

Verbal Abuse and Internalizing Problems in Early Adolescence: Negative Attributional Style as Mediator

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the contributions of verbal abuse to internalizing problems among 324 early adolescent students (aged 11-13 years) in Selangor, and the mediating role negative attributional style plays in this relationship. Students were selected using a cluster sampling method and responded to a self-administered questionnaire. Children's Perception of Parental Verbal Aggression (CPPVA; Solomon & Serres, 1999), The Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ; Seligman *et al.*, 1984) and Internalizing Symptoms Scale for Children (ISSC; Merrell & Walters, 1998) were used to measure the variables in this study. Data were analyzed using Baron and Kenny's (1986) statistical framework for assessing the mediational effects. Findings suggest that negative attributional style partially mediates verbal abuse and internalizing problems. This study sheds light on how verbal abuse contributes to internalizing problems in Asian context. Implications for intervention and prevention work related to internalizing problems among early adolescent students are also discussed.

Keywords: Internalizing problems, verbal abuse, negative attributional style, early adolescents

INTRODUCTION

A recent study by World Health Organization (WHO) in 2009 found suicide was the second largest cause of death for youth

from age 10 to 24 worldwide. Similarly, The National Suicide Registry Malaysia (NRSRM) revealed an average of 60 suicide cases per month in the country in year 2010. National press reported the alarming fact recently that the suicide rates in Malaysia are on the rise (NST, 2010; The Star, 2011). It is stated that teenagers and young adults commit suicide on their tremendous pressure in schools, breakdown in relationships and

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family issues. Likewise, the prevalence of psychiatric morbidity in the age group of 5 to 16 for Malaysian children and adolescents increased from 16% in 1996 to 20.3% in 2006, respectively (National Health Morbidity Survey [NHMS], 2006). Taken altogether, these discouraging facts raise a considerable concern regarding the incidence of internalizing problems among adolescents.

Psychological symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and somatic complaints, are increasing in prevalence during transition from childhood to adolescence (Wenar & Kerig, 2006). Early adolescents are more likely than elementary school children to have problem of internalizing disorders, such as anxiousness, depression and insecurity (Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998). Most of the parents and teachers agreed that early adolescence is the difficult time of life for them. This is the time when conflict with parents, mood disruptions and risk behaviour are more likely to occur (Arnett, 1999; Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998). Adolescents with internalizing problems often suffer in silence, a nature which covert into negative cognitive thought process (Sanders *et al.*, 1999), and thereby contributing towards negative thoughts and self-related behaviours (Merrell & Walters, 1998). People around may not be aware of the internalizing symptoms the adolescent is experiencing. Thus, adolescents who are enduring internalizing problems may commonly experience emotional despair and social isolation. In

more specific, internalizing problems in the early adolescents may lead to negative outcomes, such as poor peer relation, diminished school performances, increased risk of psychological disorders, drug use, and suicidal behaviours (Merrell, 2008).

Verbal Abuse and Internalizing Problems

A review of literature suggests that verbal abuse confers risks to the psychiatry problems within internalizing spectrums such as depression (Courtney *et al.*, 2008; Gibb, 2002; Gibb *et al.*, 2004; Gibb *et al.*, 2003; Gibb *et al.*, 2001), anxiety (Iwaniec, 2006), and social withdrawal (Affzal, 2008; Shaffer *et al.*, 2009). The impacts of verbal abuse on the occurrence of internalizing problems in early adolescence have been reported in past studies. Among other, Affzal (2008) investigated the relationship between teachers' verbal abuses and students' self perception in a sample of 376 students aged 10 and 11 years. The author found the act of verbal abuses from teachers, such as undermining, blocking and diverting, or negative evaluation, predicted students' low self-worth and self-esteem. In this study, victims of verbal abuse tended to display negative emotional problems and social adjustment. More specifically, in a study related with developmental pathways between childhood emotional maltreatment and adaptational outcomes in early adolescence, Shaffer *et al.* (2009) found a strong association between emotional maltreatment and social withdrawal. The study concluded that adolescents who were emotionally maltreated were more likely to

have difficulties in their social relationship. In addition, the relation between verbal abuse and internalizing symptoms was also supported in the study by Sachs-Ericsson *et al.* (2006) who established the influences of verbal abuse in developing internalizing problems, as mediated by self-critical style. Adolescents who were verbally victimized and severely criticized would internalize the critical voice of the abusive caregiver, and believed that they were “bad” and “worthless” (Iwaniec, 2006; Seligman *et al.*, 1995).

