

Meaningfulness in Life Span Perspectives: An Overview

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Abstract

Studies related to meaning in life and its relation to wellbeing of individuals' physical and mental health has been investigated in this review. Meaning in life describes about the value of one's life. According to Frankl (1984) meaning in life stands for the natural need for people to find conscious meaning in their lives to live a healthy and well-adapted life and struggle for a sense of significance and purpose in life. Further it has been defined in terms of belief in a purposeful pattern of the universe, which in turn may be defined from religion and spirituality (Yalom, 1980). This paper focuses on the findings of the studies carried out during the last five years (2009-2014) in the field of health and wellbeing that describe the relationship between meaning in life and health. Studies have identified meaning in life to be an important construct for both general as well as clinical population. It contributes appreciably in the development of life's goal of an individual. Recognition of meaning in life plays a crucial role in the phase of crisis. As a positive psychological construct it also works as a resource for an individual. Meaning in life also predicts health behaviours. Higher meaning in life was associated with less engagement in health risking behaviours and better physical health. Conclusion and suggestions for future research are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Meaning in life is considered as a binary construct having both existential and positive psychological characteristics. Existential philosophers and psychologists have argued that the experience of meaning in life lies at the heart of human existence. Most of the researcher defined meaning in life as a belief of an individual which is in a purposeful pattern of the universe, and sense that life is meaningful (Yalom, 1980; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Frankl (1984) defined it as a natural need for people to find conscious meaning which leads a healthy and well-adapted life. Meaning in life includes the main motivational principle that describes struggle for a sense of significance and purpose in life. Purpose in life can be considered as a feeling of people for their meaning to present and past life goals in life with a sense of directedness and upholding a belief that gives purpose to the life (Ryff, 1989). Shwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) defined it as a positively valanced framework of beliefs about the coherence of the world and one's own life which bring a sense of wonder

and joy in living. Steger (2009) elucidate that “....at its heart it refers to people's beliefs that their lives are significant and that they transcend the ephemeral present (p. 680)”.

METHODOLOGY

Inclusion criteria and Exclusion criteria

The review deals the findings of the studies carried out for the period of the last five years (2009-2014) particularly in the field of health and wellbeing that throw light on the relationship of meaning in life with health and wellbeing. The findings prior to the period of 2009 and the studies allied to gerontology and organizational psychology are excluded from the review.

Search strategies and article selection

Standard review methodology was followed. PubMed, PsycINFO databases, Science Direct, Springer and Jstor were consulted for the findings related to the meaning in life and its relationship with individuals' mental health and wellbeing. Google and Google Scholar, and several online journals focusing on the meaning in life and its association with individuals' mental health and wellbeing were also considered for review. Several search keys such as meaning in life, sense of coherence, purpose in life, sense of meaning in life, meaningfulness, presence and search of meaning in life, meaning in life and well-being / mental health / psychosocial functioning / life satisfaction / cancer / smoking / internalizing and externalizing problem etc. are used to search the relevant articles.

Sample

The sample size of the different studies included in this review varied from N=10 to 8756. The small sample size was included basically in qualitative studies and longitudinal studies mainly focus to the large group of individuals. The studies were conducted on adolescent to old age group to find out their meaning in life.

Method and measures

Basically to assess the meaning in life researchers used both important methods i.e., qualitative and quantitative. Longitudinal and cross sectional, both types of studies were conducted to assess the meaning in life and wellbeing of individuals. This construct is dualistic in nature so some researchers assessed this construct with the help of established and standardized tools while others used self developed measures as per requirement of the study. Studies from 2009 to 2014 were included. Total 28 studies fulfilling the inclusion criteria were reviewed. Results of the studies are given in the Table 1.

MEANING IN LIFE AND WELL-BEING

Well-being phenomena cover two approaches within self such as hedonic and eudiamonic approach of well-being. It is well known that hedonic approach focuses on the subjective happiness or positive mood, while eudiamonic approach focuses on a deeper sense of flourishing. Meaning in life has been recognized as a basic dimension of eudiamonic wellbeing. From this perspective Ryff and Keyes (1995) anticipated meaning in life as a critical component of mental health and personal growth.

