
**MARITAL BIOGRAPHIES AND SUBJECTIVE WELL
BEING: THE EFFECT OF DE FACTO STATUS
DIFFERS FOR THE NEVER MARRIED AND THE
DIVORCED***

By

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Abstract

Prior research in Australia and abroad shows that people in de facto relationships are not as satisfied with their lives as are people in formal marriages, both in the cross section and in panel analyses of not previously married people. We extend this research by investigating the degree to which this effect depends on prior marital biography, specifically on whether the respondent is previously married or not. To investigate this issue we use data from HILDA, a large, representative national sample of Australia (pooled N = 11,857 for this analysis). Our regression analysis of cross-sectional and panel data examines how large are the differences in life satisfaction according to marital status and cohabitation. We find that the "extra benefit" of marriage holds only among women and men who were not previously married. By contrast, among divorced people, those moving into de facto relationships experience just as much of a gain in subjective well being as do those getting married.

Introduction

Prior research shows that family arrangements affect subjective well-being, net of a wide range of control variables. In particular, cross-sectional studies have shown that married people have significantly higher levels of subjective well-being than do people in de facto relationships, never married people, or divorced people and panel studies have shown that among never married people, marriage increases subjective well-being significantly more than becoming de facto (Evans and Kelley 2004). This quite naturally suggests the interpretation that the commitment and institutional support associated with marriage make people happier, but such a conclusion could be premature, because the effects of marriage and cohabitation on happiness could depend on the marital biography. More specifically, marriage could be especially meaningful and important to the subjective well-being of single people, but divorced people could be made equally happy by marriage or cohabitation, for reasons set forth below. The purpose of this paper is to find out.

Plan of the paper. The first section briefly reviews some key theories linking family structure and well-being, and sets out their predictions. The second section describes the data. The third section describes the measurement. The fourth section sets out the models used in the paper. The fifth section gives preliminary descriptive results on differences in subjective well-being by marital status and marital history. The sixth section examines differences in life satisfaction, net of other potentially confounding influences. The seventh section assesses whether the effects of marital status and cohabitation differ by gender among previously married people. The eighth section links the findings to prior research. The ninth section discusses the implications of the results. Two appendices provide further technical information.

Theories

Institutionalist theory

One traditional institutionalist perspective sees commitment as the central feature of marriage. According to this line of reasoning, it is the public commitment, social and legal reinforcement of that commitment, and consequent expectation of long term stability that makes formal marriage distinctively rewarding (Diener, Gohm, Suh, and Oishi 2000; Mastekaasa 1993; Waite and Gallagher 2000). In sum, supporters of this hypothesis would argue that:

H1. Commitment at the nest building stage: Marriage makes people happier, because the security and community recognition of a formal marriage makes for committed, loving personal relationships. This implies that, for a never married person, (1) getting married will raise subjective well-being above its initial state and (2) entering

a de facto relationship will raise subjective well-being, but not as much as does getting married.

This is the most obvious hypothesis because abundant prior research supports its predictions. Prior research shows that married people are more satisfied with their lives than are others in the United States (Andrews and Withey 1976; Davis 1984; Haring-Hidore, Stock, Okun, and Witter 1985; Waite and Gallagher 2000), with strong supportive findings in Australia (Evans and Kelley 2004) and supporting findings internationally (Stack and Eshleman 1998). This finding derives additional strength from its replication in longitudinal studies controlling for prior subjective well-being both for the young adult population in Australia and abroad (Marks and Fleming 1999; Mastekaasa 1995), and among the general population in Australia (Evans and Kelley 2004). Indeed, on a wide variety of indicators, prior research suggests that unwed cohabiting couples feel and behave more like dating couples than like married couples (Bachrach 1986; Brown and Booth 1996; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990).

