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Thai Conceptualizations of Forgiveness within a Work Context: Comparison with Western Models

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Forgiveness research has focused almost exclusively on individualistic Western culture despite acknowledgement of the importance of cultural factors. Conflict at work is common yet studies of forgiveness in work contexts are rare, as are qualitative studies. Addressing these short-comings, this study examines the forgiveness process as experienced by Thai nurses in a hospital within a collectivist culture heavily influenced by Buddhism. Thirty nurses were interviewed about a situation at work where the need for forgiveness arose. Qualitative methods were used to identify participants' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in relation to the offensive event. Definitions of forgiveness were also elicited. Four continuous stages of the forgiveness process emerged: an experiencing stage, re-attribution stage, forgiveness stage, and behavioral stage. There were similarities with Western individualistic models but also some important differences related to Buddhism and Thai culture. Five dimensions of forgiveness emerged from the Thai definitions: overcoming negative approaches towards the offender, abandonment of negative judgment, fostering of positive approaches and loving-kindness towards the offender, awareness of the benefits of forgiveness, and forgiveness as incorporated within Buddhist beliefs. The results highlight the need to consider cultural influences when examining concepts like forgiveness.

Keywords: defining forgiveness, forgiveness and culture, work context, buddhism, thai culture

Forgiveness is conceptualized within positive psychology as an important virtue found in all cultures. There is a considerable body of research on forgiveness recognizing its importance in conflict resolution. However, most of this work is quantitative and focuses almost exclusively on forgiveness in Western culture, despite researchers and clinicians being encouraged to explore the roles of cultural and contextual factors in forgiveness (Sandage, Hill, & Vang, 2003). This study addresses some of the deficiencies in the literature by adopting qualitative methods to explore the meaning and process of forgiveness within Thai culture which has a more collectivist focus framed within the Buddhist religion. Comparison will be made with Western conceptualizations of forgiveness to highlight any cultural differences.

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Western Conceptualizations of Forgiveness

The earliest and most detailed conceptualization is the cognitive process model of Enright where forgiveness is the outcome of an interplay between cognitions, emotions, and behavior. The wronged individual begins with negative feelings, thoughts, and wishes to respond negatively but over time these are replaced with more positive ones (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). McCullough and his colleagues have conceptualized forgiveness as involving a refocusing of motivations (McCullough, 2001; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; McCullough, & Witvliet, 2002; McCullough, & Worthington, 1994). Forgiveness requires an increase in benevolent motivations, and a decrease in grudge holding and revenge motivations. DiBlasio (1998) introduced the concept of decisional forgiveness, which involves a change in will-power within the individual so that they no longer think badly of the offender and seek to harm him/her. Worthington (2003) has expanded on this conceptualization by making a distinction between decisional and emotional forgiveness, suggesting that decisional precede emotional and that the latter is more difficult to achieve, taking time and possibly the intervention of a counselor. There is also a wealth of research on individual differences in forgivingness and on variables thought to influence the process but it is all located within the Western model of individualistic psychology.

Forgiveness in the Workplace

With the exception of some intervention studies, most research has been on students and there is very little research on forgiveness in the workplace (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003; Madson, Gygi, Hammand, & Plowman, 2002). Interacting with others inevitably exposes people to the risk of being offended or harmed by those other people (McCullough, 2001). In the work setting these interpersonal conflicts are disruptive (Aquino et al., 2003; Struthers, Dupuis, & Eaton, 2005). Conflict may be an inevitable workplace problem (Butler & Mullis, 2001).

Forgiveness is one positive strategy that may moderate workplace conflict and stimulate cooperation (Butler & Mullis, 2001). Using forgiveness as a problem-solving strategy can reduce feelings of anger, resentment, and negative judgments regarding the offender (McCullough & Worthington, 1994). It is argued that forgiveness should be an important concern of organizational theorists and managers in the workplace (Aquino et al., 2003; Stone, 2002). Moreover, at the individual level, forgiveness is associated with better health and personal well-being of the workers (McCullough &

Witvliet, 2002). To address the dearth of research on forgiveness in the workplace, this research explores case studies of conflict situations in the workplace within nursing teams in Thailand described by nurses during one-to-one interviews.

In Thailand, nurses work collaboratively within their own profession and with other medical staff though teamwork. Such teamwork in health care environments has been shown to be stressful and is likely to lead to high levels of work conflict (Yuthvoravit, 2007), suggesting that nurses are an appropriate group to study. However, according to traditional Thai culture, conflict and associated displays of anger and associated emotions should be avoided. Complaining directly to the transgressor is considered to be rude. Complaints are dealt with very subtly perhaps via a third party known to both. It is frowned upon to attempt to apportion blame. Status is important with lower status individuals being less likely to challenge higher status individuals. Age is respected so that it is rude to challenge an older person. Being of a higher status in a situation also brings greater expectations that high standards of behavior should be demonstrated. Protecting face is important and loss of face should be avoided if at all possible. It terms of dealing with conflict situations the Thai phrase, "mai pen rai" translated as "it doesn't matter" is commonly used reflecting the Buddhist perspective on the attitude to adopt to conflict (Hofstede, 2001). Some previous Thai research reported that individuals attempt to use constructive and cooperative ways to resolve their work conflicts but did not examine forgiveness (Wannapaktr, 1996; Jaroenbootra, 2004).

By focusing on instances of work conflict where the need for forgiveness arises and how this is handled by individual nurses, this research will produce a model of the process of forgiveness in Thai nurses. This model and definitions of forgiveness produced by the Thai sample will then be compared with those in the Western literature for fit and any cultural influences will be highlighted. This cultural understanding would contribute significant knowledge about forgiveness in both Thai and work related contexts and would allow for further development of measures and interventions of forgiveness which incorporate culturally specific perspective.

