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Der talentierte Briefeschreiber Robert K. Merton als einflussreicher Gate-Opener: Eine Analyse von 1460 Empfehlungsschreiben

The Talented Writer Robert K. Merton as a Powerful Gate-Opener: An Analysis of 1,460 Recommendation Letters

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Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel analysiert akademisches Gate-Keeping anhand von 1460 Empfehlungsschreiben des einflussreichen amerikanischen Soziologen Robert K. Merton (RKM). Teils auf Ansuchen von Berufungskommissionen und zumeist mit ausgeprägtem Enthusiasmus gab RKM sein Urteil über das Talent sowie die stellenspezifische Eignung von 560 Bewerbern/Bewerberinnen ab, um in der Regel den Weg für eine akademische Karriere zu ebnen. In den stilistisch virtuos verfassten Schreiben geht RKM vor allem auf akademische Fähigkeiten ein, kommentiert aber auch Persönlichkeitszüge. Die hohe „Erfolgsquote“ seiner Empfehlungen ist wahrscheinlich auch auf die überzeugende Rhetorik RKMs sowie seine gute Kenntnis der Bewerber/Bewerberinnen zurückzuführen. Systematische Lebenslaufrecherchen zeigen u. a., dass im Falle von Promotionen zur vollen Professur etwa 87 Prozent und bei externen Kandidaten für ausgeschriebene Professuren etwa 43 Prozent die angestrebte akademische Position erhielten.

Schlüsselwörter: Robert K. Merton; akademisches Gate-Keeping; akademische Karrieren; Empfehlungsschreiben; amerikanische Soziologie.

Abstract: This article sets out to investigate the neglected role of academic gatekeeping in professional recruitment by studying 1,460 recommendation letters written by the eminent Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton (RKM). Partly solicited by academic selection committees and mostly out of enthusiasm for promising scholarship, RKM delivered thorough descriptions of about 560 differ-

ent candidates with the intention of opening “gates” to academic appointments. In his evaluations of former students, RKM used mostly (merit-based) academic and personal criteria while also commenting on analytical skills or work ethic. In general, the skilled writer RKM developed in his letters a compelling prose style of affirmation that presented his protégés in the best of all lights, which partly explains his effectiveness as gate-opener. A systematic match of information from recommendations with all available CVs yields that the “success rate” of RKM’s efforts varies between 87 percent for promotions to professorship and 43 percent for external candidates applying for full professorships.

Keywords: Robert K. Merton; Academic Gatekeeper; Academic Career; Letters of Recommendation; American Sociology.

1 Introduction¹

Much literature in the social sciences has explored the role of social ties in job markets. The research question most often posed is: How do people learn about the availability of jobs and then obtain those jobs? (Granovetter 1995 [1974]). Few studies, however, are concerned with the academic labor market (Musselin 2010). According to this specialized literature, the recruitment process is influenced by so-called “academic gatekeepers” (Simon & Fyfe 1994) – a concept that refers to the “role-set” of scientists (Merton 1957). As Zuckerman and Merton (1972) elaborate, the status of a scientist involves not a single role, but rather four principal roles: research, teaching, administra-

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Figure 1: Trajectories of RKM's Citations and Recommendations

Notes. Considered in this figure are 1,460 recommendations by RKM archived in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library of the Columbia University, New York (boxes 103–117). Citing articles were identified using the Social Science Citation Index (1956–present). The considered articles citing RKM (N=644) were either published in the *American Sociological Review* (ASR) or the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJ), which are the flagship journals of American sociology. The different segments in the figure refer to the various career stages of RKM at Columbia University.

tive, and gatekeeper. In their role as gatekeepers, scientists “evaluate the promise and limitations of aspirants to new positions, thus affecting both the mobility of individual scientists and, in the aggregate, the distribution of personnel throughout the system.” (Zuckerman & Merton 1972: 316) Moreover, as van den Brink and Benschop (2014: 464) argue, “gatekeeping encompasses scouting for eligible applicants through formal and informal networking and keeping a constant watch on the academic field.”

The gatekeeping role is the least explored of all four roles for obvious reasons: due to privacy issues, the deliberations of selection committees remain confidential (see for an exception: Lamont 2009), and oftentimes restrictions are placed on accessing archive materials that document gatekeeping activities (see for an exception: Tsay et al. 2003).

Much suggests that Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910–2003; I will refer to him as RKM

hereafter) – one of the most influential sociologists of his time – knew that only access to “private knowledge” can provide a window into this world of the (social) sciences that remains largely obscure (Santoro 2017: 3). Consequently, he decided to make not only all his meticulously archived correspondences with hundreds of key scholars and former students publicly accessible post mortem (Dubois 2014b); his treasures for posterity also contain approximately 1,460 letters of recommendation written between 1938 and 2002.² As shown in Figure 1, RKM was an avid writer of such letters that were sent to selection com-

² This study is solely based on archive material contained in boxes 103–117 of the “Robert K. Merton Papers, 1928–2003,” archived in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library of Columbia University. As some recommendations can be found in other boxes as well, it is likely that the archive contains overall more than 1,460 letters of recommendations.

mittees at very different academic institutions throughout his professional life.

This article explores all recommendation letters in RKM's collection not only to shed light on the scientist RKM, but also to explore the wider phenomenon of academic gatekeeping. I theorize gatekeepers in academia and identify knowledge gaps about academic gatekeeping. With this theoretical framework in mind, I examine the actual content of all recommendations as well as RKM's writing style to arrive at a better understanding of elite influence in the academic job seeker's market. The empirical analysis focuses not only on the evaluation criteria applied when judging job candidates, but also on the art of rhetorical persuasion RKM brought close to perfection. The "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973) presented in this article illuminate first and foremost how RKM acted as a gatekeeper. His actual influence on selection committees will be harder to gauge due to limitations in the source material and can only be reconstructed with great uncertainty. I conclude by discussing the study's limited generalizability and avenues for further research.

