

## Social representations of violence against women for a group of rural elderly



*Representações sociais da violência contra mulheres rurais para um grupo de idosas*  
*Representaciones sociales de la violencia contra mujeres rurales para un grupo de ancianas*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Understand the social representations of violence against rural women, from the perspective of the elderly, considering how the generation and gender influence this aggravation.

**Methods:** Qualitative study, based on the Theory of Social Representations. It was carried out with 12 elderly rural women from a city of Rio Grande do Sul, in July and August of 2013. The data obtained through a projective technique and semi-structured interviews has been analyzed through the reference of the Social Representations and content analysis.

**Results:** On one hand, the elderly represent violence as distant distress, anchored in extreme acts of aggression. On the other hand, they represent it as present in their relationships, showing themselves vulnerable to the domination of men in the context of life and work.

**Conclusions:** It was revealed the invisibility of violence against elderly women in the rural context, where the male figure overlaps with the female.

**Keywords:** Violence against women. Rural health. Aged. Primary health care. Nursing.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Compreender as representações sociais da violência contra mulheres rurais, na perspectiva de idosas, considerando geração e gênero como influência nesse agravo.

**Métodos:** Estudo qualitativo, fundamentado na Teoria das Representações Sociais. Realizado com 12 mulheres rurais idosas de um município do Rio Grande do Sul em julho e agosto de 2013. Os dados obtidos por meio de técnica projetiva e entrevistas semiestruturadas foram analisados através do referencial das Representações Sociais e análise de conteúdo.

**Resultados:** De um lado, as idosas representam a violência como distante, ancorada em atos extremos de agressão. Por outro, a representam como presente em suas relações, mostrando-se vulneráveis à dominação dos homens no contexto de vida e trabalho.

**Conclusões:** Revelou-se a invisibilidade da violência contra mulheres idosas no contexto rural, onde a figura masculina se sobrepõe à feminina.

**Palavras-chave:** Violência contra a mulher. Saúde da população rural. Idoso. Atenção primária à saúde. Enfermagem.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Comprender las representaciones sociales de la violencia contra mujeres rurales, en la perspectiva de ancianas, teniendo en cuenta generación y género como influencia en ese agravo.

**Métodos:** Estudio cualitativo, basado en la teoría de la Representación Social. Realizado con 12 mujeres rurales ancianas, en una ciudad en Rio Grande do Sul en julio y agosto de 2013. Los datos obtenidos por medio de técnica proyectiva y entrevistas semiestructuradas fueron analizados a través del referencial de las Representaciones Sociales y análisis de contenido.

**Resultados:** Por un lado, las ancianas representan la violencia como distante, anclada en actos extremos de agresión. Por otro, la representan como presente en sus relaciones, mostrándose vulnerables a la dominación de los hombres en el contexto de vida y trabajo.

**Conclusión:** Se reveló la invisibilidad de la violencia contra las mujeres mayores en el medio rural, donde la figura masculina se superpone a la hembra.

**Palabras clave:** Violencia contra la mujer. Salud rural. Anciano. Atención primaria de salud. Enfermería.

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

Violence against women permeates the history of humanity from its earliest days. However, three decades ago it started to be seen as an inherent problem of the health sector, and it is currently understood as a public health problem and a violation of women's human rights<sup>(1)</sup>, affecting them as regards quality of life and health. It is conceptualized by the Convention of Belém do Pará (1994) as "any action or conduct based on gender that causes death, harm or physical, sexual or psychological suffering to women, both in the public and private spheres"<sup>(2)</sup>.

Situating the rural context, situations of violence against rural women assume different facets, which can be visualized through daily social relations, exemplified by the subordination of women to their husbands and/or partners, male domination, and sexual division of unequal work<sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition, a study carried out in cities of Rio Grande do Sul, which aimed at analyzing the conceptions of domestic violence against rural women in the expression of Community Health Agents, pointed out that women living in rural areas are permanently exposed to different forms of violence. In addition to physical violence, psychological, moral and sexual aggressions, as well as the overload of work and deprivation of freedom on the part of the husband and/or partner, are mentioned<sup>(4)</sup>. In the case of the elderly women, this population is more vulnerable to experiencing situations such as those mentioned above, due to the low educational level, physical limitations due to diseases and the aging process, besides the subjective aspects of the elderly rural women<sup>(5-6)</sup>.

