



Title: Dignity and Precarity Among Bengali Migrant School Cleaners in Cardiff: A Critical Interpretivist Study Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

This portfolio presents a reflexive account of my development as a doctoral researcher across six sections. It begins with the assumptions I held before doctoral study, shaped by child development training in Bangladesh, where lived experience and narrative were treated as credible knowledge. I explain how Part 1 challenged my understanding of evidence, paradigms and the researcher's role, moving me from a largely interpretivist position toward a critical orientation. The portfolio then examines my engagement with theory, particularly dirty work theory, recognition theory and precarity, alongside my resistance to rational choice theory. I trace three shifts in my research focus: from flexible working in Bangladeshi organisations, to first-generation Bangladeshi finance professionals in UK SMEs, to Bengali school cleaners in Cardiff. The study now explores how cleaners construct dignity under conditions of stigma, precarity and invisibility. I analyse my positionality as a partial insider - sharing language, migration experience and cultural trust with participants while remaining occupationally and institutionally distinct. I discuss power asymmetries, assumed understanding and the risk of romanticising resilience. Ethical tensions are named rather than resolved: depth of data versus emotional harm, gatekeeper access versus sample diversity and hopeful narratives versus honest representation. Finally, I identify two gaps in my reflexive practice: soothing distress rather than interrogating it and reaching for pattern before depth. The portfolio argues that these tensions are ongoing sites of reflexive accountability in doctoral research.

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Section 1: Who You Were When You Started

My Starting assumptions

Before doctoral study, my assumptions about knowledge felt like common sense. They came from my professional formation in Child Development in Bangladesh, where formal data infrastructure is uneven and lived experience often functions as the most reliable guide. My training taught me that people's accounts of their own lives are credible knowledge (Palaganas et al., 2017). Statistics showed patterns - how many children were malnourished - but could not explain why a grandmother fed one child before another. The reasons lived in narratives and relationships. I came to believe that understanding why people act requires listening to their explanations. Numbers described; stories explained.

I now recognise this as an emic epistemological stance, prioritising lived experience and meaning-making over measurement. It made me sceptical of quantitative methods, which I saw as flattening complexity. I lacked the language then, but I was already within what Kuhn (1962) calls the interpretivist paradigm: reality is multiple and subjective and knowledge is created through engagement with meaning (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Crotty, 1998).

However, I also carried unexamined assumptions: that research should be objective, the researcher separate and good evidence measurable. These were residues of positivist thinking I had absorbed without recognising. I had internalised a message that credible knowledge must be neutral, detached and quantifiable - even as my practice taught me otherwise. This contradiction was invisible until Part 1.

What Changed During Part 1

Before Part 1, I understood good evidence as objective and statistical. Part 1 challenged this. Readings, lectures and seminars showed me that evidence shifts with social and research context and that the researcher's position influences what is noticed and interpreted. The disruption came through a seminar on reflexivity. Finlay's (2002) distinction between reflection and reflexivity unsettled me: I had reflected on practice, but never considered that my position might constitute what I noticed. It suggested my claim to "give voice" was shaped by unexamined assumptions about whose voice matters and what I hoped to find. Palaganas et al. (2017) helped me see this discomfort as necessary for doctoral development.

I can no longer treat my preference for qualitative accounts as obvious; I must justify it. Kuhn (1962) showed me that "good evidence" is a philosophical commitment shared by a research community, not given by nature (Masterman, 1970). My understanding of research purposes also changed. I once saw research as finding answers. Now I see it as solving practical problems while understanding people's experiences within their social context.

What has not changed is my belief that research should be for something. In Child Development, the purpose was to improve children's lives. That remains, though extended: my research serves not only knowledge but the people it examines. This shapes which questions I ask and what I hope findings will do.

What Remains Intact

One assumption I have not fully examined is the value I place on participant voice. I treat it as inherently good, but have not asked whether giving voice might harm. This blind spot continues into Part 2.

My paradigm is now a chain of connected assumptions. My ontology is historical realist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994): structures like visas, contracts and outsourcing are real but historically produced. My epistemology is subjectivist: knowledge is created through engagement between researcher and participant. My axiology is explicit: values are commitments to examine, not biases to eliminate and I examine power and whose interests are served. Together these inform my methodology: a critical qualitative interview study. Within it, I use Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) as my method of analysis, interpreting meaning while acknowledging structural conditions.