2 Gatekeeping and gate-opening: Towards a better understanding of elite influence in academia

The term "gatekeeper" was first introduced to the social sciences by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), who aimed at establishing a theoretical framework ("field theory") to explain social change in organizations:³

A university, for instance, might be quite strict in its admission policy and might set up strong forces against the passing of weak candidates. Once a student is admitted, however, the university frequently tries to do everything in its power to help everyone along ... Gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by "gatekeepers". In the latter case an individual or group is "in power" for making the decision between "in" or "out." (Lewin 1947: 145)

Scholars after Lewin have modified and adapted gatekeeping theory and its terminology to various social contexts (Shoemaker & Riccio 2016; Wallace 2018); the core assumptions, however, have remained the same. At the theory's core are decision-making processes (in organizations).

Positive and negative forces around a "gate" facilitate or constrain the flow of information to decision-makers (i. e. individuals vested with official authority in organizations that make in/out decisions). "Gatekeepers" allow or prevent information from passing through the "gate" and shape information into "stories." While journalists act as gatekeepers by selecting news on politicians that, once published, can influence their chances of being re-elected to office, academics use peer reviews to influence editorial decisions on what is "in" or "out" the marketplace of ideas (Coser 1975; Simon & Fyfe 1994). We have some limited knowledge on peer review gatekeepers in academic journals (Crane 1967) and on the peer review assessment of excellence (Tsay et al. 2003; Lamont 2009). Yet the power of gatekeepers in the academic job market is clearly under-researched, even if it is well established that letters of recommendation are essential to the professional evaluations of applicants (Caplow & McGee 1961; Lewis 1998).

The power of established scholars to foster the academic careers of their colleagues and students is especially a rare bird in the literature. Besides anecdotal evidence, there are few (auto-)biographical accounts that inform how influential members of a discipline "open gates" in the academic job market for their protégés (Fox 2011). One account by Parsons' student Renée C. Fox describes how Parsons assisted his students in the circulation of their ideas by making publication avenues accessible or introducing them to influential intellectual networks (Fox 1997). However, this scattered and scarce evidence offers only limited insights into how "master-apprentice relations" (Heinze et al. 2019) operate in the academic job market.

To fill the gap, I will focus on the perhaps most widely used mode of influencing professional recruitment in academia: the writing of letters of recommendation. In writing a recommendation, a referee places a "seal of approval" on a student or a colleague whose "quality" is assessed (Bell et al. 1992: 7). Every recommendation thus contains judgments made by peers, who, in most cases, are more established and senior to the person recommended. As hiring personnel have to, at least partly, "speculate in future prestige values, based on yet undone research" (Caplow & McGee 1961: 122), they are most likely to consult scholars with close knowledge of the candidate. The established authority of the letter writer reduces uncertainty about the reliability of the appraisal.

While it is undeniable that the selection committee makes the final decision, recommendations can have a significant influence on opinion-forming processes and are thus well worth sociological inquiry. At the risk of simplification, two possible effects can take place: (1) The

³ The very first usage of the term "gatekeeper" by Lewin can be found in his journal article "Forces behind Food Habits and Methods of Change" (Lewin 1943).

letter's writer may clearly emphasize the limitations of aspirants to new positions or raise doubts about the candidate's qualifications in subtle ways (Madera et al. 2018). In these cases, the term "gatekeeper" is appropriate as the person guarding "gates" sorts the wheat from the chaff. (2) The letters may convey an entirely positive impression of the candidate. In the latter case, "gate-opener" appears a more fitting term as it conjures up the image of someone who keeps watch at the doors but looks for ways to let people in, thereby opening routes to success (Koerner & Hulsebosch 1997).

To gain insight into whether and why recommendation letters from academic "stars" make a difference on the search for employment, I will focus on a single case, the eminent sociologist Robert K. Merton. An important feature of this study is thus that it specifically probes the power of an academic elite member as a gatekeeper, which sets the investigation apart from many other contributions that focus on "average" scholars as gatekeepers in academia (Crane 1967; Simon & Fyfe 1994).

3 The case of Robert K. Merton – An eminent scholar crisscrossing social circles

To fully understand how Robert K. Merton exercised the role of an academic gatekeeper some contextual information is needed that, while mentioned in most biographical accounts (e.g. Fleck 2015), is rarely elaborated in detail.

First, like most other of sociology's masterminds RKM did not work in isolation but was at the very center of different "social circles" that he crisscrossed. These circles appear especially important:

– *Department of Sociology at Columbia University:* RKM taught for more than forty years at Columbia University – one of the major centers for graduate education in American sociology. Students remember RKM as "a mesmerizing teacher, a magician in front of would-be prestidigitators" (Cole 2004: 38). His courses, such as the legendary Soc. 215 ("The Analysis of Social Structure") or Soc. 213–214 ("Social Theory Applied to Social Research") that even attracted non-sociologists such as stockbrokers from Wall Street, were a source of inspiration to many. In an interview RKM stated: "As I think back on the papers I've published over the years, the ones that engaged me the most deeply derived from the lectures I developed for courses." (Persell 1984: 363) By developing and honing, often spontaneously, his ideas in the classroom, RKM let

students participate in his discoveries, epitomized the role of the scholar scientist, and "by his example gave substance and purpose to the sociological calling" (Gieryn 2004: 859). These interactions helped to forge close, and sometimes life-long, bonds between the teacher and his many students.⁴ Some of RKM's students at Columbia who became leading sociologists are: Peter Blau, Alvin Gouldner, Lewis and Rose Coser, James S. Coleman, Suzanne Keller, Seymour M. Lipset, Philip Selznick, and Viviana Zelizer.

– *The Bureau of Applied Social Research:* When the Viennese-born Lazarsfeld came to Columbia in 1940, the Office of Radio Research moved with him and was quickly renamed to Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) – the future "research laboratory" of the Department of Sociology.⁵ The Bureau garnered resources from corporate and foundation sponsors who called on sociologists for "applied" research. At the BASR, Merton and Lazarsfeld cooperated closely on various research projects (Lazarsfeld 1975), and RKM served as the Bureau's Associate Director between 1941 and 1971. Owing no small part to the Second World War's end and the GI Bill, successive cohorts of mature and talented students brightened the Bureau in the 1940s and 1950s with intellectual excitement (Merton 1997: 292). BASR projects typically involved graduate students and non-tenured, (mostly) neophyte social scientists working in an ebullient environment. RKM helped these junior colleagues to learn the trade and micromanaged what they wrote (Fox 2011: 103). Some former employees (called "research assistants" or "research associates") of the BASR are: Richard Alba, David Elesh, Eva Etzioni-Halevy, Barney Glaser, Mary J. Huntington, Patricia Kendall, Charles Kadushin, and Hannan Selvin.

