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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bullying Behavior and Social Stigma toward an Illegitimate Child -A Field Study on Their Social Perceptions-

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This research paper aims to study a phenomenon that we operationally define as "illegitimate children," a complex and intertwined issue as it relates to various domains, including religion, law, and societal culture, among others. As a result, the illegitimate child is often subjected to all forms of marginalization, persecution, and social punishment, such as being labeled with derogatory terms (e.g., child of adultery, foundling, child of fornication). In some cases, they may even be killed under the label of "honor crimes." In the best-case scenario, they may be socially stigmatized or experience bullying behavior. Since social perceptions are the primary organizers of our reality, a way to translate our thoughts and realities, and the main guide for our behaviors and actions in their psychological, social, and cognitive dimensions, this study was conducted on a purposive sample of illegitimate children. It employed the descriptive-analytical method and utilized the sequential recall technique. The results confirmed the validity of the research hypotheses.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid and profound changes in the cultural structures, social norms, and values that society has witnessed across all its institutions have led to the globalization of thought, the decline of traditions, the transformation of beliefs and religious laws, the disregard for legal systems, and the departure from customs. This has resulted in a wave of moral decay and social deviance in various forms and manifestations. Consequently, several strange phenomena have emerged within the fabric of the conservative society. Among these foreign and unfamiliar phenomena is that of "illegitimate children," which has become a reality that intersects with social, cultural, psychological, political, and economic factors a reality that portends many tragedies and stark contradictions.

In this context, we find ourselves facing a society where contradictions become evident, with the illegitimate child becoming an undeniable reality and a pressing social issue that challenges societal values. This is particularly significant considering that pregnancy and childbirth outside the bounds of legal marriage are viewed through the lens of religious prohibition, legal criminalization, and social taboo. All of this makes the illegitimate child a victim of bullying behavior and social stigma.

Hence, the idea of studying this topic arose for the aforementioned reasons, and also to delve deeper into the minds of illegitimate children to better understand their social perceptions, which encompass their knowledge, experiences, and even their feelings regarding the subject of this theoretical and field study. Therefore, we posed the following questions:

- What are the various social perceptions held by illegitimate children?
- Do illegitimate children, based on their social perceptions, suffer from bullying behavior and social stigma?

To ensure that the research questions stem from observable phenomena in reality, they must be translated into hypotheses, which are as follows:

1. Study hypotheses

❖ **First operational hypothesis:**

Illegitimate children, based on their social perceptions, suffer from bullying behavior.

❖ **Second operational hypothesis:**

Illegitimate children, based on their social perceptions, suffer from social stigma.

2. Importance of the study:

The scarcity of research and studies on bullying and social stigma, particularly concerning illegitimate children (according to the researchers' knowledge), makes this study crucial. This research sheds light on a complex phenomenon (social, psychological, moral, religious, etc.) that requires serious scientific investigation.

3. Study objectives:

❖ To uncover what is unknown about the subject of illegitimate children, as a modest qualitative scientific attempt in the field of social and psychological research.

❖ To address the previously stated problem by following a scientific plan with a reliable methodology.

❖ To diagnose the actual reality of the phenomenon of illegitimate children by analyzing the content of their social perceptions.

4. Operational definitions of the study concepts:

❖ **Bullying behavior (operationally):**

Bullying behavior occurs when an illegitimate child is repeatedly subjected to negative actions or behaviors by others with the intent to harm. It typically involves an imbalance of power and can take physical forms such as hitting, verbal forms such as name-calling, emotional forms such as social exclusion, or abusive treatment. The level of bullying is measured by the score the illegitimate child obtains using the study's assessment tool.

❖ **Social stigma (operationally):**

Social stigma occurs when an illegitimate child is repeatedly subjected to harmful behaviors or actions by others that cause psychological and physical harm. It typically involves an imbalance of power, and the level of stigma is measured by the score the illegitimate child obtains using the study's assessment tool.