This chain - ontology, epistemology and axiology as connected assumptions informing methodology - is the coherence doctoral research requires (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Crotty, 1998). They are not a sequence but a constellation that must fit together.

Section 2: Your Relationship with Theory and Literature

During Part 1, I engaged with theoretical frameworks, some of which felt immediately legible while others produced genuine resistance. Examining that pattern has been instructive, because my responses were never simply intellectual. They were shaped by my professional formation in Child Development, my migration experience and assumptions absorbed long before I encountered formal theory.

Frameworks That Resonated

Dirty work theory resonated most immediately. Originating with Hughes (1951, 1962) and elaborated by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), it argues that occupations carry a "notion of personal dignity" and that dirty workers manage the soiled aspects of society others prefer not to see. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) identified three types of taint - physical, social and moral - arguing that stigma threatens workers' ability to construct an esteem-enhancing identity.

This framework felt convincing because I had already seen it lived. In Bangladesh hospitals, I watched cleaning staff become invisible - a phenomenon documented by Sharma et al. (2022), who describe how "dirty" work becomes socially erased. The theory gave a name to something I had witnessed but could not articulate. It validated my observation that stigma is not about the work itself but about how society constructs certain occupations. When I read Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) argument that dirty work threatens identity, I recognised the cleaners I had seen - and something in myself, too: the experience of having qualifications dismissed and being treated as though my presence required explanation.

This framework aligned with my existing assumptions about human experience. My Child Development training taught me to look for how people make meaning within their social context and dirty work theory does exactly that. In the Seven Paradigm Framework (Jawad, 2026), this aligns with critical theory, which asks who benefits and who suffers and which treats the researcher's political and ethical commitments as part of the research rather than a contamination of it.

Recognition theory also resonated, particularly Honneth's (1995) argument that dignity is not a personal quality but a relational achievement. Individuals need recognition in three spheres - love, rights and solidarity - and when recognition is denied, harm follows. This connected to my emerging interest in dignity as something claimed, recognised, or denied in relationships. It helped me see that dignity and precarity are connected: when a system denies recognition, it harms the person; when a system produces precarity, it institutionalises that harm.

Precarity theory, particularly Anderson's (2010) work on immigration controls, also resonated. Anderson argues that immigration controls actively produce precarious workers by tying legal status to employment, making workers deportable and therefore compliant. This explained what I had observed but could not theorise: why cleaners stayed in poor conditions, why complaints led to dismissal, why leaving was not an option. It gave me language for the structural forces

that constrain agency - visas, contracts, outsourcing - and aligned with my historical realist ontology.

Frameworks That Produced Resistance

Rational choice theory produced resistance. It assumes workers calculate costs and benefits to maximise utility - that cleaners stay in poor jobs because they have weighed the options. But the cleaners I observed did not calculate; they endured. They stayed because their visas depended on it, because they had children to feed, and because leaving was not an option they could imagine. Rational choice theory treats agency as a universal capacity, but agency is unevenly distributed (Anderson, 2010). It represents positivism, which treats values as bias to be eliminated and assumes behaviour can be predicted and measured. I could not work within that paradigm because it cannot see what I care about most.

My resistance was both intellectual and emotional. Intellectually, it ignored structural forces - immigration controls, labour market segmentation, outsourcing contracts. Personally, reducing dignity to a transaction felt like an act of violence. It erased the moral weight of being treated as less than human. Rational choice theory has no language for endurance. It treats remaining in harmful conditions as a choice, when it is better understood as the absence of choice - what Anderson (2010) calls the "production of precarious workers."

Institutional theory also produced resistance. It would help me understand how cleaning contracts and procurement practices are shaped by organisational fields rather than individual employers - why schools outsource cleaning, why contractors compete on price rather than quality, why fair work policies may be adopted symbolically rather than substantively. My resistance was not intellectual; I can see its value. It is that it feels abstract, distant from the lived experience of the cleaners I hope to study. I am drawn to theories that keep human experience at the centre. Recognising this is itself reflexive: it tells me I prioritise the emic over the etic and may need to work harder to integrate structural analysis.

