

# **18<sup>th</sup> SEAAIR Conference 2018**

## **“Outstanding Paper” Award**

### **Existential Realities of Students with Absentee Parents**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This is an explanatory sequential mixed-method study that investigated the existential realities of students with absentee parents. By doing stratified sampling, they used to survey and focused group discussions which were recorded, transcribed, validated, analyzed, and interpreted by the researcher following Litchman's approach in analyzing experiences. They were used to achieve an understanding of the existential realities among students with absentee parents. Data were gathered from 742 participants. The study was anchored on Rational Maintenance and Attachment theories popularized by Daniel Canary and John Bowlby (2000) which was used as a framework to guide the design of the study. Results of the study showed that students are not greatly affected by their parent's absence, but they have developed coping strategies in handling their situations such as focusing their energy on their academic life and became more resilient in facing their lives and family situations. The phenomenon of parents' absenteeism was discussed and analyzed and results in yield that students' existential realities were characterized by an initial feeling of sadness when parents left them but as years ago by they tend to understand the situations that lead them towards acceptance of their family realities. The guidance counselors may strengthen their counseling service to the students and reach out to them regularly through a strength-based approach and be able to sustain the support group and maintain group growth sessions to enhance their life skills in facing these challenges.

**Keywords:** Existential Realities, Students, Absentee Parents, Coping Strategies, Common Issues

## **Introduction**

One important necessity for youth is the development of a positive self-view that rises and falls in response to the behavior of others. The development of competence in facing difficult situations is contingent upon the availability of social support system; the most important of which comes from parents. Parental warmth, nurturance, and active involvement with their children are positively related to the latter's psychological adjustment and self-concept. Most often, the children are observant of their parents and the satisfaction and harmony in the marital relationship are related to their psychological well-being. The moment marital discord happens, the psycho-social adjustment of youth and children is affected. Children who perceived greater conflict in their families have lower self-concepts. This anger and feeling of abandonment can lead to mood swings or physical aggression, leading to difficulty in school or when interacting with peers. The child may conclude that he or she is unlovable, or not worthy of love.

In a rapidly changing society, when adults are struggling to adapt to a new social order, few adults are genuinely committed to helping teenagers attain healthy adulthood. Parents who are themselves awash in the tide of social change and are looking for self-fulfillment may have a different reaction to the teenager. A parent going through a midlife crisis may be too self-absorbed with his or her voyage of personal discovery to appreciate fully and support the needs of a teenage son or daughter.

Humans are motivated to maintain a dynamic balance between familiarity-preserving and stress-reducing behaviors. People are motivated to maintain fair relationships but they need to develop a secure dependence on parents before launching out into unfamiliar situations. Students with absentee parents may find little reason to maintain involvement where they are treated unfairly and this is shown in how they communicate themselves with the world. This would also make an impact on their overall mental health and implies their educational achievement. When only one parent is away, the remaining parent may assume the roles of both in terms of educating their children resulting in a little reduction in family inputs on children's education. Children experience intense distress when separated from their mothers. Many studies have examined family communication processes to identify patterns that either promote or hinder optimal growth and development.

Family communication styles consistently demonstrated small to moderate effects on family members' communication behaviors, emotional well-being, and mental health symptoms. The experiences of students with absentee parents had greatly affected the communication patterns among and between the family members. If there is a gap in the communication process within them, it may lead to some negative relationships and negative emotions which may manifest towards each other because they were not able to fully open themselves to talk about their situations. On the other hand, while the children are in school it may be given importance if parents could support the studies of their children not only focusing on giving them the material things and needs more so, on giving premium the psychological support and care for the child as

they embark to this intellectual journey. Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, (1993 cited in Peterson, 2009)

Lastly, the mental health of children is of prime importance, those children whose parents are not around with them tend to be more vulnerable to psychological risks for guidance and direction is not given to them by an authority figure. Further, these students with absentee parents may experience educational achievement despite parental absence which paves way for them to focus their energy towards achieving something to be more appreciative of their parent's effort in going abroad. Likewise, some of them may also have mental health issues as a result of parental absence and lastly, communication patterns among and between the students and their parents which may also be a major factor in how they relate to each other as far as their relationship is a concern.