First - Theoretical framework:

1. Bullying behavior:

1.1 Definition (terminologically):

Bullying is defined as a form of aggressive behavior intentionally and repeatedly directed towards others. It occurs when an individual or group of individuals targets another individual or group,

causing verbal, physical, social, electronic, psychological, or sexual harm. The victim is usually less powerful than the aggressor. (Ahmed & Abdu, p. 457, 2017)

It is an attack by a bully on a weaker person, deriving pleasure from witnessing the victim's suffering, and it may cause the victim some form of pain. (Abdul Rahman, 2020, p. 348)

1.2 Causes of bullying: (Al-Sabhain & Al-Qudah, 2013, pp. 52–53)

❖ **Personal factors:**

There are various motives behind bullying behavior. It may be a reckless act or something an individual does out of boredom. Additionally, those who engage in bullying may not recognize the wrongdoing of their actions or may believe that the victim deserves it. For some children, bullying can indicate their anxiety or unhappiness at home, or perhaps they themselves have been victims of bullying in the past. Emotional characteristics of the victim, such as shyness or lack of social skills, as well as having few friends, can also make them more vulnerable to bullying.

❖ **Psychological causes and factors:**

These are primarily rooted in instincts, emotions, psychological complexes, frustration, pressure, and anxiety related to self-assertion. Instincts are natural psychological and physical predispositions that drive an individual to perceive certain things, experience specific emotions, and behave in particular ways towards them. When a child or adolescent feels frustrated at school, for instance, due to neglect or a lack of attention to their personality, and learning becomes merely a goal to be achieved without consideration of their abilities or interests, this creates feelings of anger, tension, and emotional distress. These emotions arise from obstacles preventing them from reaching their goals, often leading to violent or bullying behavior toward others or even themselves, as they believe this relieves their stress and frustrations.

❖ **Social causes and factors:**

These are influenced by the individual's surrounding environment, including family, the neighborhood, the local community, peer groups, and media, as well as the school environment. Within the family, parental treatment ranges from extreme violence, which may reach the level of terrorizing the child, to excessive indulgence, where boundaries are not enforced. Violence within the family can breed more violence. The absence of a father, the presence of a depressed mother, or the effects of divorce on children can also contribute to bullying behavior.

Social circumstances, such as low family income, parental illiteracy, psychological deprivation, and oppression, are significant factors that can drive bullying behavior. Moreover, the misuse of media for personal gain and the airing of commercially driven television programs, regardless of their impact or the methods used in their execution, can contribute to the spread of violence and bullying. Imitating the characters seen on screen, particularly those involved in adventure, action, and violence, may also lead individuals to adopt aggressive behaviors.

2. Social stigma:

2.1 Definition (terminologically):

The term *stigma* originates from the Greek language, and it was first introduced in sociology by Erving Goffman in his book *"Stigma"* (1963) (Al-Wreekat, 2004, p. 57). There are several definitions of the concept of social stigma, among which are the following:

It is the process where errors or sins indicating moral degeneration are attributed to individuals in society, labeling them with derogatory traits and characteristics that bring shame and spread rumors about them. These traits can be physical, mental, psychological, or social (Goffman, 1963, p. 63).

Stigma also refers to the process by which errors or sins, indicating moral decay, are attributed to certain individuals in society, labeling them with unpleasant traits or characteristics that bring shame and provoke rumors. These traits can be physical, mental, psychological, or social. When someone is stigmatized, they are marked with an undesirable trait, depriving them of social acceptance, as they are now seen as different from the rest of society (Abu Al-Enein, 1989, p. 391).

2.2 Types of social stigma:

There are several types of stigma that can cause an individual to be socially stigmatized. The most prominent of these types include: *(Darwasha, 2010, pp. 18-19)*

- ❖ **Physical stigma:** This type is associated with physical disabilities that make an individual unable to provide necessary care for themselves (such as difficulty performing physical functions), including cerebral palsy, limb amputation, motor impairments, or serious illnesses like AIDS or cancer. These conditions may be due to genetic or acquired causes and result in negative psychological impacts on the stigmatized person.

- ❖ **Mental stigma:** This stigma affects general performance and is considered complex, attracting the interest of many scholars (in medicine, psychology, sociology). It arises from a loss of mental functions that hinder normal learning and environmental adaptation, as well as reducing independence (e.g., mental retardation, schizophrenia, intellectual disabilities). Causes may be genetic or acquired, and it has very negative psychological effects.