Stress and coping literature considers meaning in life as a person's belief about meaningfulness and purposefulness of one's own life. Reker and Wong (1988) proposed meaning in life as cognitive phenomenon with motivational and affective consequences which regulates the impact of stress on health or act as a buffer. Park and Folkman (1997) discriminate meaning as global and situational. Global meaning refers to individuals' general orienting system (Pargament, 1997), which allows them to observe their current reality, imagine alternative realities, interpret the past, anticipate the future and then direct their behaviour accordingly. Situational meaning is related to specific experiences of life events.

As such global meaning has potent impact on health and emotional well-being in both ordinary times and times of crisis. In stressful encounters, global meaning informs the ways people appraise the significance of situations in terms of their relevance and implications (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Global meaning system includes beliefs, goals and subjective feelings of purpose or meaning in life (Dittman-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000; Park & Folkman, 1997). These are the core schemas through which people interpret their experiences including beliefs. Goals may be desired future states or states already possessed that one desires to maintain (Karoly, 1999; Klinger, 1998). Global goals are internal representations of ultimate concerns (Emmons, 2005). The last part of this system i.e., subjective sense of meaning refers to feeling of meaningfulness, direction or purpose in life.

Table 1. Studies investigating the meaning in life and well-being

Studies citation /Author & year	Sample characteristics	Measures	Main Findings
Steger et al. (2009)	N=8756(Emerging Adults (18–24 years) n=1229; Young Adults (25–44 years) n=3649; Middle-Age Adults (35–64 years) n=3715; & Older Adults (over 65 years) n=163)	DMS MLQ	More meaning in life people reported, the greater well-being they experienced, at all life stages.
Steger et al. (2009)	N=99(smoking cessation group patients)	MLQ	People higher in search for meaning reported worse health and greater anxiety while people with high search for meaning and high presence of meaning reported no more anxiety and reported fairly better health.
Stillman, et al. (2009).	N = 643	MLQ	Life loses meaning following social exclusion.
Cotton Bronk et al. (2009).	N=806 (153 adolescents, 237 emerging adults, and 416 adults)	RYPS	Purpose in life was associated with greater life satisfaction. However, searching for a purpose was associated with increased life satisfaction during adolescence and emerging adulthood.
Halama et al., (2009)	N=204 (Slovakian university students)	LMS	meaning in life act as a moderator of the relationship between perceived stress and avoidant coping. Higher meaning in life was associated with less avoidant coping while in the case of higher avoidant coping meaning becomes less useful against coping with stress among individuals.
Koushede et al., (2009)	N=1393(Denmark, 7 th & 8 th grade students)	SOC	High meaning in life was associated with low sedative use.
Oztekin et al., (2009)	N=376 (169 female, 206 male, and 1 missing value) Turkish adolescents	SOC*	Meaning in life was positively associated with health enhancing behaviours
Kernan et al., (2009)	N=72	PIL	At base line level a higher level of search for meaning in life was found to be associated with a higher level of negative affect. Women who engaged in an ongoing, unresolved search for meaning from baseline to follow-up also had a significantly higher level of negative affect at follow-up than women who infrequently or never engaged in a search for meaning over time
Baiocco et al. (2009)			meaning in life is negatively associated with psychological symptoms

Cohen et al. (2010)	N=106	MLQ	High level of search of meaning in life was associated with clinical levels of depression. On the other hand, high level of presence of meaning in life was found to be associated with higher subjective wellbeing.
Farghadani et al. (2010).	N=216 (divorced women, Iran)	Developed by researcher	Meaning in life was positively associated with sociability of divorced women.
Bhattacharya (2011)	N=10 (Indian youth)	LRI	The participants who reported clear meaning and purpose in life were found to be happier.
Brassai et al. (2011)	N=2152 (Romanian adolescents)	MLQ	Meaning in life played a protective role with regard to minimize health risking behaviours.
Korte et al. (2012)	N=202 (Dutch older)	MLQ	Meaning in life mediated the relation between psychological distress and well-being.
Krause et al. (2012)		Meaning in life comprised of four dimensions: value, purpose, goals and reflections on the past (from Battista & Almond, 1973; Wong, 1998)	Meaning in life was associated with reduced functional disability.
Moksens et al. (2012)	N=1209 (adolescents 13–18 years from Mid Norway)	SOC*	Meaning in life to be higher among males than females.
Cohen et al. (2012)	N=500 (Australian)	MLQ	High level of searching for meaning was associated with lower value of wellbeing while higher level of presence was associated with higher well-being of individuals
Dogan et al. (2012).	N=232 (Turkish)	MLQ	Presence of meaning in life predicted greater subjective wellbeing, while search of meaning in life indicated negative predictors
García-Alandete et al. (2013)	N=226 (Spanish)	PIL	Meaning in life was a strong predictor of psychological wellbeing and Women were significantly higher on psychological wellbeing than men
Thege et al. (2013)	N=4,294 (Hungarian)	BSCI-LM	Meaning in life scores were found to be higher in stable non-smokers in comparison to stable smokers
Pasarra et al. (2013)	N=511	LAP-R (Reker, 1992)	Meaning in life reduced the physical disability and made people easy with adaptation towards physical disability