[Table I about here]

H2. Commitment and second-nest building: *For a divorced person, (1) getting married will raise subjective well-being above its initial state and (2) entering a de facto relationship will raise subjective well-being but not as much as does getting married.*

On the other hand, there are both empirical and theoretical reasons to doubt that what applies to the never-married applies equally to the divorced. From an empirical standpoint, most people in de facto relationships are never-married, so they dominate the analyses, potentially swamping a different pattern of effects among divorced people. From a theoretical point of view, never-married and divorced people are at different stages in the life cycle and the family formation process – one could argue that there is still an implicit social norm that part of a successful, fulfilling life is getting married. Never married people have not yet achieved that goal which may make it more desirable; divorced people have been there, have found that it did not provide them with security, and may evaluate future marriage or cohabitation more diversely, with fewer feeling their happiness diminished by the weaker institutionalisation of cohabitation. Moreover, the cohabitation option may allow divorced couples to relate to each other without taking on the parenting and kinship connections that enmesh many people by this life course stage. From a slightly different angle, the disappointment of a failed marriage may reduce expectations, leaving people so eager to be in any pair-bonded relationship that their expectations are not so high as for never married people, and so they are highly satisfied with less commitment than never married people expect from their partners. The hypothesis that pairbonding is all that matters in the general population has only received support in small samples, probably because of the imprecision of estimates small sample sizes produce (Davis 1984; Headey 1993; Macklin 1978;

Marks and Fleming 1999), but the hypothesis that post-divorce defacto relationships raise subjective well-being as much as does a second marriage has not been systematically tested before, so far as we are aware.

This contingent needs/ differing expectations perspective poses no challenge to H1, concurring that getting married will make never-married people happier than will cohabiting. But the prediction for divorced people is quite different from H2.

H3. Post-divorce pairbonding: *For a divorced person, (1) getting married will raise subjective well-being above its initial state and (2) entering a de facto relationship will raise subjective well-being as much as getting married.*

Hypothesis 4a: Male dominance of marriage. Very influential in studies of marriage and the family has been the male-dominance-of-marriage hypothesis that marriage is a patriarchal arrangement that furthers men's interests at the expense of women's interests (Bernard 1982). Although the levels of life satisfaction for married men and women do not differ, even after adjustments for potentially confounding variables in the general population (e.g. Evans and Kelley 2004), this idea has been so influential that it is still worth testing. It implies that divorced men should be happier if they marry and divorced women should be happier if they cohabit. By contrast, interpretations that declines in marriage and the rise of cohabitation represent male flight from commitment imply that marriage elevates women's subjective well-being more than men's, the *female-dominance-of-marriage* hypothesis (*Hypothesis 4b*).

Data

This article uses the baseline year of a new representative, national panel survey, HILDA, the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (N=11,857 adults over age 18 with non-missing data on the dependent variables, including 418 divorced de factos and 822 never married de factos). We use the cross-sectional data, because the panel is still short and divorced people are, of course, a small minority of a representative sample, so there were too few transitions to analyse with adequate precision. Because HILDA is a large recent survey it provides more timely data and more precise estimates of the effects of being in a second marriage and of cohabitation, both of which have become much more common in recent years than would existing longitudinal databases such as the Australian Family Survey of 1987 or the Negotiating the Lifecourse survey of the 1990s.

HILDA is a face-to-face survey of Australian households based on a high-quality cluster sample (this is necessary for personal interview surveys in Australia as distances are very great and the population is small compared to the land area). It is directed by Professor Mark Wooden of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research on behalf of the (Australian Commonwealth)

Department of Family and Community Services, with fieldwork by the firm A. C. Nielsen. Conducted in 2002-2003, HILDA Wave-1 (the data used here) had a response rate of 71%.¹ The characteristics of HILDA's sample closely match those of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Monthly Population Survey (Wooden 2002). 11,857 cases from HILDA have the appropriate data for this analysis. We use robust standard errors to adjust for the lack of independence in the observations (Stata 1997; White 1980). NORC's estimate of effective sample size for high quality cluster samples is that they are generally worth about 2/3 of a random sample (Davis and Smith 1998). Parameter estimates of effects on subjective well-being in the general population from HILDA have been shown not to be significantly different from those obtained from a simple random sample (Evans and Kelley 2004), so it is a reasonable working hypothesis that the results of this analysis generalise to the divorced population as a whole.