- ❖ **Sensory stigma:** Sensory stigma refers to the partial or complete loss of function in one or more senses (hearing, sight, or rarely, touch). It affects an individual's ability to communicate and learn normally, though it can be managed with special needs accommodations. This stigma also impacts the individual's psychological state and social relationships.

- ❖ **Linguistic stigma:** This type involves difficulty in understanding or expressing language, or noticeable speech impairments that hinder communication, causing discomfort for both the speaker and the listener (e.g., aphasia, stuttering, mumbling, dyslexia). The causes may be physical disorders or psychological functional disturbances related to the speech system.

- ❖ **Racial stigma:** Racial stigma is linked to differences in race, nationality, or religion within a single society. It leads to efforts by racial, religious, or class groups (upper or lower) to create hostility and hatred among members of society, particularly towards those stigmatized due to their racial background, resulting in widespread social chaos.

- ❖ **Criminal stigma:** This stigma is associated with criminal behavior and exists in most human societies. It encompasses any behavioral patterns that violate social stability, laws, or regulations. The punishments imposed on offenders often lead to internalizing negative stigma and feelings of societal rejection and alienation. As a result, the stigmatized individual may continue their deviant behavior, perceiving themselves as unjustly treated (e.g., drug addicts, criminals, sexual offenders).

3. The illegitimate child:

3.1 Definition (terminologically):

An illegitimate child is defined as a child born to two unknown parents who had an illegitimate relationship outside the bounds of religious law. When this relationship results in a child, both parties evade responsibility, denying the child's rights. The father refuses to acknowledge his paternity, and the mother refuses to acknowledge her maternity. She may abort the child, abandon it at the hospital after birth, or leave it in an orphanage or with a childless family. (Saadawi, 1990, p. 490)

It has been agreed that the term "illegitimate child" is broader and more inclusive than other labels. The term can be divided into three categories:

- ❖ **Category (S):** Refers to a *child of fornication*, born as a result of a sexual relationship between blood relatives who are prohibited from marrying, such as incestuous relationships.

- ❖ **Category (L):** Refers to a *foundling*. Linguistically, the term "foundling" is derived from the Arabic root meaning "to throw," indicating that the child was abandoned or found. A foundling is typically a child left behind or discarded. (Khalaf, 2008, p. 13) A foundling is taken from the ground, which is how the term came to describe their fate, as they are usually picked up and cared for. In "Lisan al-Arab," Ibn Manzur defines a foundling as a child abandoned in the streets

whose parents are unknown. This definition aligns with religious understanding. In short, a foundling is a child whose lineage is unknown. (Khalaf, 2008, p. 14)

❖ **Category (Sh):** Refers to *illegitimate children*. The term "illegitimate" (*Illégitime*) refers to anything that contradicts legal rulings or societal values. The concept of illegitimacy is opposed to what is permissible and lawful. Something is considered illegitimate when it conflicts with societal norms, laws, and religion, constituting a transgression of agreed-upon standards. In some cultures, such illegitimate behavior may result in special forms of deterrence or punishment.

3.2 Sociologists' and psychologists' perspectives on the concept of the illegitimate child:

❖ **Sociologists' perspective:**

An illegitimate child is defined as one born from a pregnancy outside or before marriage, unrecognized by the parents. This child is the product of a sexual relationship outside the boundaries of marriage, the socially accepted formal contract. Such a child is often labeled with various derogatory names like "child of sin," "child of adultery," or "foundling," among others, making them pay for a mistake they did not commit—a sin that the adults in society imposed on them. This child becomes a victim of societal judgment and is often seen as cursed, with an uncertain future and lifelong social rejection.

Unfortunately, the number of illegitimate children tends to increase with rapid social changes, periods of instability, wars, poverty, ignorance, and delayed marriages, which give rise to the phenomenon of spinsterhood. In addition, the spread of moral decay, especially through uncontrolled access to pornography and unmonitored communication channels, contributes to this problem.

The mother, often a teenager herself, bears the primary responsibility for this crime. She frequently faces social problems, acting immaturely due to a lack of knowledge and experience. Despite being unmarried, she faces the responsibilities of a married mother. She is left with the choice of either raising the child in a society that stigmatizes her for her mistake or abandoning the child, which is the more common choice for many.