This study was anchored on Relational Maintenance Theory wherein it states that social relations are regarded as biologically rooted and genetically encoded fundamental motivational processes. Thus, sexuality and aggression are understood not as preformed instincts with inherent meanings which impinge upon the mind but as powerful responses.

Early relationships like later relationships are multiple and complex. They are not simply registered but experienced through physiological response patterns, temperaments, sensitivities, and talents which comprise the individual life relational nature of human experience.

Five relational maintenance strategies include Assurances (expressing commitment, faithfulness, love); Network (involvement with social networks); Openness (disclosure and other communication); Positivity (being upbeat and cheerful); and Tasks (sharing household chores).

Maintenance communication protects the relationship to keep it in existence. People engage in maintenance behaviors to keep their relationships stable (Canary, 2015).

This study considered the concept of permutation. It is defined as a major or fundamental change based primarily on the rearrangement of existing elements" (Elkind, 2009). Separation of parents is one major life change for just about any teenager to be concerned with. When the family is permuted and which would usually be a consequence of divorce, the traditional order of things change.

The theory of John Bowlby was also used as the theoretical framework of this study. Bowlby defined attachment as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (McLeod, 2009). Attachment does not have to be reciprocal. One person may have an attachment to an individual which is not shared. Attachment is characterized by specific behaviors in children, such as seeking proximity with the attachment figure when upset or threatened.

According to McLeod (2009), attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space. The theory explains how the parent-child relationship emerges and influences subsequent development.

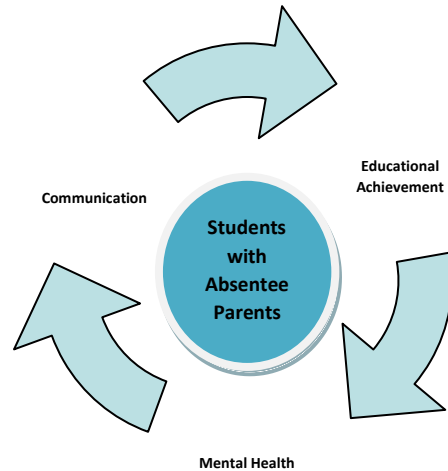


Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of the Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 showed that the students with absentee parents may experience educational achievement despite parental absence which paves way for them to focus their energy towards achieving something to be more appreciative of their parent's effort in going abroad. Likewise, some of them may also have mental health issues as a result of parental absence and lastly, communication patterns among and between the students and their parents which may also be a major factor in how they relate to each other as far as their relationship is a concern.

## **Research Methodology**

This section presents the research design used; the participants of the study, the instruments, and the data gathering procedure and data analysis.

### ***Research Design***

This is a descriptive design that primarily employs an explanatory sequential mixed method approach in data generation and analysis. The quantitative data was generated through a social survey while qualitative data made use of focus group discussion to relevant gather data.

### ***Participants of the Study***

Participants of the study were the college students from the catholic university who are currently enrolled for the academic year 2016-2017 coming from the different colleges of the university and whose ages range from 16-21 years. A pre-survey was conducted to check if the students fit in the inclusion criteria set forth; Participants have absentee parents which may categorize into three (3): 1. parents working abroad, 2. deceased parents or 3. separated parents and was selected via convenience sampling and FGD participants were chosen representing each college of the university.

### ***Research Instrument***

This study made use of a three-part questionnaire which gathered the following: (Part I) the demographic profile, (Part II) Survey Questionnaire, and (Part III) Focus Group Discussion Guide. The Part I Demographics consisted of name (optional), age, course, parent's occupation, and family income are information to be included in the profile. Part II consisted of the survey questionnaire to identify the communication, educational achievements, and mental health of the students with absentee parents. Part III consisted of the guide questions for focus group discussion. Four experts scrutinized and analyzed the questions and gave their comments and suggestions, using the Good and Scates' Evaluation Form which obtain a mean of 3.70 and is considered to have high validity index. The survey questionnaire underwent obtain a Pearson R 0.93 which is considered a very high-reliability score.

### ***Data Gathering Procedure***

The following procedures were observed during data gathering. Preliminary data gathering started with a pre-survey to identify students with absentee parents. After which, students who had been identified as having absentee parents were given the survey questionnaire. A free prior informed consent form was given to the participants explaining to them the research processes that may take place in the study. Considering the sensitivity of the topic; rapport building with the entire target participants will be established in all cases. The researchers ensured that the purpose of the study was explained thoroughly despite being a personal and sensitive topic.