Measurement of subjective well being

Prior research shows that reports of subjective well-being approximate "real" subjective well-being insofar as it is knowable (Headey and Wearing 1992: 49-52). Andrews and Withey's life-as-a-whole index is our core measure is (Andrews and Withey 1976; Cantril 1965). For foundational research in Australia see (Headey 1988; Headey and Wearing 1992).² There have been similar developments in economics, both by economic psychology (Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz 2003) and by the Leiden school (Frijters 1999). The HILDA survey used a now common European variant of the question in an 11-category "points out of 10" format, with only the top and bottom categories labelled. This is probably less reliable than versions of the answer set using 5 to 9 categories (Schwarz and Hippler 1991), although it may have advantages in enhancing international comparisons if language differences lead people in different countries to perceive different distances between labelled intermediate categories. On subjective questions apparently equal interval answer categories are not necessarily treated by respondents as equal interval, but a prior analysis comparing predicted values from equal-interval and ordinal-probit scored versions of the subjective well-being/ life satisfaction dependent variable used here found that they correlated at over 0.98 (Evans and Kelley 2004), so they are of equal quality, and hence the simpler equal interval version should be preferred. We use it here.

There is a strong concentration of cases towards the top end of the subjective well-being distribution – the more satisfied answers -- with 92% of the cases in the top 5 categories and only 8% scattered over the remaining six categories: a roughly normal distribution towards the top with several nearly empty

¹ This is the completion rate per household, including households in which some, but not all eligible persons responded. The information on completions is from page 11 of (Wooden 2002)

² Foundational research in Australia suggested that the concentration of cases at the high end of life satisfaction could be made more analytically tractable by using unbalanced scales (Headey 1988).

categories towards the bottom. This is a standard finding for life satisfaction, whether numeric or verbal (Headey and Wearing 1992: 37-48).

There is only a single indicator of subjective well-being in the dataset, so there will be more random measurement error in the results we present here than there would be if a multiple-item index were available. That said, the effects of control variables in the model very closely approximate those found using a multiple-item index of subjective well-being in other datasets, and the correlations of criterion variables with the lone subjective well-being measure are not very much lower than they are with a multiple item index in another dataset. Moreover, analyses in another data set using an 11-answer-category numeric happiness measure found it to be very reliable (Headey and Wearing 1992), enhancing confidence in this 11-answer-category single item too. This suggests the working hypothesis that attenuation due to random measurement error does not grossly distort the results on the focal variables.

Measurement of focal variables

The impact of marital/cohabitation history on subjective well-being has formed the focus of abundant prior research, as summarised in the “Theory” and in the “Discussion” sections. The marital status/ cohabitation variables are operationalised as a set of dummy (indicator) variables representing current arrangements plus some history:

Solo single: The reference (omitted) category is single (here defined as never married) and not cohabiting. The effects of the other family arrangements are then estimated relative to it.

Cohabiting single

First marriage

Widowed

Solo divorced or separated

Cohabiting divorced or separated

Second (or subsequent) marriage

In prior research, marital status and cohabitation and their intersection are defined in a variety of ways, For our purposes, the advantage of the way that we have defined it is that the key results are obvious from the coefficients. One could also come to the same place by using marital status as a set of dummies and cohabitation status and their interactions in the model. Although cohabitation and divorce are minority statuses, there are enough for reasonably precise estimation (418 who are cohabiting divorcees and 822 cohabiting singles), so we are likely to find any reasonably large differences between cohabitation and marriage for those not previously married and for those previously divorced.

It should be noted that the reporting of marital status and cohabitation status is not hugely reliable, so there is a risk that the findings are affected by attenuation due to random measurement error.

Measurement of control variables

Following prior research, we include several known influences on life satisfaction as control variables: gender, age, and parental divorce (Evans and Kelley 2004; Headey and Wearing 1992: 148-159). We also include whether migrant or native born, measured as a dummy variable, and father's occupational status, measured in the Worldwide Status Scores (Evans and Kelley 2002; Kelley 1990). The family background variables are entered into this analysis only as controls, to avoid potential omitted variable bias, so we do not discuss their effects, focusing rather on the effects of the variables depicting respondent's own marital and cohabitation situation. To be sure that none of the marital status effects is merely a proxy for an omitted background variable, we retain the background variables in the model (Pedhazur 1997), even though their effects are small.

