

Jonathan Palant's Dallas Street Choir is one of the groups in our sample that provides direct, material relief of community members' needs. In this case, those community members are the singers themselves. Four collaborating authors from the social sciences help to tell the story, through research, of this choir's impact.



On June 14, 2017, twenty-one members of the Dallas Street Choir (DSC) walked onto the Carnegie Hall stage and made history, for never before had the 126-year-old venue hosted a musical ensemble constituted solely of those experiencing homelessness. Also performing that evening were Dallas's Credo Community Choir, soprano Harolyn Blackwell, mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, and composers Jake Heggie and Stephen Schwartz. Members of the Valley Lodge Shelter Choir (a New York City-based operation) joined the massed choir for the finale. In a 2017 Associated Press article, Verena Dobnik summed up the evening by writing, "They drew one of the most diverse audiences Carnegie Hall has ever seen: just about every race, religion and age, including a three-month-old baby, and from wealthy New Yorkers to the nearly penniless homeless, rocking to the rhythms" (Dobnik, 2017).



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THE DALLAS STREET CHOIR

The Impact of Communal Singing on Those Experiencing Homelessness

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THE DALLAS STREET CHOIR:

The Dallas Street Choir

In 2007, Jonathan Palant was asked by a Dallas-based arts philanthropist and affiliate of The Stewpot, a day shelter for those experiencing homelessness, to conduct an ad hoc choir constituted solely of those living on the street. The Stewpot Choir, as it was known, convened two or three times a year with no prescribed or consistent structure. It was not until the autumn of 2014 that the DSC was formed, weekly rehearsals were established, and local performances began.

The DSC debuted on January 25, 2015, at Dallas's City Performance Hall (now the Moody Performance Hall) singing the North American premiere of *Street Requiem*, a work composed by Kathleen McGuire, Andy Payne, and Jonathon Welch in memory of those who have died living on the streets. Since that night the ensemble has mounted several of its own concerts, but now it focuses more on outreach performances, visiting churches and synagogues, schools, philanthropic events, and agencies serving the poor and marginalized.

When the DSC first began, three tools were used to recruit new singers: word of mouth, signage, and broadcasting an attractive incentive program. Unlike in a school, church, or other “usual” choir setting, DSC members benefit from even the smallest incentive. After much trial and error, the incentive program now offers each singer his or her choice of a \$2 bill or an all-day public transportation voucher usable on any Dallas bus, trolley, or train. Members receive this as motivation to successfully complete each hour-long rehearsal or performance per the rules set forth by the director.

Because of the success of these incentives, early recruiting strategy included doubling the reward for members who helped spread the word, those returning members who brought a friend to rehearsal were offered a \$2 bill *and* a transportation voucher. As a result, membership numbers skyrocketed, and after about three months the DSC did away with the double-incentive program. The DSC now consistently rehearses with 80 to 90 singers and has welcomed nearly 2,000 individuals into their rehearsal room.

The mission of the DSC is to offer a musical outlet for those experiencing homelessness and severe disadvantage. The rehearsal structure is similar to that of most other choirs, but there are some “house rules” in place to



Photo by Stephanie Merchant

protect both singer and director alike. They are:

- Everyone participates at all times.
- No cell phones or other reading materials.
- No sleeping.
- Respect is shown to the director and to one another.
- All singers keep their feet and hands to themselves at all times.

At nearly every rehearsal there is someone who fails to meet these expectations; any such person is asked to leave early and is denied the participation incentive.

The DSC is open to any person who is experiencing or has experienced homelessness. There is no audition, and singers are welcome to participate regardless of musical ability or experience. While consistency of attendance is not required, it is stressed, and attendance is recorded at every rehearsal. New members are welcome to join at any rehearsal throughout the year. There are many accommodations made to ensure that every member feels successful. Singers are given word sheets, and all melodies are taught by rote. Many members use canes, walkers, and wheelchairs; therefore, the DSC employs only accessible motor coaches and always provides advance notice of accessibility needs to any performance ven-