From the survey participants, the investigators choose 8 students to be part of the focus group discussion, these participants were assured as to the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses such that their narrative stories carry the fictitious name and will be recorded and transcribed. These notes and transcriptions were organized and structured for integration in the overall discussion of the study and its findings.

### **Results and Discussion**

Through the pre-survey, 724 participants were identified as having absentee parents. Data revealed that 300 out of 724 respondents often want to be around and talk to their absent parents while 206 likewise mentioned that they want to be around and talk to their parents all the time. Only 49 of the respondents indicated that they never want to be around and talk to their absent parent.

A part of any child will always be dependent on a parent. Especially those children who are still in school, they would want support and affection from parents. They may display an independent attitude but this research shows that deep inside them they are still very much dependent on their parent and this sense of dependency is part of their reality and overall outlook in life. It showed the prevailing issues and needs of the participants concerning communication. It was indicated that the social sphere of 263 or 36.3% of respondents was rarely limited in the absence of their parents. Only 45 respondents or 6.2% indicated that their social sphere is limited all the time due to the absence of their parents.

The school is one venue where these adolescents could express themselves well especially in terms of sharing and disclosing interpersonally. The majority of the students nowadays accept the reality that single-parent households are very much in existence. But this is not a deterrent in terms of their social life and social undertakings with other people.

Participants consider the use of technology as an important tool to communicate easily with their parents and they rarely have disagreements over the use of it. This could still be validated on the part of the parents because this perspective comes from the view of the students. Although a majority of the parents do employ technology as part of how they evolved with life and with their children, this area needs to be considered as to how they see this way of interacting with their children.

The importance of open communication in single-parent families can never be underestimated. Open communication among families will pave way for more harmonious relationships within them. Healthy communication will ensure that family conflict and issues are effectively managed accordingly. It was further shown that 54.8% of the participants were one in saying that they never engage themselves in relationships that might influence them negatively. Participants are more aware of the implications of their decisions brought about by rational thinking because they are motivated to be self-reliant and empowered because of their situation. While the remaining 2.8% continuously engaged in unfavorable relationships because of their unwise choices and seems to be staying in that situation despite knowing unhealthy relationships.

In relaying messages to their parents, most of them rarely (39.8%) never (31.2%) sought help through significant others while very few of them (8%) obtained help with an aid of significant others. Children who exceptionally share intimate and personal relationships with parents before the separation are likely to continue such remarkable relationships after the separation. Communication is important not solely during separation but more so over time as families may undergo further change and transition.

When it comes to sharing deep feelings, many of the participants indicated that they rarely (31.8%) prefer to share it with others in comparison to those who preferred to share it with others frequently (31.8%). Only very few (12.4%) of the participants indicated at no time they preferred to share their deep feelings with other people.

Effective and open communication is frequently demonstrated through active listening whereby ideas, deep feelings, and problems of children are willingly listened to and accepted by parents. It encourages children to think and talk freely rather than run away from them. Otherwise, children would get in touch with someone with whom they can share their problems, heartaches, fears, and failures with no recriminations.

This may imply that robust and resilient parents contribute to their own children's well-being. As they remained hardboiled amidst adversity, they are better confident and flexible to manage stress and assist their families to do the same. On the contrary, parents who succumb to

vulnerability are likely to engender emotional problems among children which can be manifested in marked low self-esteem, lack of patience, and self-control that oftentimes may create distress.

Moreover, parental separation was a very private matter for participants and most were reluctant to talk to other children and others. They were sometimes unsure about whom they could trust to understand and accept them and were most willing to talk to people they believed would understand them, such as other children whose parents had separated or divorced.

The result of the survey revealed that a significant majority of the participants (40.9%) rarely have trust issues while more than one-fourth of them frequently have. Correspondingly, only a few (14.1% and 16.7%) continually and occasionally have trust issues with their peers as reflected in.

