaire, or problem scoring by interviewers can all contribute to pre-test the questionnaire itself.

If, on the other hand, most risks lie in the questionnaire, lab testing is to be preferred above field testing. This is so because, firstly, no other test situation can facilitate so well in-depth research, and, secondly, lab testing is most suited to investigate unexpected problems, and, thirdly, lab testing is relatively safe: it is conducted in the office with volunteer respondents and very professional interviewers.

The most important lesson we learned, not only in this case, but in many others, has been ‘don’t imitate, innovate’ to use the slogan of a famous fashion house. For every project we try to develop a tailor-made test trajectory, first considering where in that particular case lie most risks, then trying to think up ways to investigate as much risks as possible, leaving also open the possibilities of finding unexpected ones.

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