– *Editing as an almost life-long passion:* Columbia University alumnus David Caplovitz estimates that "Merton has spent from a third to a half of his professional life reading and commenting on the work of others." (Caplovitz 1977: 146) RKM himself stated that as soon as sociology became his vocation, editing became his avocation, which becomes evident by the self-reported fact that he helped out editorially in roughly 250 books and 2,000 articles over the course of 60 years (Merton 1997: 293). It is easy

⁴ The closeness of these teacher-student relationships is revealed in dedications. RKM's book contribution "Opportunity Structure: The Emergence, Diffusion, and Differentiation of a Sociological Concept, 1930s-1950s" (Merton 1995) is, for example, dedicated to "James S. Coleman, my onetime student, longtime colleague, enduring friend and teacher."

⁵ For the foundation history of the BASR as well as a narrative of the rise and fall of the Bureau, see Barton (1979).

to imagine that he might have been a professional editor had he not been an academic: RKM was known for going over manuscripts line by line, writing detailed and voluminous memos explaining flaws and suggesting means of correcting them. For almost three decades he worked as a consulting editor on sociology books for the publishing house Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, which published, among other things, some major works of noted sociologists such as Lewis Coser or Arthur Stinchcombe. For RKM, editing not only rewarded him with the ability to stay in touch with his former students, but also to build new relationships with colleagues-at-a-distance.

– *Russell Sage et al.*: If RKM traveled abroad for professional reasons, it was only for very short periods. He exerted mostly local influence by serving, inter alia, as president of the American Sociological Association (1957), a trustee of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1953–1975) and a Resident Scholar of the Russell Sage Foundation (1979–1999) or by sitting on the boards of Social Science Research Council (1968–1970), the American Academy of Sciences (1969–1971), the National Academy of Sciences (1971–1978), and Barnard College (1978–1986). His affiliations with these and other research institutions enabled him not only to act as a gatekeeper offering expert advice to local decision makers, but also connected him to academics from different backgrounds. While working at the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF) he came to know, for example, the anthropologist Philippe Bourgeois and the medical sociologist Howard Freeman. During stays at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS), he became better acquainted with the philosopher Yehuda Elkana, the political theorist Yaron Ezrahi, the Polish sociologist Adam Podgorecki, and the science historian Arnold Thackray.

These intellectual circles were, at least partly, also wider support or even friendship networks that provided its members with contacts and opportunities job seekers might not otherwise have heard about. RKM especially assisted his former students and colleagues in various ways, ranging from offering academic advice and (unpaid) editorial work to writing letters of recommendations.

Another characteristic worth pointing out is RKM's extraordinary attention to language. Already in his graduate days, RKM found dictionaries and volumes devoted to new words "irresistible" (Merton 2004: 239). At mid-career, he marked "categories of thought" as central topics for the sociology of knowledge (Merton 1973 [1945]: 12). His combined etymological and sociological quest led, for example, to the study of sociological semantics *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* (Merton & Barber 2004), which traces the eventful history of the word "ser-

endipity" from its coinage into the twentieth century. Achieving clarity, precision, and unambiguous meaning of sociological concepts characterized RKM's intellectual style and seems to have been "an almost obsessive preoccupation" (Sztompka 1986: 98). It is not an exaggeration to claim that no other wordsmith in the social sciences coined more sociological key concepts ("Mertonisms") qua linguistic innovation, from "the Matthew effect" to "serendipity pattern."

Merton's lifelong cultivation of the art of using words effectively through speech and writing led to a lecturing and prose style that captivated audiences: "Readers were swept away, even sometimes without understanding what exactly it was they were applauding." (Sica 1998: 123) Linguistic elegance also characterizes Merton's letters of recommendation, which is illustrated by a juxtaposition of an excerpt from a standard recommendation printed in Lewis (1998) with one by Merton that comments on the same job candidate's qualities:

He is normally extroverted and prefers to form close friendships, with a few rather than casual friendships with many. As a graduate student he gave little attention to personal grooming, whereas on social occasions his appearance was prepossessing. He has a good sense of humor which is often masked by his usually serious manner (Lewis 1998: 88).

I find him an engaging person. He is modest without being timid; congenial without being given to backslapping. He is an earnest person who does not permit his seriousness of purpose to become solemnity. I should think that he would fit in very well indeed in a liberal arts college (box: 107, folder: 'G-General, 1936–1996, 6–7').

It is this Mertonian lean and straightforward prose written artfully and spiced with wit that deviates from the dry language found in most letters of recommendation and leaves a long-lasting impression.

Taken together, RKM's close knowledge of many scholars and linguistic elegance, which makes reading his letters a literary pleasure, make him apt for writing effective letters of recommendation.

4 Robert K. Merton's letters of recommendation

4.1 Digitization of Archival Material

Letters of recommendation are an important part of the "Robert K. Merton papers, 1928–2003," which are deposited at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library and contain about 500 manuscript boxes. This

collection holds RKM's letters of recommendations written between 1936 and 2001⁶, arranged in folders alphabetically by the names of colleagues or students for whom he wrote recommendations.⁷

I digitized all letters written, and oftentimes signed, by RKM.⁸ I disregarded all other letters such as recommendation requests written by other persons (e. g. RKM's former students). I also excluded letters that did not fully correspond to the format of recommendations, such as student assessments and some recommendations for students grants or loans that are uniform in format and contain very little text.

Thus, all included letters address an academic institution with a job opening (the recipient of the letter), a call for fellowships, or an ongoing nomination process for awards/memberships, and are specifically written in favor of or against one or several potential job candidates. One exception was made in the case of the Columbia University Fellowship Award, which provided payment of tuition and health fees (and were accompanied by teaching appointments), as RKM gives relatively detailed descriptions of students in these recommendations.

Another decision I made in the research design was related to letters that recommended more than one scholar. Since RKM devoted equal space to each candidate in most of the letters, these recommendations were entered multiple times in the register of all recommendations.