Another aspect that contributes to the non-confrontation of violence against women is the absence of collective resources for the social care and protection in the rural settings, together with the geographical distance from the urban centers<sup>(7)</sup>. Most of the time, rural women do not have access to police stations, health services and social assistance, for example; and they end up not reporting violence situations, which contributes to the invisibility of the problem.

In view of the above, discussing the issue of violence against elderly women in the rural context is relevant, since there are difficulties in identifying the occurrence of these events, both by women and other segments of society, especially in the health sector. Giving a voice to this population with generational and cultural particularities can contribute as a guideline for the development of strategies for coping with and preventing violence in rural areas, as well as for the (re) construction of public policies in this area.

In this perspective, the theory of Social Representations is inserted as a theoretical and methodological set

allowing a better understanding of the object under study, understanding it as a social phenomenon. The Theory of Social Representations is a typical product of present times and of paradigmatic transition, as well as the feminist and other theories that, in their own way, emerge as new conceptual tools to analyze angles of reality highlighted by new looks<sup>(8)</sup>.

In view of the exposed problem, this study was guided by the following research question: What are the social representations of violence against rural women, from the perspective of the elderly in the rural context?

In order to answer to this question, this study aimed at understanding the Social Representations of violence against rural women, from the perspective of the elderly, considering generation and gender as an influence in this aggravation.

## ■ METHOD

This is an exploratory-descriptive study, with a qualitative approach. The qualitative method applies to the study of history, relationships, representations, perceptions, and opinions resulting from humans' view of themselves, their ways of living and building their artifacts, as well as their feelings and thoughts<sup>(9)</sup>.

The Theory of Social Representations has been chosen as a theoretical-methodological reference. This reference makes it possible to make something unfamiliar, or even the non-familiarity, and to this end it uses two mechanisms called projective techniques: anchorage and objectification, which act on the basis of memory<sup>(8)</sup>.

The study was developed with elderly women living in rural areas, linked to the rural Family Health Strategy (FHS) of a city located in the northwest region of Rio Grande do Sul, in the months of July and August of 2013. Previous contact was made with the nurse responsible for the rural FHS, who, through a Community Health Agent (CHA), has organized a workshop with elderly women living in rural areas.

The participants of the study were 12 elderly women residing in the rural area of the study scenario city. The following inclusion criteria have been used: to be aged 60 years or over, and to present cognitive conditions to respond to the interview.

For the generation of data, projective techniques have been chosen<sup>(8)</sup>, and semi-structured interviews have been used. With the projective techniques, a collage workshop was organized and held in a community hall suggested by the CHA as a place more geographically accessible to the elderly participants. In this, magazines and newspapers were made available to women, so that they could express, through the use of images (cut and pasted), thoughts and

meanings about violence against rural women, thus, allowing the objectification.

For the anchorage, the elders were asked to verbally present their knowledge about the phenomenon. The workshop was recorded in audio, with an average duration of two hours. The observations were recorded in field diary by the researcher and a research assistant, academic of the undergraduate course in Nursing.

Also, in order to complement the data obtained through the workshop, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the 12 elderly women who participated in the workshop. The sample size has been defined by the data exhaustion criterion, that is, the closure of data collection through the interviews occurred when all the eligible participants participated in the study<sup>(10)</sup>.

For the interviews, an operative script has been divided into two parts: one related to the sociodemographic data of the elderly, containing closed questions; and the other part consisting of open questions regarding the object of the study, that is, the social representations of violence against rural women. Thus, during the semi-structured interviews, so that women could verbalize about situations of violence against rural women, it was necessary to instigate them from questions such as: What do you understand by violence against rural women? How do you conceptualize violence against rural women? Are you aware of the forms (types) of violence against existing rural women? Do you know or have you witnessed any type of violence against women in rural areas?

It should be emphasized that the semi-structured interviews had previous scheduling, being carried out individually in the house of the participants, with an average duration of one hour. The home environment has been chosen as the *locus* for the interviews, considering that the elderly women could feel more at ease and comfortable to answer the questions at their own environment.