A good number of participants (36.7%) rarely nor never (32.2) felt being left out and abandoned by people. However, some of them (21.4%) frequently felt being left out and abandoned by people and very few (9.3%) always felt being left out and abandoned by people. Children need to receive reassurances from their parents as it warrants concern about their well-being and commitment to being available for them. Indeed, children value good relationships, love, and support, and dislike conflict within the family. Close supportive links with parents, other family members especially the grandparents, and trustworthy friends are the significant persons identified in putting things together and making it easier for them to cope with parental separation.

With regards to coping, more than half (60.9%) of the participants revealed that not at any time they engaged in alcohol, smoking, drugs, and online games and find comfort. Likewise, less than one-fourth (20.3%) of them rarely engaged in vices to find comfort while only very few (6.8%) continuously engaged in alcohol, smoking, drugs, and online games and find comfort.

Most of the participants rarely and at no time experienced that their parents appeared to have misunderstood them. To some of them perhaps, the feeling of being misunderstood may be associated with their feeling of being left alone, inhibited expression of deep feelings which may further influence by the trust issues that might cause them trouble. Data revealed that participants rarely (35.4%) and never (32.7%) felt the lack of care of their parents when not around. This probably suggests that the absence of their parents is not a big issue for the majority of the participants. This is likely because, at this stage, adolescents have already gained much independence from their parents. Independence at this time is a strong need among adolescents. They are more comfortable when with their friends than with their parents.

The majority (68.8) of the adolescents do not engage in sexual activities without their parents' knowledge. This data represents that adolescents are likely not comfortable with sexual things especially when parents are informed. This may be attributed to the fact that Filipinos are known to be conservative given the strong Catholic faith and sex as a topic is considered taboo especially for parents and adult people. This further implies that adolescents are not open to



sharing experiences related to sex. Thus, parental communication seems to be weak when this is the matter.

The parental arrangement is a necessity when parents decide to get separated or annulled. A positive parental arrangement may require a good relationship among the family members. According to Nielsen (2017), the parents with joint custody have more cooperative relationships with their children than those parents with joint physical custody presents that parents with joint custody have more cooperative relationships than parents with joint physical custody and parents with sole physical custody. In addition, results likewise explain that custody may have already been settled earlier thus conflict and effects on the children is minimal.

Moreover, parent's separation is always a big issue among children that destabilizes the family dynamics of the family. Most children report their painful feelings and a significant minority suffer extended and prolonged symptomatology related to parental divorce that may include both internalizing and externalizing problems (Lee, 2014).

Data reflected that there were 31.8 % of the participants not affected when their parents begin to criticize each other. Likewise, there were 30.2% of the participants may be rarely affected. Given these percentages, participants can likely tolerate or probably used already with the exchange of criticism of their parents thus for them it is not anymore a big deal. In addition, given the fact that participants are already in their adolescent and young adult stage, they have probably learned to deal with it or have likely found an escape for them not to witness this situation. Or it might; that participants seldom or occasionally witness this instance the fact that they are always in school, or their parents are already separated, or maybe busy in their work or working abroad.

When confronted with challenges, most participants may likely possess a positive attitude that enables them to deal with them. Family ties and a strong support system probably also play a very important role in the process even with the absence of their parents. With the assistance of technology, getting in touch with parents and loved ones for any concerns is very convenient. So despite the physical absence, technology somehow bridges the distance and makes things lighter for children left behind by their parents.

Results further indicate that despite having no parents physically most of the time, they can manage to do their responsibilities and have a better understanding of the very reason why their parents are not with them. This is an indication also that participants have reached a certain level of maturity, acceptance, and resilience. Data revealed that 66.9% of the participants have not less involved in any disciplinary sanction throughout their stay in the university. This explains that even with the absence of their parents, they have not dealt with any violations that complicate their status in school. This result likewise was supported by the other items in the questionnaire that participants indeed are true to their commitment to their studies and at the same time have a positive attitude towards their future. Despite the absence of their parents, participants regard this as more of an inspiration to perform and accomplish their goals instead of getting into trouble.



As noted in one of the tables in this study, participants are coping well and resilient against the different challenges they encounter.

However, participants of this study expressed that they rarely experience problems (37.4%). While 23.5% of the participants felt able to manage time well in their day-to-day activities. Results show that participants in one way or another have good time management skills that they know how to prioritize their responsibilities despite the absence of their parents. They probably get in trouble with time only when there is so much to accomplish in just a limited time. Yet despite these possible demands, they are likely able to comply even with so much stress. Their social media time can likewise probably be their way of coping also and a chance for a short relaxation.