❖ **Psychologists' perspective:**

An illegitimate child is a victim of the mother's psychological state during pregnancy. The circumstances under which the child was conceived play a significant role in their development, especially if the conception resulted from rape, incest, or other distressing events. The psychological struggles of the single mother, her internal conflicts, and her rejection of the pregnancy reflect on the child, transferring her emotional breakdown to the infant. The mother's abandonment of the child after birth, during a time when she should be their first source of care and comfort, further affects the child's personality development.

Doctors emphasize the importance of immediate bonding between the mother and the newborn— through holding, nursing, and comforting the child—because humans are born as biological beings who need physical and emotional nourishment from their mother and family. The family serves as the social institution that provides the child with culture, traditions, and social values, essential for healthy psychological development, adaptation, and social integration. (Georges, 1970, p. 206)

Despite the child's efforts to appear happy and content as they age, whether in orphanages or foster homes, they often experience deep depression that becomes evident in moments of solitude or when they reflect on their obscure and painful past. (Karkouti, 1995, p. 84)

Additionally, they suffer from anxiety, instability, and confusion, especially when transitioning between different care environments, where they encounter new supervisors and lose familiar faces. In foster families, some relatives may constantly remind the child of their illegitimate status, either directly or indirectly, compounding their distress. Family issues, such as the death of a parent or divorce, can also have a significant impact.

Some illegitimate children face a severe psychological shock when the harsh truth is revealed during a moment of anger or frustration. This revelation shakes their sense of identity, leading to a loss of self-esteem and confidence, and generating feelings of inferiority and alienation. This is particularly

damaging during adolescence when they are already struggling to understand their identity. This confusion may push them toward deviant behaviors, forming a psychopathic and aggressive personality. They constantly search for validation but are hesitant to ask about their origins for fear of being confronted with the question, "Who are you? Who are your parents?" (Dimly, 2003, pp. 1-3)

Illegitimate children, consciously or unconsciously, develop a fierce defense mechanism over anything they own, no matter how trivial, as they perceive these possessions as extensions of themselves the only things they truly have. (Karkouti, 1995, p. 85)

How can an illegitimate child feel secure or loved when they have never experienced a single moment of tenderness since birth? Some argue that even if they marry and have children, they will continue to be plagued by doubts about their spouse and children. These psychological battles, stemming from emotional deprivation by their biological parents, prevent them from achieving psychological and social stability. Therefore, it is essential for the various forces within society, including educational and cultural systems, to unite in protecting society from moral and ethical decay.

Second - fieldwork:

1. Study methodology:

The researchers used the descriptive method, which relies on analysis. The descriptive method addresses a specific phenomenon by describing the relationships between one variable and another or between a group of variables. Descriptive studies focus on understanding individual cases, such as the individual or family. Additionally, descriptive studies can address more than one case, such as a group of individuals or organizational units (Meziane, 2008, p. 32).

2. Research sample and selection process:

The most suitable sample for the purposes of this study is the purposive, non-probabilistic sample, which is based on the homogeneity of its members. The sample size is estimated to be 23 illegitimate children (14 females and 10 males), with ages ranging from 13 to 21 years.

3. Data collection tools:

This study employed the following tools to capture the perceptions of illegitimate children regarding this topic:

3.1 Interview and its type:

We used the *focused interview*, where the researcher's primary function is to focus attention on a specific experience encountered by the individual and on the effects of that experience (Milhem, 2010, p. 300). Thus, we explored the social perceptions of illegitimate children regarding the issues of bullying and social stigma.

3.2 Definition of sequential recall:

This method is inspired by the work of Paul Vergès (1992), who proposed using the *free association* technique, considering two progressive indicators: the frequency of a word and the order of its appearance. This method gained significant attention and was widely used, though it presented a crucial issue for Vergès, related to the order of word appearance, which he considered a more significant indicator for individuals. In other words, in free expression, the most important words and ideas tend to be mentioned first.

However, this assumption is not always valid from a psychological perspective. We know that in conversations, important information often emerges later, after trust has been established, or once defense mechanisms are lowered. Therefore, Vergès proposed abandoning the initial word appearance order in favor of "ranked importance," where individuals rank the terms they produced by significance. (Abric, 2003, p. 26)

How to apply the sequential recall method:

Its application is based on two main phases:

❖ **Free association:**

Free association allows access to implicit or hidden elements that may not surface during conversational production. These associations are crucial for uncovering the core structural elements of social perceptions.