The Mediating Role of Negative Attributional Style

What mediates the process by which verbal abuse may contribute to the development of internalizing problems? Researchers suggest that verbal abuse and internalizing problems may be mediated by the way individuals interpret negative experiences in their life (i.e. negative attributional style). Negative attributional style is the way of attributing the causes of negative life events to stable, internal, and global factors (Seligman *et al.*, 1984). As such, past studies related to the influence of verbal abuse on negative attributional style and the influence of negative attributional style on adolescent internalizing problems are discussed.

Verbal Abuse and Negative Attributional Style

Past studies have found that verbal abuse is more likely to be related to negative attributional style than other forms of abuse

(i.e. physical and sexual abuse) (Gibb, 2002; Gibb & Abela, 2008; Gibb *et al.*, 2004; Gibb *et al.*, 2003; Gibb *et al.*, 2001; Rose & Abramson, 1992). Gibb (2002) conducted an extensive review on qualitative and quantitative research related the impacts of different types of abuse on attributional style and found that childhood verbal abuse was significantly associated with cognitive style (i.e. negative attributional style). Nonetheless, the same study revealed that physical abuse had no significant relation with cognitive style. The above finding was further supported when Gibb *et al.* (2003) tested Rose and Abramson’s (1992) developmental model for childhood abuse and negative cognitive style using a cross sectional study. A stronger association appeared in the relationship between verbal abuse and negative cognitive style as compared to physical and sexual abuse. In fact, verbal abuse was found to be more related to negative cognitive style than was physical or sexual abuse, in line with the notion proposed by Rose and Abramson (1992). According to Rose and Abramson (1992), verbal abuse is more likely to predict negative attributional style because the negative self-schema is directly supplied by the abuser. On the other hand, victims of physical or sexual abuse were making their own explanation about the causes of abuse. They have greater opportunity in developing a more benign explanation compared to victims of verbal abuse. Therefore, verbal abuse may confer a higher risk for the development of negative attributional style.

Negative Attributional Style and Internalizing Problems

Negative attributional style has been extensively studied in child psychopathology. For example, children who had greater potential to interpret their negative life experiences to internal, stable, and global factors were more likely to experience depression. Seligman *et al.*'s (1984) theory of learned helplessness may lend a support on this. Depressive symptoms are associated with a characteristic way of attributing bad events by internal, stable, and global causes (i.e. negative attributional style). Seligman *et al.* (1984) found that children who attributed internal, stable, and global ways of construing causes of negative events significantly predicted their level of depression 6 months later. This argument is still consistent with the recent studies (e.g. Brown & Kolko, 1999; Gladstone & Kaslow, 1995; Joiner, 2000; Joiner & Wagner, 1995; Runyon & Kenny, 2002).

In another study, Joiner (2000) examined the association between depression and anxiety in a sample of 60 young psychiatric inpatients (22 boys and 38 girls, aged 9-17); depressive symptoms were prone to increase within participants with a negative attributional style who reported higher number of negative events, but not anxious symptoms. However, Luten *et al.* (1997) revealed that anxiety and attributional style was significantly correlated, where pessimistic attributional style was not specific to depression. It was also mentioned in the study that it is important to find out the relation of pessimistic attributional style

and anxiety, where depression and anxiety tend to co-occur. Other studies have also examined the co-existence of psychological symptoms within internalizing spectrums in relation with negative attributional style. The findings showed that negative attributional style was consistently correlated with internalizing problems (Brown & Kolko, 1999; Frey & Epkins, 2002; Hankin & Abramson, 2002). Likewise, Frey and Epkins (2002) investigated cognitive models of internalizing and externalizing problems in a juvenile delinquent sample and found that the internalizing group of delinquents showed more negative attributional style than the non-internalizing group. Besides, in a study of abuse victims, Brown and Kolko (1999) found an association between self-oriented attribution and internalizing problems. They stated attributions as the main predictor for developing psychopathology after abuse. Negative attributional style is a process of cognition, which is also referred to as cognitive vulnerability (Gibb, 2002). Therefore, it has more linkage to internalizing problem, a problem directed at the self associated with covert cognitive thought processes (Sanders *et al.*, 1999).