The study considers in total 1,460 recommendations in favor of 560 scholars. On average, RKM wrote 3.4 recommendations for each mentee. Table 1 provides an overview of the types of recommendations considered. Approximately 65 percent are recommendations for academic positions (assistant, associate, full professor) or administrative positions such as dean or departmental chairmanship at American universities. A quarter of the letters are in support of applications for fellowships (e. g. Guggenheim, SSRC, CASBS) or for visiting scholarships/professorships at universities. The remaining 10 percent of all the letters are recommendations for job positions at

universities outside of the USA, for honorary degrees and awards (e. g. American Sociological Association Career of Distinguished Scholarship), or for memberships in honorific societies (e. g. American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Philosophical Society).

Table 1: Register of Recommendations (N=1,460)

recommendations for ...	freq.	perc.
academic and administrative positions at American universities	942	64.5
fellowships and visiting professorships/scholarships	365	25.0
academic and administrative positions at non-American universities	103	7.1
honorary degrees/prestigious awards	35	2.4
membership in honorific societies	15	1.0
total	1,460	100.0

If we focus on the most important category of institutions as recipients of RKM's letters –universities and colleges in the U.S. – we find 215 different academic organizations (see Supplemental Material). Repeated gatekeeping activities become especially visible in the case of UC Berkeley, Columbia University, Rutgers University, CUNY, University of Pennsylvania, and Hunter College. Interestingly, the geographical distribution of recommendations reveals a concentration of RKM's academic advising. The bulk of all recommendations clusters in two states, New York (25.6 percent) and California (14.5 percent). The numerous recommendations for New York-based institutions suggest a strong local influence. Apparently, RKM's outstanding reputation as a researcher and teacher at Columbia University made him a towering local figure whose judgment was much sought after when it came to filling vacancies at Columbia University and, more importantly, in its immediate environment. Furthermore, the many local acquaintances and friendships most likely facilitated contacts between RKM and the various academic selection committees.

4.2 Departmental Prestige and Mentor-Mentees Relationships

The 942 recommendations for academic posts at US universities and colleges that are mostly one or two pages long can be best categorized using a classification scheme with three criteria (see Figure 2):

⁶ It is important to note that all folders of the "Robert K. Merton Papers, 1928–2003" contain *no* special access restrictions.

⁷ For example, box 103 contains, inter alia, the folder 5 "Alba, Richard, 1976–1990" and the folder 6 "Amsterdamska, Olga, 1976–1986." If I quote directly from a source, I will always indicate the box as well as the folder that holds the cited letter so the reader can find the referenced archival material.

⁸ In a very few cases, such as during lengthy hospital stays, RKM advised his secretary Mary W. Miles to reply to incoming request letters. Mrs. Miles either copied and pasted passages from older recommendations or put down on paper what RKM transmitted to her orally. These letters were included as well in the study.

Figure 2: Mentor-Mentees Relationships

Notes. Considered are 942 recommendations by RKM written for applications to American universities and colleges. Prestige categories are adopted from Weakliem et al. (2012); top 10 departments: Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Berkeley, Princeton, N Carolina, Yale; top 20 departments: Penn, Ohio State, UCLA, Washington, Cornell, Northwestern, Iowa, Illinois-Urbana, Stanford, NYU.

(1) *Departmental prestige groupings:* As already indicated, RKM wrote the recommendations for applications submitted to a variety of academic institutions. As the bulk of the job openings were in sociology, it seems appropriate to classify the various letter recipients according to prestige rank groupings developed for US sociology. The ranking used here was constructed by Weakliem et al. (2012) for the year 1965.

(2) *Relationship types:* There were clearly different degrees of closeness between the mentor RKM and his mentees. In many letters RKM wrote about how long and in what capacity he knew an applicant. These are examples for such text passages:

I came to know Nikos Passas some fifteen years ago through his work on anomie and deviant behavior and have since kept in quite close touch with his further research and writing (box 113, folder “Passas, Nikos, 1989–1995”).

Full disclosure requires me to report that Harriet [Zuckerman] and I first came upon Jon Cole back in the 1960s when, as an

undergraduate at Columbia College, he applied for admission to our graduate seminar in the sociology of science (box 105, folder “Cole, Jonathan, 1968–1995”).

For fifteen years or more. I regard myself as a close friend (though one still capable, I trust, of fairly detached judgement of his work and capacities). For the last nine years or so, he has been a colleague in the same department at Columbia (box 109, folder “HO-End, 1937–1992”).

To refer to these three different relationship types, RKM frequently used the labels “colleague-at-a-distance” (for N. Passas), “student” (for J. Cole) and “immediate colleague” (for H. Hyman). I adopt here the same terminology and classify scholars whom RKM never or only occasionally met in person as “colleagues-at-a-distance.” “Former students” might only have attended a single course of RKM or have been his teaching assistants – this category thus has the most heterogeneity in relationship closeness. “Immediate colleagues” either shared with RKM (temporarily) the same working spaces or worked closely with RKM (over

several years). The label “immediate colleague” therefore stands – in contrast to “colleague-at-a-distance” – for high relationship closeness. Further, I decided to classify student-turned-immediate colleagues, such as Peter M. Blau or Seymour M. Lipset, as students.

(3) *Letter types*: Recommendation letters have at least four different types of “back-stories”: (a) RKM heard of an opening and proposed a qualified candidate on his own initiative; (b) a Columbia colleague passed on a recommendation request to RKM; (c) an employing institution contacted RKM directly asking for his opinion on a job candidate (who indicated RKM as a reference); (d) the applicant contacted RKM asking him to write a recommendation letter and send it to the potential employing institution.

While the archived material suggests that the last two variants were the most frequent ones, it is impossible to differentiate reliably between the various scenarios based on the text material collected.⁹ The only distinction that can be inductively established is between letters that give textual cues that RKM responded to incoming letters from the employing institution (“response letters”) and letters that do not contain such cues (“letters”). Typical clues I coded, inter alia, were these phrases: “This is a much belated response to your request...”, “I am glad to tell you what I can about ...”, “your letter reached me...”

Figure 2 cross-tabulates all three classification criteria. What immediately catches the eye is that the bulk of all recommendations were in favor of former students and concerned job openings at non-elite U.S. universities and colleges. More letters were even sent to middling New York-based departments rather than to the top 10 departments of the discipline (including Columbia University). It further transpires that RKM wrote slightly more recommendations for colleagues-at-a-distance than for immediate colleagues. Interestingly, letters outnumber response letters, which suggests that former students and colleagues typically contacted RKM directly (rather than only providing his name as a reference on application letters).