What This Pattern Reveals

This pattern reveals something about my starting assumptions. I am drawn to frameworks that treat meaning as socially constructed, that take power seriously and that do not reduce human experience to calculation. I am suspicious of frameworks that claim neutrality, because neutrality often conceals the values of those who hold power (Weber, 1949; Hammersley, 1995). In Crotty's (1998) terms, my epistemology is subjectivist: knowledge is created through engagement with others, not discovered by a detached observer. In Rocco and Plakhotnik's (2009) terms, I am drawn to theoretical frameworks that function as interpretive lenses rather than causal models.

At the same time, I recognise that my comfort with interpretive and critical frameworks may itself be a limitation. If I am drawn only to theories that confirm my existing beliefs, I may miss insights from traditions I have not yet engaged with. I have not, for example, seriously engaged with labour process theory, which could deepen my analysis of how work is controlled under

capitalism. Recognising this gap is an act of reflexivity: it tells me I prioritise the emic over the etic and may need to work harder to integrate structural analysis into my work.

These theories function as etic frameworks that help me analyse how structural conditions shape the emic experiences participants narrate. They are not separate from who I am as a researcher; they express who I have become. I chose them because they allowed me to say what I already believed - that dignity matters, that structures harm, that listening to people is a form of knowledge - and to say it with rigour rather than sentiment.

Section 3: The Evolution of Your Research Focus

My research question has undergone three distinct shifts since I began Part 1. Each one was driven by a different combination of forces - some intellectual, some methodological, some deeply personal - and tracing them reveals not only how my focus has changed but what those changes say about the kind of researcher I am becoming. These shifts also trace my paradigmatic movement: from an unexamined interpretivist position carrying residual positivist assumptions, through a more deliberate interpretivism, toward a critical interpretivist stance.

My first research question asked how employees in Bangladeshi organisations interpret flexible working hours and how those interpretations shape motivation, wellbeing and work-life balance. It was a broad, exploratory question grounded in HRM literature. The research was designed to capture employee experience, but it did not ask who was most vulnerable to the absence of flexibility, or what structural forces constrained their choices. In the Seven Paradigm Framework (Jawad, 2026), this question sat within interpretivism, but it still assumed that flexible working was a policy that could be evaluated in isolation from power.

The first shift came when I narrowed my focus to first-generation Bangladeshi finance professionals in English SMEs. This was driven partly by reading and partly by my own experience as a migrant professional in the UK. I began to see that flexible working is not experienced uniformly. It is shaped by visa status, by prior professional socialisation and by the cultural assumptions employees bring from their home countries. My research questions shifted accordingly: How do prior experiences in Bangladesh shape interpretations of UK flexibility? This was a step toward recognising that workplace experiences are structured by migration and culture, not just by organisational policy (Anderson, 2010; Marcel, 2024). But the second assignment still framed the study as an evaluation of HR policy. It was only when I engaged with dirty work theory and Anderson's (2010) work on immigration controls that I realised the deeper issue. Cleaners do not experience flexibility or precarity in isolation; they experience dignity - or its denial - within systems designed to keep them insecure.

The second shift was methodological. My early interest in TikTok videos of domestic cleaners was abandoned not because it was uninteresting, but because it was ethically inaccessible. Cleaners rarely consent to being filmed and the footage is controlled by homeowners. Commercial cleaning, by contrast, is accessible through community gatekeepers and has been the subject of recent ethnographic work in the UK (Cleaning up Westminster, 2025). It is also more prevalent, more precarious and less studied. The shift was also driven by a growing awareness that domestic cleaning is not representative of the sector as a whole. Domestic cleaners often work alone, in private homes, with direct relationships to homeowners. Commercial cleaners work in teams, in public buildings, under contracts, with layers of management between them and the client. Commercial cleaning, particularly in schools, offered a context where the moral dimension of dirty work is heightened - where cleaners are physically close to children and yet remain invisible.