Age needs to be controlled, especially in order to avoid a biased estimate of the effects of being single (they are mostly young) and of widowhood (mostly old). In conformity with prior discoveries for Australia on other datasets, (Evans and Kelley 2004; Headey and Wearing 1992: 148-159), the age patterns we found are U-shaped and compactly summarized by age and age squared.³ We also experimented with a set of 7 dummy variables specifying 10 year intervals but, even with our large sample, the dummy variables offered no significant improvement in fit over the quadratic specification ($F = 1.52$, $t = .17$) so we retained the more parsimonious quadratic specification.

Gender is a dummy variable with women scored as the reference category; it is omitted in the model estimated separately for men and women.

Models

The core model is thus:

$$LifeSatisfaction = f(Single_DeFacto, 1stMarriage, 2ndMarriage, Widowed, Divorced_Alone, Divorced_DeFacto, ForeignBorn, FathersOccupationalStatus, ParentsDivorced, Age, (Age-45)**2, Male)$$

Eq. 1

³ To reduce rounding error in estimation, the quadratic term is calculated as (age - 45) squared. This subtraction reduces the danger of rounding error but has no other effect, leading to predictions that, after some algebra, are mathematically identical to those that would be obtained by simple quadratics in the absence of rounding error (Mosteller and Tukey 1977: 285-286). The subtracted constant does not have to be the mean: any other number near the centre of the distribution would do as well.

We report OLS estimates with robust standard errors with clustering to adjust for the lack of independence among household members in HILDA (Stata 1997: 235-239; White 1980).⁴

Supplementary analyses

Equation 2 allows us to address the issue of **gender differences** in how rewarding marriage and cohabitation are for divorced and single people. It is estimated once for men and once for women, and the resulting coefficients are presented in Table VI, below.

$$\text{LifeSatisfaction} = f(\text{Single_DeFacto}, \text{1stMarriage}, \text{2ndMarriage}, \text{Widowed}, \text{Divorced_Alone}, \text{Divorced_DeFacto}, \text{ForeignBorn}, \text{FathersOccupationalStatus}, \text{ParentsDivorced}, \text{Age}, (\text{Age}-45)**2, \text{Male})$$

Eq. 2

Estimation is by OLS with robust standard errors corrected for clustering.

One could achieve a nearly identical result by interacting the gender variable with all the other variables.

Results

Women and men together

The mean levels of life satisfaction/ subjective well being of cohabiting singles are about 6 points out of 100 higher than for solo singles, and about 3 points lower than for people in first marriages, all else equal according to this model (see eq 1 in the "Models" section, above). The results are in Table 1. These differences are statistically significant at the .01 level.

[Table 1 about here]

By contrast, among the divorced, both those who marry and those who cohabit are about 15 points happier, on average, than those who have been divorced and are neither remarried nor cohabiting, all else equal, according to this model. In this case, the difference in happiness between married people and cohabitators is not statistically significant. From a slightly different angle, an F-test on the equality of the coefficients for being a cohabiting single and a cohabiting divorcee detects a statistically significant difference between them at the .01 level.

Women and men separately

Among women, divorced cohabitators average about 4 points out of 100 higher life satisfaction than do single cohabitators (Table 2), all else equal, according to this model (see Eq 2 in the "Models" section). The difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (the standard errors are larger, because we've halved the sample

⁴ Ordinal probit estimates lead to the same conclusions (details available on request).

size by doing separate estimation by gender). Moreover, the situation of the single and the divorced differs in that single cohabiting women are significantly less happy than are women in first marriages, but post-divorce cohabiting women are not significantly less happy than are women in second marriages, on average, all else equal, according to this model.

[Table 2 about here]

For men, too, the single cohabiters are significantly less happy than divorced cohabiters. All else equal, divorced men who are cohabiting average about 4 points out of 100 more subjective well-being than do single men who are cohabiting, according to this model. As with women, single cohabiting men are significantly less happy than are men in first marriages, but post-divorce cohabiting men are not significantly less happy than are men in second marriages, on average, all else equal, according to this model.