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ue. Additionally, the DSC provides shelter for all singers who perform evening concerts, as area shelters close their doors at 5:00 PM. It is DSC policy to require that presenters of evening concerts offer hotel rooms for any singers needing them. This can be very costly to the presenter and has proven difficult for some who wish to host the group; however, the aim of the DSC is to improve the lives of its members, not to exacerbate the challenges and suffering of those experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness

According to the most recent estimates, approximately 550,000 people experience homelessness on any given night in the United States.¹ More than half of these persons are concentrated within five states: Washington, Texas, Florida, New York, and California.² Dallas is among the major cities with increasing unsheltered populations, with a more than 50% increase in unsheltered homelessness between 2016 and 2017.³ In Dallas, unsheltered individuals are largely male (76%), middle aged ($m = 53$), black (58%), and chronically homeless.⁴

Individuals experiencing homelessness may be overlooked by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike.⁵ Individuals experiencing homelessness are more likely to report feelings of isolation and social alienation.⁶ Researchers emphasize the devastation caused by social exclusion, equating it to *social death*.⁷ Interventions designed to improve social support and inclusion have been demonstrated effective in buffering the negative impacts of stressful life events and may be a contributing factor in the ability of some individuals to manage the stresses associated with homelessness.⁸ One study even found social support to be a greater predictor of self-reported well-being than housing status, both for those experiencing and those exiting homelessness.⁹ Recognition of the prevalence and the negative impacts of social exclusion, and of the benefits of social support, has recently led many homelessness service providers to identify community and social support as critical programmatic components.¹⁰

Inclusion through Choral Performance

Choral communities such as the DSC are low-cost

programs that provide valuable structure, support, and increased interpersonal contact.¹¹ The art of choral performance fosters group learning in a complex interplay of interpersonal and situational factors.¹² Many studies have verified the social and mental-health benefits of singing.¹³ Participation in group ensembles may result in increased self-esteem,¹⁴ social engagement,¹⁵ and self-efficacy,¹⁶ particularly among individuals who are currently experiencing stressful or adverse life events.¹⁷



One study found that the focus on choral singing allows participants to build internal resources and to individualize their interpretation of that focus in ways that most benefit them. As consistently structured and rule-bound experiences, choir rehearsals provide safe, supportive environments where participants can express emotions in a socially unthreatening way.¹⁸

Group membership in participatory arts organizations provides a sense of shared expectations, working trust, and mutual support.¹⁹ Research indicates that performing in front of others may help individuals to feel part of the larger society.²⁰ For marginalized populations, the “communicative intersection between the performer’s actions and the spectator’s reactions”²¹ is particularly critical, because it may empower individuals to alter their self-perceptions based on the favorable responses of the audience.²² Both the audience and the performing artists may benefit from connections forged during the performative sharing of emotions, creativity, imagination, and intellect.²³ One study found that this shared emotional connection between audience and artists is stronger with musical performances than other types of participatory arts.²⁴

The research described on the following pages was part of a larger mixed-methods study that was co-designed by this article’s first four authors and Jonathan Palant, DSC’s founder and director. It is designed to add to the literature about the experiences of choral involvement among people experiencing homelessness. It is also a deliberate attempt to amplify the voices of this population. The research question for this study was: *What is the impact of the DSC among its members?*

Methods

A university ethics review board approved this re-

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search. All participants signed informed-consent documents and were compensated with a \$5 gift card for their participation. Purposive sampling was used to recruit twenty members (seven women and thirteen men) of the DSC who were preparing for an East Coast tour, including an appearance at Carnegie Hall. Director Palant selected tour members from roughly 100 DSC members based on regular rehearsal attendance and their essays about why they wished to be considered for the tour. Participants constituted a subset of both the Carnegie tour choir and the whole choir. Ranging in age from 24 to 63 years, almost all reported to be Christian of various denominations, and 30% were White, 55% Black, and 15% Latino.

The study team attended weekly choir rehearsals during the spring of 2017. After each rehearsal, each researcher interviewed one choir member. Given the gender diversity of our team, we attempted to gender-match interviewer and participant, especially for women. Interviews, which averaged twenty-eight minutes in duration, were audio-recorded, and audio files were professionally transcribed.