The third shift was personal. When I began Part 1, I was interested in workplace experiences broadly. By the end, I was drawn to school cleaners specifically because of my background in

Child Development. I kept asking: What about the cleaners' children? What happens when a parent comes home exhausted, invisible and carrying the weight of being treated as less than human? That question was missing from the dirty work literature. I realised that my research could not be separated from what I cared about most - not just work, but family life; not just dignity at work, but dignity as a parent.

My research moved from a predominantly etic policy evaluation toward a predominantly emic exploration of meaning and now combines both through critical theoretical integration. This movement reflects my paradigmatic evolution: from unexamined interpretivism carrying positivist assumptions, through a more deliberate interpretivism, toward a critical interpretivist position that treats structures as real while still prioritising participant meaning-making.

What has shaped this evolution is a combination of reading, methodological constraints and personal experience. The literature showed me that structural forces matter; methodology showed me what was feasible; my background showed me what was worth asking. But there is one question I have chosen not to ask: whether employers break the law. I decided early that this would shift my role from researcher to whistleblower. I am not there to expose individual employers; I am there to understand how cleaners experience dignity under conditions that make dignity fragile. I have also chosen not to interview children, because that would widen my scope and raise ethical stakes beyond what my design can support. I have chosen not to use a participatory approach, with cleaners as co-researchers. A participatory design would have been valuable, but it requires a level of trust, time and shared ownership difficult to establish in a doctoral study with a fixed timeline.

What the field has left underexplored is the intersection of dirty work, migration and family life. Dirty work theory has examined how workers manage stigma, but rarely in migration contexts. Precarity theory has examined how immigration controls produce vulnerability, but rarely in relation to dignity. Neither tradition has seriously examined how work conditions shape family life. My study addresses this gap by asking how Bengali migrant school cleaners narrate the bearing of their work conditions on family life.

Section 4: Positionality, Power and Research Relationships

My relationship with participants is shaped by proximity and distance. I am not a cleaner, manager, or policymaker. I am a doctoral researcher, a Bangladeshi migrant woman in Cardiff and a Bengali speaker. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe this as the space between insider and outsider, a continuum examined by Bukamal (2022) and Mohler and Rudman (2022). This study adopts an emic-led, etic-informed approach. I begin from participants' lived experiences, using in-depth interviews to prioritise their meaning-making. I then draw on etic frameworks - dirty work theory, recognition theory and precarity - to analyse how structural conditions shape those experiences. My positionality is that of a partial insider: culturally and linguistically close to Bengali school cleaners, but occupationally and institutionally distinct. Reflexivity manages the risks of over-identification, assumed understanding and romanticising resilience.

The insider dimension is real. I share language, migration experience and cultural trust with the cleaners I hope to interview. Participants are more likely to speak openly about family pressures, community expectations and the quiet exhaustion of navigating a new country because I understand those realities without needing them explained. But proximity is not sameness. I hold a university position and am not subject to immigration restrictions in the way many cleaners may be. I can leave Cardiff if I choose; they may not have that option. I control how their stories are represented; they do not (Rose, 1997). These power imbalances shape what participants feel able to say, what they withhold and what they expect from me in return.

A subtler form of power runs in the opposite direction. Participants hold experiential knowledge I need. Without them, my research cannot exist. They know what it means to clean a school before dawn, to be treated as invisible by the very people whose children they protect, to come home too tired to answer their own children's questions. I can read about these experiences, but I cannot know them. This asymmetry is not something I can resolve; it is something I must work with.

The practical implications are specific. Because I share language and cultural background, participants may assume I understand more than I do. I will explicitly tell participants: "I am not a cleaner. Please explain things as if I know nothing about your job. Do not assume I understand." My presence may also shape what participants withhold. They may avoid criticising community leaders because they do not want to seem disloyal. They may modify accounts of their immigration status because they fear, even without evidence, that I could report them. I cannot fully prevent this. What I can do is be transparent about my role and limits. I will state clearly that I will never share identifying information, that I am not an employer or regulator and that their words will not be traced back to them. However, I must be honest about the limits of anonymity in a small community. I cannot guarantee complete anonymity. I will remove identifying details, but I will explain that complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed and that participants should decide what they feel safe to share. This is consistent with the unresolved tension I name in Section 5.