❖ **Sequential or ranking phase:**

In this phase, each individual is asked to rank the words or phrases they produced according to their perceived importance.

❖ **Analysis:**

After collecting the set of words and phrases, the frequency and repetition of the elements are calculated, as well as the importance assigned to each topic. The collected information is then cross-analyzed according to the four designated categories.

4. **Study boundaries:**

❖ **Time frame:** The year 2024

❖ **Geographical scope:** Selected municipalities in Tebessa and Skikda

❖ **Human scope:** A sample of illegitimate children

5. **Presentation of results:**

After applying the sequential recall method to the research sample, we obtained the following results, summarized in the table below:

Table 1: Results of sequential recall according to the factors of frequency and importance for the study topic.

Number	Words/Phrases	Frequency	Importance
1	Foundling	22	165
2	Bastard	21	150
3	Illegitimate child	20	140
4	Moral corruption	17	125
5	Dishonorable	16	120
6	Deviant	14	115
7	Child of adultery	13	120
8	Shame	13	110
9	Abandoned	18	150
10	The oppressed	2	4
11	Without parents	12	105
12	Lacking virtue	15	92
13	Corrupt	11	88
14	Lost	10	77
15	Unwanted	9	70
16	Disgraced	7	28
17	Marginalized	6	23
18	Unknown identity	8	30
19	Outcast	3	5
20	Poor soul, in God's hands	4	10
21	Unknown lineage	5	15
22	Victim of society	2	5

Source: Prepared by the researchers.

Afterward, the results were ranked in descending order based on the factors of importance and frequency, as shown in the following table:

Table 2: Results of sequential recall for frequency and importance in descending order

Number	Words/Phrases	Frequency	Importance	Total:
1	Foundling	22	22	44
2	Bastard	21	21	42
3	Illegitimate child	20	20	39
4	Abandoned	19	19	39
5	Moral corruption	18	18	36
6	Dishonorable	17	17	28
7	Lacking virtue	16	16	26
8	Shame	15	15	29
9	Child of adultery	14	14	29
10	The oppressed	13	13	26
11	Without parents	12	12	24
12	Immoral	11	11	21
13	Lost	10	10	19
14	Unwanted	9	9	17
15	Unknown identity	8	8	17
16	Disgraced	7	7	13
17	Marginalized	6	6	11
18	Outcast	4	4	7
19	Unknown lineage	5	5	7
20	Poor soul, in God's hands	3	3	7
21	Victim of society	2	2	7
22	The oppressed	1	1	2

Source: Prepared by the researchers.

The next phase involved distributing the obtained elements, after ranking them by importance and frequency, into the four categories of the sequential recall method, as shown in the following table:

Table 3: Sequential recall results for the studied social perception

Importance / Frequency	Greater Importance	Lesser Importance
Most Frequent	Foundling Bastard Illegitimate child Abandoned Moral corruption Dishonorable Child of adultery	Deviant Shame Without parents Lacking virtue Immoral Lost Unwanted
Least Frequent	Unknown identity Disgraced Marginalized Outcast	Unknown lineage Poor soul, in God's hands Victim of society The oppressed

Source: Prepared by the researcher.

6. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS:

6.1 Analysis of results in light of the formulated hypotheses:

❖ The first hypothesis states: *Illegitimate children, in their social perceptions, suffer from bullying behavior.* This hypothesis was confirmed in both the first and second central and peripheral elements.

❖ The second hypothesis states: *Illegitimate children, in their social perceptions, suffer from social stigma.* This hypothesis was also confirmed in the first and second central and peripheral elements.

6.2 General analysis of the study:

The previously presented table, obtained through the application of the sequential recall method, consists of four categories. The elements found in the first category, which are the most important and most frequent, represent the central elements of social perceptions regarding bullying and social stigma towards illegitimate children. The second category includes the most frequent but less important elements, representing the peripheral elements of the same social perceptions.

As for the third category, which contains the most important but less frequent elements, these represent variant elements. They could form central elements of social perceptions regarding bullying and social stigma towards illegitimate children, but they differ from the majority of the sample. In other words, they pertain to a small subset within the sample that does not share the same social perception as the majority of participants.

