






INCLUSION OF TRANSGENDERS IN ACADEMIC SPACES: PERSPECTIVE OF STAKEHOLDERS OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS (HEIs)

Anumita Das ¹ , Pritam Pyne ²  & Dr. Umakant Prasad ³ 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Education, Vinaya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, West Bengal, India;

² Research Scholar, Department of Education, Vinaya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, West Bengal, India;

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Vinaya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Anumita Das

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Abstract

Even though policies have been formulated, transgender students continue to be discriminated, marginalized, and identified as a subaltern group. In such a situation, it becomes crucial to examine the reasons behind their condition. In this context, the perspectives of stakeholders within institutions, primarily non-transgender individuals, play a vital role in sustaining or challenging these inequalities. So, the aim of this study is to investigate the perception of stakeholders, specifically faculty and non-transgender students (NTS) of Higher educational Institutions (HEIs) towards transgender students. A narrative method was adopted, and through purposive sampling, 45 non-transgender students (NTS) and 23 faculty members were selected from higher educational institutions from the Presidency Division of West Bengal. In-depth data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule to understand their perceptions, and the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed mixed responses from both faculty and students. Although a few non-transgender students and faculty viewed transgender individuals simply as human beings and accepted their gender expression, most participants upheld the gender binary system by aligning with politically conservative ideologies. They provided various justifications (spiritual, religious, biological, or economic) for not accepting the different gender expressions of transgender students. However, all of them emphasized the need for discussion and orientation programs on this topic within institutions.

Keywords: *Non-transgender students (NTS), Academic Faculty, Transgender individuals, Institutions*

Introduction

Transgender persons are those who challenge the conventional gender binary norms of being male or female within Indian society (Elishberger et al. 2018). Because of this violation, they are marginalized and treated as subaltern groups. Studies conducted in different countries have shown that negative attitudes of ordinary people toward individuals from this group often originate from potential psychological sources (Norton & Herek, 2013). Consequently, gender diversity has emerged as one of the most debated concerns in contemporary Indian society. In this context, the education system possesses the capacity to transform perceptions and circumstances, as institutions bear a unique and immense responsibility in shaping social attitudes. Institutions improve the process of socialization by promoting diversity and inclusivity. Specifically, in higher education, students transition from adolescence into legal adulthood, and they can negotiate their autonomy, identity, and diversity in their own ways while maintaining mental well-being (Melendro et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2024). Since this is a complex process for every young adult, teacher guidance plays a significant role, and also peer acceptance becomes a crucial aspect (Ullrich et al., 2023).

Although the NALSA judgment, NEP 2020, and the Transgender Protection Act of 2019 have all emphasized equality for transgender people, focusing on their inclusion within educational institutions as well as society. The act has provided legal provisions, but the ground realities remain uneven. Over the past few years, considerable work has been carried out in Indian society on the issues of transgender students and the discrimination they encounter in academic spaces. It is evident that transgender students continually face discrimination and exclusion. There is a lack of adequate support structures and gender-inclusive facilities (Kamath & Vaidya). From restrooms and washrooms to general sensitivity toward them, discrimination is still pervasive (Mittal & Goel, 2024). Studies also reveal that compared to cisgender students, transgender students are far more victimized, discriminated, marginalized, and, most importantly, experience invisibility, along with exposure to physical and verbal abuse (Airton & Koecher, 2019; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017; Johns et al., 2019; Martín-Castillo et al., 2020; Norris & Orchowski, 2020; Paechter, Toft, & Carlile, 2021). Thus, even though the discourse of policies around transgender students may begin with the notion of empowerment and equality, in reality, they continue to remain trapped within transphobic

harassment. This raises the critical inquiry: Why does this kind of situation still exist in our society? Deep-rooted cultural norms and societal influences are clearly influential. Moreover, there are still certain factors that prevent non-transgender individuals from moving beyond the rigid gender binary system and from accepting transgender individuals. Therefore, it becomes essential to understand the in-depth perceptions of institutional stakeholders (non-transgender individuals) regarding gender (e.g., 'gender identity', 'gender fluidity', gender expression etc).