If a participant discloses unlawful immigration status or unlawful employment, I will not report them. I will pause the interview, remind them that they do not have to answer and ask if they

wish to continue. I will not include identifying details in my analysis. I will have a referral list for migrant support organisations if they request help. I will also clarify in my consent form that I am not a legal authority and cannot provide legal advice.

Interviews will be conducted in the language the participant chooses: Bengali, Sylheti, or English. While many migrant workers have functional English, some may prefer their first language for emotional depth and nuance. Translation is not neutral: it involves interpretation and can lose nuance, idiom and cultural meaning. For transcripts in Bengali or Sylheti, I will keep original language transcripts alongside translations, note where translation is uncertain and use back-translation for key passages. For transcripts in English, no translation is needed, though I will remain attentive to how participants' language choices shape what they say and how they say it.

My relationship with gatekeepers is different from my relationship with participants, but it is no less shaped by power. Fearless Achievers and Tidy Titans hold something I need: access. They control who I meet, who trusts me and who agrees to speak. They may steer me toward participants they consider "representative" or "articulate." I cannot fully control this. What I can do is be transparent about my sampling strategy, explain that I am interested in the full range of experiences and monitor who is being included and excluded (Rashid et al., 2015).

This study asks: How do cleaners interpret and respond to the stigma of dirty work? How do they experience structural conditions of employment and the insecurity these produce? How does the Welsh Fair Work policy context feature in their accounts? How do they narrate the bearing of their work conditions on family life and parenting? Data will consist of semi-structured interview transcripts with 12–15 Bengali school cleaners, alongside publicly available policy documents analysed thematically.

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), I will establish trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I will also address the risk of romanticising resilience by deliberately coding for pain, exhaustion and powerlessness alongside resistance (Finlay, 2002; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Section 5: Ethical Tensions in Your Study

Ethical tensions in research are conflicts between two things that matter, not procedural problems to be solved (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Israel and Hay, 2006). My study contains several such tensions and naming them honestly is more valuable than pretending they have been resolved through ethics paperwork.

The first tension is depth of data versus emotional harm. My research asks cleaners to narrate precarity, stigma and insecurity. Rigorous answers require rich, detailed accounts, but narrating such experiences revisits humiliation and powerlessness. This tension cannot be fully resolved (Palaganas et al., 2017). I cannot prevent distress; I can only respond. My mitigation is to pause when distress appears, offer referral to migrant support organisations and never push when a participant signals discomfort. This response is partial. I also cannot control what happens after the interview, when the participant goes home and the conversation stays with them. My ethics protocol covers the interview, not its aftermath. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) distinguish procedural ethics from "ethically important moments." My application will address consent, anonymity and data storage, but cannot prepare me for the moment a participant cries or discloses something worrying. I will prepare reflexively: reading, discussing in supervision and practising responses.

The second tension is gatekeeper access versus sample diversity. Recruiting through Fearless Achievers and Tidy Titans avoids employer gatekeeping, which would compromise consent. But community organisations connect me with people they know - those already engaged, coping and visible. The cleaners who most need their voices heard may be least connected to community infrastructure. Snowball sampling (Rashid et al., 2015) relies on existing networks and may not reach them. I cannot fully resolve this. I can monitor who is included and excluded and be honest in analysis about missing voices.

The third tension is hopeful narratives versus honest representation. I am drawn to stories of resilience, but romanticising resilience lets systems off the hook (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). I may downplay suffering because it is harder to sit with. My mitigation is to code deliberately for pain, exhaustion and powerlessness alongside resistance and dignity. I will ask repeatedly: Am I telling a story of dignity, or avoiding a story of indignity? I will bring this to supervision.

The fourth tension is anonymity in a small community. As Section 4 acknowledged, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Participants may be identifiable even without names. I will be transparent from the outset: I will remove identifying details, but cannot guarantee anonymity. I will invite participants to decide what they feel safe to share and offer transcript review so they can remove anything they later regret.

The fifth tension concerns unlawful immigration status or employment. If a participant discloses this, I will not report them. I will pause the interview, remind them they do not have to answer and ask if they wish to continue. I will not include identifying details in my analysis. I will have a referral list for migrant support organisations if they request help. I will clarify in my consent form that I am not a legal authority and cannot provide legal advice.

