

A Review of Gratitude Research

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Abstract

Gratitude is a very special emotion. Our society and organizations should pay attention to gratitude, and furthermore, should understand how to manage gratitude. Up to now, gratitude research lacks a systematic arrangement. Thus, this study first reviews the near gratitude research and preliminarily finds that gratitude research could be divided into three categories: clarify the concept of gratitude; the consequences of gratitude; the causes of producing gratitude.

Keywords: benefactor, beneficiary, emotion, favor, gratitude, guilt.

Research Background, Motives and Purposes

In contemporary society, gratitude plays a vital role, and many often express gratitude while talking (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). However, there are few academic researches on gratitude, till recently, when psychological studies began to systematically study gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Gratitude has been neglected by academic research, probably because gratitude is a psychological and positive emotion, which is likely to be overlooked (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). Theories in many fields hold that gratitude is a significant variable regarding the establishment and maintenance of social relations (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Some studies have demonstrated that gratitude has a positive influence on individuals, others, and organizations; for example, in terms of individuals, gratitude could enhance an individual's well-being (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009); while for others, gratitude increases the occurrence of altruistic behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006a). In regard to organizations, gratitude contributes to generate repurchase intention, positive word of mouth (Soscia, 2007), and long-term performance benefits (Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, & Kardes, 2009).

Based on the foregoing, it can be determined that gratitude is worthy of advocacy. It will contribute to social harmony and organizational performance if we effectively utilize gratitude in

our social and management systems. However, according to this study, currently, there is a lack of integrated research on gratitude. This study reviews, analyzes, and classifies gratitude research, in order to learn the previous research categories of gratitude, help future researchers quickly grasp the entire picture of gratitude research, and serve as a reference for practitioners to make strategies based on gratitude.

According to this study, there have been few studies (approximately 20) on gratitude in academic journals in recent years, most of which focused on clarifying the concept and consequences of gratitude, while few discussed the causes of gratitude. This study summarizes gratitude research published in academic journals in recent years, as shown in Table 1, having four aspects, including author and publication year, method, theme, and findings. The preliminary findings of this study indicate that gratitude research can be classified into three categories: the concept of gratitude, the result of gratitude, and the cause of gratitude.

Clarifying the Concept of Gratitude

McCullough et al. (2001) proposed that gratitude is an affective readout that alerts people that they have benefited from another person's prosocial behavior. Gratitude has been conceptualized as a moral virtue, an attitude, a trait, or a coping response as well as a state of thankfulness or appreciation (Pelsler et al., 2015).

The first category of gratitude research clarifies the concept of gratitude. Some studies have explored the differences between gratitude and other similar concepts, including indebtedness (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Tsang, 2006b), happiness (Soscia, 2007), and appreciation (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008c). Some studies pointed out that the characteristics of gratitude and the state of gratitude were two different concepts, and proved the relationship between them (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008d), while some verified the measurement of the characteristics of gratitude (Chen, Chen, Kee, & Tsai, 2009). Through the efforts of such research, this study clarifies the basic concept of gratitude, and gains a clearer understanding of it. The following paragraphs further explain the research regarding the basic concept of gratitude in recent years.

(1) The characteristics of gratitude and the state of gratitude are two different concepts

Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008d) clarified the concept of gratitude by comparing the characteristics and state of gratitude, and believed that people with the characteristics of gratitude were more likely to produce the state of gratitude. The characteristics of gratitude indicate personal differences; in other words, it refers to the frequency of the emotion and mood of gratitude in daily life. In contrast, the state of gratitude refers to the current thinking of emotion, mood, and action tendencies of gratitude. The most commonly used scale to measure gratitude characteristics is the gratitude questionnaire (GQ), which includes six questions, "I am grateful for many aspects of my life", "If I am asked to list the

things that I want to appreciate, that will be a long list", "When I face the world, I don't think there is anything that is worthy of my appreciation", "I want to appreciate many people", "As I grow older, I find that I am more and more grateful to people, things, and environments in my life", and "It takes a long time for me to be grateful to a matter or person." Based on these questions, we can understand the meanings of the characteristics of gratitude. Chen, Chen, Kee, and Tsai (2009) further simplified the six GQ questions into five.