Objectives of the Study

The intention of the current research was to provide some insight to understand how Thai nurses conceptualize the concept of forgiveness with respect to the work-related conflict. The main objectives of this research were:

1. To identify the concept of forgiveness process in a work context of Thai nurses.
2. To identify the meanings of forgiveness from Thai nurses representing the theme of Thai definitions of forgiveness.
3. To compare the findings of the current research with the existing western literature.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study are Thai nurses who work in both government and private hospitals in Thailand. They were selected using multiple-case sampling suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994). The sampling frame was implemented by type of organization (government and private hospital) and operation units as the case sampling dimensions. However all the hospitals were structured slightly differently, and they did not all have the same operational units. To overcome this problem, the decision was made to select interviewees from as wide a range of units as possible and to try to ensure fairy even coverage of private and government hospitals. This resulted in thirty cases (28 females, 2 males). Eighteen participants were employed in government hospitals and 12 in private hospitals. Sixteen participants were aged under 30 years, 9 were 31-40 years, 4 were aged 41-50 years, and one was over 50 years. In order to present the quotations specified by each participants, we named the participants from government hospital with "A" and the participants from private hospital with "B", follows with numbers as their identification.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the research was given by the hospitals and ethical approval was given by the university. Informed consent to record the interviews and use the anonymized data was given. Semi-structured tape-recorded interviews lasting 30 minutes on average were conducted in the participants' workplace after their shifts. The researchers conducted the interviews within two months, during June to July 2009.

Interview Schedule

Participants were asked to recall a work event where they had been offended by a colleague and the need for forgiveness arose. The interview schedule then explored the participants' experiences about the offensive

event and forgiveness following the guidelines in Lawler-Row, Scott, Raines, Edlis-Matityahou, and Moore (2007). For example, details were requested about the nature of the offence, who had committed it, how they felt about it, how seriously they rated it, and whether and how fully they had forgiven the offender. Once the event had been discussed, participants were asked for a definition of forgiveness and whether reconciliation was necessary. The theoretical conceptual framework underlying the interview questions is summarized in figure 1. Participants could provide additional information at any stage.

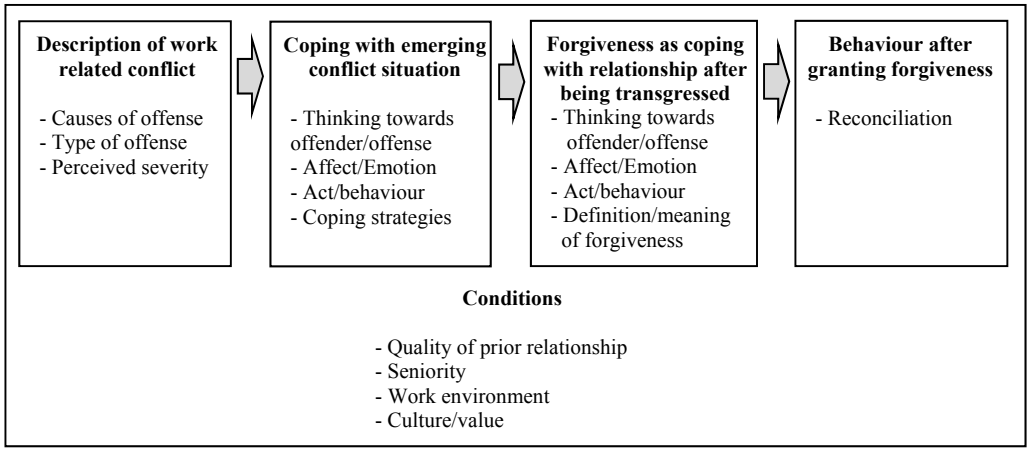

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for forgiveness study on work-related transgression.

Data Analysis

We checked the cases to ensure they represented work-related conflict with colleagues. Then the three stages of activity of case analysis, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusion and verification as recommended by Miles and Huberman, (1994) were followed. These stages are interrelated, iterative and continuous activities.

Data reduction

Audio files of the interview conversations were transcribed and then translated into English, checked by a native English speaker, and any suggested English changes were translated into Thai and checked against the original Thai transcripts by a Thai researcher to ensure that the meaning did not change. Each case was analyzed sequentially. Descriptive codes were generated in the first round of case analysis (Saldana, 2009), resulting in over

100 codes. The researcher then re-read the transcription and the codes in order to achieve more interpretive codes. Descriptive codes and interpretive codes were used to summarize segments of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, pattern coding was conducted to group the summarized codes into a smaller number of constructs and themes. This coding process was implemented interchangeably with the next step of data display. All coding was undertaken by the same researcher and checked independently by the others.

Data display

Once the data had been reduced, visual display was used to verify the conclusions drawn about themes and pattern and the interactions between participant's constructs in the forgiveness process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For each participant as a single case, a cognitive map coupled with causal networking was drawn for within-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 134). The four steps of cross-case analysis using causal networking were conducted (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 228-232). Firstly, from single case analysis, the causal networks which represent the core variables, constructs, and their linked network were assembled. Secondly, the researchers identified the predictors of forgiveness and related conditions for each case. Thirdly, pattern matching considered whether a pattern found in one case was replicated in others. Finally, for verification of similar patterns, the rules were that that the core predictor variables were the same, sequences were consistent, and the quotes associated with the variables in the network confirmed the similarity across cases. This multiple cases approach enabled this study to increase the generalisability of the conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Drawing and verifying conclusions

To ensure the quality of meaning generated from the data, three procedures were used (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 245-274). The first identified evidence of the same pattern or recurring regularities among categories and processes. Secondly, when drawing the network for a case, the researchers ensured that conclusions were plausible. Thirdly, the computer software, ATLAS.ti, was used to count the frequency patterns or themes to verify importance and protect against bias in interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The results shows two themes were found from the qualitative analysis. The first theme is about the process of forgiveness within the work-context and the second theme regards the meanings of forgiveness defined by nursing participants as Thai layperson.

Addressing the Process of Forgiveness in a Work Context

Four stages in the ongoing process of forgiveness within the Thai work-context were emerged: an experiencing stage, a re-attribution stage, a forgiveness stage, and a behavioral outcome stage, as shown in figure 2. Each stage is discussed in details.