Objectives

- i. To study the perception of Non-transgender students (NTS) towards transgender (m2f) students
- ii. To study the perception of academic faculty towards transgender (m2f) students

Methodology

This study is designed as a narrative study (Moen, 2006) focusing on the perspectives of stakeholders in higher education. The study was conducted in selected institutions of the Presidency Division, where transgender students (specifically male-to-female individuals who have already undergone the transitional process) are enrolled. In this context, a total of nine institutions were identified. From each specific department of the institution, five students were selected. Additionally, 2–3 faculty members from each specific department agreed to participate in the study. Therefore, the total number of participants in this study was 45 students and 23 faculty members.

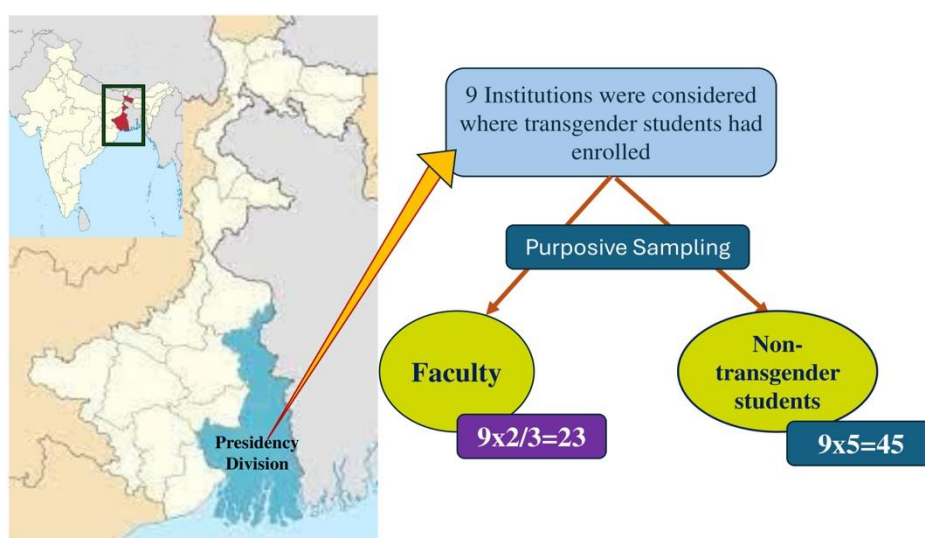


Figure 1: Selection of participants for the study

Data collection tool

In this study, the researcher developed two semi-structured interview schedules for NTS and faculty. And assessed their content validity from five external experts, including a language specialist.

Semi-structured interview schedule for NTS	Semi-structured interview schedule for Faculty
1. What do you mean by transgender and cisgender?	
2. Do you have any transgender friend? a. If yes then how many? How does you treat them? b. If not then are you interested to make them friends?	2. How does you assume gender identity or sexual orientation of a student?
3. Are you comfortable to talk or hang out with transgender students?	3. How does you call your students in the college campus (use any specific pronouns or abbreviations)? ---Are you preferring their legal name or their chosen name?
4. Do you have any whatsapp group from your department side? Do you discuss about gender - identity in that group?	4. How does you maintain an inclusive classroom environment?
5. Are you watching web series and movies? When lgbtq or transgenders are the content of the movies how does you feel?	5. Have you attended any workshop or seminar to create safe and supportive environment for transgender students.
6. Do you know the policies for transgender students in our India? ---If yes then which laws do you support? Would you like to add anything to that?	

---If no, which one you don't support specifically and why? How would you like to change those laws to suit your needs?	
7. Have you intervened any negative situation where transgender students are bullied in open place? If yes, then where and how?	
	8. Do you have any gender inclusive practices for sports facility or athletics programs, sign languages (e.g rainbow flag, pink triangles, unisex bathroom signs) in your institution for transgender? ---If so then what are the written policy to implement those?

Table 1: Basic items of the semi-structured interview schedule which was asked to the participants

Data collection and processing

For obtaining in-depth data, it was essential to build rapport with the students, and so the researcher spent nearly three months with the NTS for collecting data. In this process, participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from the students before commencement. Each student interview lasted for approximately 30–40 minutes. In the case of faculty members, each interview continued for about 20 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. During the process of data collection, the non-verbal gestures of the participants were also carefully noted. The data were collected between January 2024 and March 2024.