Given past studies, verbal abuse is positively related to negative attributional style (Gibb, 2002; Gibb *et al.*, 2003; Gibb *et al.*, 2001; Rose & Abramson, 1992), whereas negative attributional style is positively related to internalizing problems. This suggests that negative attributional style may be a mediator in the relationship. Prior studies (Gibb & Abela, 2008; Gibb

et al., 2004; Gibb *et al.*, 2003; Gibb *et al.*, 2001) have examined the relationship between verbal abuse, attributional style and depression. However, there is strong evidence for the co-occurrence of depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal, and only a very few studies have examined the same association on internalizing problems.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Numerous studies have examined the relationships between verbal abuse, negative attributional style and depression. For instance, Metalsky and Joiner (1992) proposed attributional style as specific in predicting depression. Relatively few studies have examined this particular topic of interest comparatively on internalizing problems, making this a timely study to conduct. Moreover, victims who are rejected and verbally maltreated by significant persons, such as mothers, will result in a greater tremendous effect (Iwaniec, 2006). On the other hand, Seligman *et al.* (1984) found that mother has stronger influences (during ages 8 to 13) on child's attributional style for bad events and their depressive symptoms, as compared to father. Thus, this study investigated participants' self perceived verbal abuse specifically from mother.

The objective of the present study was to examine the relationships of verbal abuse, negative attributional style and internalizing problems. Negative attributional style was hypothesized to mediate the relationship between verbal abuse and internalizing problems. As such, three predictions were

examined to accomplish the first objective. First, a significant and positive relationship between verbal abuse and internalizing problems was expected. Second, verbal abuse was expected to be significantly and positively related to negative attributional style. Finally, negative attributional style was expected to mediate the relationship between verbal abuse and internalizing problems.

METHODS

Participants

The population in this study comprised of students aged between 11 and 13 years from a total of 203 primary and secondary schools in Petaling district. The representative primary and secondary schools were randomly selected from two main areas of the district, namely, Petaling Perdana and Petaling Utama. Classrooms of primary five, primary six, and secondary form one of each school represent clusters of the subjects. A total of 324 participants (153 males, 171 females) were involved. The average age of the participants was 12.07 years ($SD = 0.84$). Ethnicity indication is as follows: 86.1% Malay, 7.4% Indian, and 5.9% Chinese, and 0.62% categorized as "Others". Approval was sought from the Ministry of Education, Department of Education Selangor, and also the principal of each school to conduct the research investigation. Data were gathered using a self-administered questionnaire. For the participants aged 11 and 12 years, the researcher read out and explained each statement so as to provide a better understanding and avoid misleading.

Measures

Verbal abuse. Verbal abuse was assessed with Children's Perception of Parental Verbal aggression (CPPVA; Solomon & Serres, 1999). The CPPVA comprised of a 27-item scale that measured emotional abuse based on seven types of verbal aggression drawn from the literature, which are rejecting, demeaning, ridiculing, cursing, terrorizing, criticizing, and insulting. For the purpose of the study, two statements related to physical punishment were excluded. The participants were required to make a choice between two versions of the statement separated by the word "But" and mark whether the statements such as "really true in my case" or "almost true in my case" best describe their experience. All the statements were scored 1, 2, 3, 4, score 4 is attributed for most negative answer. Higher scores indicated higher frequencies of which a child perceived he or she received verbal abuse. Cronbach Alpha for the CPPVA scores in the present sample was .78.