During the data collection period, other people, especially neighbors, spouses and/or companions were sometimes present at the women's home for the interview. In these situations, the interviews were not carried out, since the presence of another person violates the ethical principles of the study development, as well as could interfere in the answers, besides exposing the elderly women, considering that violence against women is an issue that is surrounded by censorship. In these situations, the researcher rescheduled a new date for the interview, in order to perform it when the elderly woman was alone at home. It is important to observe that the interviews have been recorded in digital media after the consent of the elderly, guaranteeing the authenticity of the data for the analysis.

It should be highlighted that prior to the data collection procedure, the participants have been clarified about the objectives, methodology, risks and benefits of the study, and the researcher read the Term of Free and Informed Consent (TFIC). After this procedure, all the elderly women who agreed to participate in the study signed the TFIC in two copies, remaining one with the participant, and the other with the researcher responsible. In order to ensure the participants' anonymity, they were identified by the letter I followed by the ordinal number according to the order of the interview (E.g.: I1, I2, I3 ... I12).

The data obtained through the workshop has been analyzed in the light of the theoretical reference of the Social Representations, based on the methodological steps<sup>(11)</sup> below. The 1<sup>st</sup> moment understood as objectification: through the process of making something thought into something real, through the collage, it was possible to form the figurative nuclei, which correspond to the themes that have the property of being represented and that express the veracity of ideas; 2<sup>nd</sup> moment - anchorage: it corresponds to the interpretation of the elderly about the material generated in the collages, assigning a meaning to the images produced by them.

Such a moment allows the collection of symbolizations and perceptions from the verbal descriptions about the knowledge regarding the phenomenon in question; later, the themes that represent this knowledge have been identified, constituting the symbolic nuclei. The 3<sup>rd</sup> moment - validation by the participants of the configurations given by the researcher to the social representation of violence against elderly rural women, confirming or not the identification of nuclei of this representation<sup>(11)</sup>.

The 4<sup>th</sup> moment provides for the systematization of information, grouping the main themes into figurative and symbolic nuclei<sup>(8)</sup>. Then, in the light of the theoretical reference, the anchoring about the social representation of violence against rural women for the elderly has been obtained.

The semi-structured interviews have been submitted to the content analysis proposed by Minayo, which is divided into three stages: pre-analysis, exploration of the material and treatment of the results obtained and its interpretation<sup>(9)</sup>.

Regarding the pre-analysis, it began with the organization of the material collected for further analysis. Initially, the complete transcription of the data obtained from the audio recordings of the workshop and semi-structured interviews has been carried out in the Word text editor, producing the *corpus* of the study.

Afterwards, this material was printed, to facilitate the manipulation by the researcher. Then, the listening of the recordings was carried out, as well as the floating reading,

which allowed generating the initial impressions about the material to be analyzed, coming from the two techniques of data collection.

Continuing the analysis, a sequence of detailed readings has been made, from which it was possible to highlight, with a text-mark brush, the excerpts in which the speeches of the participants were similar.

The exploration of the material was carried out from the segmentation of similar information contained in the transcribed material, which provided the constitution of the themes, from which the registration units emerged. These units are associated with the meaning of the phrase, which can be obtained through words, phrases and expressions<sup>(9)</sup>.

Then, after the registration units have been defined, it was possible to categorize the three thematic categories through the condensation of the recurrent speeches and the isolated speeches, both relevant to the study. During the treatment phase of the results obtained and interpretation, the researcher proposed inferences and performed interpretations about the results, based on the research objective.

The research originates from a course completion work<sup>(12)</sup>, and it has obeyed the ethical recommendations in force for conducting research involving human beings. The study has received a favorable opinion from the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM) with the protocol No. 17148813.0.0000.5346. Therefore, all the recommendations of the Resolution No. 466/12 of the National Health Council, which regulates the development of research with human beings, have been respected.

## ■ RESULTS E DISCUSSION

Regarding the sociodemographic characterization of the elderly women, the age ranged from 62 to 83 years old, with an average of 68.83 years old. As for marital status, eight were married or had a partner, and four were widows.