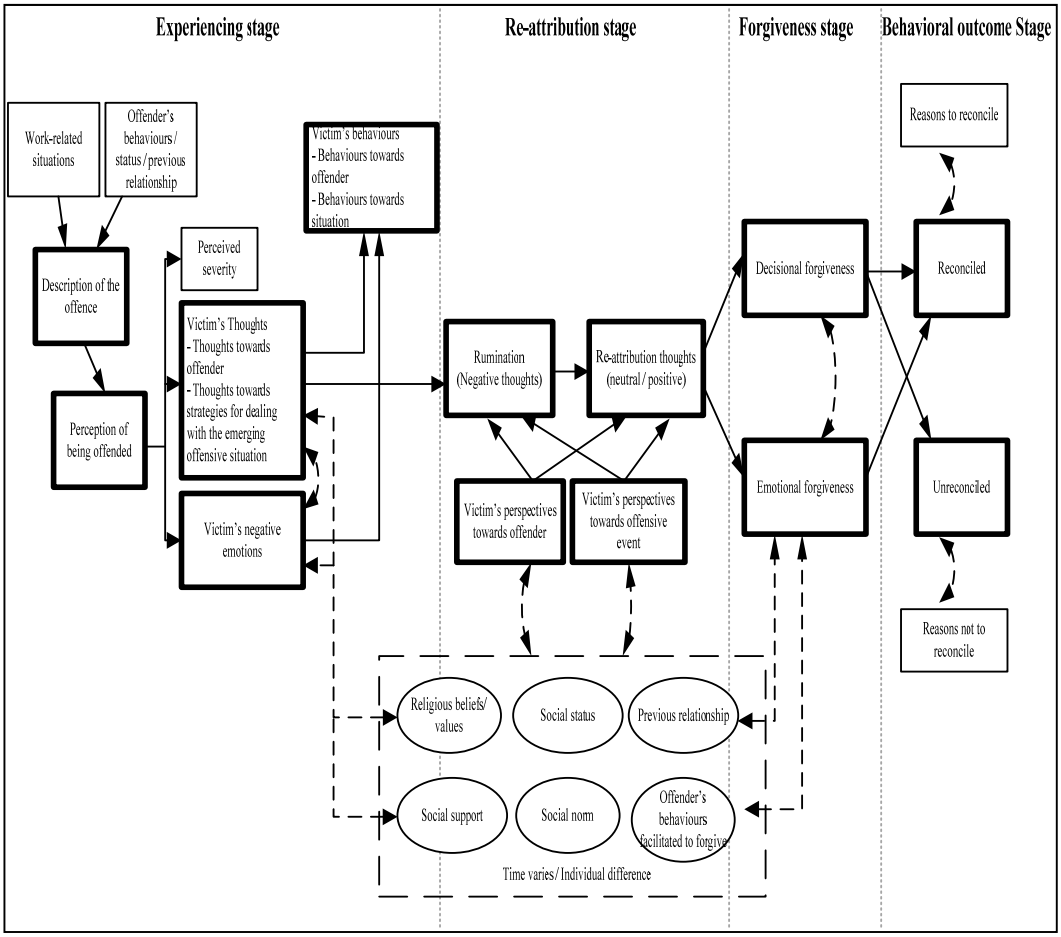

Figure 2. Process of forgiveness in work context.

1. Experiencing Stage. Here victims assess the severity of the offence, while experiencing negative thoughts and emotions towards the offenders. After that, they seek coping strategies to deal with the conflict as a reaction towards the perceived threat.

1.1 Description of the offence. The causes of offence are summarised in table 1. The offender's misunderstanding of the interviewee was the most frequent cause of work conflicts (8 cases), supporting previous research in Thailand where communication issues were the main cause of conflict in nursing teams (Yuthvoravit, 2007). B9 said:

The doctor spoke to me in an unfriendly way asking why I let the assistant nurse wake him up. He said that he could not accept that he was woken up by other nurses but only by his own staff. He wanted to report me to the supervisor.

The second most frequent offensive situation involved implied professional incompetence (5 cases) of younger nurses by senior nurses or doctors. B15, when first starting work said,

"I was always being scolded by my senior nurse. Though it was meant to be teaching, I felt that I was criticised by my senior nurse." In three cases injustice related to workload caused the offence. A22, said:

While I was working at my desk, there was a patient who was not my case, asking for attention. My senior colleague spoke loudly saying, *"Why is no one dealing with this patient?"* I felt that she wanted to blame me in a way that made others know that it was my fault. It was because I was junior and therefore should do any work.

This also involved loss of face for the junior colleague and includes a status element with junior staff taking on more work if they are free even if it is not their direct responsibility. Even in Thai culture where conflict is discouraged, a range of work conflicts occurred.

Table 1

Selected Categories, Codes, and Their Frequency Derived from Respondent's Narratives

Category and Code	f	Category and Code	f
Description of the offense		***Perceived severity***	
Offender's misunderstanding	8	Very trivial	2
Offender implies professional incompetence	5	Quite trivial	7
Perceived injustice of workload of victim	3	Quite serious	16
Accusation of being ill-prepared for work status	2	Very serious	5
Incongruence in perception of work responsibility	2	***Victim's perspectives towards offender***	
Mistake in job performance	2	Seek to understand offender's reason-empathy	18
Social loafing in group work	2	Continuing his/her working relationship	7
Uncooperative behaviour of offender	2	Does not categorise as a wrongful act-reattribution	5
Offender's bias	1	Abandon of negative judgment	4
Offender intoxicated (alcohol)	1		
Offender jealous of victim's performance	1		
Snatch victim's task/position inappropriately	1	***Victim's perspectives towards the offensive event***	
Perception of being offended		Retaliate is not useful	12
Verbal attack	11	Conflict would affect to work negatively	7
Beneath victim's dignity (loss of face)	7	Offense is not a personal issue-distancing	4
Betrayal	4		
Social loafing	2	***Level of forgiveness***	
Unfriendly manner	2	Decisional forgiveness	20
Behaviour is not within expected work norms of behaviour	2	Emotional forgiveness	10
Perceived injustice	1	***Reconciliation***	
Team member mistake	1	Reconciliation is necessary in work context	23
		Reconciliation is unnecessary in work context	3
		Not answer	4

Note. f = frequency of code within the stories of thirty interviewees.