Negative attributional style. The Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ; Seligman *et al.*, 1984) contained 48 items. Each item was a hypothetical event (24 negative and 24 positive). The current study only involved participants' attributional style for negative events, and only the corresponding 24 negative event items were used. For each event, the participants were presented with two possible causes of each event and they were asked to choose the item that best describes the way they think. The two causes held constant for three attributional dimensions

(internal-external, global-specific, and stable-unstable). The items were scored by assigning a value of 1 to each internal, global, or stable response and a 0 to each external, unstable, specific response. Higher scores indicated a more depressogenic attributional style. The Cronbach Alpha for the CASQ scores in the present sample was .52. This is compatible with reliability reported by the original authors, which is .50. Although the alpha value for CASQ was relatively low, it had been established as a valid measure of attributional style for negative events (Joiner, 2000; Turner & Cole, 1994; Seligman *et al.*, 1984; Gibb, 2002).

Internalizing problems. Internalizing problems was measured by Internalizing Symptoms Scale for Children (ISSC; Merrell & Walters, 1998). The ISSC was a comprehensive self-report for children aged 8-13 to assess the symptoms of various internalizing problems, including depression, anxiety, social withdrawal and somatic complaint in a combined manner in 48 items. The participants were asked to rate the accuracy with which the symptoms reflected on a four point scale, ranging from 0 (never true) to 3 (often true). Higher scores indicated greater internalizing symptoms. The Cronbach Alpha for the present sample is .85.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed according to Baron's and Kenny's (1986) statistical concept and recommendations for examining the presence of mediation effect. Multiple

regression was conducted in three steps to test three equations, as demonstrated in the Fig.1. In the first step, the internalizing problems score was regressed on the verbal abuse score (path *c*). In the second step, the score of negative attributional style was regressed on the verbal abuse score (path *a*). In the third step, the internalizing problems score was regressed on both the verbal abuse and negative attributional style score. This was done to test whether the negative attributional style was related to internalizing problems (path *b*) and the estimate of coefficient between the verbal abuse and internalizing problems with controlling for the negative attributional style (path *c'*). If the negative attributional style was a complete mediator, the effect of the predictor (verbal abuse), when controlling

for negative attributional style, should be zero. If it was only a partial mediator, the effect would be merely reduced, but not eliminated. In psychological research, it would be unusual for the effect of path *c'* to be reduced from statistical significance to zero (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Thus, the effect of reduction or change in regression coefficient would be evaluated as the degree of the potency of mediator.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, reliability, and the Pearson correlations for the study variables. All the variables were significantly correlated as expected. Meanwhile, verbal abuse was positively and significantly correlated with negative attributional style and internalizing

TABLE 1
Means, standard deviations, reliability, and correlations for study variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's Alpha	1	2	3
1. Verbal abuse	31.08	7.67	.78	—	.15**	.31**
2. Negative Attributional Style	9.69	2.42	.52		—	.18**
3. Internalizing Problems	59.97	14.93	.85			—

Note: ** *p* < .01

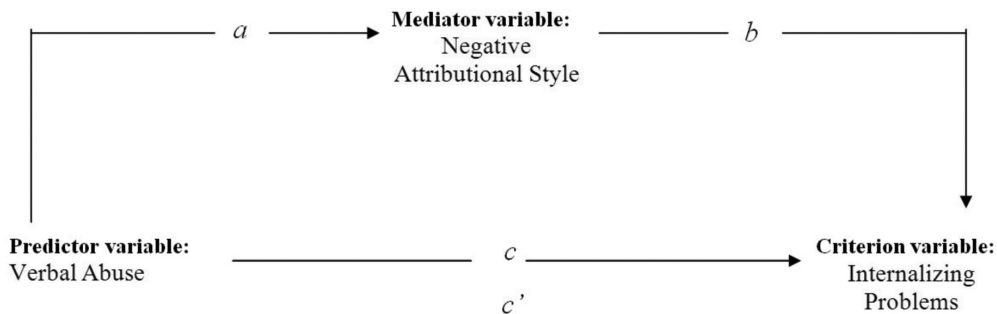


Fig.1: Illustration of path coefficient among variables in the mediational model

TABLE 2
Testing negative attributional style as mediator using multiple regression