With regard to schooling, nine elderly women had incomplete primary education and three had not attended school at any point in their lives. These data converge with a nationwide survey, which pointed to the fact that the majority of the rural women over the age of 60 are not literate or have only incomplete elementary education<sup>(5)</sup>. Also, in the direction of these findings, an international study revealed that the level of education is closely linked to situations of violence, so the lower the educational level, the greater the chances of experiencing situations of violence<sup>(13)</sup>.

The discussions obtained through the analysis of the empirical material collected during the workshop and the semi-structured interviews have been grouped into three categories: *violence anchored in extreme acts of corporal aggression*

*and distant from the rural context, violence anchored in male domination and gender culture, and violence anchored in the context of life and work.*

### **Violence anchored in extreme acts of corporal aggression and distant from the rural context**

The first meaningful nucleus identified in this study presents the issues related to violence in the rural context, exposed by the elderly as events distant from their reality and visualized in most of the speeches by extreme acts of corporal aggression, signaling the difficulty of recognizing the problematic in this context. The speeches express their representations:

*A lot happens, but it happens more in the big city [...] we live in the countryside, there are no cases here. (I4)*

*There is a lot of violence against women, but here, thank God, there is nothing to tell about it, because there are no cases. Violence against women exists a lot, but we are not aware. (I9)*

*What we see is the boyfriend killing the woman, [...] we see it on television, there are fights at home and they also kill the woman. (I12)*

*[...]There are many who also beat the woman [...] we watch on television. (I1)*

The testimonies reveal the representation of violence against women anchored in the social dimension, in which it occurs daily. However, as it is not understood as a violence, it becomes banalized and naturalized by the elderly, since this event is a common phenomenon, introjected to their daily life and that is often overlooked.

In this sense, a study developed with rural Pakistani women has revealed the different forms of violence suffered by them. They are understood by psychological, sexual and physical violence. These, in turn, contribute to the findings of the study in question, since violence in the rural context is understood as intrinsic to their daily routine, that is, they do not perceive that they are being abused<sup>(13)</sup>.

In this context, identifying situations of violence becomes more difficult, since the women who experience it, most of the time, do not identify that they are being abused. Thus, they perceive this violence as something natural, which is sometimes present in their lives since childhood, from relationships in the family environment, for example<sup>(14)</sup>.

In this sense, a study has identified that women living in

the rural context were treated with brutality by their companions, however, they did not understand such brutality as violence and, rather, as a common behavior that was part of their daily lives<sup>(5)</sup>.

And the images they presented in the collage workshop represented the violence anchored in extreme acts, related to death and the great centers.

*If we lived in the big city, I think it would be a lot, kids kill parents, women get raped, but not here, there are no such things here. (14)*

*Violence is rape and death, this is the worst thing, because either you surrender or give your body or you are dead. (12)*

*It shows on the television those women full of bruises because the husband had hit them. [...]. (111)*

The elements reveal the representation of violence as associated with violent attitudes, such as death, rape, and its occurrence as a phenomenon of the urban world, not being visualized in the daily context of the elderly women living in rural areas. A study, developed with managers in the cities of the southern half of Rio Grande do Sul, has pointed out that they also related violence to large centers and poor regions, confirming that for some managers there was no violence in rural areas<sup>(3)</sup>. These data (re)think about the non-recognition of violence in the daily lives of people living in rural areas, and its invisibility as a public health problem.

### **Violence anchored in male domination and gender culture**

In this nucleus of meaning, contradictory aspects have been identified, because although in the first the elderly rural women represent violence against women as a phenomenon distant from the rural context, in this nucleus they mention marks of symbolic violence and gender asymmetries in their experiences, mainly related to power and male domination.

The statements of the elderly revealed that the male-female relationship in the rural context is anchored in chauvinism, in which man is given the role of sovereign and dominator, holder of physical strength and other characteristics representing power. But the woman is "graced" with attributes related to fragility and submission, in which she can hardly manifest and challenge her companion.

On the other hand, the elderly women recognized this behavior as belonging to the past, mentioning achievements such as employment and retirement, which were important for the economic development of women. The-

se elements can be identified in the following statements:

*The woman is humiliated, the woman suffers all kinds of humiliation ... it seems that the man is becoming more manly. (18)*

*In the past women had nothing, there was no retirement, they had no job [...] if the husband said: "I'm the one who orders!"; the woman would lower her head, she would never said anything, because the man was the owner, the one that ordered. (14)*

*Over the years the woman began to take over ... she no longer admits being lowered by men. (16)*

The speeches reveal the representation of violence, which are anchored in the psychological and moral perspective, considering that for women many deprivations are imposed when compared to men. Such representation is anchored in the ideology that man is the one who has power in the context of the conjugal relationship, and the woman, as a passive subject, must accept all that is imposed, without questioning.