 The fourth and final category includes second-tier peripheral elements, which have low importance and frequency. Based on the results obtained, after sorting them, it became clear that this sample of illegitimate children holds social perceptions regarding bullying behavior and social stigma. These perceptions are formed around a central core that includes the following key elements: foundling, bastard, illegitimate child, abandoned, dishonorable, immoral, child of adultery.

Surrounding this core is the first peripheral system, which consists of elements such as deviant, shame, without parents, immoral, lacking virtue, lost, unwanted. As for the second peripheral system, its elements include: unknown lineage, poor soul, victim of society, oppressed.

From this, we can infer that these illegitimate children perceive that society views them as children of sin and products of prostitution, thus labeling them as dishonorable and immoral, and as children born out of adultery.

This group of illegitimate children views themselves as victims of bullying and social stigma, as they are subjected to numerous negative words and actions unjustly. As a result, they lack social skills, struggle with reciprocal interactions, and have difficulty with life adaptability. They tend to isolate themselves. The longer they are subjected to bullying and stigma, the more severe the negative effects become, leading to psychological and emotional issues such as depression, anxiety, and frustration.

According to "Dollard, Dobb, and Miller Sears," frustration generates an aggressive drive that triggers behaviors aimed at hurting others. This drive diminishes after causing harm, a process known as "catharsis," because frustration leads to anger and a sense of injustice, making individuals prone to engage in bullying or stigmatizing behavior.

On the other hand, "Freud" asserted that hostile behavior, whether in the form of stigma or bullying, is merely an expression of the death instinct, where individuals seek to destroy either themselves or others. This behavior is an instinctual response and a form of expression. Freud emphasized that aggression, including bullying and stigma, must be redirected toward constructive goals instead of destructive ones. He also stressed that all forms of aggression have a sexual source, aimed at controlling sexual impulses, and are tied to the different stages of psychological development in children.

Additionally, the presence of role models and the tendency to imitate during early childhood years foster learned behaviors such as bullying or stigma, which are directed against illegitimate children, according to the social learning theory.

Based on the findings presented earlier, we can conclude that the perceptions of this sample are deeply connected to the cultural and social system that underpins Algerian society, specifically within the framework of values related to honor and virtue. An individual's status in society is strongly tied to moral conduct.

From the analysis of the interviews, it became evident that most, if not all, of the sample experienced feelings of frustration, inferiority, low self-esteem, and self-loathing. We also observed compulsive behaviors that indicate hidden shame, such as lowering their heads, speaking in hushed tones, and fidgeting with their fingers. Furthermore, three individuals had attempted suicide multiple times, which we attribute—based on our analysis—to deep sadness, depression, and the overwhelming

presence of painful and sorrowful circumstances, reflecting a profound sense of loss and estrangement from religion.

We also noted emotional instability among the sample, where expressions of laughter were mixed with tears and indifference. These emotional responses reflect their true relationship with the outside world, manifesting as extreme emotions that stir feelings. This indicates an inability to maintain emotional stability, accompanied by generalized tension. Illegitimate children live in a state of loss and alienation, shaped by anxiety and fear imposed by their environmental circumstances, such as the absence of familial emotional warmth, social rejection, and exposure to harsh experiences and life traumas. Their lives are filled with complications and contradictions.

The German scientist "Karen Horney" (1885–1952) emphasized that anxiety and conflict are not inherent to human nature, but rather, they arise from social conditions.

7. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the structure and content of the social perceptions of illegitimate children, this simple scientific study sought to provide a clearer picture of the immense pain these individuals endure without any fault of their own for their presence within the social fabric. Once they are abandoned to state institutions (orphanages, childhood assistance centers, SOS Children's Villages) or to foster or adoptive families, they experience emotional and maternal deprivation, and often familial deprivation as well. This leads to feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, as they are marginalized and rejected wherever they go.

The collective societal perception reflects, in one way or another, the complexity and entanglement of this value-laden issue in all its dimensions.

In conclusion, we can only emphasize the need for more studies on such complex and sensitive topics. This could help us work toward changing the current reality in a way that fosters greater harmony and adaptation for all segments of society without exception.

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