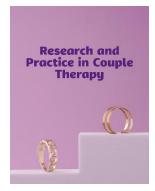


Co-Parenting Disagreement and Marital Detachment: The Mediating Role of Perceived Injustice

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of perceived injustice in the relationship between co-parenting disagreement and marital detachment among married individuals actively involved in childrearing. A descriptive

correlational research design was employed, involving a sample of 405 married participants from Hungary, selected using Krejcie and Morgan's sample size determination table. Data were collected using standard questionnaires: the Co-Parenting Relationship Scale (Disagreement subscale), the Injustice Experience Questionnaire (IEQ), and the Marital Disaffection Scale. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS-27 for descriptive and Pearson correlation statistics and AMOS-24 for structural equation modeling (SEM). Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, and the significance of mediation was tested using the bootstrap method. Pearson correlation results indicated that co-parenting disagreement was significantly and positively associated with both perceived injustice (r = .53, p < .001) and marital detachment (r = .48, p < .001), while perceived injustice was also positively correlated with marital detachment (r = .56, p < .001). SEM results showed that the model had an acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.04$, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.051). Co-parenting disagreement significantly predicted perceived injustice ($\beta = 0.53$, p < .001), and perceived injustice significantly predicted marital detachment ($\beta = 0.56$, p < .001). A significant partial mediation effect was observed, with an indirect path from co-parenting disagreement to marital detachment through perceived injustice ($\beta = 0.30$, p < .001), and a total effect of $\beta = 0.66$ (p < .001). The results highlight the central role of perceived injustice as a cognitive mechanism that links co-parenting conflict to emotional detachment in marriage. Addressing justice appraisals in couple and family interventions may be critical in mitigating relational disengagement.

Keywords: Co-parenting disagreement; perceived injustice; marital detachment.

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Introduction

Marital detachment, characterized by emotional disconnection, erosion of intimacy, and diminished mutual responsiveness, is a critical phenomenon that contributes to the deterioration of relational quality and long-term marital instability. A growing body of research has linked psychological disengagement between spouses to underlying interpersonal stressors and unresolved conflict patterns, particularly within the co-parenting context (Ysidron et al., 2020). When parenting-related conflicts persist without resolution, they not only compromise child outcomes but also intensify emotional alienation between partners, which may eventually manifest as marital detachment. As contemporary families navigate increasingly complex roles in childrearing, understanding the psychological and relational factors that bridge co-parenting difficulties and marital estrangement becomes essential.

One of the key relational stressors identified in post-parenthood dynamics is co-parenting disagreement, which refers to the frequency and intensity of conflict between partners regarding parenting strategies, discipline, responsibilities, and expectations



(Woine et al., 2023). These disagreements are not limited to divergent views about child management but often reflect deeper issues such as misaligned values, perceived inequality in parenting efforts, and power struggles within the relationship (Villanueva-Flores et al., 2017). When such disagreements are frequent or unresolved, they can foster frustration, resentment, and emotional distance—eventually spilling over into broader marital dissatisfaction and detachment. Studies suggest that coparenting conflict is uniquely predictive of long-term relationship strain beyond general marital discord, indicating the need for focused investigation into its psychological implications (Sarwar & Muhammad, 2020).

However, not all couples experiencing co-parenting conflict exhibit equal degrees of marital detachment, suggesting that mediating psychological processes may influence how such conflict is internalized. One such mechanism increasingly recognized in psychological literature is **perceived injustice**—a subjective appraisal that one has been treated unfairly, disrespected, or devalued within a relational context (Trost et al., 2019). This construct is rooted in cognitive appraisal theories and social comparison frameworks, where individuals judge the fairness of interpersonal exchanges and relational outcomes (Bohmann & Kalleitner, 2023). In romantic and parenting relationships, the perception of injustice may stem from unequal workload distribution, lack of appreciation, or perceived emotional neglect. Such appraisals can intensify emotional responses such as anger, hopelessness, and withdrawal, fostering detachment and disengagement from the partner (Dupré et al., 2010).

Recent scholarship has emphasized the significant role perceived injustice plays in shaping negative emotional and behavioral outcomes across diverse domains, including occupational, medical, and familial settings. In the context of health, for instance, perceived injustice has been associated with greater psychological distress, poorer recovery outcomes, and maladaptive coping strategies (Pavilanis et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2022). In interpersonal relationships, it has been linked to aggression, diminished empathy, and social withdrawal (Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018; Qin & Zhang, 2022). These findings converge on the notion that injustice appraisals are not merely reflections of external events but potent internal processes that shape how individuals react to relational stressors. In families, when one partner perceives the co-parenting dynamic as unjust—whether due to unequal distribution of effort or emotional support—such perceptions may evoke bitterness and emotional detachment, particularly when sustained over time (Alizadehfard, 2020).