The transcribed qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings

The findings of the study reflect the diverse viewpoints of stakeholders on the integration of transgender students. The data, gathered from interviews, disclosed various critical issues, difficulties, and new insights. The principal themes identified in the analysis are described below.

Perception of NTS towards Transgender students

Concept about Transgender & Cisgender: The majority of students are familiar with the concept of transgender; however, they possess a few doubts regarding it. Most participants indicated that their awareness of transgender identities increased mostly through social media, films, or web series. Nevertheless, no student received an understanding of transgender identities from educational institutions. Their understanding derives from their surroundings.

NTS 34 (Bengali graduate student) said,

“When I was a child I used to think ‘transgender’ only referred to eunuchs. I was a bit surprised when I first saw a cross-dresser in Kolkata. But after watching LGBTQ-related web series and movies, I now understand the whole concept better.”

Eight further students inaccurately believe that the term transgender solely relates to eunuchs, while others think that homosexual or gay or lesbian people are only transgender. NTS 5 (history graduate) declared,

‘I understand the meaning of transgender, but only on a surface level. With the emergence of such broad terminology as LGBTQIA+, the confusion has increased a lot. You could say that I struggle to differentiate between the terms properly.’

Four students were able to provide the correct response regarding the term ‘cisgender,’ while the remaining students were unfamiliar with the term. NTS 14 (statistics graduate student) replied sarcastically,

“Everywhere, I only hear the word ‘transgender.’ And now you’ve added ‘cisgender’ as well! Is this some kind of new variety?”

So, most of the students have stereotypical and limited views on transgender people. The misconceptions or confusion are still with the NTS.

Discussion about gender identity: None of the NTS have a clear idea about gender identity or gender diversity, and they have never had any such discussions on this topic with either teachers or parents. Many students could not differentiate between the terms gender and sex. On the other hand, some students believed that gender expression is a natural phenomenon, and there is nothing new to express or even think about in a different way. But, students from the Sociology department mentioned that gender discourses are occasionally discussed in their classes so they have clear concept about ‘gender diversity’.

NTS 42 said,

‘Since childhood, I thought, why do we even need to redefine gender identity? I am a girl, so I should do what girls are supposed to do—keep long hair, apply nail polish, wear makeup, know household chores, and be soft-spoken. These things felt natural. But if any of these traits were present in a boy, we would laugh at him. Because no one ever told us that gender expression is something that happens naturally.’

Most of the students believe that there is a need for discussions on 'gender identity', 'gender expression', and 'gender diversity' within the institution. Such conversations, they feel, would provide access to many unknown facts. NTS 33 (Bengali masters student) says,

'There are many queries about this. It would be better to have an open discussion. It's essential.'

A geography student shared,

"Once we had a discussion about this topic. Suddenly, a boy said they had a lot of money. Their dad has money, that's why they had an operation."

In a prestigious institution, transgender identity is not seen as a topic for discourse because they possess a considerable understanding. The NTS believes that the expression of one's gender as a personal concern and do not contemplate it extensively.

A student from Political Science department said,

'If someone appears in cross-dressing and personally asks me how they look, I can only share my perspective—whether I like it or not. However, making fun of them, mocking them, or gossiping about them with friends seems completely ridiculous to me.'

'It's not a separate topic for us. After watching web series related to transgender issues, we discuss it. But we discussed Sushmita Sen's extraordinary acting, not the transgender. It's not abnormal for us.'

Comfortability with Transgender People: When students were asked about comfortability, a mixed reaction was observed. According to most of the students, transgender students are ultimately human beings, and they can be approached and interacted with in a normal and comfortable manner. A student from the History department said,

'I don't have a problem personally. But my other friends do when they see me with a transwoman friend. They are from different institutions, and they thought I might become like her, or worse, be considered gay. So, mixing with transgender individuals makes me feel bothered and conflicted.'

One fine arts student said,

'I am comfortable. I can talk about it without any hesitation. However, there is some hesitation about hanging out together.'