It should also be noted (24.7%) that there were participants who seem often and all the time (14.2%) experienced trouble in time management. These concerns may be attributed probably to their personality temperament at the same time their inability to manage their schedule very well. They tend to get overwhelmed when given so many responsibilities and so instead of working it out positively, some tend to procrastinate and may escape from work. According to Starter (2014), procrastination is the major enemy of time management.

Resilience can be attributed to the students' personal experiences that have molded them into more mature and stronger individuals. Perhaps their separation from their parents made them stronger and more resilient. The support of significant others such as the surrogate parents, siblings, teachers, and friends likewise contributes to the development of a stronger personality that can survive the challenges of life. The school that has become the second home for students played a big role in the enhancement of resilience among the students. Those who have strong coping skills and are innately resilient are likely to be motivated in school despite their parent's absence.

These adolescents performed their best in school and even sacrifice a lot just to ensure that they achieve something because they tend to think of the sacrifices of their parents who are away from them. Also, by making good in their academics they make their parents proud of them, and eventually after they graduate, their parents will go home and they will be the ones to support them.

Data showed that more than one-third (39%) of the participants rarely have difficulty dealing with complicated subjects and are missing the physical help of their parents, about one-third (29.3%) have difficulty dealing with complicated subjects and are missing the physical help of their parents, almost one-fourth (23.3%) often have difficulty dealing with complicated subjects and are missing the physical help of their parents and a few (6.9%) have difficulty dealing with complicated subjects and are missing the physical help of their parents all the time.

With the rise of technology, cellphones, the internet, and social media have become an important part of a child's life that they find it difficult to live without. Many children nowadays have

become addicted to social media perhaps because they have found refuge in it. The psychological impact of social media on individuals and their sense of “self” becomes alluring to the teenager who needs some kind of recognition or affirmation. Teenagers feel that they have never been more linked, more connected, and more bound to virtual reality.

Lucky are they if they are influenced for good but when their peer influences them in a bad way, it may pollute the minds of the children, and sooner, perceptions may become twisted and values may deteriorate. Aside from this, preoccupation with social media may lead to depression, anxiety, or even suicide. These effects put the children at risk.

Data showed that 64.4% of the participants never encountered an abrupt decline in their grades when their parents left them, some (22.5%) rarely encountered an abrupt decline in their grades when their parents left them, a few (7.9%) often encountered an abrupt decline in their grades when their parents left them and very few (4%) have encountered all the time an abrupt decline in their grades when their parents left them. This shows that more than half were not affected by their parent's absence. They were mature enough to understand why their parents needed to leave them. They took their experience as a challenge instead of a loss. They did not dwell on their frustration and instead looked at it from another perspective. They devoted their energy towards improving themselves. To those who were deeply affected by the parent's absence, separation from their parents could have been a tough experience for them, and that they needed time to recover from the separation. Separation distress as one of the distinguishing characteristics of attachment occurs in the absence of attachment figures (Cherry, 2017).

Furthermore, data showed that 49.4% of the participants never joined school-related activities that their parents are not supportive of them, 25.1% rarely joined school-related activities that my parents are not supportive of, 17.5% often joined school-related activities that their parents are not supportive of and 7.2% joined school-related activities that my parents are not supportive of. This means that most parents are supportive of their children's endeavors. They try to cover up with the distance and the lost time with children, so they support whatever the children are interested in. Moreover, students need support from parents, teachers, and administrators to not fall behind and leave school due to risky behaviors, poor attendance, and low grades (Santacruz, 2016).

On the contrary, some parents would not support their children in their activities. This is one of the reasons why children lose their motivation because they feel that there is no support from their families. When this happens, their academic performance could be greatly affected. Data showed that more than half (63.7%) of the participants were never forced to take a degree that they do not like, a few (18.6%) were rarely forced to take the degree that they do not like, very few (10.8%) were often forced to take the degree that they do not like and 6.6% were always forced to take a degree that they do not like.