The mediating role of perceived injustice has also been supported by research into how relational dynamics translate into emotional and cognitive consequences. For example, Trost et al. (2017) demonstrated that perceived injustice significantly mediated the relationship between injury-related stressors and emotional outcomes in patients, with anger serving as an intermediate affective response (Trost et al., 2017). This mediational framework aligns with cognitive-emotional theories that view perceived injustice as a lens through which individuals interpret and respond to adversity. In co-parenting relationships, one partner may interpret the other's behavior—such as inconsistent parenting, lack of engagement, or decision-making dominance—as unfair, ultimately leading to psychological distancing and erosion of marital connection (Baert et al., 2020). The same mechanisms appear in parental burnout, where unaddressed injustice appraisals intensify cognitive exhaustion and emotional withdrawal (Woine et al., 2023).

Furthermore, perceived injustice is often exacerbated by gender role expectations and societal norms regarding parenting responsibilities. Empirical work shows that mothers often report higher levels of perceived injustice when they perceive their caregiving contributions as overlooked or underappreciated by their partners (Baert et al., 2020; Nijs et al., 2021). Such perceptions are not only internalized but also perpetuated by structural imbalances in time allocation, emotional labor, and decision-making authority. Over time, these perceived inequities may shift the emotional tone of the marriage, particularly when one partner consistently feels devalued in their contributions. These dynamics resonate with broader social justice models that link micro-level interpersonal injustice to macro-level patterns of inequality and psychological distress (Zechmann et al., 2019).

In addition to contributing to emotional disengagement, perceived injustice may interact with coping mechanisms and meaning-making strategies, further influencing marital outcomes. For instance, individuals who appraise relational interactions as unjust may be more likely to ruminate, suppress emotions, or disengage from communication—each of which weakens relational cohesion and trust (Secinti et al., 2022). Moreover, relational contexts marked by repeated invalidation or imbalance tend to restrict opportunities for meaning-making and forgiveness, fostering chronic emotional wounds that sustain detachment (Emmelkamp et al., 2020). This is particularly salient in long-term relationships where unresolved injustice perceptions accumulate over time and transform into rigid cognitive schemas about the partner's intentions and the viability of the relationship itself (Roshdy & Zhou, 2020).

Integrating these strands of evidence, it becomes evident that co-parenting disagreement may not directly cause marital detachment in a linear manner, but rather through cognitive-affective mediators such as perceived injustice. This framework is consistent with multi-level relational models that emphasize the interaction of structural stressors (e.g., role conflict), individual appraisals (e.g., fairness judgments), and relational outcomes (e.g., emotional disconnection) (Ysidron et al., 2020). As couples navigate co-parenting complexities, their interpretation of relational equity—particularly how justly responsibilities and emotional labor are distributed—plays a pivotal role in shaping emotional closeness or distance. When justice perceptions are negative and unaddressed, the likelihood of marital withdrawal and detachment increases substantially (Sullivan et al., 2022).

Despite the theoretical robustness of this model, empirical research directly linking co-parenting disagreement, perceived injustice, and marital detachment remains sparse. Prior studies have largely examined these constructs in isolation or within broader marital satisfaction frameworks without isolating the mediating pathways. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by investigating whether perceived injustice mediates the relationship between co-parenting disagreement and marital detachment among couples from Hungary.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to investigate the mediating role of perceived injustice in the relationship between co-parenting disagreement and marital detachment. The target population included married individuals residing in Hungary who were actively co-parenting at the time of data collection. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 405 participants was deemed adequate for correlational and structural equation analyses. Participants were recruited through online social media parenting forums and family counseling centers via convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria consisted of being legally married, having at least one child under the age of 18, and both spouses being involved in childrearing responsibilities. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Measures

To assess marital detachment, the study employed the Marital Disaffection Scale developed by Kayser (1993). This instrument is widely used to measure emotional estrangement in marital relationships. The scale consists of 21 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), capturing the degree of emotional disconnection, loss of affection, and relational indifference between spouses. It includes three subscales: emotional distance, loss of intimacy, and indifference. Higher scores indicate greater levels of marital detachment. The Marital Disaffection Scale has demonstrated robust psychometric properties, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.84 to 0.92 in previous studies, confirming its internal consistency and construct validity across diverse populations.