(2) Gratitude and indebtedness are two different concepts

Tsang (2006b) verified the different influences of the motivations of people extending help to others on gratitude and indebtedness, in order to prove that gratitude and indebtedness were two different emotions. When comparing benevolence and unknown motivations, Tsang found that, if a helper extended help with the motivation of benevolence, the one being helped was more likely to feel gratified; nevertheless, there were no differences between the influences of benevolence and the unknown motivations of the helper on indebtedness. When comparing selfishness and unselfishness, Tsang found that, if a helper extended help with unselfish motivation, the one being helped was more likely to feel gratified; nevertheless, there were no differences between the influences of the selfishness and unselfishness of the helper on indebtedness. The findings also indicated that gratitude and indebtedness were two different emotions. Algoe, Gable, and Maisel (2010) pointed out that gratitude was a positive emotion, while indebtedness was a negative emotion. Gratitude inspired people to thank the benefactor in a creative way; however, when one had the sense of indebtedness, he/she would only focus on returning the favor. They assumed that indebtedness could maintain a relationship, while gratitude could enhance it, implying that gratitude and indebtedness were different.

(3) Gratitude and happiness are different concepts

Soscia (2007) found that gratitude could predict re-purchase intention and positive word of mouth, while happiness could not, which demonstrated that gratitude and happiness are different concepts.

(4) Gratitude and appreciation are the same concept

Wood, Maltby, Stewart, and Joseph (2008c) by exploratory factor analysis concluded that gratitude and appreciation were the same factor.

Studies on the Consequences of Gratitude

The second category of studies on gratitude explored the consequences of gratitude, which has had rich achievements in recent years. With respect to positive consequences, it has been found that gratitude could strengthen relationships and increase satisfaction with future life (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Howells, 2014; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008a), raise the

awareness of employees to common social responsibilities (Andersson, Giacalone, Jurkiewicz, 2007), inspire prosocial behaviors of the benefactor (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006a), produce long-term performance benefits (Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, & Kardes, 2009), generate re-purchase intention and positive word of mouth (Soscia, 2007), create well-being (Lin, 2016; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009), intimacy with the helper (Weinstein, DeHaan, & Ryan, 2010), gain higher social support, and reduce stress and depression (Lin, 2015; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008b). The above researches explain that gratitude had favorable influence on individuals, others, and organizations from the point of view of individuals. In addition, some studies have probed into the influence of gratitude from the viewpoint of groups, and found that gratitude activities in a disaster area held by governments also had a good effect on non-disaster areas (Raggio & Folse, 2011a, 2011b). While almost all the results of gratitude were positive, there were still negative findings. Some asserted that when gratitude could not be returned, one might have the sense of guilt (Cohen, 2006). Some studies probed into the causes and consequences of the sense of guilt (Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2003; Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2005). However, when gratitude could be returned, the result was positive. Just as Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes (2009) pointed out; the beneficiary would have behaviors with long-term interests to an organization due to their intention to return gratitude.

The results of gratitude are further explained below according to recent academic research.

(1) Increasing well-being

Toussaint and Friedman (2009) found that gratitude and well-being had positive and strong correlation, which could be explained with affect and belief as mediators. Weinstein, DeHaan, and Ryan (2010) discovered that gratitude could affect the beneficiary's positive attitude and well-being, and intimacy to the benefactor. Wood, Joseph, and Maltby (2009) found that the predictive ability of gratitude to psychological well-being was stronger than the 30 facets of the five major personality. Lin (2016) found gratitude could directly increase well-being and also indirectly increase well-being through social support and coping style.

(2) Reducing stress and depression

Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, and Joseph (2008b) deemed that gratitude could reduce stress and depression. Lin (2015) revealed a significant path from gratitude through self-esteem and psychological well-being to depression.