A study, which sought to outline the current generation of older women in Pernambuco, indicates that women in the rural context are associated with responsibility to the family, children and the home, a context in which, according to the women studied, "to suffer a lot" is part of their destiny, because they are women<sup>(5)</sup>.

It reveals the gender violence, which is a problem that transposes the barriers of the domestic context, involving the community and the work. The relationships in society are permeated by the structural asymmetries of gender, in which the reproduction of the relations of subordination of the woman to the detriment of the man is visualized.

The older women living in rural areas are seen from the perspective of work, subordination and obedience. The speeches demonstrate their role, as housewives, mothers, care takers and workers:

*She had to work, and would be hit if she would not [...]. (19)*

*She just has a few cows, and she defends herself with it. Only with that. Because she depends on the husband. A little is this [...] but a woman who works, who takes care of the house, the children, why be so abused? (18)*

The dimensions expressed by the participants regarding situations of violence between rural men and women reveal the power and authority of man as a provider and

head of the house. But the rural woman is seen from the perspective of subordination, obedience, and service<sup>(15)</sup>.

Regarding the division of labor in the rural context, this occurs in an asymmetrical way, in which the woman, by assisting her husband in the field, is seen as the “wife of the producer”, and her work is represented as aid, favoring; thus, favoring the invisibility of the work and the lack of feminine professional identity<sup>(16)</sup>.

This aspect, elucidated by the speeches, points out that most rural women are financially dependent on their partners, and they are not encouraged to seek other means to provide for their livelihoods. In this way, they feel obliged to continue to bear the different manifestations of violence, in addition to the violation of their rights<sup>(4)</sup>. It is observed in the expression of these women discontentment by the absence of recognition of the domestic work on the part of their companions.

Violence is seen as an old problem, which presents itself in different forms, based on patriarchal representations of women, thereby compromising relationships, highlighting the inequalities of power, as well as the threat to the physical, moral and psychological integrity of women<sup>(17)</sup>.

In this direction, the home environment is the space in which older women suffer more abuse when compared to men. And considering that the phenomenon of gender violence against the elderly occurs primarily at the heart of the family, in Brazil there are still no records about this kind of violence, given that issues such as these are not identified as a social phenomenon<sup>(18)</sup>.

Also, it is possible to visualize the aspects related to the influence of culture and generation on the reproduction of violence against the elderly women residing in rural areas. The speeches represent the above:

*I remember that since my family, my parents, that the father was the macho, he was the boss, so the mother was quiet [...], because she had no time for anything [...](14)*

*[...] the neighbors were generally all the same ... they were in charge of women and they obeyed [...] this is also violence. (15)*

It is observed in the narrative that the elderly women represent violence in family relations, in which the role of women in this space is based on submission and coercion, and there is no possibility of challenging the facts. This is anchored in the reproduction of violence taking into account culturally imposed ideologies. Corroborating with these findings, a study with 354 rural Nicaraguan women reveals that 20% of these women have observed situa-

tions of physical, psychological or sexual violence against their mothers<sup>(19)</sup>.

In many instances, the representation of violence against women in the rural context anchored in gender heterogeneities is seen, in which the social role of women is restricted to the home environment, based on the relationships of subordination and obedience, whereas man is seen as the reference in the family unit. These facts reaffirm the gender stereotypes already instituted, derived from social and cultural ideologies.

### **Violence anchored in the context of life and work**

The third nucleus of meaning reveals the representational elements directed to the life and work context of women living in rural areas, which shows the deprivation of the right to study, depending on the work. The speeches express these representations:

*Those years we did not study. They did not want us to study, we had to work. (13)*

*I studied until the middle of the year of the third grade, then, my father took me to work in the field, because at that time the parents did not offer education. (110)*

*Oh, I never went to class [...] my father never wanted me to. (17)*

The speeches point out that the aging generations of women had difficulty accessing school when they were young. Traditionally, these women did not study because they continued to live in the countryside, married to men of the same environment, continuing their lives and production established in their families. Nowadays, there is a tendency among rural women to leave home to seek new alternatives, both for study and for paid work. This empowerment of rural women is associated with their participation in social movements, which tends to grant them greater autonomy<sup>(20)</sup>.