1.2 Victims' perception of the offence. These are displayed in Table 1. Verbal attack was commonest (11 cases). B14 perceived the verbal attack on her as serious, as it involved criticising her to her face and to others, saying, *"She spoke to me and said to others in the unit that I was a swine...She said that I have a dog's mouth (Thai idiom meaning speaks badly)."*

The next most frequent perception related to lack of dignity involving loss of face, especially if it contradicted their work status (7 cases). B13 was criticised by a doctor, accepted to be of a higher professional status in Thailand:

I followed him to check on one of our patients. He asked me, *"Has the patient already been examined?."* I said that I wasn't sure because. I had just come on to the shift. I could not make a decision. Then, he turned to ask the patient. When I heard what the patient said, he said to me, in front of the patient, *"The patient knew but you didn't."*

Some of participants reported that they experienced loss of face from colleagues who were of different seniority. A4 said:

I attempted to talk to Jane about why the quality administrative unit wanted her to write her name on the urine bag. When I talked with Jane, she acted like I was not her senior. She did not respect me at all.

Perceived betrayal was the next commonest perception of being offended (4 cases). B18 said:

She was my senior. She was assigned by my supervisor to observe my performance. I felt terrible because I found out that she reported me on false grounds and it led my supervisor to misjudge me. I felt angry towards her.

Other perceived offences were due to social loafing, being unfriendly, not observing social norms, perceived injustice, and making mistakes.

1.3 Perceived severity. More than half of participants (16 cases) rated their offence as being quite serious, with verbal attacks being most frequent. A20 said, *"Quite seriously, I did not like him misunderstanding me. My intentions were good but how he acted towards me was bad."*

1.4 Victim's thoughts. Two categories of thinking emerged: thoughts towards the offender and towards strategies for dealing with the situation. In the first, the victim attempted to think about the reasons for the offender's transgression. Several participants (5 cases) wondered why the offender had acted unreasonably. A4 said:

I think she was this way because she is really self-centred. Why didn't she think? Was it my fault that I had to give this order? She did not accept what I had said to her and she tried to verbally attack me back by raising her voice at me.

Some victims tried to understand the offender's reasons using self-reflection followed by re-attribution of responsibility to themselves, what Weiten, Lloyd, Dunn, and Hammer (2009), term self-attribution. A1was verbally attacked by her supervisor. Minutes after the offence, she began to think about how her behavior may have contributed to the misunderstanding:

Perhaps she (supervisor) thought that I had suddenly come in and taken the work from another nurse who was already on duty. It's like I had not prepared myself for work and wanted to grab the workload of another nurse who was already on duty. But I didn't think like that I just didn't know that the shift had changed. Perhaps she thought I was irresponsible. Three cases sought understanding by trying to take the perspective of the offender. A4 tried to understand a younger colleague's aggressive behavior saying, *"I thought that, firstly, maybe she had her own personal problems with her supervisor. Secondly, perhaps she felt inferior, and also she always tends to act like this to others."*

In the second approach, victim's focussed their thoughts on strategies to deal with the offence. Four interviewees thought that they should avoid retaliating against the offender, and used the word "End", reflecting their desire to end the situation. A2 said, *"The end is the end. I don't want to keep it in my thoughts."* B9 said, *"He wanted to report me to the inspector. I wanted to end this problem, so I decide to apologise to him first. Though it was not my fault, I had to end this conflict."*

These results are consistent with Williamson and Gonzales (2007) American participants who also tried to understand why the offender had harmed them and why them in particular. However, the focus on simply ending the incident without any attempt to understand it further reflects the Buddhist concept of a conflict situation not being important, and just being accepted and moving on.

1.5 Victim's emotions. Various types of emotions are present in participants' narratives such as anger, hurt, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and fear. Verbal attacks mainly caused anger (7 from 11). B11 reported, *"He made me feel angry because he asked why no one had written on the patient records and why as he was a doctor, did he have to wait for this to happen?"* Anger as the most reported emotion is consistent with Williamson and Gonzales (2007) findings in an American sample. Disappointment in their offenders (5) was quite common, like A3, whose allocated task was suddenly taken over by a younger colleague. She said, *"I felt so sad and disappointed*

about her saying that she wanted to do all the work by herself." Other emotions were dissatisfaction, hurt, and fear.

1.6 Victim's behavior. Immediately after the event, two broad patterns of coping behavior were reported, non-oppositional, and oppositional behaviors. Non-oppositional behaviors were found in most reports, where at the moment of the offence, individuals respond by not retaliating against their offenders. The commonest behavior was staying calm (17 cases). A1 said, *"After my supervisor's reply, I became calm and didn't say anything, and just washed my hands."* Similarly, B8 said, *"I stayed calm. Though I felt I wanted to retaliate against her, but I chose better. To stay calm, I think it wasn't proper to confront her."* This fits with Thai cultural expectations. Staying calm in Thai culture, is not conceptualized as withdrawal behavior but instead individuals take this time to manage their negative emotions, which are likely to lead to more serious conflict if left uncontrolled. This reaction reflects a distinctively Buddhist response which is perceived to be an appropriate and even desirable way of coping. The nurses were almost all female, and the American females in Williamson and Gonzales (2007) also displayed more non-oppositional behaviour that did males. A future study could explore whether non-oppositional behavior was commoner in Thai men than American men perhaps due to Buddhist influences.

Eight cases chose avoidance. A7 said she had to escape to let her emotions calm down, *"I had to walk away... If I had stayed in the meeting, it would have led to more serious problems."* Seven cases described how they kept greater distance from the offender. B14 said, *"After that, when she spoke to me, I also spoke to her politely but my distance is not the same. I did not initiate conversation with her."* Five cases said they attempted to focus on work to avoid thinking of the offence. A1 said, *"I just paid attention to my tasks, doing my best, trying hard, not to think about this offence… I would not think beyond the task."*

Oppositional behaviour was displayed by five nurses, displaying assertive responses to their transgressor by explaining why they were offended. B15 said, *"I had explained my reasons and the facts to her."* Likewise, A21 reported, *"I ordered some wrong things because there were a lot of brands. I couldn't decide which one was correct. I gave my reasons to her and left the situation."* There are just two cases where interviewees retaliated verbally to the offender. B5 challenged his senior colleague who had kept him late on his shift. He said, *"I spoke to her quite loudly asking why she did not allow me to leave after the shift."*

In the experiencing stage conflict at work was caused by a variety of factors with misunderstandings as the commonest. Victims' perceptions differed as did their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors but the rate of challenge of the offender by victims was very low reflecting cultural influences on dealing with conflict.