Discussion

Linkage to prior research

Commitment. Prior research in Australia and abroad tends to find that married people are significantly more satisfied with their lives than other people: solo singles; unrepartnered divorced people, cohabiters, and unrepartnered widows and widowers. These results hold on average, and both raw and net of many covariates (Andrews and Withey 1976; Diener, Gohm, Suh, and Oishi 2000; Evans and Kelley 2004; Haring-Hidore, Stock, Okun, and Witter 1985; Stack and Eshleman 1998; Veenhoven 1984; Waite and Gallagher 2000). But prior research had not systematically considered whether the effects of cohabitation differed between never-married and divorced people. We have argued that the commitment of formal marriage matters contingently – that people's needs and expectations change depending on their marital biography. We find that the results for the never married are consistent with the commitment hypothesis: marriage is more satisfying for them than cohabitation. This is consistent with:

***H1. Commitment at the nest building stage:** Marriage makes people happier, because the security and community recognition of a formal marriage makes for committed, loving personal relationships. This implies that, for a never married person, (1) getting married will raise subjective well-being above its initial state and (2) entering a de facto relationship will not raise subjective well-being as much as getting married.*

However, we also find several results that are not consistent with the global commitment hypothesis. (1) Cohabitation enhances the subjective well-being of divorced people significantly more than it does the well-being of never married people. This suggests that the public commitment associate with marriage is not

equally important to subjective well-being at different life cycle stages. (2) Cohabitation and marriage have equally large positive effects on the well-being of divorced people. This is true for both men and women.

These results are contrary to the global commitment hypothesis which implied that marriage would enhance subjective well-being more than would cohabitation for divorced people (as well as for others):

H2. Commitment and second-nest building: *For a divorced person, (1) getting married will raise subjective well-being above its initial state and (2) entering a de facto relationship will not raise subjective well-being as much as getting married.*

By contrast, these findings are consistent with the contingent commitment argument's prediction that pair-bonding is all that matters to subjective well-being post-divorce, H3, (although prior results have invalidated the general pair-bonding argument by showing that cohabitation on average and for single people leads to lower levels of subjective well-being, *ceteris paribus*).

H3. Post-divorce pair-bonding: *For a divorced person, (1) getting married will raise subjective well-being above its initial state and (2) entering a de facto relationship will raise subjective well-being as much as getting married.*

Prior research on whether the effects of cohabitation on life satisfaction differ from the effects of marriage has been ambiguous (Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1988; Evans and Kelley 2004; Headey 1993; Macklin 1978; Marks and Fleming 1999; Mastekaasa 1993), although the balance of the evidence, especially in larger samples, has been that marriage is, on average, associated with higher subjective well-being than is cohabitation, *ceteris paribus*. Our results suggest that this prior ambiguity may reflect, in part, the heterogeneity of the cohabitation experience between never-married people (where cohabitation generally involves lower quality relationships than marriage) and divorced people (where, according to our evidence, cohabitation involves relationships of an equally high equality with marriage).⁵

Hypothesis 4a: Male-dominance. This hypothesis predicting that married men should be substantially happier than de facto men, but that married women should be less happy than defacto women has never found support in the general population (Diener, Gohm, Suh, and Oishi 2000; Evans and Kelley 2004; Forest 1996; Mastekaasa 1993; Rogers 1999). Here we find that general result replicated for the divorced population: divorced married men are not happier than divorced cohabiting men. The evidence for divorced people is also contrary

⁵ Similarly, prior research showing that quarrelling and violence are more common in de facto relationships than in marriages (Headey, Scott, and de Vaus 1999), has not considered whether this is different for never-married cohabitators and divorced cohabitators.

to **Hypothesis 4b, the female- dominance hypothesis.** Divorced cohabiting women are not happier than are remarried women.

All in all, our results support **Hypotheses 1 and 3:** that marriage is especially important for never married people, whereas remarriage and cohabitation seem to be equally satisfying for divorced people.

Tables

Table 1. Effects of cohabitation and marriage on life satisfaction/ subjective well-being for divorced and never married people, net of other influences: OLS Regression coefficients with robust standard errors. Hilda, Wave 1.