(3) Enhancing relationships

Algoe, Gable, and Maisel (2010) assumed that gratitude could enhance relationships. Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, and Joseph (2008b) held that gratitude could obtain higher social support. Howells (2014) had shown that from the perspective of senior high school teachers, gratitude

could impact positively on building teacher-student relationships.

(4) Increasing satisfaction with life

Algoe, Gable, and Maisel (2010) pointed out that gratitude could increase satisfaction with future life. Wood, Joseph, and Maltby (2008a) thought that gratitude could predict life satisfaction.

(5) Raising the awareness of social responsibility

Andersson, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz (2007) found that gratitude could raise the awareness of social responsibility of employees.

(6) Increasing prosocial behavior

Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) found that gratitude contributed to the occurrence of prosocial behavior. Tsang (2006a) assumed that gratitude could inspire the beneficiary to have prosocial behavior to the benefactor. Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechhoff, and Kardes (2009) deemed that gratitude could stimulate relevant return behavior, and for a company, it could produce long-term performance benefits.

(7) Being helpful to an organization

Soscia (2007) found that gratitude could predict re-purchase intention and positive word of mouth. Raggio and Folse (2011a, 2011b) discovered that gratitude activities held in disaster areas by governments had good effects, including enhancing the willingness of consumers to purchase products made by the disaster area, and have prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering and donations, purchasing the products and services of the disaster area at a higher price, visiting the disaster area, and spreading positive word of mouth.

(8) Generation of the sense of guilt when gratitude could not be returned

Cohen (2006) argued that gratitude was not necessarily a positive emotion; when gratitude could not be returned, a sense of guilt would be generated. Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda (2003) pointed out that there were three kinds of guilt, as based on different reasons, including: negative influence on others (other type), violation of social morality (social type), and failure to achieve self-standard (self-type); and they found that different types of the sense of guilt would lead to different consumption responses. Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda (2005) studied the generation and influence of the sense of guilt of consumers, and found that if consumers had a sense of guilt toward salesmen, they wanted to make up for the latter.

Studies on the Causes of Gratitude

The third category of studies on gratitude explores the influencing factors of gratitude, meaning the causes of gratitude. While there are few studies on this aspect, based on such studies, we can

still identify some important causes of gratitude. Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes (2009) studied the relations between sellers and buyers, and found that the investment in relationship marketing by the seller could lead to the gratitude of short-term customers, thus, gratitude of customers was related to two factors. The first factor was the seller or the benefactor. The second was the investment in relationship marketing, meaning the favor given from the benefactor to the beneficiary, or the factor of a favor. Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008d) discovered that a favor with different degree of interest would influence the state of gratitude through beneficial appraisal. This study holds that a favor with different degree of interest belongs to the factor of favor itself. Tsang (2006a) deemed that one was more likely to have gratitude when receiving favor from others, rather than from accident; this is a comparative study of benefactor and accident. Tsang (2006b) found that if the helper extended help with the motivation of benevolence and unselfishness, the one being helped was more likely to feel gratified; thus, it was a study on the motivation of the benefactor. Unsworth, Turner, Williams, and Piccin-Houle (2010) pointed out that gratitude was less likely to be generated in a relationship with high trust. This study considers that a relationship with trust belongs to environmental factors. Weinstein, DeHaan, and Ryan (2010) observed that the one being helped receiving the help extended with spontaneous motivation was more likely to feel gratitude than with a controlled motivation. This study believes that the motivation of the benefactor belongs to the factors of the benefactor. Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008d) held that the characteristics of gratitude would influence the state of gratitude through beneficial appraisal. This study holds that the characteristics of gratitude belong to the factors of the beneficiary. Based on the abovementioned research, this study classifies the influencing factors of gratitude into four categories: factors related to favor itself, the factors of the benefactor, the factors of the beneficiary, and environmental factors.