Steps in Testing Mediation	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	95% CI	β
Step 1 (path <i>c</i>)				
Outcome: Internalizing Problems				
Predictor: Verbal Abuse	.59	.11	0.39, 0.80	.31***
Step 2 (path <i>a</i>)				
Outcome: Negative Attributional Style				
Predictor: Verbal Abuse	.05	.02	0.01, 0.08	.15**
Step 3 (paths <i>b</i> and <i>c'</i>)				
Outcome: Internalizing Problems				
Mediator: Negative Attributional Style	.86	.34	0.18, 1.528	.14*
Predictor: Verbal Abuse	.55	.11	0.34, 0.77	.28***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

problems. Similarly, negative attributional style was also positively and significantly correlated with internalizing problems.

Table 2 shows the mediational analyses of present study. As the steps have been explained in the earlier part of the study to test that the predictor (verbal abuse) was related to outcome variable (internalizing problems), the internalizing problems were regressed on verbal abuse (Step 1). Verbal abuse was found to be significantly related to internalizing problems ($B = 0.59$, $\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), path *c* was significant, and the condition for mediation in step 1 was also met. The second step was to test if verbal abuse was related to mediator (negative attributional style), and if negative attributional style was regressed on verbal abuse. The results revealed that verbal abuse was also significantly related to negative attributional style ($B = 0.05$, $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$), and thus, step 2 was met (Path *a* was significant). Next, to test if the mediator (negative attributional style) was related with the outcome variable (internalizing problems), internalizing problems were

regressed on both verbal abuse and negative attributional style. Negative attributional style was significantly related with internalizing problems controlling for verbal abuse ($B = 0.86$, $\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$). Path *b* was also significant. The third step also provided estimation for path *c'*. If path *c'* was zero, there would be a complete mediation. Nevertheless in the present study, path *c'* was reduced in negligible value ($B = 0.55$, $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) from path *c* but was still significant ($B = 0.59$, $\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, the amount of mediation was calculated using the unstandardized regression coefficients from the study. This is an alternative way of calculating the amount of mediation in terms of the total effect which has been mediated as defined by ab/c , as suggested by Shrout and Bolger (2002). It is important to note that this study received a calculated value of 0.068. Therefore, approximately 6.8% of the total effect of verbal abuse on internalizing problems was mediated by negative attributional style.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of negative attributional style as the mediator in the relation of verbal abuse and internalizing problems. The objective was met, whereby three predictions of Baron's and Kenny's statistical recommendations for mediation effect were successfully fulfilled. Meanwhile, negative attributional style was found to be a partial mediator for verbal abuse and internalizing problems. The strength of the relation between verbal abuse and internalizing problems was reduced from 0.59 to 0.55 when negative attributional style was included in the model.

Some important findings have been highlighted in the predictions of mediation analyses. In the first regression of the mediation analysis, the analysis has shown that verbal abuse is a predictor for internalizing problems. This supports the notion that adolescents who are verbally victimized by their mother will internalize hurtful words that are directed to the self. They thus display problems such as depression, anxiety, social withdrawal and somatic complaints simultaneously (Affzal, 2008; Courtney *et al.*, 2008; Gibb, 2002; Gibb & Abela, 2008; Gibb *et al.*, 2004; Gibb *et al.*, 2003; Gibb *et al.*, 2001; Iwaniec, 2006; Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995; Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991). The second regression showed that verbal abuse is a significant predictor for negative attributional style. This finding is consistent with several past studies which indicate that verbal abuse contributes to the development of negative attributional style (see Gibb,

2002; Gibb & Abela, 2008; Gibb *et al.*, 2004; Gibb *et al.*, 2003; Gibb *et al.*, 2001; Rose & Abramson, 1992). The final regression analysis revealed that partial mediation occurred. When negative attributional style was controlling for, the effect between verbal abuse and internalizing problems decreased. Though it was negligible, the result showed that there was still association between the variables. This supports that verbal abuse may contribute to the risk for internalizing problems in the presence of negative attributional style.