Analysis proceeded primarily according to the tenets of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Transcriptions were divided equally among the four researchers, shuffled so that all researchers had opportunity to evaluate interviews that we had not ourselves conducted. Each of us carefully read our assigned transcripts line by line, searching for the meaning of the choir among our cluster of choir participants. We independently coded the transcripts and then met as a team. Over the course of six hours, we compared and combined codes, discussing the themes we saw emerging. Where we found discrepancies among our codes or themes, we conferred until reaching full agreement. When we found codes that were interesting but tangential, we agreed to lay them aside for the purposes of this manuscript. We identified five themes.

Results

Theme 1: Rules that Structure Participation

Many participants described the benefits of the structure of rehearsals as outlined in the prominent display of



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the house rules. It was widely acknowledged that Director Palant tolerates no bad behavior or deviation from these rules. Many participants appreciated this structure. For example, Mack said of Director Palant, “He’s always been strict, but really nice,” a sentiment echoed by many other participants. Some acknowledged that Director Palant has discouraged their own bad behaviors. Edith admitted to enjoying the spotlight and said:

I know I can do the little diva thing sometimes and, when Jonathan [Palant] wouldn’t let me just run with it, I would be upset. But then I realized, this is a group effort. It’s not about me... showcasing my talents. It’s about the choir working together in unity. So I understood when he would shut me down a little bit, that it wasn’t anything personal against me. But he didn’t want to alienate everybody else to feed my ego.

Theme 2: Social Belonging

Participants had many ways to express their feelings of social belonging as fostered by choir membership. By far, the most common of these was to employ a metaphor of “family.” This word was mentioned 83 times throughout the course of our interviews.

It’s like we belong to a family, to one another,

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and it just gives us something else to think about other than what we are worried about; getting to ourselves another place to live. It's just great. —Bonnie

These guys are like brothers and sisters to me. They're like the siblings that I've not had in many years because mine were passed. And so, these guys have come to be really close to me. They share with me. They help me. —Alice



things in common in choir. —Betty

We're like a big family. You know? ... the majority of us are homeless, looking for a place. We're like family. So we're close. I mean, some people might not talk to others, but, overall, we're a family and we listen to each other, help each other. We come from pretty much the same similar type of background, as far as homelessness, so, we lend an ear, give a helping hand, or just be friendly with each other. —Carl

For Les, the meaning of the choir was:

... peace, harmony. We all together. And John [Palant], I mean, I just can't describe it. We just, we together like a family. I mean like one big family.

Consistent with the metaphor of family was the description of Director Palant as a father and brother:

I look at him as a brother. I don't care if you down, or out...Jonathan, he's going to pick you up. That's what I like about him, 'cause he...he sees something in me...and I never thought I would see in myself. —Clarence

Other participants may not have used the words “brother” and “father,” but they felt Director Palant genuinely cared for them:

He's really professional, and he actually cares about us. He actually cares about us. That's something that around here we can tell fake-ness quick. You know, and we feel his sincerity. I mean, he's really a good man. —David

Many participants discussed their common experiences and their subsequent sense of fellowship:

Well, I mean, lot of us have something in common you know. Like me, I have been homeless, but now I have a place and...like some of us have done drugs and some of us have, you know some of us have a mental illness...and other

For some participants, singing in the choir was a way to de-stigmatize homelessness for audience members and to create a social bridge between the choir and society:

We go to different churches and the people are so nice and they look at us and they just smile. They just smile. They hear of our beautiful voices. The homeless, you know? And we get them another outlook on the homeless. If they were thinking negative about the homeless and when they see us sing, they start thinking positive. That's how good it is. —Les

It is not only the adequately housed who stigmatize the homeless. Marcus struggled with his stereotypes even after he became homeless. Singing with the choir helped de-stigmatize homelessness for him:

Before I came to Dallas, I used to be afraid of homeless people (laughs) because, I knew as soon we walk up on them, they, they'd be saying, 'Oh, I want ... can you uh give me a dollar? Can you help me out with a ride?' You know or try to rob you or something like that. The group is helping me realize that they are normal people. You know, at the end of the day, they're normal people, just like I'm a normal person.