4.3 A Collective Portrait of RKM’s Mentees

Going through the list of 560 applicants for whom RKM gave detailed evaluations, one can find considerable diversity. The list includes, of course, RKM’s former teaching and research assistants (e.g. Rosa Haritos, Suzanne Keller), close collaborators (e.g. Patricia Kendall, Harriet Zuckerman), and friends (e.g. Lewis A. Coser, Alvin W. Gouldner) who pursued academic careers in sociology. But there are as well scholars who achieved renown in other disciplines as well, such as the historian of science Arnold Thackray, the political scientist Yaron Ezrahi, and the anthropologist Herbert Passin. While the majority are American, scholars such as the German sociologist Wolf Lepenies, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, and the Hungary-born philosopher of science Yehuda Elkana worked mostly outside of the USA. Further, while scholars are of very different academic caliber, we do find two Nobel Prize winners (the psychologist-turned-economist Daniel Kahneman and the American writer Saul Bellow). Finally, there are individuals who completed a Ph.D. but decided that academic life was not for them.

To bring structure to this seemingly diffuse crowd of individuals, I apply a “collective biography” approach that aims at identifying commonalities by subjecting all members of a social group to the same “questionnaire” (Charle 2015). Such an approach is not interested in the unique but in the average. The main biographical sources consulted were the biographical dictionary *American Men and Women of Science* (McKeen Cattell 1973) as well as its supplements and official curricula vitae. Other sources include *Marquis Who is Who in America*, obituaries published in the members’ newsletter “Footnotes” of the *American Sociological Association* (ASA) and in the *New York Times*, the *ASA Biographical Directory*, short CVs published on the digital platform *LinkedIn*, author biographies accompanying monographs or (JSTOR-archived) journal articles, other biographical handbooks (e.g. Glass 1980), and, most importantly, the *Columbia Libraries Catalog* (CLIO) that contains doctoral dissertations.

As Table 2 reveals, I found reliable biographical materials on 90 percent of the 560 mentees. Every fourth mentee was a woman, and most were born in the USA. Among the Europe-born acquaintances of RKM, many immigrated to the USA from, for example, Nazi Austria (e.g. P. M. Blau, K. T. Erikson, M. Jahoda, S. Keller). Even if the population is far from uniform regarding academic specializations, sociologists are clearly dominant. About 40 percent went through the Columbia Ph.D. program; the core group among all mentees thus consists of Columbia sociologists. Half of the other mentees received their Ph.D. from

⁹ The following text passage, for example, could be interpreted as pointing either to scenario (a) or (d): “I have just learned that you are chairing the Faculty Recruitment Committee there just as I, in turn, am chairing the Placement Committee here. In that capacity, you might have noticed that I sent an unsolicited letter a while ago strongly supporting the application of one of our recent graduates, Steven R. Cohen” (box 105, folder “Cohen, Steven, 1981–1983”).

other top tier departments (e.g. Harvard), and the other half from rather average departments. Perhaps the most striking result is that about 20 percent were associated in various ways to the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR). To give some examples: After completing her Ph.D. at Harvard, the eminent medical sociologist Renée Fox joined a medical education project at the Bureau; quantitative sociologist Richard Alba was employed by the Bureau as a computer programmer; and Cynthia F. Epstein investigated success stories of (black) professional women at the BASR. The mentees were connected to each other as well. For example, Leo Löwenthal, a European exile associated with the “Frankfurt School,” supervised the MA thesis of the Lazarsfeld student and BASR assistant Elihu Katz. Both Katz and Löwenthal received recommendations by RKM. Thus, much suggests that the BASR at Columbia University was an intellectual hub that helped not only to identify sociological talent through joint research projects, but also a place where lifelong social ties were forged that, even if they weakened over time, could be used when seeking jobs.

Another insight that can be gleaned from Table 2 is that even with a prestigious Ph.D. most mentees were not given the *first* full professorship from elite departments – a finding that is in line with Figure 2. Thus, cases such as Patricia Kendall, who became a professor at Queens College, are much more prevalent among RKM’s mentees than career stories like the one of Seymour M. Lipset, who left Columbia University to become a full professor at UC Berkeley.

Table 2: Biographical Information on RKM’s Recommended Mentees

biographical information	freq. (in %)
data availability	
some reliable biographical information available: yes	504 (90.0 %)
reliable biographical information available: no	56 (10.0 %)
data source	
American Men and Women of Science & Supplement	146 (26.1 %)
official CV	110 (19.6 %)
other sources	248 (44.3 %)
	missing 56 (10.0 %)
gender	
female	131 (23.4 %)
country of birth	
USA	348 (61.1 %)
European Countries	79 (14.1 %)
Israel	10 (1.8 %)
Canada	7 (1.2 %)
Russia	6 (1.1 %)
other countries	15 (2.7 %)
	missing 95 (17.0 %)

biographical information	freq. (in %)
discipline	
sociology	376 (67.1 %)
psychiatry/psychology	23 (4.1 %)
history	21 (3.8 %)
political science	16 (2.9 %)
philosophy	10 (1.8 %)
other disciplines	27 (4.8 %)
	missing 87 (15.5 %)
PhD from ...	
Columbia U	226 (40.4 %)
Harvard U	48 (8.6 %)
U Chicago	28 (5.0 %)
UC-Berkeley	13 (2.3 %)
Yale U	12 (2.1 %)
U Wisconsin-Madison	7 (1.3 %)
Stanford U	7 (1.3 %)
other PhD-granting universities	143 (25.5 %)
	missing 76 (13.6 %)
PhD year	
min.	1922
mean	1963
max.	2009
mentor-mentee relationship	
weak or strong involvement with the BASR*	115 (20.5 %)
co-author/co-editor	22 (3.9 %)
research/teaching assistant to RKM**	15 (2.7 %)
first full professorship from ...***	
other departments	198 (35.4 %)
top 10 US departments in sociology	84 (15.0 %)
other departments in NY	56 (10.0 %)
no full professorship	43 (7.7 %)
top 20 US departments in sociology	38 (6.8 %)
	missing 141 (25.2 %)
	560 (100 %)

Notes. * involvement with the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) is indicated by mentions of a person’s name in the “Bureau of Applied Social Research Records, 1944–1976” (Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library Collections); ** a person is coded as a research or teaching assistant of RKM only if mentioned as such in recommendation letters; ***same classification as in Figure 2, source: Weakliem et al. (2012).