Nonetheless, while the NTS experience comfort with transgender students, they also occasionally confront awkwardness; for example, during initial interactions, they are uncertain about appropriate greetings, the correct names to use, or potentially inappropriate language to avoid in conversation.

One nursing student said,

'I don't have any personal problem with them, but I won't make friends or go out with them. After all, they are boys physically.'

However, some of the students are afraid to interact with transgender students. According to the non-transgender students, the mental health of transgender students is not stable, they are unaware of the exact physical sex of transgender students, and sexuality also becomes a point of concern for them.

One social work graduate student said,

'I feel quite scared to talk to trans women. After all, I am straight. What if they are homosexual? So, I prefer to keep some distance. I don't have any direct or personal issues with them, but I feel uneasy about mingling or becoming friends with them.'

Almost everyone has no problem in interacting with transgender students, and some non-transgender students have even made transgender friends. However, none of them are willing to engage in any form of relationship (specifically love or marriage). But none of them have ever experienced any awkward situations with transgender students, nor have they experienced any unpleasant behavior from them.

Thoughts about Gender Transition: In this case too, a mixed response was observed. For some students (NTS), gender transition is considered as a 'personal choice', and they feel it is not their place to pass any judgment. However, some NTS consider it an 'unnecessary process' where the body has to deal with so much pain. Some students also perceive gender transition from a religious perspective, labeling it as a 'sin'. More than 30 students consider the body as a gift from God. They neither perceive the alteration of God's creation in a positive light nor regard it as appropriate. One statistics Master's student said,

'In my opinion, gender transition seems a bit excessive. Gender roles are socially constructed, so we can choose to break them, and following them is not mandatory. However, the body is created by "Him" (God), and I don't think it's right to alter something that is His creation.'

Another statistics student said similarly,

'I acknowledge that gender stereotypes exist in our society. However, undergoing surgery feels like an excessive step. Just for the sake of wearing certain clothes, is surgery really necessary?! Not everyone is going to be a model or work in movies. So, what's the need? Instead, focusing on education would be a better choice. In my opinion, it is a waste of time.'

A physics student portrayed transgender differently, stating,

'It could be due to hormonal imbalance or mental disorder. If it's hormonal, they should see a doctor, and if it's a mental issue, they should seek psychiatry or counseling.'

Surprisingly, 28 students were very curious about the reproductive system of transgender individuals. A chemistry student said,

'It's okay if they want to change themselves. But what about their fate? And next generation? They can't be involved in reproduction. If there's no reproduction, there won't be the next generation. It's one of our species' characteristics, isn't it?'

And a physics student added,

'If transgenderism were natural, it would be visible in other species in the animal kingdom. It's not naturally accepted among humans.'

Protection for transgender people: Most of the students believe that transgender students need protection because they are a subaltern group in society. However, there is a common question in everyone's mind about whether reservation is actually necessary. According to them, such a reservation might create further discrimination against transgender people within society and reinforce stereotypes.

One chemistry student said,

'Will mere reservations bring any real benefit? Until there is awareness and sensitization among people, achieving true equal opportunities for transgender individuals will remain difficult.'

Some students are aware of Article 377 but have limited knowledge about the Transgender Protection Act 2019.

Perception of faculty towards Transgender students

Concept about transgender and cisgender: The faculty has a mixed reaction about awareness of transgender persons, with just six faculty demonstrating the concept of cisgender identity. And the others did not show much concern regarding cisgender. Initially, most faculty members perceived transgender individuals as similar to eunuchs or 'Hijra'. One faculty member said,

"What are you saying! Should I now teach males and females alongside eunuchs? Will they also come to educational institutions?"

Another faculty member said,

"This is not an openly discussable topic. How do you discuss such a sensitive issue in class?"

Maintaining trans-inclusivity in the classroom and academic campus: Certain institutions possess LGBTQ support organizations; however, in one university have inscriptions promoting LGBTQ topics, such as 'gender shaming is a societal problem.' But no distinct washrooms or toilets exist for any institution. One faculty member from degree college said,

'In our department, we don't have such students. Most of the students in our department are economically poor. They don't have time to think about gender issues. They are more concerned with earning money.'