Parents have sacrificed being away from their children just so they can go to a good school to have a quality education and to live a decent life. Sometimes, however, in exchange for the

financial stability of the family, children lose their direction in life. They would find love and attention elsewhere which is why many of our teenagers are either hooked on drugs, addicted to alcohol or nicotine while still others become pregnant at a very early age. The prize of leaving the children for a greener pasture is so great that the purpose of going abroad is defeated.

A few (13.5%) and (8.6%) expressed that the financial support is always delayed. This indicates a need for students to find other options in case the money does not arrive on time and is always delayed and may make the students anxious all the time. They need to be prepared to avoid getting frustrated. To address this issue, parents should be made aware of their important role in the development of the children. Lack of support from parents or family members may affect academic performance in school.

This may imply that parents have an important role to play in the development of their children's personality and behavior, without their presence these children may experience a lot of struggles and confusion which may lead sometimes to some mental health concerns. They decide to leave the country to find better opportunities where they can support more the needs of the family sometimes at the expense of the absence of guidance and authoritative figure to their children when they were growing up having discipline issues whenever manifested at the school or school. An intervention program that is a socially responsive and relevant program will be developed to address the developmental needs and concerns of these children in collaboration with the stakeholders which may include the school, church, government, and media respectively.

## **Conclusions**

This section presents the conclusions and recommendations based on the problems presented in the objective of the study in the light of the results including suggested solutions to the problems addressed to its intended purpose. Based on the findings of the study, the only conclusions are drawn:

- The majority of the participants may initially react to the situation of their parent's separation and loss. However, these adolescents gradually embracing these realities brought about by their sense of assurance that despite the distance of their parents they can still feel the emotional connectedness within the family. They may experience communication issues due to their parents' absence but technology, enables them to be connected despite the distance which paved way for a closer relationship as a family. With the advent of technology, parents can easily communicate with their children, provided they have access to it. These new platforms of communication bridge the gap of physical and emotional distance and enables the parents to continually monitors the activities of their children vis a vis school engagements. Furthermore, there is no substitute for face-to-face communication, and adolescents with absentee parents have developed resiliency by accepting the reality of the situation.

- Moreover, in terms of educational achievements; they value their educational experiences and give priority to their studies. They could have excelled more if they feel the physical support of their parents. Lastly, in terms of their mental health, they experienced a roller coaster of emotions such as sadness, struggles, and longing for their loved ones. Nevertheless, they were accepting of these realities and choose to be more resilient over their adversities. As for their coping mechanisms, they employed healthy and productive ways of dealing with their life challenges. They ensure that they strike a balance with the different aspects of their life through the support of their family, friends, and even significant others whom they feel they are being loved and accepted as they are.

Based on the foregoing conclusions, the following recommendations are offered to the sectors concerned: USLS Administrators may consider the following:

- This is to provide administrative support to the GEC programs and services for students with absentee parents. Moreover, to take into account the existence of this vulnerable group of students and policies relating to their especially student support services.
- The guidance counselors may focus on strengthening their counseling service; the counselors as full-time faculty may be considered as “professional faculty status” under their licensed which they still enjoy the same benefits as that of a full-time teaching faculty, for them to focus on serving the students through their counseling services. Moreover, The GEC as a unit should encourage the students with absentee parents to be more receptive and participative in the different activities organized by the GEC and the guidance counselors like individual and group counseling sessions and workshops related to their issues and concerns. The guidance counselors may strengthen their counseling services to the students and reach out to them and be able to sustain the support group to these students and organized growth group sessions.
- Furthermore, the parents may consider the following. Parents/guardians may attend parenting sessions organized by the school to help them hone their skills on how to properly raise their children experiencing separation anxiety. Also, parents may consistently communicate with their children to ensure that their sense of connectedness among and between the family members.
- Students may consider taking initiative in their development by engaging in worthwhile activities that such as those initiated by the guidance office to help them improve themselves by joining GEC special programs such as Peer Facilitators and Children with Parents Abroad. Be inspired and motivated to help other students with absentee parents to survive life even if their parents are away from them by seeking regular counseling sessions with their counselors.
- While academic researchers may consider conducting related researches about students' positive coping strategies in facing the marital separation of their parents and to provide relevant studies on parents' absenteeism concerning students' self-esteem and confidence as a basis for enhancing counseling programs.

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