4.4 A “Tough Codger”?

RKM dedicated much care to his recommendation letters, which he wrote on different models of typewriters (e. g. an IBM Selectric, Dubois (2014a: 12) and, in most cases, signed.¹⁰ The archived letters contain partly blue penciling of text and the crossing out of weak words that are replaced by better prose, which suggests that the perfectionist RKM applied the same editorial standards to recommendations as he did to other manuscripts (Caplovitz 1977). While RKM did use various techniques for duplication (carbon copy, xerography, etc.), it appears to the reader that when recommending someone more than once the writing never became a ritualistic exercise or an unpleasant duty.

In the 2,065 pages of text material, there are only a few fixed expressions that RKM used repeatedly. In one phrase extensively used to conclude letters, RKM referred to himself a “tough codger” who expresses praise most reluctantly. Even more frequently RKM described himself as a “curmudgeon” with high standards:

By way of context, a word about what is for me an enthusiastic endorsement. During a long lifetime of teaching, I’ve evidently acquired notoriety as a curmudgeon (in the strict sense of being difficult if not impossible to satisfy). But, as you see, I do make an effort to recognize scholarly merit (box 113, folder “Poros, Maritsa, 1999–2000”).

Given this self-description, it seems appropriate to investigate how critically RKM assessed job applicants in his letters. To do so, I will consider different types of reservations expressed. Table 3 differentiates, on one hand, between straight rejections of candidates perceived to be unqualified, research statements that are (heavily) criticized, letters in which candidates are judged to be middling rather than outstanding, and letters that mention limitations of a candidate, and, on the other hand, letters in which RKM makes clear that he cannot give a well-grounded opinion given some of his own limitations. Finally, I also coded letters in which RKM abstained completely from giving an evaluation due to his insufficient knowledge of the candidate.

Table 3 indicates that in the overwhelming majority of cases RKM transmitted a completely positive impression of the applicant to the evaluators. Whether or not phrases such as “I can tell you next to nothing of her capabilities as

a teacher” had the potential to raise doubts for the evaluators (because they convey the writer’s uncertainty about the applicant) is impossible to know. In general, one can summarize that the (archived) letters of recommendation are overwhelmingly couched in laudatory terms.

Table 3: Serious Reservations and Hedging in RKM’s Recommendations

types of reservation	number of letters	in percent of all letters (%)
no first-hand knowledge on teaching	147	10.1 %
not knowing him/her closely	58	4.0 %
not kept up with his work; seen little of her/him in recent years	56	3.8 %
not competent to judge him/her as a specialist	38	2.6 %
he/she is not ... [top-notch]; he/she is rather ...[reliable] than ... [brilliant]	29	2.0 %
his/her limitation/weakness is ...	27	1.8 %
no first-hand knowledge of administrative abilities	25	1.7 %
cannot be of help; must abstain from giving any opinion	22	1.5 %
cannot recommend; he/she does not qualify; do not support the nomination of ...	12	0.8 %
the research statement is ... [sketchy, unintelligible mishmash]	11	0.8 %
	425	29.1 %

Notes. Considered are all 1,460 recommendations.

4.5 The Assessment of (Extra-)Academic Qualities

Although we cannot know which requests RKM received from various departments that were interested in filling a vacancy, it is likely that he was asked to evaluate a candidate’s “qualifications for teaching, research, and participation as a colleague,” which was the usual formula Lionel S. Lewis encountered in his analysis of 180 letters of recommendation written by sociologists in the late 1960s (Lewis 1998: 51).

Partly building on Lewis’s seminal study, and in order to systematically analyze recommendations for the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, Tsay et al. (2003) developed a differentiated classification scheme that allows one to assess types of classification criteria utilized to exercise gate-keeping discretion. I have adopted this scheme with only minor modifications. For example, the category “physical description” was completely dropped, as RKM

¹⁰ One finds only three letters with the following postscriptum added by RKM’s secretary: “Dictated at home and therefore not read after typing.”

Figure 3: Evaluation Criteria Used in RKM's Recommendations for (Former) Students

Notes. Considered are 942 recommendations written in favour of (former) students. Categories (see Supplementary Material) were dichotomously coded (1= category applies) and aggregated at the level of master categories (i. e. general academic ability). The values indicate in percentage points the relative share of each master category. Calculations were conducted separately for male and female students.

never described someone as “attractive,” “virile,” “well dressed,” etc. The electronic supplementary file provides illustrative examples for each coding category. It is important to note that I have used words/phrases and not sentences as coding units. As an example, the sentence “He is a man of the highest integrity, with a real zest for inquiry and an obvious capacity for relating himself to others” received three separate codes: “academic/intellectual integrity” (moral character), “intellectual curiosity/drive/enthusiasm/zest” (intellectual desire), and “at ease socially” (social competence).

A systematic analysis of all RKM's recommendations written in favor of students reveals that he commented more frequently on the academic or analytical abilities of his (former) students and less often on their technical skills and personality traits. Interestingly, RKM's references to personality and social competence vary according to the student's gender. When RKM was asked to assess the capacities of men, he tended to give more space to personal maturity or affability (“pleasant,” “friendly,”

“quiet,” “modest”) and the ability to handle social interactions (“cooperative,” “congenial,” “likeable,” “a nice guy to have around”). The most plausible explanation for this finding is that RKM felt that departments were more anxious about recruiting men who could disrupt social relationships and upset the status quo, while in the case of females such concerns seemed to be less prevalent.

More generally, RKM felt it was necessary – like most writers of recommendations in sociology around the same time (Lewis 1998: xii) – to comment on academic *and* extra-academic qualities (see Figure 3).