A sociology faculty member said,

"In our department, I use trans-inclusive language in class. After studying gender studies, I give explanations of femininity and masculinity. I try to discuss topics like 'gender fluidity' and 'gender diversity'."

One lady faculty from degree college rudely remarked,

'This is a new issue now. The biggest thing is that no one can understand it from outside! For those who cannot be identified, special pedagogy is needed, but how will that be done?'

Professional development for gender sensitization: None of the institutions conducted orientation, workshops, or gender sensitization programs for faculty members. The faculty expressed that the topic of 'gender' is highly sensitive in the current society. Consequently, the majority of faculty members are uncertain about how to address transgender students in the classroom. Even at degree colleges, there is a lack of awareness regarding the resolution of conflicts of gender identity.

A faculty member of degree college confessed,

'We need some orientation on gender sensitization. If there is any conflict regarding gender identity in the classroom, we should know how to address it. Besides, we need to learn how to guide or teach other students.'

Another Bengali faculty from another degree college said,

'We don't have any such students. Therefore, we have never felt the need for a course or orientation program on gender sensitization.'

Policy for Transgender: Most teachers are aware of the Transgender Act 2019, while only a few professors know about the NALSA judgment. However, there has never been any discussion with students about this policy. A teacher from a degree college said,

'When there was women empowerment, there was a reservation for them in job seeking. It has been seen in studies that this has been beneficial for us. Inclusivity is fine, but should special provisions be made for transgender individuals? I don't think so. My students will be connected with private companies. I don't think they need any special'

treatment. So if any transgender person has any special talent, she will win it. There is no need for separate reservations.'

Discussion

The findings reveal a significant inadequacy in understanding of transgender issues among faculty and students, with the majority of participants possessing insufficient information regarding 'transgender identities' and 'gender expression'.

Stakeholders	Positive perceptions	Negative Perceptions
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----Transgender is not something abnormal; it is quite natural ----Don't have any personal problem with transgender peers ----Considering gender expression as a personal choice, there is no scope for passing any kind of judgment on it. ----There is no need to mark transgender individuals separately; they are like any other human beings. ----Awareness and sensitization programs can bring about a change in the situation and enhance the inclusivity of transgender individuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----Transgender people are being categorized only as hijras. ----Gender expression is natural and innate from birth; there is nothing new to be explored or discovered about it. ----There is a hesitation in getting close to transgender peers because of the apprehension that such closeness might make one "become like them." ----transgenderism is a sin. because body made by God (the supreme creator) ----Giving too much attention to all these aspects of gender expression is a waste of time. ----may be Hormonal disbalance or mental disorder ----The new generation won't produce, so biologically it's an imperfect situation. For being a species, reproduction is a one of the criteria.
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----using trans-inclusive language ----need some orientation programme on gender sensitization ----Talent will definitely speak for itself. In no area does gender matter ----Lack of knowledge on identifying transgender individuals prevents the provision of proper dealing with them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----They have conflated hijras together, unable to differentiate among LGBTQ+ individuals and hijras. ----There is reluctance to teach in eunuchs ----Transgenderism or gender expression is not considered a discussable topic. ----Economically disadvantaged students don't spend much time thinking about these issues; in other words, it's considered a fancy concern.

This study correlates the attitudes of faculty and students toward transgender individuals with findings from past literature. In 2011, Beemyn and Rankin stated that most educators lack awareness regarding transgender identities, and even the classroom environment failed to ensure inclusion. Similarly, Goldberg et al. (2018) found that only a small number of faculty members make efforts to maintain gender inclusivity in the classroom, still majority possess insufficient knowledge about transgender issues. In the present context, within India and particularly in the Presidency Division, even in urban regions such awareness has not yet reached within faculty members. On the other hand, faculty members often lack clarity on how to address or recognize or deal with transgender students in the classroom. Only a very limited number, especially sociology faculty, are considering gender inclusivity and engaging in classroom discussions on gender identity and expression. So it is clear from previous evidence that the change of this situation has been exceedingly slow.