Honesty requires acknowledging what remains unresolved. I do not have a clear rule for when to probe distress and when to stop. I cannot guarantee gatekeeper recruitment reaches the most precarious cleaners. I do not know how to balance rich description with anonymity. I do not know how translation may distort meaning for participants who choose Bengali or Sylheti. These are not failures of preparation; they are ongoing ethical work. Naming them is the first step.

Two things need separating. First, what my paradigm cannot do: critical interpretivism cannot predict outcomes or generalise to populations. I accept these limitations. Second, what I have chosen to leave out: I have not asked whether employers break the law, because that would shift my role from researcher to whistleblower. I have not interviewed children. I have not used a participatory approach. Interviewing cleaners rather than working with them as co-researchers is a methodological decision, not a judgment about their capacity.

Section 6: You as a Developing Researcher

My central argument is that dignity is not a personal quality but a relational achievement - something claimed, recognised and denied within structures of power. Two gaps in my development as a reflexive researcher are specific enough to name (Schon, 1983; Finlay, 2002). I do not yet know whether Bengali migrant school cleaners sustain dignity under conditions that systematically undermine it; that is what my study will explore.

The first gap is a tendency to soothe rather than interrogate distress. In my pilot study, when a participant described a "freeze" response - a physical block preventing him from speaking up, I offered empathy and moved on. Reflection told me what happened; reflexivity told me why. My Child Development training taught me to respond to distress with care, not to dwell in it. The professional habit of protecting people from discomfort is a strength in many contexts. But my research question requires the opposite. It asks how cleaners experience precarity, which means I must stay with discomfort rather than resolve it. This gap matters because if I soothe distress too quickly, I may miss the very experiences I am trying to understand. I may hear the beginning of an account and, without meaning to, signal that the participant should move on. I may prioritise their comfort over their testimony.

Addressing this will require deliberate practice (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I will pause when I feel the urge to move on. I will ask "What was happening in your body?" rather than "I understand." I will review transcripts specifically for moments of premature closure. I will bring examples to supervision and ask my supervisor to challenge me when I describe soothing a participant rather than staying with their distress.

The second gap is a tendency to reach for pattern before depth. When I read interview data, I notice that I begin grouping responses into themes before I have spent sufficient time with individual accounts. This comes from professional habits of working quickly to conclusions under time pressure. In Child Development practice, urgency was often real. That habit served me in practice. But it does not serve my research question. My study asks how individual cleaners narrate dignity in their own terms. If I move too quickly to cross-case themes, I may lose the particularity of each account. I may hear what fits my emerging pattern and miss what does not.

Addressing this will require structured time in analysis where I work with single transcripts without comparison. I will analyse each case in full before moving across cases. I will use the idiographic first phase of IPA-inspired analysis, even though I am using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, because the commitment to the particular is one I need to practise. I will ask my supervisor to check this tendency at the data stage rather than only at write-up.

There is also a third gap I am beginning to see. I am drawn to stories of dignity and resilience and I have already named in Section 5 the risk of romanticising resilience. What I have not yet examined is how this draw shapes my analytic attention. I may notice dignity more readily than indignity. Addressing this will require coding deliberately for pain, exhaustion and powerlessness alongside resistance and dignity.

These gaps are shaped by my professional formation and by the assumptions I brought into doctoral study. My Child Development training taught me to care for people, not to interrogate them. It taught me to work quickly, because the needs were urgent. These are not weaknesses in themselves - they are strengths in other contexts. But my research question requires a different orientation.

What I will do differently:

1. Pause when I feel the urge to soothe and ask instead what the participant is experiencing.
2. Work with single transcripts without comparison before moving to cross-case analysis.
3. Code for pain, exhaustion and powerlessness alongside resistance and dignity.
4. Journal after each interview and analysis session to examine what I noticed, what I avoided and why.
5. Ask my supervisor to hold me accountable at the data stage, not only at write-up.

These practices are specific, achievable and directly linked to my research question. They are the work of becoming a reflexive doctoral researcher.

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