(1) Favor

In the context of exchange, if customers received some relationship benefits (e.g. additional efforts, care, or gifts from the service providers), they would be grateful. These relationship benefits belong to favors to customers; for the seller, it is an investment in relationship marketing. Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes (2009) argued that an investment in relationship marketing by the seller could generate the gratitude of short-term customers. Regarding the value of favor, Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008d) pointed out that those who considered help from others as more valuable would have a higher state of gratitude. In addition, the degree of interest would influence the state of gratitude through beneficial appraisal, implying that the value of favor would influence gratitude. Unsworth, Turner, Williams, and Piccin-Houle (2010) explored the relationship between postgraduates and their professors, and found that there was positive correlation between the altruistic behavior and value of the behavior of professors and the gratitude of postgraduates.

(2) The benefactor

The efforts and motivations of the benefactor would influence gratitude. Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008d) assumed that, when the one being helped believed that the helper spent high costs to help him/her with altruistic intentions, the former would have a higher state of gratitude. Tsang (2006b) found that if the helper extended help with the motivation of benevolence and unselfishness, the one being helped was more likely to feel gratified. Weinstein, DeHaan, and Ryan (2010) thought that the one being helped was more likely to feel gratitude for the helper with spontaneous motivation than that with controlled motivation. In addition, unlike the aforementioned study categories, Tsang (2006a) deemed that favor given by others resulted in higher gratitude than gained by accident, implying that gratitude had a strong relationship with the benefactor, meaning the benefactor was a vital factor generating gratitude.

(3) The beneficiary

When the personality traits of an individual had the characteristics of gratitude, it had key influence on the presence of gratitude. Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008d) believed that those with characteristics of high gratitude had more positive beneficial appraisals regarding help from others, resulting in a higher state of gratitude. More positive beneficial appraisal included that the help from others was more valuable, and was given with higher costs and stronger altruistic intentions.

(4) Environment

The relationship environment in which the benefactor and the beneficiary interact influences gratitude. Unsworth, Turner, Williams, and Piccin-Houle (2010) discovered that, in a relationship with high trust, gratitude was less likely to be generated, because, in such relationship, the parties had had the expectation to obtain interest, thus, less attention was paid to the favor extended by the benefactor. So, there was less gratitude. Moreover, Cohen (2006) found that gratitude varied according to individuals, culture, and religions. Culture and religion belonged to environmental factors, while individual was the beneficiary previously mentioned.

Table 1. Gratitude Studies Published in Academic Journals in Recent Years.

Author and Publication Year	Method	Theme	Findings
Algoe, Gable and Maisel (2010)	Questionnaire	Roles of gratitude and indebtedness in maintaining a romantic relationship between cohabiting lovers	For men and women, the gratitude generated from interactions could enhance the relationship and increase satisfaction with future life. Indebtedness could maintain a relationship, while gratitude could improve a relationship.
Andersson, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2007)	A longitudinal study on 308 American white-collars	Influences on social responsibility of hope and gratitude	Hope and gratitude could raise the awareness of social responsibility of employees. Employees with stronger hope and gratitude had a stronger sense of responsibility over other employees and social events, but did not influence the sense of responsibility over economic/security/quality events.
Bartlett and DeSteno (2006)	Experiment with student samples	Correlation between gratitude and prosocial behaviors	The beneficiary would exert efforts to help the benefactor, even if the former had to pay the costs. The effects of gratitude were different from general positive emotions. Gratitude could drive helping behaviors.
Chen, Chen, Kee and Tsai (2009)	Questionnaire with student samples	Verification of the validity of the GQ6 questionnaire	Confirmatory factor analysis showed that five items model was superior to GQ6.
Cohen (2006)	Retrospective and qualitative study	Cohen reviewed the key points of Emmons and McCullough (2003) and discussed four questions, including: Is gratitude an emotion? What are the cognitive components of gratitude? Is gratitude positive or negative? Is gratitude moral?	Gratitude was not necessarily a positive emotion. When gratitude could not be returned, a sense of guilt would be generated. It was not necessary for gratitude to have a reason and assessment structure. Gratitude varied due to individuals, culture, and religions.
Dahl, Honea and Manchanda (2003)	Critical incidents and questionnaire	In the context of a consumption, the categories of the sense of guilt related to a consumption, and consumer reactions which resulted from different senses of guilt.	There were three kinds of guilt based on different reasons, including: negative influence on others (other type), violation of social morality (social type), and failure to achieve a self-standard (self-type). Consumers with the social type of guilt were more likely to adopt corrective measures than those with the self-type of guilt. Consumers with the self-type of guilt were more likely to adopt admitting measures than those with the social type of guilt.