4.6 Artful Persuasion

Rhetoric was in general a very important resource to Robert K. Merton (Simonson 2010: 215) and in his letters of recommendation he brought the “art of persuasion” as close to perfection as an art form can be. To convince members of selection committees of candidates’ qualifications he mostly used three rhetoric strategies already discussed in *On Rhetoric* (Aristotle 2007): First, he enhanced rhetorically his already large credibility or trustworthiness (*ethos*). Second, he increased the persuasive power of his letters by allowing the reader to easily follow his logic (*logos*). Third, he aimed at keeping readers in a certain frame of mind by putting himself in the shoes of the committee members or by aiming to infect others with his excitement (*pathos*). In his letters RKM bolsters his credibility by detailing his depth of knowledge of the job candidate. In some cases, the reader becomes easily convinced that RKM is the best available person to provide information:

First, full disclosure: My opinion of Tom is based on a good deal of direct experience. I have known him since he began his graduate work at Columbia back in the early 70s and we have since worked together in various scholarly capacities (box 108, folder “Gieryn, Thomas, 1974–1996”).

In other cases, RKM shows personal humility when pointing to his own limitations regarding the selected candidate’s qualifications, which makes his overall judgment of the candidate even more credible (because the reader tends to suspect that RKM is deeply knowledgeable about all other qualifications).

This particular investigation deals with matters directly germane to the Juvenile and Family Court so that, in all truth, I am not in a position to say anything about her competence in this respect. However, I do know her as a person of utmost integrity and impressive intellect (box 109, folder “J-General, 1940–42, 1958–1992, 1–2”).

Further, RKM provides “proof” for his judgments and clearly structures his assessment. What is striking is *how* RKM frames this “proof”:

It is indicative that his classical book, *CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL THEORIES*, is being reprinted twenty years after its first appearance (box 115, folder “Smith R.C.-Stinchcombe”).

His substantial monograph *Interviewing in Social Research* is by general assent the most thoroughgoing analysis of interviewing procedures available in the field (box 109, folder “HO-End, 1937–1992”).

All this as well as his recent monograph on the sociology of inflation and recession – *MAKING ENDS MEET* – has resulted in his being nationally identified as the sociological authority on the subject of the low-income consumer (box 105, folder “CA-CM, 1946–1990, 2–3”).

One of his early works, *The Sociology of Conflict*, is by all odds the best monograph on the subject in any language accessible to me. It has had an immense influence in the years since it was first published. (box 105, folder “COS-End, 1948–1992”).

These comments not only have a strong positive vibe but also present the recommended scholar as belonging to *the* best. The very concept of academic excellence presumes a well-defined hierarchy, and RKM positions his protégés indirectly at the *very* top.

Finally, RKM refers to the institution’s search for qualified new members and effectively conveys a sense of understanding the department’s needs:

I should think that Ms. Moseley might be of particular interest to you in connection with your strong program in comparative sociology at Brown. I hope that it all works out (box 111, folder “M-General, 1945–1996, 5–5”).

It so happens that we have two young sociologists who would, I think, meet your needs admirably. The Department here at Columbia strongly supports both men as candidates for the post. [...] If there is any further information which I may be able to provide, please let me know (box 114, folder “SA-SE, 1946–1992, 2–3”).

RKM not only identifies with the members of selection committees and makes a case for how the candidate aligns with their interests, but also may have influenced the letters’ readers with his enthusiasm about the candidate:

It is not often that one can continuously applaud a scholar’s contributions to humanistic learning over a span of several decades. But that is inevitably the case with the scholarly work of David Joravsky (box 109, folder “Joravsky, David, 1972–1990”).

It is with enthusiasm that I answer your letter of inquiry about Arthur L. Stinchcombe. For some time, he has seemed to me to be the outstanding sociologist of his years in the country (box 115, folder “Smith R.C.-Stinchcombe”).

The balanced mix of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* combined with elegant prose that is often marked by vivacity¹¹ make up the Mertonian recommendation style. The importance of RKM as a recommender thus not only stems from his outstanding eminence in sociology but also from his rhetorical strategies. Put somewhat exaggeratingly: Such a compelling writer as RKM who could make anybody seem worth hiring is very likely to have been an effective writer of recommendations who could open doors for other scholars.

¹¹ To give a few illustrations only: Arthur Stinchcombe is described as a “sociological virtuoso” and Roy M. MacLeod as an “industrious journeyman.” The versatile Jonathan Cole is said to have “more than one string to his bow,” Alvin Gouldner is given “a clean bill of health,” Henry Etzkowitz is judged to be “a sturdy, reliable worker in the sociological vineyard,” and to dispel the impression of Hugh F. Cline as a pure quantitative sociologist, RKM makes clear that he is “not a routinized computer mechanic.”

4.7 Success of Recommendations

To empirically establish the “success” of RKM’s recommendations, I have systematically matched information on academic careers with data gained from the analysis of recommendations letters. Things become potentially problematic if letters do not contain any information on the vacant position. To give an example: In a letter dated with December 9, 1947, RKM recommended his former student Seymour M. Lipset to E.W. Strong of UC Berkeley without mentioning the post for which Lipset applied (box 110, folder “L-General, 1939–1999, 4–5”). I decided nevertheless to code “success” (=1) for the category “associate professorship” because of the proximity in time between the recommendation and Lipset taking up an associate professorship. More generally, I decided to apply this logic whenever the vacant position is unknown *and* recommendations preceded the job by one or two years.

Coding becomes more complicated when RKM recommended the same person to several institutions using only slightly modified letters. To use an analogy, this can be compared to someone shooting several arrows at the same time hoping that at least one will hit the target. “Success” would then be defined as just one of the many recommendations leading to an appointment. Thus, I decided to consider jointly all recommendations for a scholar given in the same year and coded “failure” (=0) only if *all* letters turned out to be unsuccessful.

Table 4 presents the success rates for different types of job categories. Obviously, success differs significantly between two kinds of appointments: promotions within an organization (closed personnel system) and job postings that are open to outsiders (open personnel system). In cases of (internal) promotions to associate or full professorships, the success rate lies between 90 and 100 percent, which partly suggests that nearly all scholars asking RKM for a recommendation had achieved an outstanding record that qualified them for promotion.