2. Re-Attribution Stage. This stage refers to the cognitive processes of transformation to neutralise negative thoughts, and/or increase more positive thoughts about the offence. It is an important phase which can lead to forgiving behavior. The time taken for re-attribution to occur varies from a minute to several months; individual's negative thoughts remain as rumination. This ruminative thinking inhibits a positive approach towards the offender. To facilitate more constructive thinking, individuals must change their thinking, so called re-attribution, towards both the offender and the offence. Western models suggest that through re-attribution the ruminations become more empathetic cognitions, emotions, and behaviours including the emergence of forgiveness towards the offender (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Glaeser, 2008). However, we found the process influenced by the work environment, religious beliefs, and values.

2.1 Rumination. This refers to the process where repetitive thoughts about past events re-occur. It emerges after an experience such as anger resulting from conflict. Rumination then partially maintains and can even strengthen the anger (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001). Rumination towards the offender and the offence is negatively associated with forgiveness (Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005; Burnette, Taylor, Worthington, & Forsyth, 2007).

2.2 Re-attribution of thoughts. Reframing their thoughts results in individuals changing their views about the incident resulting in a reduction of negative obsessing and more neutral or positive cognitions. Victims achieve this transform by displaying empathy and taking the perspective of their offenders as now described.

2.3 Victim's perspectives towards the offender. Table 1 indicates that 18 cases tried to understand the offender's reasons. This involves adopting an empathic approach towards the offender. Taking his/her perspective to try to understanding the situation from the offender's viewpoint. Sometimes they empathised with the offender's character traits. B12 said, *"I thought we have different backgrounds, experiences so our character traits were not the same. At that time, perhaps she was pre-occupied with her thoughts. I understood it was her character. I decide to let it go."* Several cases reported

putting themselves in the other's place to clarify the offender's view. A23 explained, *"I thought that maybe he didn't know what I had been doing while he was waiting for the bed….I thought he maybe thought it was late because of me."* Victims also attempted to understand the offender by analyzing the situations. A2 said, *"At that time she (the offender) was sitting on the chair and having her lunch. Perhaps she was hungry or even tired. These were my thoughts."*

Seven interviewees explained that they thought about their ongoing relationship with the offender, especially if they had received positive responses from the offender since the offence. Like A19 said, "My negative attitude towards her went due to the fact that she had been good to me. Later, she came and spoke to me politely.

Five cases did not categorise what offenders had done to them as being wrong, thus allowing victims to abandon their negative thoughts towards the offenders. For example, A3, *"I didn't mind what she had done. She works hard. I think, perhaps she is a little negligent."*

The final category is relinquishing negative thinking towards the offenders (4 cases). Individuals abandon their negative judgment with regard to the offender's behaviour. For example, A26 after being treated beneath her professional dignity by a doctor said, *"It was not a serious problem. If I didn't think that it was serious, I would be ok."*

2.4 Victim's perspectives towards the offence. Another approach involved victims re-attributing their thoughts and then reframing their views of the offence. As shown in table 1, this was done in three ways, retaliation seen as not useful, conflict would affect their future work negatively, and the offence not being a personal issue. Twelve cases felt that retaliation was not useful after evaluating the potential negative outcomes of retaliation. They then relinquish their intention to retaliate. A7 said, *"I thought it was useless if I retaliated against her. There would only be a bad outcome."* B13 reported, *"I thought that if I retaliated against him, it was not a good outcome for me and him. I tried not to want revenge."* Seven cases indicated that they anticipated that continuing conflict would negatively affect their work. B9 explained, *"I was afraid that my work would not go smoothly. I wanted to work cooperatively with him and also wanted him to cooperate with me as well because we work within the same organization."* A4 did not want to carry on the argument, as it would damage the image of their profession. Her thoughts reflect Thai culture which is described as a high collectivist culture. Individuals who work in collective cultures feel strongly that they belong to

an in-group, act according to the interests of the group or the normal expectations of society (Hofstede, 2001). As she (A4) said, *"I thought that if the conflict became more serious, it would affect the health professional image in our hospital. I thought we can manage this conflict within our nursing team."* Four cases defined the offence as not being a personal issue. This is called distancing. They thought that the transgressions did not directly relate to them, rather they concerned work. For stance, A6 explained, *"She improved her performance as I have said. It was not a personal issue. It was directly about the task."*

2.5 Social support and work environments as they affected re-attribution. Social support refers to the mental and emotional support given by the victims' family members and/or colleagues. This buffers the negative impact of stressful offensive events and also provides informational resources for reframing their thoughts positively towards the offence. Sixteen cases were supported by their colleagues and family members after being offended at work. A3 said, *"I talked to my senior nurse and my immediate supervisor. My senior nurse told me that there wasn't a problem, and I had to forgive her."* Similarly A28 reported, *"I talked to my husband and my intimate colleague. They also said that I had to stay calm, not be assertive, or retaliate. I had to behave the same with her."* Both examples of advice giving comply with Thai cultural expectations. Some respondents received emotional support. A27 said, *"After the meeting, my colleagues came and sympathised with me."* Social support seems to be a vital factor providing advice and emotional support to individuals as they choose forgiveness because they wish or need to restore their relationship with the offender. Seeking support as a facilitating factor in forgiveness after an offence is consistent with Glaeser (2008) in his American sample although the nature of the advice is influenced by culture here.

Social norms and status present cultural influences on the victim's ability to re-attribute their thoughts towards the offender. These social factors exert pressure on the individuals to conform to Thai cultural norms of proper behavior such as not retaliating, forgiving, respecting, etc. Status played a major role in exerting social pressure. In many instances, the words *"younger colleague"* and *"senior colleague"* are found from interviewees' narratives. That is to say, Thai culture accepts the hierarchy of status and sees it as very important. Seniority plays a vital part, as individuals should respect their elders and people who occupy more superior positions (Klausner, 1993). Not to do so is perceived as behaving improperly. When the victim is more senior to the offender, we found that victims thought that they should be friendlier towards the offender as they then presented as being a generous senior

colleague. B5 explained, *"What is her level of experience? If she was senior like me, I would still have some angry thoughts towards her. If she was a younger nurse, I would be more likely to forgive her."*

When the victim is less senior than the offender, they have no right to retaliate but need to act benevolently. A7 said, *"She was older than me. Also if I retaliated against her, it would affect the nursing professional image."* Here this serves to protect the reputation of the group as well, an important cultural consideration. A2 said, *"I apologised to her. I thought, whatever, she is still my supervisor. She is more senior than me. I acted like a younger colleague should and did not retaliate."* This phenomenon reflects cultural norms in the workgroup and specifically Buddhist influences which dictate how individuals should act. There would appear to be less concern with group members behaving in ways to protect their professional group image in Western culture. Similarly, more senior members of staff are not generally expected to act benevolently towards their junior colleagues in the more individualistic Western culture (Hofstede, 2001).