Author and Publication Year	Method	Theme	Findings
Dahl, Honea and Manchanda (2005)	Experimental study	Cause and influence of the sense of guilt of consumers	When consumers and salesmen had social connections, and consumers had the right to control their purchase decisions, if consumers did not purchase, a sense of guilt would be generated. When consumers had the sense of guilt, in their future interaction with the salesmen, they wanted to make up for the latter, rather than for the company.
Howells (2014)	Questionnaire and focus group	Investigate the role that gratitude may have in enhancing teacher-student relationships.	Gratitude impacted positively on the teachers, classroom and school environment.
Lin (2015)	Questionnaire	Explore the relationship between gratitude and depression in young adults	Self-esteem and psychological well-being acted as full mediators of the association between gratitude and depression
Lin (2016)	Questionnaire	Explore the relationship between gratitude and well-being	Structural equation modeling showed partial mediation effects of social support and coping style between gratitude and well-being
Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff and Kardes (2009)	Experimental study and longitudinal field study	Explore the mediating role of gratitude in the correlation between the investment in relationship marketing by the seller and performance results	The investment in relationship marketing by the seller generated the gratitude of short-term consumers. Based on return behaviors related with gratitude, consumers generated the long-term performance interests of the seller.
Raggio and Folsie (2011a)	Online survey	Effects of gratitude activities held by governments in disaster areas	Governments held gratitude activities to respond to the help from the outside, which was appropriate and beneficial. After receiving the expression of gratitude, consumers were more likely to purchase the products made by the disaster area, and continue to have prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering and donations. The gratitude activities would also encourage those who had not participated in the help and recovery activities to join future similar activities. This policy had economic and social feedback to disaster areas.
Raggio and Folsie (2011b)	Online survey	Effect of the gratitude activities held by the government after the Louisiana hurricane	Those who had heard or saw the ads of "gratitude" had more positive attitude toward Louisiana and the local residents. They were more willing to purchase the products and services of

Author and Publication Year	Method	Theme	Findings
			Louisiana at a higher price, visit the state, and spread positive word of mouth, indicating that it was appropriate for the government to hold gratitude activities. The expression of gratitude generated affective commitment, followed by positive outcomes.
Soscia (2007)	Experimental study	The relationships among assessment (goal consistency/inconsistency), consumer emotion (gratitude, happiness, guilt, anger, pride, and sadness), and post-consumption behavior (positive and negative word of mouth, repurchase intention, and complaint)	Assessment results generated emotions, which affected the post-consumption behavior. Especially gratitude could predict re-purchase intention and positive word of mouth, while happiness could not. In addition, the sense of guilt could prevent complaints and negative word of mouth.
Toussaint and Friedman (2009)	Questionnaire survey of the patients in Psychotherapy Outpatient	The effect of forgiveness and gratitude on well-being, and whether the relationship was mediated by affect and belief	Both forgiveness and gratitude had strong and positive relationship with well-being, and was mostly mediated by affect and belief.
Tsang (2006a)	Experimental study	Adopting the method different from the past which was often used like script of and self-reporting. Tsang triggered gratitude in the lab and measured the influence of gratitude on prosocial behaviors. In addition, Knowing whether gratitude was equivalent to positive emotion.	One was more likely to have gratitude when receiving a favor from others, rather than receiving a favor by accident. The favor from others could inspire the motivation of prosocial behavior to the benefactor.
Tsang (2006b)	Experimental study	The influence of intention of the helper on gratitude and indebtedness	When comparing benevolence and unknown motivations, Tsang found that, if the helper extended help with the motivation of benevolence, the one being helped was more likely to feel gratified. Nevertheless, there were no difference between the influences of benevolence and unknown motivations of the helper on indebtedness. When comparing selfishness and unselfishness motivation, Tsang found that, if the helper extended help with unselfish motivation, the one being helped was