Others emphasized the normalcy of people experiencing homelessness and conceptualized the choir as a means to challenge stereotypes:

People just see us as, you know, that kind of ste-

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reotype of we're all the same and that, no, we're not intelligent people. We're just as normal as everybody else. We just don't have a home, for whatever reason. Everybody's is different. But, we're just normal thinking people like everybody else. —Carl

really just relax and enjoy. —Earl

It gives me something to do to cope with the stress I have here. It's things like that, and mostly, I love music anyway. It's a way to escape, like I say, you know, in a good way. —David

Respondents who had felt alone and without value found acceptance upon joining the choir:

Beyond providing respite, the choir serves for some as a pathway of personal development:

I felt unworthy. Like I felt like I was just unable to do anything. I wasn't worth nothing. Until I sat there and was singing and and could see that I was accepted. And, because I felt unaccepted for so many years. To actually have, not one person, but a whole classroom of people to accept me. —Alice



Means everything right now...I can see a stepping stone to something better, bigger, or even more opportunities. When one door closes, many more open. And so, that's what I see. I just see a path, part of my life closing off and many more doors opening up. —Carole

It's like we feel we're more in...with the community. Instead of being isolated we're more in with people, where people accept us for who we are. —Carl

And the movement is to go further and go forward. Because I've got the gift to go there and I have been shown. And why I'm here is to tell the people everyday, 'Look. You wake up, it's a blessing. You lay down, it's a blessing. Why not do something that instead of making people look down on you, you let people look up on you.' Because now they're saying, 'What's he doing? When y'all going to sing again? What's y'all program? Can I go?' ...it make me feel way better than I ever felt in my whole entire life. ... but I tell people, show them out there, 'This is where I've been. This is what I'm doing now. You see? I'm not slacking behind no more. I'm growing up now.' —Donn

Carole simply said, "It's a gift to be a part of a group again, something that means something."

Theme 3: Developing Capacity for Change

Many participants described choir membership as a helpful outlet:

Especially when you're homeless or when you're feeling like you're just stuck in a rut, an outlet like this is really helpful. —Joan

My perspective about the choir it is relieves pressure on the things I'm going through. When I come here, I just leave a lot of pressure. I feel rejoice. And I get to meet some of the happy faces. The people's happy when they come here. —Les

I go through so much on the daily basis, you know, with the homelessness and trying to find work and all this, so that's my time to, you know,

Director Palant emerged in this theme as someone on whom choir members rely as a mentor and teacher, in matters musical and otherwise:

Mr. Jonathan, he's a like a mentor for me, cause he teach me a lot. I was under a music teacher for like a year or two before I met Jonathan. I was trying to get him to continue giving voice lessons but since I met Jonathan and came into the choir my voice has gotten more better. —Clarence

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Theme 4: Shifting Paradigms

Many participants felt that choir membership offered them another chance at new directions and future possibilities. Much of their future orientation was grounded in a shift from voicelessness and invisibility to being heard and seen. Director Palant tells choir members regularly that they are “homeless not voiceless.” It was astounding to us how many participants either repeated these words exactly during their interviews or described other ways that choir membership shifted them out of invisibility into visibility. For example, speaking about performances, Oliver said:

We’re there to let people know we’re homeless, but not voiceless.

Similarly, when asked what the choir means to him, Mack said:

Most people they’ll talk to you but they’ll never really listen. Because, basically if you can be talking and talking and they’ll be looking at you, that’s even family sometimes, they’re not hearing you. They’ll come back and ask you something that you’ve already told them and you have to repeat yourself. So, honestly after so many years of it you realize: I just brief words. The briefest things get the briefest answers. And then I start realizing when you’re singing you have to go on through the whole thing until you come to the end. And people are listening. People are paying attention. People are trying to make sense of every word that you’re saying.... And it’s kind of weird. That they’re actually listening. So that’s what the choir means to me.

For Edith, singing opens up other possibilities:

I just can’t stress enough how singing opens me up to the world and opens up possibilities for me. When I’m singing, I can do anything. I’m invincible. When I’m on stage and I’m performing, I feel no pain. None.