In contrast, faculty from statistics adopt a highly practical perspective, asserting that reservations are unnecessary, and that talent and skills should be given primary importance. Additionally, some faculty were unwilling to discuss gender diversity within the classrooms. Although considerable time has passed, the scenario regarding the acceptance of transgender individuals has not shown any significant change. However, it is clear that individuals who are unclear of the concept of 'gender' are not free and comfortable discussing, and their perspectives can vary between neutral and occasionally negative.

Like the faculties, most non-transgender students lack an explicit understanding of cisgender and commonly mix transgender identities with the hijra community, with only a minimal no of students holding a precise grasp of transgender identities. However, three main reasons are identified from non-transgender students for not accepting transgenderism. Firstly, pupils perceive transgenderism through the lens of contrast: 'divine' and 'sin', which reflects a strong influence of religious and spiritual reasoning over social and cultural understanding. These findings align with the work of Norton and Herek (2013), who observed that politically conservative ideologies often resist change and avoid ambiguity. This relationship is further supported by Cassese (2020), Flores (2015), and Billard (2018), who highlighted that politically conservative thoughts tend to uphold traditional social structures, align themselves with antifeminist attitudes (skepticism of feminist goals), and reinforce hetero-cis-normative ideology, which makes it harder to accept deviations from the binary gender system.

Secondly, many non-transgender students also attempt to disprove transgenderism through biological justification. According to them, reproduction is an essential criterion for being a species, and since transgender individuals undergo SRS and thereby lose the ability to reproduce, they are seen as violating this essential natural law of species. Moreover, as this tendency is not observed among any living beings other than humans, transgenderism is also considered unacceptable. In the view of non-transgender students, transgenderism is therefore scientifically not acceptable. Conversely, some ascribe transgenderism to hormonal abnormalities, which non-transgender students believe could potentially be rectified via treatment. There are even some people who consider it to be a mental health issue.

And finally, it is about the non-transgender students' own fear and safety. According to them, those transgender individuals who have not undergone SRS still physically belong to their original state, and those who have changed cause worry for the non-transgender students. Moreover, no non-transgender student is willing, in any way, to engage in intimacy or a relationship (marriage or love) with any transgender individual, which leads to transphobia. Recently Martin-Castillo et al. (2023) in their study stated that university students have negative attitudes that accelerate transphobia among them. Schilt's (2003) study further strengthens these findings, noting that cisgender men fear forming relationships with transgender women because it challenges their sense of masculinity and power, and compels them to make violent efforts to reclaim these as well as to prove their heterosexuality. Additionally, they believe that being close to transgender individuals might make them '*become like them*', which is the another reason behind their fear.

However, there are a very small number of students who consider gender expression a '*personal choice*' and are only they have accepted transgender students. It is also observed that those who have developed friendships with transgender students in their class possess a clearer understanding of gender expression and transgenderism. Evidence from previous studies supports this, indicating that prior contact with transgender individuals fosters more favorable attitudes toward them among non-transgender individuals (Barbir, Vandevender, & Cohn, 2017; Cao & Gurcay, 2021; Earle, Hoffarth, Prusaczyk, MacInnis, & Hodson, 2021; Kanamori & Xu, 2021; King et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2021). Like the study of Gegenfurtner (2021), this study also confirms the need for gender sensitization programs for faculty, where they will understand the lived experience of transgender students. And it is also necessary to make the faculty understand that having free and open discussions on gender-related issues with students in the classroom is very important.

Conclusion

Overall, this study reveals a mixed response among faculty and non-transgender students toward transgender individuals; however, a greater number of participants hold negative perceptions. Among non-transgender students, such negative perceptions arise sometimes from religion, sometimes from spirituality, sometimes from biology, and also from their own fears or transphobia. Ultimately, it can be argued that politically conservative ideology fosters a mentality of adhering to the binary system. Although gender is a socio-culturally constructed attribute and, as Butler notes, a performance enacted by individuals to maintain themselves.

This means that within the four walls of educational institutions, such negative perceptions still persist. Therefore, even after the introduction of NEP 2020 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, it is clear that non-transgender individuals have still not been able to fully accept them. Hence, in this situation, special efforts are required to implement the policies effectively so that the positive evolution of transgender students' inclusion in higher educational institutions can truly take place.

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