Saraf et al. (2013) Qualitative	N=10 (Indian)	Semi structure interview + narrative analysis	Meaning in life was strongly mediated by faith in God and increased religiosity which facilitated hope and resilience. Strong support systems further enhanced meaning in life.
Hedayati et al. (2014)	N=214 (56male, 158 female, Allameh Tabatabaei University Students)	MLQ	Meaning in life reduced the mental health problems as depression of adolescents.
Henry et al. (2014).	N= 2,936 (6th–12 th Grade American students)	MLQ	Weaker meaning in life was associated with more frequent suicidal ideation
Steger et al. (2014)	N=571 (European American undergraduate)	MLQ	Higher meaning in life reduced engagement in health risking behaviours.
(Dezutter, et al., (2014).	N=273 (Belgian chronic pain patients)	MLQ	High levels of presence of meaning resulted in fewer depressive symptoms and greater life satisfaction.
Dezutter et al., (2014)	N=8492 (American)	MLQ	Presence of meaning showed the most adaptive psychosocial functioning, while search for meaning was associated with maladaptive psychosocial functioning.
Machell, et al., (2014).	N=162 (College students (68% women; Mage=21.65, SD = 2.36)	DMS	Positive daily social and achievement events were related to greater daily meaning. People who reported more depressive symptoms had greater increases in daily meaning in response to positive social and achievement events than individuals who reported fewer symptoms.

Full form of all scales: Meaning in life Questionnaire (MLQ, Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Keler, 2006); The Daily Meaning Scale (DMS, Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2007); The Life Meaningfulness Scale (LMS, Halama, 2002); Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC, Antonovsky, 1987*; Antonovsky, 1993); Purpose in Life test (PIL, Crumbaugh, 1977); Revised Life Regard Index (LRI-R, Harris, & Standard, 2001); Life Regard Index (LRI, Debats, Van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993); Meaning Subscale of Brief Stress and Coping Inventory (BSCI-LM, Rahe & Tolles, 2002); Revised Youth Purpose Survey (RYPS, Bundick et al., 2006); Life Attitude Profile—Revised (LAP-R, Reker, 1992). Daily Meaning Scale (DMS; Steger et al., 2008).

Cross-sectional Studies

Steger, Oishi and Kashdan (2009) reported that presence of meaning enhance wellbeing among all age groups and older people report more meaning in their life. Result also revealed that search for meaning was associated with lower wellbeing especially in older people. Steger, Mann, Michels, and Cooper (2009) conducted a study on smoking cessation

patients and reported that people higher in search for meaning reported worse health and greater anxiety while people with high search for meaning and high presence of meaning reported no more anxiety and reported fairly better health.

To assess the meaning in life of adolescents (n=153), emerging adults (n=237), and adults (n=416), Cotton Bronk et al. (2009) used Revised Youth Purpose Survey method (RYPS, Bundick et al., 2006). Purpose in life was found to be positively associated with greater life satisfaction. However, searching for a purpose increased the life satisfaction of people during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Halama and Bakosova (2009) investigated the role of meaning in life between perceived stress and coping on general population. They drawn the sample (N=204; 44 male and 160 female students) from Slovakian university. Meaning in life acted as a moderator of the relationship between perceived stress and avoidant coping but not for emotion based coping. Higher meaning in life was associated with less avoidant coping, while in the case of higher avoidant coping meaning becomes less useful against coping with stress among individuals.