The insertion of rural women in the context of work is anchored in the fragility of being a woman in a scenario in which gender inequalities stand out in the male-female relationship. The role of the woman is restricted to the home environment, to the care of the children, the house, and in the aid of the crop. This is reinforced by the form of social organization of work in rural areas, where farming, considered a productive site, is a symbolic masculine domain; while the space of the home, considered as reproductive and in some ways unproductive, is the feminine symbolic domain<sup>(7)</sup>.

The representation of these elderly women is that this form of social organization and work generates suffering, given the overload of work attributed to the rural women and the lack of recognition of their own work, as rural workers, which is observed in the following statements:

*The woman suffers enough [...] to have her children, to take care of the house, to help in the fields. (14)*

*The woman should not suffer anything, because she is everything, she raises the family, she raises her children, she has to take care of her husband, she has to do the chores. (19)*

In this direction, by not recognizing the double/triple working hours of women, the established social representation is based on a discourse that makes the majority of women internalize and incorporate, through a subtle process, the "consent", thus, establishing the complicity with the masculine power, generating consequences by the excess of work<sup>(3)</sup>.

The dynamics of life with double or triple working hours of the rural women occurs daily through the development of activities in the fields, in the home and in the care of the children and husband and/or companion. In this way, their work day is continuous, starting at dawn, extending until dusk. The activities developed involve the productive and domestic environments, the latter considered unproductive, that is, without economic value. Women, however, do not receive recognition for their working hours, given the gender culture<sup>(20)</sup>, in which they assume the position of "helping" the husband.

## ■ FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The situations of violence against women have always been present in the historical construction of society and are still current; however, they require strategies for their recognition and confrontation, especially when it comes to the rural context. In this sense, it was possible with this study to understand the social representations of violence against rural women from the perspective of the elderly women who lived in rural areas.

On one hand, the elderly women represented violence as distant from their life context, relating it to extreme acts of corporal aggression and to the great centers. On the other hand, they represented violence as present in their relationships, showing themselves vulnerable to domination and subordination towards men, being still seen as the "fragile sex", not having the right to question and to impose their desires. It is worth considering that the elderly women evoked these aspects when they were indu-

ced to think about violence against women, which leads them to infer that they perceived themselves involved in this phenomenon.

It was also possible to visualize the elderly women in a context in which the attributes related to the house and children care, help in farming activities, are evidently introjected, evidencing the overlapping of roles and the overload of work, characterizing their lives as suffering. Thus, this study has provided an approximation with the different faces of violence perpetrated against women living in rural areas, and the determining and triggering factors of this phenomenon.

Knowing the social representations of violence against women in the perspective of the elderly has as theoretical contributions that it can help in the (re) formulation of actions to confront violence in the health sector, as one of the sectors that can make up the network of attention to rural women in situations of violence, with a view to promoting their right to life and health. The nurse stands out as a member of this sector, which, in the rural setting, is in a privileged position to identify and intervene in situations of violence against women, since they are inserted in the territory through the Family Health Strategy.

This research presents characteristic limitations of qualitative and descriptive studies. The contradictory elements that have appeared in the testimonies of the elderly women may be due to the collection scenario, or to the fact that one of the techniques of data collection approached the phenomenon of violence against rural women in a workshop with a group of women that knew each other, which may have inhibited the participants' speeches.

Future research is recommended in order to give greater visibility to the violence perpetrated against women in the rural context, given the complexity of this problem and consequences for the health/illness process of the women who experience it. Moreover, the data presented here offer possibilities for the development of interventional studies, aiming at suggesting measures to promote the quality of life and health of rural women.

The theme of violence against women is an object of contemporary study for the fields of health and nursing, increasingly present in scientific productions. However, researchers should be encouraged to produce research on this theme in the rural setting, given the specificities of this scenario and the population that lives in it.

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