I think he brings a lot out of me, because he says that, ‘You can go further in this world if you try. You’ve got a gift. God gave you a gift. Why not share it? He gave you something to show. Show it.’ I don’t know about everybody else, but I’m glad to see him every day... I’m always going to learn something from him because, like I said, I look up to him and he’s pushing me in the right direction that I need to go. —Donn

Al was among the participants who thought choir participation helped him refrain from maladaptive behaviors:

It’s like a deterrent. It’s, it’s, I guess it’s like, it don’t really make the time go by, because to me it’s just like the environment. People I’m around and things. The people I’m around, they don’t drink and stuff like that.

Edith found that within the choir she could step into a leadership role for younger women experiencing homelessness:

I’ve made friendships here. I run into characters here (laughs). I have an opportunity, um, with some of the younger women to provide mentoring.

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Theme 5: Choir as Impacting Physical and Emotional Healing

For many participants, choir membership is a healing experience and provides the relief of a foil to life on the street. For example, when Alice described the first time she sang in rehearsal, she said:

As I'm singing, it's just like so relieved, just everything off my shoulders and I just started crying. But it was, it was a cry of happiness, of joy because the choir just made me feel that good.

Les described the link between feeling good, making good choices, and obtaining housing:

I feel good about myself. I'm thinking positive. Some of the songs we go over, and you listen to them and sing them, you have a positive attitude. Like it's a brand-new day. Every day is a brand-new day. If I make this day, tomorrow, I can go a little further... Trying to get housing ...

When the interviewer asked for clarification about how the choir was related to housing, Les admitted there was no direct connection but said:

[When I participate in choir] I just feel good. When I feel good, I do good things.

There were many participants who spoke more specifically about the impact of choir membership on their physical and emotional health:

It was hard for me to give up what I was. I use to be a drug addict, I use to be a alcoholic ... sex addiction. But all because of Jonathan and my case manager to help....and the Dallas Street Choir. —Clarence

It helps my focus.... It's like therapy. —Les

The choir itself is a comfort. A medication within itself. You know. That a lot of people in this position is fighting depression. And the choir is a way that you can kind of calm that depression. —Earl

Most people, they use drugs and alcohol to escape, you know. But being in a choir, it gives you something positive. You know, it frees your heart, for that hour. ... It's like, you know, it just makes your whole day better, the rest of the week better. It's like going to church on Sundays to me. So I get two days of worship in. It's like, I go to church on Sunday, and by the time my spirit is kind of weak, or something's going on, I come to this street choir, and I feel better. You know, it's like getting a double dose of spirituality. —David

Marcus was pleased to note health effects in a fellow chorister. At first, the bus passes had been the young woman's only incentive to attend, but she began to enjoy being involved. Marcus described the impact on her health:

She said that it's out of her way to get here and so, that gets her to walking more. And so, she feels better, because she's ... a big, big lady. She walks it [the route to rehearsal] now.

Alice's expression of healing was more subtle. She spoke of the contrast in perspective between being in the rehearsal space and living life on the streets. In the following exchange, she described the second-story rehearsal room and its large window overlooking downtown Dallas. The interviewer asked, "So tell me about the choir, please." Alice responded:

I was downstairs one day and I seen the sign that said Dallas Street Choir and I kinda, like, would look at it but I never came up. And then one day I decided to just go ahead and go up anyways. And it was the most wonderful thing because I'm sitting there and I got this most beautiful view of Dallas out the window.

When asked to elaborate, she said,

When you're homeless on the streets, you only see the surface. You know? And, everything just so gray and so lonely. And when I was up here

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I actually was face view, top view of all these beautiful buildings and, and the sky and everything. And I actually seen Dallas probably for the very first time in all the years that I've ever been here to Dallas. And so, it was like remarkably wonderful to me.