2.6 Buddhist beliefs as a positive inducement to forgive. Buddhist beliefs provide constructive methods and resources which can influence the victim's worldview about the offence which encourage individuals to decide to forgive. Empirically, respondents showed that they were influenced by Buddhist beliefs as a means of dealing with emotional and relational problems. Four cases practised Dhamma, as taught by Buddha, in order to lose their negative thoughts and emotions, and turn to more positive ways. These practices are intended to purify an individual's mind against their anger and negative thoughts towards the offender, to keep their mind away from rumination and vengefulness, and also to approach the offender with more loving-kindness and compassion as taught by Buddha (Phra Dhammakosajarn (Prayoon Dhammacitto), 2008). A3 said that she had to manage her feelings of disappointment following what she had read from Dhamma books. A7 explained that:

I tried to use the Dhamma to cope with my emotions. I prayed the loving-kindness towards her and stayed calm. I thought that if I could not stay calm, the person who suffered was myself. I talked to myself to stay calm.

Another Buddhist belief that emerged during thought reframing is belief in Karma. It is the belief in terms of the law of cause and effect operating through action, good action is rewarded with good and evil action with evil. Buddhists see the world as fundamentally just, and this justice is maintained by Karma. It means that victims who strongly believe in the law of Karma

would restore justice by letting offenders receive their own negative feedback in due course. In a serious case A30, to promote forgiving her colleague responded thus:

I thought forgiveness is the most merit. If I forgive the wrongdoer, one day I may involuntarily do wrong to another. I would then get forgiveness from my victim. I said the Sadhu…(it means she hopes this thought will be effective in the future).

Two interviewees reported that ruminating about the offence caused them to suffer. Respondents included the word *"Dukkha"* or suffering in their narratives. Buddhism guides people to an understanding of the causes of suffering (Lake, 2004). Suffering caused by ruminating on the event is seen to be deserved, as it is perceived to be unwholesome to ruminate in Buddhism. Some of the participants showed an awareness of this and attempted to relinquish their suffering by forgiving. A3 said, *"I think everything is immortal. I try to think positively."* A4 explained why she had to give up her rumination saying, *"I think that anger and resentment cause me suffering. She (the offender) did not suffer like me."*

3. Forgiveness Stage. This stage infers that victims have forgiven their offenders as a result of their re-attributed thoughts. Two types of forgiveness emerged from the nurses' experiences: decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness (see table 1). Results showed consistent support for this forgiveness distinction first described by Worthington (2003).

3.1 Decisional forgiveness. Worthington (2003) explained that individuals grant decisional forgiveness and commit to controlling their negative behavior towards the offenders to try to restore the relationship to where it was before the offence occurred. Victims attempt to eliminate their negative thoughts and emotions. However, this takes time. That is to say, the decision to forgive helps to prevent negative behavior such as retaliation or continuing the conflict, but the some of the negative emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, or hurt still remain. Two-thirds of interviewees (20 cases) committed to decisional forgiveness. For example, A7, though she said she had forgiven her offender, negative emotions remained, "I knew that it would be happening repeatedly. I tried to let it go. For this offence, I already forgave her; however, I still worry that she will do it again." Similarly, B12 forgave her senior colleague but the feeling of unjustness still endured in her mind:

I forgave her….I decide to let it go. Sometimes, I thought it wasn't fair because we had the same status at work. We just differed in our experiences and age. Do I have to work as a younger nurse all the time?.

3.2 Emotional forgiveness. This is defined as complete forgiveness where individuals experience positive feelings of good will towards the offender. Worthington (2003) defined emotional forgiveness as:

"the emotional juxtaposition of positive emotions against a) the hot emotions of anger or fear that follow a perceived hurt or offence, or b) the unforgiveness that follows ruminating about the transgression, which also changed our motives from negative to neutral or even positive" (p.41).

For this type of forgiveness, positive emotions such as empathy, love, and compassion replace the negative emotions. One-third of participants (10 cases) showed that they have fully forgiven their offenders. B16 said, *"I forgave her….I understand her, it was because she wanted me to learn how to work by myself. She wanted to teach me."* A28 explained *"If we forgive, let our bad emotions go, and try to think of the good side. I get the benefit as happiness. If I fully forgive her, my mind will be truly happy."*

However, the instances of decisional forgiveness are greater than emotional forgiveness in our study. It does show that decisional forgiveness is necessary to reduce conflict and to maintain working relationships. The research literature suggests that emotional forgiveness takes time to occur completely and the conflicts reported in the study were all fairly recent (Worthington, 2006).

Some conditions promoted emotional forgiveness such as the existence of a previous intimate relationship with the offender reported in four cases. A28 explained that, *"I forgave her because I got on well with her for a long time. She was my intimate colleague and I was fond of her. We used to help each other."* Perceiving good intentions from the offender also encourages emotional forgiveness (2 cases). Impoliteness in particular, in daily conversation between the nurses was perceived as offensive. A15,after being offended, realised that her senior colleague had not meant to harm her but rather wanted to teach her to improve her work, *"I thought she wanted me to pass my probation, so I have to learn more about my responsibilities. I thought she had my interests at heart."* Narratives showed that when the offenders seek to continue the relationship, victims are more likely to forgive them such as A20, *"I intended not to interact with him; but when I met him and he spoke to me politely, my bad feelings went."*

4. Behavioral Outcome Stage. This stage occurs after the forgiveness stage as the emotions of the victim have been transformed into more positive feelings in harmony with their re-attributed thoughts. Most participants felt reconciliation was necessary for maintenance of their working relationships and their performance at work. However, a few participants reported that they were not continuing their working relationships with their offenders (see table 1).