The findings in this study suggests that in treating adolescents with internalizing problems, practitioners must take into account their attributional styles, and investigate the possible experiences of verbal abuse. Cognitive therapy that trains one's cognitive skills, changing one's pessimism to a more flexible optimism has always been an effective way in treating internalizing problems and abused victim. In fact, it helps to recognize adolescents' dysfunctional beliefs provided by verbal abuser. Abused victims who attribute positive (optimistic) interpretation to negative events they face tend to be more resilient to internalizing problems than those who do not.

Prevention work, on the other hand, should also target on parents on the way they communicate with their adolescent children. Studies have supported that conflict with parents increases in early adolescence, as compared with preadolescence (Arnett, 1999). During this critical period, hurtful words, with or without intention, do not differ in undermining the parent-child

bond and result deleterious impacts on adolescent's development. Prevention work such as campaign and workshop for building robust parent-child relationship must pay more attention to the appropriate communication skills between parent and child in order to effectively avoid verbal abuse.

Meanwhile, a number of limitations should also be noted in this study. First, the statistical significance of mediated effect was tested in the present study. According to Frazier, Baron and Tix (2004), the product of paths *a* and *b* is equal to the difference in paths *c* and *c'* and the statistical significance of the difference between *c* and *c'* can be estimated by testing the significance of the products of paths *a* and *b*. In this study, standard error term mentioned by Baron and Kenny (1986) was used. In more specific, the product of paths *a* and *b* was divided by the standard error term to test whether a mediator carried the influence of predictor to outcome variable. The calculation of the test was as dividing mediation effect (*ab*) by square root of $b^2sa^2 + a^2sb^2 + sa^2sb^2$, where *a* and *b* were unstandardized regression coefficients and *sa* and *sb* were standard errors. This yielded a *z*-score. If the *z*-score is greater than 1.96, the effect is significant at the .05 level. In present study, however, the results indicated that the magnitude of indirect effect was not statistically significant (*z*-score was 1.81). In the present study, negative attributional style was found to be a weak mediator for verbal abuse and internalizing problems. In this respect, the result is consistent

with a study which did not find negative attributional style as a strong mediator for negative events and internalizing problems (Rodriguez, 2006). Although the role of negative attributional style as a significant mediator is not supported in present study, the results still suggest the importance of intervention and prevention work for adolescents.

Second, the attributional style measure exhibited low reliability, which might have reduced the strength of relations between attributional style and other measures (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Nevertheless, the internal consistency of CASQ in the present studies is similar with the original study as well as the previous studies (Abela, 2001; Gibb & Alloy, 2006; Nolen-Hoeksema, Seligman & Girgus, 1986; Seligman *et al.*, 1984). Moreover, it should be noted that there are norms and cultural differences in applying the measure. Some items in the construct might not accurately represent the situations faced by children and adolescents in Malaysia. Thus, future studies should consider modifying or developing a more local embedded construct in assessing attributional style. On the other hand, measures that have higher reliability, such as Children's Attributional Style Interview (Conley, Haines, Hilt, & Metalsky, 2001) and Youth attributional style questionnaire (Brozina & Abela, 2003) are recommended by Gibb and Alloy (2006), and these are worth to gain initial exposure upon utility in the local context.

Third, although cross-sectional design can be highly informative, especially in

the early stages of investigation (Cole & Turner, 1993), the causality of the variables cannot be assessed. Hence, it is suggested that future studies examine the changes of variables over time and whether these changes mediate the relationship. In addition, a longitudinal study is also recommended for future studies.

Finally, this study focused on one and the only variable, i.e. negative attributional style, as possible mediator. Other cognitive variables might have stronger effects in mediating the relation of verbal abuse and internalizing problems, such as self-criticism (Sachs-Ericsson *et al.*, 2006) and hopelessness (Courtney *et al.*, 2008). Thus, future study may consider exploring other possible mediators for better prediction of the relation between verbal abuse and internalizing problems.

CONCLUSION

In summary, despite the limitations, by examining the mediating effects of negative attributional style on the relation between verbal abuse and internalizing problems, the findings from this study have contributed to the existing international research literature on internalizing problems, especially in the Asian context. These findings also have both applied and practical implications for intervention and prevention work so as to address internalizing problems among early adolescent students.

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