Brassai, Piko, and Steger (2011) examined the protective role of meaning in life among Romanian adolescents (N=2152). Meaning in life played a protective role with regard to minimize health risking behaviours. Findings revealed that meaninglessness was associated with a poor psychological health (high psychosomatic symptoms, poor psychological well-being, and quality of life). A gender difference was observed, among females lower levels of meaning in life enhanced poor psychological well-being and quality of life as well as higher levels of psychosomatic symptoms. Among males, lower levels of meaning in life were increased the poor perception of quality of life and psychosomatic symptoms. Several studies have reported that meaning in life is negatively associated with psychological problems (Baiocco, Crea, Fizzotti, Gurrieri, Laghi & Paola, 2009) and mediate the relation between psychological distress and wellbeing (Korte, Cappelliez, Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2012).

Studies associated with adolescents suggested that meaning in life played a role in protecting adolescents from risking behaviours that harm their health. Meaning in life was found to be negatively associated with sedative use (Koushede & Holstein, 2009) and positively associated with health enhancing behaviour as physical activity (Oztekin & Tezer, 2009). Studies regarding gender showed meaning in life to be higher among males than females (Moksens, Espnes & Lillefjell, 2012).

Pasarra and Kleftaras (2013) assessed the role of meaning in life and depression in adaptation to physical disability. The sample (N=511) was quite heterogeneous having various types of physical disability (paraplegia 34.3%, quadriplegia 16.9%, amputation 24.3%, poliomyelitis 20.9%, multiple sclerosis 2.3% & hemiplegia 1.3%) and also with

wide age range from 19-78 years. For measurement of meaning in life the Greek version of Revised Life Attitude Profile consisted of 48-item was used (Reker, 1992). Reported Cronbach's alpha for adopted version was .89. Results indicated that meaning in life reduced the physical disability and made people easy with adaptation towards physical disability.

An enlightening study about the role of meaning in life in the relationship between bullying victimization and suicidal ideation among US adolescents was done by Henry, Lovegrove, Steger, Chen, Cigularov, and Tomazic (2014). They studied the two potential mechanisms i.e., mediator and moderator by which meaning in life may clarify the relationship between bullying victimization and suicidal ideation. The study reported that bullying victimization was associated with weaker meaning in life and further weaker meaning in life was associated with more frequent suicidal ideation. In this study dissimilar role of meaning in life for male and female was outlined. There was moderation role of meaning in life for males and mediation role of meaning in life for females which indicated that it served as buffering factor for males but not for females between bullying victimization and suicidal ideation. Meaning in life reduced the mental health problems as depression of adolescents (Hedayati & Khazaei, 2014).

Steger, Fitch-Martin, Donnelly and Rickard (2014) assessed the association between meaning in life and risking behaviours (i.e., substance use), of European American undergraduate students (N=571, 75% female; $M_{age}=20.83$ years). For meaning in life only MLQ-presence subscale (Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Keler, 2006) having Cronbach's $\alpha=.86$, was used. The study explored an alternative explanation about the facilitative role of meaning in life towards a more positive health orientation which in turn might inhibit health-risking behaviours and increase health-promoting behaviours and ultimately health. Higher meaning in life reduced engagement in health risking behaviours that further enhanced physical health. Mediation analysis revealed meaning in life to be associated with more beneficial health orientation and less with health information denial.

Dezutter et al. (2014) investigated a person-oriented approach of meaning in life in emerging adulthood. The study included American emerging adults (N=8492, 72.5% women, 27.5% men). Both presence and search for meaning in life (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Keler, 2006) was found to be positively associated with psychosocial functioning. They reported that presence of meaning showed the most adaptive psychosocial functioning while search for meaning was associated with maladaptive psychosocial functioning of these people.