Regression with robust standard errors						Number of obs = 11857	
						F(12, 11844) = 61.81	
						Prob > F = 0.0000	
						R-squared = 0.0684	
						Root MSE = 22.524	
life_sat	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]		
marr1q	9.184456	.7435665	12.35	0.000	7.726943	10.64197	
marr2q	9.101412	1.04121	8.74	0.000	7.060469	11.14236	
widowq	2.874756	1.279106	2.25	0.025	.3674985	5.382013	
divorceq	-4.731684	1.077668	-4.39	0.000	-6.84409	-2.619278	
sngldfq	6.134131	.9576159	6.41	0.000	4.257046	8.011215	
dvrcdfq	10.37176	1.380127	7.52	0.000	7.666489	13.07704	
ageq	.0999887	.018494	5.41	0.000	.0637374	.1362401	
agesq	.0076962	.0008525	9.03	0.000	.0060252	.0093672	
malem	-2.098407	.4231329	-4.96	0.000	-2.927817	-1.268996	
mig2ndq	1.207076	.8475338	1.42	0.154	-.4542295	2.868381	
fastat2m	-1.027683	.8019982	-1.28	0.200	-2.599731	.5443651	
pntdv14x	-1.888521	.7774785	-2.43	0.015	-3.412506	-.3645351	
_cons	60.09451	.931518	64.51	0.000	58.26859	61.92044	

The coefficients for the effects of being a never married cohabitor and a divorced cohabitor are significantly different.

Hypothesis:	$\text{sngldfq} + \text{dvrcdfq} = 0$
F(1, 11844) =	6.38
Prob > F =	0.0116

Table 2. Are there gender differences in the effects of cohabitation and marriage on life satisfaction/ subjective well-being for divorced and never married people, net of other influences? OLS Regression coefficients with robust standard errors. Hilda, Wave 1.

Panel A: WOMEN						
Regression with robust standard errors				Number of obs = 6310		
				F(11, 6057) = 38.05		
				Prob > F = 0.0000		
				R-squared = 0.0703		
				Root MSE = 22.503		
Number of clusters (id_iss) = 6058						
life_sat	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
marr1q	8.986453	1.058656	8.49	0.000	6.91111	11.0618
marr2q	7.122064	1.497897	4.75	0.000	4.185653	10.05847
widowq	3.179442	1.579995	2.01	0.044	.0820904	6.276794
divorceq	-6.373565	1.429379	-4.46	0.000	-9.175657	-3.571473
sngldfq	5.232299	1.39936	3.74	0.000	2.489055	7.975544
dvrcdfq	9.90273	1.91797	5.16	0.000	6.140369	13.66018
ageq	.1114637	.0251964	4.42	0.000	.0620698	.1608577
agesq	.0065565	.0011427	5.74	0.000	.0043165	.0087966
mig2ndq	.9393228	1.177272	0.80	0.425	-1.368549	3.247195
fastat2m	-2.437291	1.118228	-2.18	0.029	-4.629416	-.2451665
pntdv14x	-.0315693	1.006874	-0.03	0.975	-2.005401	1.942263
_cons	60.81505	1.318779	46.11	0.000	58.22978	63.40033

Panel B: MEN:						
Regression with robust standard errors				Number of obs = 5547		
				F(11, 5340) = 29.48		
				Prob > F = 0.0000		
				R-squared = 0.0673		
				Root MSE = 22.522		
Number of clusters (id_iss) = 5341						
life_sat	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
marr1q	9.33052	1.061508	8.79	0.000	7.249531	11.41151
marr2q	10.99983	1.447026	7.60	0.000	8.163072	13.8366
widowq	.9411144	2.586332	0.36	0.716	-4.129152	6.011381
divorceq	-2.638348	1.661314	-1.59	0.112	-5.895201	.6185056
sngldfq	6.920826	1.33535	5.18	0.000	4.302994	9.538657
dvrcdfq	10.68087	2.02283	5.28	0.000	6.715296	14.64644
ageq	.0844013	.0275779	3.06	0.002	.0303373	.1384653
agesq	.0090957	.0012883	7.06	0.000	.0065701	.0116212
mig2ndq	1.517811	1.249728	1.21	0.225	-.9321659	3.967788
fastat2m	.4861184	1.157814	0.42	0.675	-1.783669	2.755906
pntdv14x	-4.276132	1.20501	-3.55	0.000	-6.638444	-1.913821
_cons	57.41647	1.323484	43.38	0.000	54.8219	60.01104

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