In contrast, RKM’s support for external candidates is marked by substantially lower chances of appointment. The rates are lower for assistant and full professorships than for associate professorships, which can be explained, at least partly, by the difficulties of entering the marketplace directly after receiving a Ph.D. and the scarcity of full professorships. The general take-away is that about 40 percent of all scholars supported by RKM succeeded in acquiring the academic job. Interestingly, the success rate is the lowest for fellowships. The reason for this non-effectiveness is far from obvious. All three considered fellowships are, however, prestigious and known for a rather rigorous selection process. Furthermore, there was a larger

applicant pool to choose from for (one-year) fellowships than for faculty positions. It is important to note that such “success” is based on recurrent efforts by RKM to assist his mentees in establishing themselves professionally, which becomes apparent through the mere number of recommendations per scholar. To give a few examples: RKM recommended Gary A. Abraham twenty times, Stephen Cole sixteen times, and Henry Etzkowitz ten times.

Table 4: Success Rates

application for	no. of scholars (n)	success rate (%)
assistant professorship	52	42.3 %
associate professorship	42	57.1 %
full professorship	73	42.5 %
promotion to associate professor	35	97.2 %
promotion to full professor	45	86.7 %
CASBS fellowship	40	15 %
Guggenheim fellowship	29	34.5 %
IAS fellowship	10	30.0 %

5 Conclusions

This article aimed at investigating an important yet under-researched figure in academia, namely the gatekeeper for academic job markets, by examining recommendation letters of RKM – one of the most eminent sociologists of the twentieth century. The case study aimed at giving a holistic picture of the scholars RKM supported in their endeavors to find employment and how he went about writing recommendation letters. The main insights gained are as follows:

Over a period of approximately sixty years RKM wrote (at least) 1,460 detailed recommendations for 560 scholars, most of whom were former students at Columbia University and/or research associates at the Bureau of Applied Social Research. In these letters RKM portrayed candidates as talented and promising prospects for vacancies. While the key attributes he mentioned were knowledgeableness (“well-read”), mental capacities (“intelligent”), creativity (“originality”), and facility of expression (“he is articulated”), he also gave personal traits (“pleasant”) due consideration. The number of letters in which he raised doubts about the candidate’s qualifications or suitability is negligible. The geographical distribution of recommendations reveals that RKM played foremost a gatekeeping role within the United States while his influence was

clearly the strongest in New York. The analysis of the biographical data of RKM's mentees reveals that they disproportionately received their Ph.D. from Columbia University and other U.S. elite departments. However, most recommendations by RKM were written in connection with vacant positions at average (sociology) departments, and most mentees were appointed to their first professorship at second or even third-tier departments rather than at first-tier departments. While the appointment processes remain a "black box," in retrospect one can establish for many cases whether or not the applicant received the appointment. Merely *assuming* that RKM's affirmative letters had an impact on the final decision makers, one can, in a second step, measure the "success rate" of recommendations. It turns out that the best estimate for external job candidates is 40 to 50 percent, and between 90 and 100 percent for internal promotions.

Much suggests that the success of RKM is not only attributable to his outstanding scientific authority and his professional seriousness with which he played the gatekeeping role, which led him, *inter alia*, to nearly always write several detailed letters of recommendation in favor of the same person. It was most likely also the stylistic side of Merton's letters that made his recommendations effective. Using different rhetorical strategies and employing high standards of linguistic elegance, RKM let his protégés appear in the best of all lights. Even when he felt to have showered too much praise on someone, he knew which rhetorical buttons to push in order to appear as a credible source of information:

A paragon? I doubt it – on the general principle that no one is. But whatever his limitations and flaws, I am not privy to them (box 109, folder: "Johnston, Barry, 1987–1997")
I don't intend to have this sound as though Larry Stern is a paragon. Who is? But he is everything which I have tried to convey in this letter (box 114, folder: "STA-STI, 1949–1995, 2–2")

The term "gate-opener" appears to capture best the essence of RKM's professional engagement. The talent scout RKM – who sometimes called himself self-mockingly "truffle dog" (e.g. box 104, folder "Brubaker, Rogers, 1985–1993") – aimed to open gates to sociological talents by placing his "seal of approval" on job applications. The number of letters in which one can find a lack of endorsement is small (see Table 3). This insight may also have broader implications for the literature on academic gatekeeping that is preoccupied with restrictive practices or the "power of exclusion" (see, for example, Posselt (2016)). The case of RKM, however, clearly demonstrates that there is another side to gatekeepers as they may effectively facilitate access to academic positions by acting as brokers, vouching for

researchers, and building trust ("power of inclusion"). A more balanced view therefore appears warranted.

The available empirical evidence suggests that RKM's "seal of approval" very likely increased the chances of receiving positive evaluations by academic selection committees. While it is impossible to exactly know whether such protégés as Suzanne Keller, Seymour Lipset, Philip Selznick or Vivianna Zelizer could have established themselves as scholars without RKM's helping hand, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to argue that without RKM's dedication to fostering the careers of colleagues and former students, the faculty composition of American sociology could have looked differently.

5.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

It is well established that a limitation of case studies is their lack of generalizability. While Merton is an unambiguous member of the academic elite in American sociology, especially in 1950s and 1960s, the results presented in this study do not necessarily allow to draw conclusions about the gatekeeping power of the academic elite in general. However, adding cases such as Talcott Parsons may clarify to which degree connections to the most eminent scholars were beneficial to the advancement of careers in American sociology ('small-N testing', Goertz 2017). Further, we can gain a better understanding of RKM's power/influence as a gate-opener by comparing his letters with those of a less renowned professor. A third potential avenue for future research is to compare writers of recommendation letters across social science disciplines. Extensions of the current study may offer answers to the following questions: How powerful was the 'Capitoline Triad' of post-war American sociology (Lazarsfeld, Merton, Parsons)? How influential was RKM if compared with a less prestigious professor of sociology? Lastly, what is the importance of master-apprentice relations in different social science disciplines? All three questions appear worthy of further exploration.

This in-depth study has explored one specific case of elite influence on academic appointments from multiple angles and has remained at a descriptive level. A causal experimental method must be applied to provide a cause-and-effect analysis. Finally, one must bear in mind that archival materials are never complete and therefore leave room for interpretation. For example, it is simply impossible to reconstruct how exactly RKM's letters impacted the final decisions of academic hiring committees. Because of this inherent limitation this study has refrained from making causal claims.

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