4.1 Reconciliation is necessary for forgiveness in the workplace. In every case of emotional forgiveness (10 cases) and nearly every case (14 cases) of decisional forgiveness interviewees saw the necessity of reconciling with their transgressors (see table 1). Individuals who fully forgave their transgressors accepted that re-establishing relationships after being offended is important for them. Like Worthington (1998), who presumed that forgiveness, though some of negative emotion may still remain, results in the victim and the offender restoring their relationship as completely as they can, bringing them back to neutral ground, and coming to rebuild good feelings to resume their relationship. A19 said, *"It is necessary as I work in every unit because if we distrust others, it will affect our service."* Similarly, A28 said, *"I think reconciliation is a good thing that I should practice in my daily life."* In the cases of decisional forgiveness, reconciliation occurred in order to maintain smooth working relationships. A21 explained, *"I think reconciliation is necessary for the work context. I have to interact with him."* The desirability of reconciliation as part of forgiveness demonstrated here is consistent with that reported by Macaskill (2005) in a British general population sample.

4.2 Reasons to reconcile. Most respondents reconciled (10 cases) because they wanted to maintain teamwork. A19 said that, *"It is necessary… It would affect our service badly. The medication service has to work as a team. If we have a serious conflict, it would affect our performance. I have to reconcile and maintain harmony in our team."* The effect on the work performance of the victims themselves was another reason for reconciliation (6 cases). A21 said, *"I think reconciliation is necessary for my work. I have to interact with him. I want my work to go smoothly."* Another reason is that they consider their future career (3 cases). B5 said, *"I have to work for a long time. I thought about the bad impact on the future if I retaliated."* In three cases reconciliation resulted from the perception of positive intentions from the offenders. For example younger victims being aware those senior nurses wanted them to improve their professional behavior. B16 said, *"Yes, because she had good intentions towards me. She wanted me to improve myself."*

The last reason to reconcile given is that of being in a position of lower power than the offender (2 cases).

4.3 Reconciliation is unnecessary for forgiveness in the workplace. In three serious incidents, participants could not reconcile with their offender. A30 who was verbally attacked by her colleague reported, *"No, I'm still trying to avoid him but I think I have forgiven. I don't want to contact him."* Another instance is A4 who explained that *"It is not necessary…. It is really difficult to be the same. My actions towards her are the same such as smiling and greeting her but there is a greater distance."*

4.4 Reasons not to reconcile. B8 showed that she was not reconciled with her offender as she judged that the offender was not central to her life, saying, *"She does not benefit, nor have an influence on my life."* A4 said, *"I'm afraid that re-offending will occur if I am as close to her as before. The more serious the offence, the greater the distance."*

Addressing the Definitions of Forgiveness

Five categories of definitions of forgiveness with subdivisions emerged from the data analysis and are summarised in table 2. Where these correspond to Western definitions, this is indicated within the table by including the references. There was consensus on definitions 1, 2, and 3, although there were distinctive ways of achieving forgiveness in some of the Thai definitions.

Table 2

Comparison of Forgiveness Definitions Obtained and their Components with the Literature

Category and Code	f	Consistency with the other scholars and researchers
Overcome negative approaches towards offender		
- *Overcome negative Thoughts*		
Overcome negative thinking towards offender	6	McCullough et al. (2000); Aquino et al. (2003)
Do not retaliate	2	Enright & Coyle (1998); Wirthington (1998); Aquino et al. (2003)
Forget about the offense	1	
Do not ruminate	1	

Table 2 *(continued)*

Category and Code	f	Consistency with the other scholars and researchers
- *Overcome negative emotions*		
Let go anger and grudge	16	Wirthington (1998); McCullough et al. (2000); Aquino et al. (2003)
Renounce negative emotions	1	Aquino et al. (2003)
Abandonment of negative judgment		
Seek to understand offender's reason	10	
Do not categorise as a wrongful act	8	
Accept offender's mistake	6	
Perspective thinking	4	
Abandon of negative judgment	3	Enright, Freedman, & Rique (1998)
Foster positive approaches & loving-kindness towards offender		
- *Foster positive thoughts*		
Foster positive thinking towards offender	11	McCullough et al. (2000)
- *Foster positive emotions*		
Empathy	4	Enright & Coyle (1998)
positive feeling	2	McCullough et al. (2000)
- *Foster positive acts*		
Continue to act in friendly manner	11	Wirthington (1998); Hargrave & Sell (1997); McCullough et al. (2000)
Awareness of the benefits of forgiveness		
Forgiveness leads to happiness	8	
Reciprocal forgiveness	2	
Think that anger (as opposite to forgiveness) is not useful	1	
Forgiveness as Buddhist beliefs		
Forgiveness is a higher-order merit of giving	2	
Forgiveness as a good Karma	1	

Note. f = frequency of code within the stories of thirty interviewees.

For definition 1, these are forgetting about the offence and not ruminating, although only a small number included these. With definition 2, the distinctly Thai elements were a focus on abandoning blame and accepting that everyone makes mistakes. Relinquishing blame tends not to be explicitly

acknowledged in Western definitions but is implied by Enright et al. (1998). One-third of participants indicated that seeking to understand the offender's motivation was at the heart of forgiveness as it was how they gave up blaming. It appeared qualitatively different from developing empathy as it was less emotionally toned and more pragmatic. A1 said, *"It is accepting the reasons that we both had. Someone maybe upset us. We should attempt to listen to the different causes."* Six participants focussed on accepting the offence as a mistake. A1 said, *"In general, everybody makes an error or mistake in their life."* Eight interviewees defined forgiveness as not categorising what the offenders had done to them as being wrong. A3 said, *"Do not think of it as a wrongful act.",* also B14 said, *"Forgiveness is about not minding the offence."* These elements reflect a cultural tendency to try to avoid categorising the event as conflict and letting it go.