Discussion

The researchers, in collaboration with Director Palant, undertook this study to better understand the meaning of the DSC in the lives of choir members. The team discovered that the choir has become a form of family for the choir members. It provides the ultimate in social inclusion: a group of people with shared histories, conditions, and values. Many members have similar circumstances such as lack of strong family support, struggles with addiction, unresolved trauma, and frustrations related to stigma and discrimination. The choir is a safe space where they can relate over these commonalities and feel free of the need to “explain themselves.”

Perhaps the most striking finding was the extent to which choir members' experiences of inclusion and support enhanced their inner resources for managing and overcoming the adversities of living on the street. For example, many repeatedly spoke to a renewed sense of ability and desire to take on challenges outside of choir that might lead them out of homelessness (e.g., applying for jobs, reconnecting with family members, etc.). This

connection between the external social inclusion and the internal capacity for action and change may be a critical link for individuals experiencing homelessness that is often overlooked in traditional service environments. Overall, the researchers saw a unique relationship between social inclusion and self-efficacy—that being an individual member's sense of an ability to accomplish things neither they nor others thought possible.

Another striking finding to emerge was participants' perception that choir membership was healing. Here, the act of making music with others in similar situations provided potent catharsis. Individuals living on the street and in shelters often lack safe places in which to deal with trauma. The choir appears to provide that safe space. Moreover, choir members described the choral singing as unlocking an internal healing process within themselves.

The choir seems to accomplish this sense of family, social inclusion, non-judgment, self-efficacy, and healing through a multitude of processes. The embodied nature of making music with the voice soothes all pain and confers the positive feeling of creating something beautiful from one's very self. Secondly, the structured, cooperative activity of rehearsing together fosters group identity and social inclusion. Third, the challenge of performance builds the singers' sense of capacity for action and accomplishment.

Limitations and Rigor

The researchers should note some study limitations. First: Our results reflect a community sample not necessarily representative of other homeless populations or street choirs across the United States. Secondly: Choir members who participated in interviews had been selected by Director Palant to attend the Carnegie tour. Thus, they may have felt some pressure to report positively in order not to jeopardize their opportunity to go on the tour. This risk is minimal, though, as the researchers and Director Palant repeatedly stressed the voluntary aspect of the interviews and the confidential nature of the content. In addition, participants were not unequivocally positive and did identify some problems with the choir, indicating that they trusted the interviewers and Director Palant enough to be honest about their experiences.

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For example, some participants mentioned that certain choir members do not get along well; others spoke about bad attitudes of some members.

Finally: The coding process may have introduced bias, as all of the researchers had attended multiple choir rehearsals and performances and naturally had formed their own observations and beliefs about the DSC. However, the method of triangulating data analysis across the four research team members was designed to prevent against coding aberrations due to individual bias; the themes reported here reflect only those concepts that all members of the coding team had independently identified.

Conclusion

Individuals in this study overwhelmingly expressed positive feelings toward choir participation, including social belonging, developing capacity for change, shifting paradigms, and healing. Social service agencies and non-profit organizations may be interested in starting street choirs in their communities. Although there is great variability in the demographic composition and the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness across geographic locations, the Dallas Street Choir recommends partnering with a social service agency serving individuals experiencing homelessness, like a shelter or a day resource center. A partnership with an established agency may be helpful in building rapport with individuals experiencing homelessness and key stakeholders, recruiting participants, finding volunteers, and securing space for rehearsals. Prospective choir directors should also secure sheet music, lyric sheets, and incentives for participation. Finally, the choir director should create rules that provide structure and a safe place for participants to express their creativity and vulnerability such as the house rules mentioned earlier in this article.

Through community engagement and public performance, the DSC seeks to improve the way society views those experiencing homelessness. The model demonstrates that participation in a consistent, structured, safe, and creatively engaging environment may better equip individuals experiencing homelessness to attain employment, housing, and an improvement in their overall well-being. For its members, the DSC provides practical musicianship training, an environment that promotes

accountability, and a community that offers compassion and hope. To this otherwise marginalized population, the DSC offers the experience of shared artistic expression. To volunteers, donors, and community and corporate partners, the DSC presents service opportunities, welcoming them into the profound rewards of empowering individuals to achieve the seemingly impossible through the act of singing together. 

NOTES

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