Co-parenting disagreement was measured using the Co-Parenting Relationship Scale developed by Feinberg, Brown, and Kan (2012), which evaluates the quality and dynamics of the co-parenting relationship. The full version of the CRS includes 35 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). For this study, the "Disagreement" subscale—comprising 6 items—was specifically used to measure the extent of conflict and disagreement between parents in managing childrearing responsibilities. Higher scores reflect more frequent or intense co-parenting disagreements. The CRS has shown excellent psychometric properties in both clinical and community samples, with Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.80 and strong support for convergent and discriminant validity in family research.

To evaluate perceived injustice, the study utilized the Injustice Experience Questionnaire (IEQ) developed by Sullivan et al. (2008). Originally designed to assess injustice appraisals in the context of chronic pain, the IEQ has been effectively adapted for interpersonal and relational contexts involving perceived unfairness. The questionnaire includes 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (all the time), with two core subscales: severity of loss and blame/unfairness. Higher total scores indicate a stronger sense of perceived injustice in relational experiences. The IEQ has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha typically reported above 0.90, and strong evidence of convergent and criterion-related validity in studies of interpersonal stress and perceived relational trauma.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 for descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses, and AMOS version 24 for structural equation modeling (SEM). First, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (marital detachment) and each independent variable (co-parenting disagreement and perceived injustice). Then, SEM was applied to evaluate the proposed mediating model and assess model fit. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Chi-square/degrees of freedom (χ^2 /df) ratio. A bootstrapping procedure (n = 2,000 samples) was used to test the significance of indirect effects.

Findings and Results

The sample included 405 married participants from Hungary, consisting of 186 males (45.93%) and 219 females (54.07%). Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 51 years, with a mean age of 37.18 years (SD = 5.64). Regarding education, 58 participants (14.32%) had completed secondary education, 204 (50.37%) held a bachelor's degree, and 143 (35.31%) had postgraduate qualifications. The majority (n = 289, 71.36%) were employed full-time, while 71 (17.53%) were part-time employed, and 45 (11.11%) were unemployed or homemakers. The average length of marriage was 11.42 years (SD = 4.97), and all participants reported having at least one child under the age of 18, with a mean of 1.83 children per family.

Prior to conducting correlation and SEM analyses, the assumptions for parametric tests were evaluated and met. Normality was assessed through skewness and kurtosis statistics, with all variables falling within the acceptable range of ± 1.5 (e.g., marital detachment skewness = 0.41, kurtosis = -0.62; perceived injustice skewness = 0.37, kurtosis = -0.71). Linearity and homoscedasticity were confirmed by inspecting scatterplots between predictor and outcome variables, showing evenly distributed residuals. The assumption of multicollinearity was tested using variance inflation factor (VIF) values, which ranged from 1.17 to 1.34, well below the cutoff of 5.0. Additionally, Mardia's coefficient for multivariate normality was 2.81, supporting the application of SEM with maximum likelihood estimation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 405)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	
Co-Parenting Disagreement	3.94	0.83	
Perceived Injustice	2.81	0.89	
Marital Detachment	4.26	0.78	

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the main study variables. Participants reported a moderate to high level of marital detachment (M = 4.26, SD = 0.78) and co-parenting disagreement (M = 3.94, SD = 0.83), both rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Perceived injustice was moderately present in the sample (M = 2.81, SD = 0.89), measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 to 4. These means suggest that the sample experienced notable co-parenting and relational strain.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	
1. Co-Parenting Disagreement	_	.53** (p < .001)	.48** (p < .001)	
2. Perceived Injustice	_	_	.56** (p < .001)	
3. Marital Detachment	_	_	_	

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients among the three main study variables. Co-parenting disagreement was significantly and positively correlated with perceived injustice (r = .53, p < .001) and marital detachment (r = .48, p < .001). Perceived injustice also showed a strong positive correlation with marital detachment (r = .56, p < .001). These findings suggest significant linear associations among all key variables, supporting the basis for mediation analysis.

Table 3. Fit Indices of the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Threshold Criteria	
χ^2	118.34	_	
df	58	_	
χ^2/df	2.04	< 3.00 (acceptable)	
GFI	0.94	> 0.90 (good fit)	
AGFI	0.91	> 0.90 (good fit)	
CFI	0.96	> 0.95 (excellent fit)	
TLI	0.95	> 0.95 (excellent fit)	
RMSEA	0.051	< 0.06 (excellent fit)	

Table 3 presents the goodness-of-fit indices for the hypothesized structural model. The χ^2 /df ratio was 2.04, indicating a good fit. Additional indices supported the model's adequacy, including GFI = 0.94, AGFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.96, and TLI = 0.95, all exceeding conventional thresholds for acceptable to excellent fit. RMSEA was 0.051, further confirming a close model-data fit. These values collectively support the structural model's validity in explaining the observed relationships.