Machell, Kashdan, Short, and Nezelek, (2014) conducted a study on 162 college students and examined the relationships of daily social and achievement events, and daily positive and negative affect with daily meaning in life. They also assessed the moderating influence of

depressive symptoms on these relationships. Results revealed that positive daily social and achievement events were related to greater daily meaning. Negative social and achievement events were related to less daily meaning. Depression moderated the relationships between positive events and meaning, such that people who reported more depressive symptoms had greater increase in daily meaning in response to positive social and achievement events than individuals who reported fewer symptoms. These findings suggest the important role that daily events may play in fluctuations in people's affective experiences and sense of meaning in life.

Longitudinal Studies

A longitudinal study on women (N=72) primarily diagnosed with breast cancer, revealed that at base line level a higher level of search for meaning in life was found to be associated with a higher level of negative affect. Women who engaged in an ongoing unresolved search for meaning from baseline to follow-up also had a significantly higher level of negative affect at follow-up than women who infrequently or never engaged in a search for meaning over time (Kernan & Lepore, 2009).

Krause and Hayward (2012) conducted a nationwide longitudinal survey of older adults including six wave of data collection from 1992-2007 for assessing the role of religion and meaning in life in physical functioning. The scales, which were used for the assessment of meaning in life comprised of four dimensions such as value, purpose, goals and reflections on the past (from Battista & Almond, 1973; Wong, 1998) as well as indicators developed by Krause (2004) were used for data collection. The study revealed that older adults, who attended church more often, feel closer relationship with God and they provided emotional support to their social network members. Providing support to others was found to be very important factor because attitude of providing emotional support tended to bolster the sense of meaning in life, which in turn reduced the functional disability over time.

Thege, Urban, and Kopp (2013) conducted a four-year prospective evaluation of the relationship between meaning in life and smoking status of Hungarian adults (N=4,294, $M_{age}=54.7+-16.5$). The aim of the study was to assess the predictive power of life meaning construct concerning changes in smoking status. For assessing the meaning in Life, Meaning subscale from the Brief Stress and Coping Inventory (BSCI-LM, Rahe & Tolles, 2002) was used. The result unfold that both baseline and follow-up meaning in life scores were found to be higher in stable non-smokers in comparison to stable smokers. On the other side, quitters and starters differed from stable non smokers in their baseline but not in follow-up life meaning scores. Study also indicated some other demographic factors, i.e., gender and education to have importance in context of smoking behaviour.

Another crucial longitudinal study explored the relationship between meaning in life and adjustment to chronic pain in a three-wave, 2 year, of 273 Belgian chronic pain patients. They examined the directionality of the relationships among the meaning in life dimensions (Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning) and indicators of adjustment (depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, pain intensity, and pain medication use). Presence of Meaning was found to be an important predictor of well-being. High levels of presence of meaning resulted in fewer depressive symptoms and greater life satisfaction. These findings point to meaningfulness as an important factor in the psychological adjustment of pain patients. Secondly, they used a typological methodology to distinguish meaning in life profiles, and the relationship of individual meaning in life profiles with indicators of adjustment. Five meaning in life profiles emerged: High Presence High Search, High Presence Low Search, Moderate Presence Moderate Search, Low Presence Low Search, and Low Presence High Search. Each meaning in life profile was found to be positively associated with a unique adjustment outcome. Profiles that scored high on Presence of Meaning showed more optimal adjustment. The profiles showed little change over time and did not moderate the satisfaction. It seems that experiencing meaning in life is an important factor for optimal adjustment. Patients in the High Presence Low Search and in the High Presence High Search profile showed more optimal adjustment to their pain condition as compared to their counterparts in the other profiles. This pattern was especially prominent for the psychological variables (depressive symptoms, life satisfaction) indicating that experiencing meaning is more important for psychological adjustment than for the physical experience (Dezutter, Luyckx, & Wachholtz, 2014).