Author and Publication Year	Method	Theme	Findings
			more likely to feel gratified. Nevertheless, there were no difference between the influences of selfishness and unselfishness of the helper on indebtedness. The findings indicated that gratitude and indebtedness were two different emotions.
Unsworth, Turner, Williams and Piccin-Houle (2010)	Interview and online questionnaire	Study on the emotion and expression of gratitude, and the relationship between postgraduates and their professors in the context of relationship.	There was positive correlation between the altruistic behavior and value of behavior of professors and gratitude of their postgraduates. Such a conclusion was true in the context of work relationships with low trust rather than with high trust.
Weinstein, DeHaan and Ryan (2010)	Reading a script and answering open-ended questions	Influence of the spontaneous motivation of the helper and the controlled motivation on the one being helped	The one being helped received the extended help with spontaneous motivation was more likely to feel gratitude than that with controlled motivation. Help with spontaneous motivation could predict positive attitude and affect, as well as intimate feeling of the one being helped. Gratitude played a mediating role in the influence of spontaneous help on the positive attitude, well-being, and intimate feeling of the one being helped.
Wood, Joseph and Maltby (2008a)	Questionnaire of 389 adults	Predictive ability of gratitude to life satisfaction	After controlling the Big Five domains of personality, gratitude could explain 9% more variance of life satisfaction. After controlling the Big Five all facets of personality, gratitude could explain 8% more variance of life satisfaction.
Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley and Joseph (2008b)	Longitudinal field study and questionnaire	Correlation among gratitude, social support, stress, and frustration	The direct model obtained support. Gratitude could gain higher social support, and reduce stress and frustration.
Wood, Maltby, Stewart and Joseph (2008c)	Questionnaire	Structure of gratitude and appreciation	Analysis of the exploratory factors indicated that gratitude and appreciation were the same factor. Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis also indicated that gratitude and appreciation were a single-factor structure, and for respondents of different genders, such structure did not change. The author suggested that literature on gratitude and appreciation could be integrated.
Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley	Experiment of reading essays	Establishing the mechanism to connect the	Those with high characteristics of gratitude had more positive beneficial

Author and Publication Year	Method	Theme	Findings
and Joseph (2008d)		characteristics of gratitude, objective context, and state of gratitude	appraisal on the help from others, resulting in a higher state of gratitude. More positive beneficial appraisal included the consideration that the help from others was more valuable, and was given with more costs and stronger altruistic intention. Such positive beneficial appraisal fully mediated the relationship between the characteristics and state of gratitude. Moreover, objective contexts with high and low benefits would influence the state of gratitude through beneficial appraisal.
Wood, Joseph and Maltby (2009)	Questionnaire	Predictive ability of gratitude to psychological well-being	The predictive ability of gratitude to psychological well-being was stronger than that of the 30 facets of Big Five of personality.

Conclusion

Gratitude is often used in everyday life; however, the users of gratitude lack correct concepts because very few studies on gratitude, and insufficient attention was paid to such significant emotion. Certainly, it is a pity that gratitude is not properly utilized in life and organization management. Through examining past studies on gratitude, this study obtains a clearer concept of gratitude. Additionally, we know the favorable results of gratitude which should be well utilized; surely, the findings also could prevent the occurrence of negative results of gratitude. Moreover, fully understanding the influencing factors of gratitude is beneficial to managers to propose strategies that can inspire gratitude. To sum up, this study is helpful to effectively interpret and manage the attitudes and behaviors of gratitude.

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