Table 4. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects Between Study Variables (Standardized Estimates)

Path	В	S.E.	β	p
Co-Parenting Disagreement → Perceived Injustice	0.67	0.08	0.53	< .001
Perceived Injustice → Marital Detachment	0.72	0.09	0.56	< .001
Co-Parenting Disagreement → Marital Detachment (Direct)	0.41	0.07	0.36	< .001
Co-Parenting Disagreement → Marital Detachment (Indirect via Injustice)	0.48	_	0.30	< .001
Co-Parenting Disagreement → Marital Detachment (Total)	0.89	_	0.66	< .001

Table 4 displays the standardized path coefficients for direct, indirect, and total effects in the structural model. Co-parenting disagreement significantly predicted perceived injustice ($\beta = 0.53$, p < .001), and perceived injustice, in turn, significantly predicted marital detachment ($\beta = 0.56$, p < .001). The direct effect of co-parenting disagreement on marital detachment was also significant ($\beta = 0.36$, p < .001), while the indirect effect via perceived injustice was $\beta = 0.30$ (p < .001), indicating partial

mediation. The total effect of co-parenting disagreement on marital detachment was strong and significant ($\beta = 0.66$, p < .001), confirming the central mediating role of injustice perceptions in this relational dynamic.

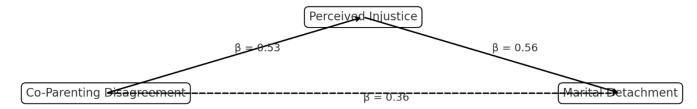


Figure 1. Final Model with Standardized Coefficients

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the hypothesized model, indicating that co-parenting disagreement significantly predicts marital detachment, both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of perceived injustice. The results from the Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive association between co-parenting disagreement and marital detachment, suggesting that when couples experience frequent or intense disagreement over childrearing issues, their emotional connection and marital cohesion decline. Furthermore, the SEM results revealed that perceived injustice serves as a significant mediator in this relationship. This indicates that couples who perceive unequal treatment, imbalance in responsibilities, or emotional neglect in the co-parenting context are more likely to develop detachment from their partners as a response to perceived relational unfairness.

These findings align with previous literature suggesting that co-parenting conflict can erode the emotional infrastructure of romantic relationships. Disagreements in parenting are not merely task-oriented disputes but are imbued with deep emotional content, often interpreted through the lens of equity and recognition (Woine et al., 2023). When one partner consistently feels overburdened or underappreciated, especially in caregiving roles, it fosters cognitive appraisals of injustice, which then contribute to disengagement behaviors. This is consistent with earlier studies showing that chronic parental conflict fosters emotional distance and reduces spousal intimacy over time (Sarwar & Muhammad, 2020; Ysidron et al., 2020).

The mediating role of perceived injustice adds nuance to this relational mechanism. The results support theoretical frameworks that position injustice appraisals as a central psychological process that influences emotional outcomes in interpersonal relationships. As suggested by Baert et al. (2020), when individuals perceive that their efforts are not acknowledged or that the relational distribution of effort is unjust, they are more likely to exhibit emotional withdrawal and experience diminished marital satisfaction (Baert et al., 2020). In the current study, perceived injustice functioned as a key cognitive mediator translating co-parenting conflict into emotional disconnection, reinforcing the idea that subjective appraisals, rather than objective task division alone, drive marital detachment.

Additionally, the significance of perceived injustice as a mediator corresponds with findings from other domains where injustice appraisals lead to maladaptive emotional and relational responses. For example, in the context of chronic illness and caregiving, individuals who appraise their roles as unjust report higher psychological distress and reduced relational satisfaction (Nijs et al., 2021). Similarly, Pavilanis et al. (2022) demonstrated that perceived injustice following injury significantly predicted post-traumatic stress symptoms, underlining its emotional impact beyond the initial stressor (Pavilanis et al., 2022). The current study expands this understanding to the family and marital domain, showing how persistent feelings of inequity in parenting can produce chronic emotional distance between partners.

The finding that perceived injustice partially mediated the relationship between co-parenting disagreement and marital detachment also suggests that additional mediators may be involved. While injustice perceptions play a crucial role, other variables such as emotional regulation strategies, communication skills, and attachment styles may also shape how co-parenting conflict translates into relational outcomes. This is echoed in research by Trost et al. (2017), who found that anger and emotional suppression mediated the relationship between perceived injustice and psychological distress in patients with spinal cord injuries (Trost et al., 2017). In couples, similar emotional mechanisms may co-exist alongside injustice appraisals, leading to compounded effects on relational quality.