Qualitative Studies

Bhattacharya (2011) examined the relationship between meaning in life and subjective wellbeing of Indian youth (N=10, Age 23-28 years). Study attempted to know the concept of meaning in life as perceived by the youth in the Indian scenario. A semi structured interview with Life Regard Index (LRI- 28item) was conducted to gather the responses with the help of Grounded theory. Diverse topics concerning the construct of meaning in life, meaninglessness, happiness and unhappiness were made. For instance, the themes of meaning in life centred on sense of worth and self efficacy, fulfilment of aims and goals, self growth, beliefs in Indian philosophy, life having inherent meaning, attainment of peace, hope as giving meaning in life etc. Topics of meaning in life were connected to the ups and downs in life that usually lead to meaninglessness, uncertainty about the future, loss in relationship. Topic of happiness focused on emotion of peace, time spent with loved one, achievement in carrier and having a purpose in life etc. On the other hand, topics related to unhappiness were emotional turmoil, sense of loss, feeling of loneliness, unhappy memories and feeling of failures. Findings revealed that meaning in life spans a huge time space in which not only individuals' past experiences but also their future plans cause the

way they endow with meaning to their life. Findings highlighted the cultural context in which the meaning in life appeared to be an important predictor of subjective wellbeing of youth. Youth who reported clear meaning and purpose in life were found to be happier in life than those who experienced meaninglessness from the uncertainty about future of life. Result indicates that youths' lives experiences and present life situations create impact on their interpretations regarding the meaning in life.

In a narrative analysis, Saraf, Singh and Khurana (2013) performed an investigation on Indian sample of cervical cancer patients to measure the association of meaning in life with long term treatment, recovery and survivorship of women patients (N=10, age 35-60 years) belonged to post treatment stage. A semi structured interview was designed to measure the meaning in life before the diagnosis of cancer, meaning in life in current situation, experiences and significant others that influenced the patients since the diagnosis of cancer, change in perception of life since cancer diagnosis and their recovery, role of spirituality since cancer diagnosis and recovery, and purpose, hopes and future plans. Thematic Apperception Test was used to assess the purpose of the study. Findings were interpreted in terms of themes (for example, distress during treatment, post treatment distress, renewed meaning in life, support system, faith and religiosity, hope and purpose) that were come out on the narratives from the life experiences of the subjects. Subjects experienced life being predestined and guided by fate. In few cases, the realization of immortality resulted in peace and satisfaction. This transformed meaning was strongly mediated by faith in God and increased religiosity which facilitated hope and resilience. Strong support systems further enhanced meaning in their lives. However, underlying factors like fatigue, fear of recurrence of the disease and perceived burden continue to be worrying factors for them. On the other hand, few subjects who sensed a preoccupation with somatic complaints and ambivalent feelings toward God, experienced a sense of meaninglessness, lack of purpose and diminished hope. They most often used defence mechanisms such as sublimation, reaction formation, undoing, displacement and projection.

CONCLUSION

Researches in the area of positive psychology have painted the beneficial impact of meaning in life on health and well-being of people. The construct of meaning in life is found be positively associated with different positive psychological variable such as optimism, hope, spirituality, positive emotions, feeling of fulfilment etc. Researchers have identified it as an important predictor of health and well-being. It operates in a different way among different age group especially in the phase of calamity. To draw the clear picture there is need to open the thread of culture in which individuals grow and acquire meaning in their life. Family dynamics of an individual may also be indentified in the acquisition of meaningfulness of life because the characteristics and constituents of a family may also have an influence on

the development of meaning in life of individuals. Findings generally revealed adolescents to be involved deeply in the search of meaning in life and elderly people reported greater importance for the presence of meaning in their life.

The studies regarding presence and search of meaning in life generally indicated that higher search of meaning in life to be associated with maladaptive psychosocial functioning of individuals while higher presence of meaning in life contributed in adaptive psychosocial functioning and associated with greater sense of well-being. Studies also indicates that some times search is higher and there is no effect on subjective wellbeing of individual so it is point of assessment that why it does so.

Studies reported gender difference regarding meaning in life. Male experienced greater meaning in life than females. Females reported greater search of meaning in life while males reported greater presence of meaning in life. Meaning in life also predicted health behaviours and illness. High meaning in life reduced the tendency of the engagement in health risking behaviours of adolescents and also enhanced physical and mental health. Review regarding the meaning in life indicated that most of the studies are cross-sectional in nature which does little help in understanding the direction of influence, longitudinal studies may be conducted to reveal the role of presence and search for meaning in life for different developmental period. The results related to meaning in life and personality of an individual may be helpful in better understanding of psychosocial adjustment of normal people. By revealing this aspect new insight can be gained. Role of cultural factors in the acquisition, development, and maintenance of meaning in life of people may also be explored in some qualitative analyses.

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