Eleven cases felt that awareness of the benefits of forgiveness is part of its definition. Eight cases suggested that forgiveness leads to happiness. A27 said, *"Forgiveness makes me happy because my mind can disengage from the anger that affects my quality of life."* Two cases stressed that reciprocity was involved in forgiveness. A4 said, *"Forgiveness is that I forgive her because I want her to consider forgiving me in return."* A2, described forgiveness in term of it facilitating her thinking that anger is unhelpful, saying, *"I think our life is not too long, anger, and anger rumination towards someone until we die is not useful."*

The final category of forgiveness definition referred only to Buddhist beliefs (3 cases) although many others included Buddhist elements. Two cases viewed forgiveness as a higher-order merit of the principle of giving which, as taught by Buddha, encourages Buddhists to let revenge go and instead to give the condonation towards the persons who hurt them (H. H. Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, 2008). A29 stated, *"Forgiveness is the greatest, most wonderful gift." A30* said, *"Forgiveness is the worthiest merit."* B8 defined forgiveness in the sense of Karma reflecting her belief that what she faced is a result of her own Karma, perhaps caused from actions in her previous or present existence. She stated: I think it was my destiny to be offended by her. In my previous life, I may had done something wrong to her, so, in this present life, she maybe came to retaliate on me…. However, I have to stay in the present and not retaliate towards her because it could cause another Karma which would be attached to my next life.

Comparison of the Forgiveness Process with the Western Conceptualizations

A four-stage model plus a majority view that reconciliation was a component of the forgiveness process emerged from the Thai data as shown in figure 2. Comparing this to Enright and his collaborators' conceptualization highlights that while there is a similar interplay between cognitions, emotions, and behavior there are also some distinctively Thai elements influencing the process. While Enright and Fitzgibbons, (2000) suggest that the victim begins with negative feelings, thoughts, and wishes to respond negatively and over time replaces them with more positive ones, this was not necessarily the case in the Thai sample where cultural norms promote conflict reduction and forgiveness at an early stage.

The motivational conceptualization of forgiveness developed by McCullough and his colleagues is subsumed within the Thai model, which includes reducing the motivation to hold a grudge or seek revenge and increasing feelings of benevolence towards the offender (McCullough & Worthington, 1994; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; McCullough, 2001; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). However, there are additional features in the process of forgiveness as experienced in a Thai workplace.

The Thai sample provided empirical support for the distinction between decisional and emotional forgiveness highlighted by DiBlasio (1998) and Worthington (2003).

Furthermore, the findings of forgiveness definitions are both consistent and distinct with the current Western literature. Three categories of meanings, overcoming negative approaches towards the offender, abandonment of negative judgment, and fostering positive approaches and loving-kindness towards the offender are consistent with previous definitions (Hargrave & Sell, 1997; Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Wirthington, 1998; McCullough et al., 2000; Aquino et al., 2003). However, two meanings are different, awareness of the benefits of forgiveness and forgiveness as Buddhist beliefs. These findings demonstrate that participants view forgiveness as having a benefit or positive gain; that is to say, as a motivational concept, where individuals foresee or expect the positive valence of forgiveness as being the good choice for their working life, as it is a benefit resulting in happiness or improved quality of life. Buddhist concepts are contained within their sense of forgiveness. Buddhist utterance such as merit giving (called Dana in Pali), and Karma are found in their definitions of forgiveness. This is consistent with Rye et al. (2000) who

suggest that religion influences the psychological process involved in forgiveness through victim's belief and practice in their own faiths

Conclusions and Limitations

While the stages in the model are similar to that described in the Western literature, there are cultural differences reflect in the constituent processes that emerged and in the definitions obtained. Buddhism is seen to influence the process of forgiveness in Thai people. This is unsurprising as there are several Buddhist teachings on how to deal with emotional conflict with others. For example, the Buddhist anger management process (Mettabrahmavihara) instructs that individuals who feel anger or vengefulness towards their opponent, can practice changing their thinking by using ten specified steps of reflection which include the disadvantages of being angry, the negative effect of anger, the goodness of the offender, Karma, moral conduct, the good that results from loving-kindness, which were all identified in the interviews (Phra Brahmagunabhorn, (P. A. Payutto, 2007). Another method called thinking wisely or Yonisomanasikara (Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto, 2009) is taught by Buddha, includes methods for dealing with vengeance towards an offender. These Buddhist methods emphasise forgiveness as being the more empathetic and moral choice for dealing with offences.

While every attempt was to made to apply the methodology in the study rigorously there are some weaknesses. In terms of the sample real efforts were made to ensure that a cross sample of nurses from private and government hospitals, from different specialisms and age ranges were recruited, that broadly represented the workforce. While a good number of interviews were obtained, there was a preponderance of younger participants simply because more of them volunteered to participate. Interviews all tended to last around 30 minutes, as this was the time specified in the arrangements with the participants as they were doing this at the end of their shift and this was all the time that was possible. While more flexibility might have been helpful, in reality the time allocated seemed to be sufficient to cover what individuals wanted to say and some did exceed the time limit by a few minutes.

The researchers are aware that while we are interested in forgiveness in the workplace, we have only considered health care settings and then focussed only on nurses. Studying conflict in the workplace poses a challenge in a Buddhist society where the religion discourages conflict, so we selected nurses because earlier research had found work conflict in

nursing teams. What applies to nurses may not totally apply to other professions and future studies should explore this. Similarly, future research needs to examine whether the Buddhist concepts identified as being influential in forgiveness in the Thai culture apply to Buddhists living in other cultures.

Working across languages is challenging and while effort was made to ensure accuracy in translation, this was challenging especially when dealing with culturally specific information, as sometimes there are no identical terms in English. The data analysis was carried out meticulously and checked at each stage to try to ensure that a reliable and valid analysis but again this may have been affected by language issues despite our best attempts.

How far qualitative data can be generalized is always an issue especially for those more familiar with quantitative methods. However, the aim here was to present an analysis of how Thai nurses dealt with forgiveness in terms of workplace conflict with their colleagues, what influenced their decisions by focussing on real life examples from their work. In doing so we identified some of the ways that a collectivist culture influences group dynamics between disciplines in hospitals with individual decisions being made in order to protect the group image for example. The study has highlighted the importance of understanding how religiously based values and practices can influence behaviour. Buddhism clearly influences the daily working lives of Thai people in terms of how they deal with issues in the workplace where the need for forgiveness arises. Researchers such as Sandage et al. (2003) have rightly stressed the need for researchers to explore the role of cultural values on forgiveness as this study demonstrates.

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