Furthermore, the current findings resonate with studies on workplace and organizational dynamics, where perceived injustice often leads to emotional disengagement and reduced productivity. In the context of romantic and family relationships, these findings suggest a parallel process wherein perceived relational injustice contributes to emotional detachment and a breakdown in collaborative functioning. For instance, Qin and Zhang (2022) showed that perceptions of organizational injustice predicted deviant behavior through anger and moral disengagement, highlighting a pathway of affective disconnection that mirrors findings in the present study (Qin & Zhang, 2022).

The cultural context of the study also warrants consideration. Conducted in Hungary, this research contributes to the limited literature on relational justice and co-parenting in Central and Eastern European countries. Prior cross-cultural research suggests that sociocultural norms influence perceptions of fairness and role expectations in parenting. In more traditional or patriarchal contexts, for example, mothers may be more likely to perceive injustice if their caregiving efforts are normalized or undervalued. Villanueva-Flores et al. (2017) found that perceived discrimination and injustice were more pronounced among individuals in structurally disadvantaged roles, which may be extrapolated to caregiving dynamics within families (Villanueva-Flores et al., 2017).

Moreover, the study's findings complement those of Zechmann et al. (2019), who found that perceived injustice significantly impacted mental health among unemployed individuals, further reinforcing the pervasive psychological effects of unfairness across various life domains (Zechmann et al., 2019). In marital contexts, the persistent internalization of injustice can lead to emotional distancing, similar to the alienation observed in unemployment or organizational disenfranchisement. When injustice becomes a recurring cognitive lens, it distorts relational interpretation, perpetuates emotional injury, and reduces relational commitment.

Another noteworthy alignment is with research by Emmelkamp et al. (2020), who demonstrated how perceived social injustice contributes to radicalization in youth through emotional and cognitive alienation (Emmelkamp et al., 2020). While the relational scope is different, the psychological trajectory—moving from perceived mistreatment to emotional disconnection—remains strikingly similar. It suggests that injustice perceptions are not domain-bound but rather serve as transdiagnostic and transrelational mechanisms of estrangement.

This study also supports work by Alizadehfard (2020), who found that perceived injustice was predictive of maladaptive cognitive-emotional outcomes in women with breast cancer, reinforcing its relevance as a predictor of psychological distress across populations (Alizadehfard, 2020). The current findings extend this to marital relationships, where similar cognitive patterns foster disengagement and detachment. Finally, the results resonate with the meta-analytic findings by Sullivan et al. (2022), who underscored the role of perceived injustice in maintaining work-disability outcomes through affective dysregulation and cognitive rigidity (Sullivan et al., 2022). In families, this same pattern may inhibit repair processes and deepen relational wounds, leading to long-term detachment.

While the study provides important insights into the psychological mechanisms linking co-parenting disagreement and marital detachment, several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations. Although

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the mediational model is theoretically driven and statistically supported, longitudinal data would better capture the dynamic and temporal progression from conflict to detachment. Second, the reliance on self-report measures raises concerns about social desirability and response biases. Participants may have underreported conflict or overestimated their sense of fairness. Third, while the study was conducted in Hungary, the cultural generalizability of the findings remains uncertain. Parenting roles and relational expectations vary significantly across cultures, and the observed associations may differ in collectivist or non-Western contexts. Fourth, the study did not include partner-report or dyadic data, which would have enriched the relational analysis and allowed for more robust insights into shared versus divergent perceptions of injustice.

Future research should adopt longitudinal or daily diary designs to explore how co-parenting conflict and perceived injustice evolve over time and predict subsequent marital outcomes. Additionally, studies should consider including dyadic data from both partners to investigate mutual perceptions of injustice and their interaction effects on relationship quality. It would also be beneficial to explore potential moderators such as emotion regulation, attachment styles, or forgiveness that may buffer the impact of injustice on detachment. Expanding this research to diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts would enhance the external validity and allow for culturally sensitive interventions. Moreover, qualitative studies could deepen our understanding of how individuals construct and narrate experiences of injustice within the family system.

Clinicians working with couples should pay close attention to justice-related appraisals in co-parenting conversations. Couples therapy may benefit from incorporating cognitive techniques that address fairness perceptions, attribution biases, and role expectations. Interventions focused on equitable division of parenting labor, validation of emotional contributions, and acknowledgment of perceived burdens may help reduce emotional withdrawal and foster marital reconnection. Parenting programs could also include modules on collaborative problem-solving and emotion-focused dialogue to preempt the development of entrenched detachment. Overall, integrating perceived injustice into relational assessments and treatment plans may enhance therapeutic efficacy and support long-term relational health.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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