

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S IDENTIFICATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON BETWEEN BULGARIA, ITALY AND UKRAINE

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Abstract. *The study presented here analyses the development of self-categorisation, national, European and local identification of Bulgarian, Ukrainian and Italian children and adolescents growing up in Bulgaria, Ukraine and Italy.*

The sample consisted of 541 children aged 6, 9, 12 and 15 years. It was found that national, European and local identifications differ in the three national groups. It is argued that the cognitive-developmental account of the development of national identification is unable to explain the patterns of findings which were obtained. The social identity theory, however, is able to explain the different patterns of importance given to the different identifications by the three national groups.

Keywords: *self-categorisation, national identity, cross-cultural comparison*

INTRODUCTION

Every human being, besides its personal identity, possesses a number of *social identities* that ensue from its belonging simultaneously to a different group – national, gender, age, religious, ethnic, etc. They are internalised and represent a

significant part of the self-image of the person. For a human being to be a part of a given national group and to belong to it means to share its values, customs, traditions, rites, language and its territory, to hand them down from generation to generation and as if in this way to touch eternity. In so far as the participants in the cross-cultural relations are representatives of different national groups, the examination and revealing of the nature of the process of formation of national identity during childhood turn out to be undoubtedly necessary. It is the comparison of this process in the case of children from Bulgaria, Italy and Ukraine that this article is dedicated to.

Two theories are mainly applied in scholarly literature when explaining the results obtained from empirical investigations of development of national identity in childhood. These are the social cognitive theory (Aboud, 1988) and the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). Both theories will be presented in brief.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

The social cognitive point of view (Aboud, 1988) that is based on Jean Piaget's theory pays attention to the universal cognitive processes and to the social experience – a result of the interaction between sociocultural variables and the level of cognitive development, reached by the individual. Aboud (1988) and Milner (1996), referring to the results obtained from a study performed on majority children in countries with multicultural composition, suggest the presence of a stable developmental construct.

In the beginning of 1950s, J. Piaget and A. Weil (Piaget & Weil, 1951) conducted a study, which turned into a classical one, on the **relationship between regional and national identity** of children aged 4 to 15 years, who lived in Geneva. Analysis was made of their understanding of the terms “from Geneva” and “Swiss”. In authors' opinion, the development of national identity is based on the relation between “whole” and its “parts” and the child until the age of 10-11 years does not know that the logical categories may be included into other, bigger ones.

In the beginning of 1960s, G. Jahoda (Jahoda, 1963) investigated how children aged 6 to 12 years from Glasgow realise what it means to be a citizen of this city, to be a Scotsman or Briton. In his opinion, the children understand the hierarchical relations and interrelations at a much earlier age. They know that “women” and “men” are “people”, that “fruit” and “vegetables” are “foods”, etc. Hence, small children realise that they can be simultaneously “boy”, “brother”, “man”. According to G. Jahoda, Piaget and his collaborators are wrong when arguing that children cannot build a notion of national relations because of their inability to work with logical inclusion before the age of 10-11 years.

The existing investigations (Barrett & Short, 1992; Barrett, Wilson & Lyons, 2003) show that before the age of 5 years the children have little knowledge of their own country and national group. After the age of 5 years, they usually know the name of their own country and national group, and start to categorise themselves as members of their own national group (Bennett, Lyons, Sani & Barrett, 1998). During middle childhood, children's knowledge of the people who belong to their nationality is expanding considerably (Bennett, Lyons, Sani & Barrett, 1998; Barrett & Short, 1992; Katz, 1976; Piaget & Weil, 1951) and at an age of about 10-11 years they can describe many of the stereotypical characteristics that are ascribed to the members of their own and of other nationalities, such as typical bodily features, clothes, habits, behaviour, psychological, religious and political convictions (Bennett, Lyons, Sani & Barrett, 1998; Barrett & Short, 1992; Barrett, Wilson & Lyons, 2003). At the age between 5 and 11 years, the degree of identification with the national group also increases.

In recent years, several studies have underlined how variations in the development of national identifications occur as a function of the specific country in which the children live (Barrett, 2007; Inguglia et al., in press). However, while all these studies were focused on national level, very few researches have considered the other levels of identification such as European and local ones.

- ❖ *National identity*: the sense of belonging to the nation based on cognitive and affective aspects as regards the national ingroup and outgroups (Barrett, 2000).
- ❖ *European (supranational) identity*: the sense of belonging to the Europe based on the beliefs, opinions, feelings and attitudes about European continent (Cinnirella, 1997).
- ❖ *Local identity*: the sense of belonging to the place where everyone grew up (generally, the *city*); it is based on the circumstances, environment, traditions, values, family obligations and interactive and affective styles of this place (Arnett, 2002).

These identities have shown to have a multidimensional nature (Ashmore et al., 2004), including three basic elements:

- ❖ *Self-Categorisation*: identifying self as a member of, or categorising self in terms of, a particular social group.
- ❖ *Importance*: the relative subjective importance of a particular group membership to the individual's overall self-concept.
- ❖ *Degree of identification*: the degree, from low to high, with which a person categorises self in terms of a particular social group.

As an alternative to the social cognitive theory, some authors propose the Tajfel's social identity theory (SIT).

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social Identity was defined by Tajfel (1981) as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his (her) knowledge of his (her) membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (1981, p. 255).

The positive characteristics ascribed to the in-group lead to a positive self-evaluation. If the identification with the group is weak or absent, this phenomenon will not appear. For example, if somebody belongs to a group of low social status, he or she will have difficulties in acquiring a positive evaluation of their in-group. Tajfel proposes the example of the research carried out by Goodman (1964), analysing the preference of white and black persons on the part of 3- and 5-year-old children. Results showed that 92% of white children showed preference for their in-group and only 26% of black children preferred their in-group. The fact that the black children at such an early age prefer the white people is a reflection of the rapid and early assimilation of norms and values of the social environment in which they live, and where some groups are more evaluated than others. According to the SIT, there are some cognitive processes thanks to which the differences between the members of the in-group disappear while the differences with the members of out-groups are underlined. Thus, the SIT considers that the in-group favouritism is a psychological consequence of the internalised belonging to the in-group.

According to Tajfel (1978), it can be said that each social group provides to children a concrete social identity based on a determinate representation of the world as well as a set of values, attitudes, beliefs and actions that corresponds to the social representation.

National identity in particular is a complex psychological structure that encompasses a number of **cognitive and affective aspects**. The **cognitive aspects** include: knowledge of the national groups and territories, child’s categorisation as their member, symbols (the national flag, anthem, etc.), customs, traditions, historic events and national heroes who have turned into a nation’s symbol, beliefs of the typical features of the members of the national group and the knowledge of to what extent the child resembles the national type. The **affective aspects** include: importance that is ascribed to national identity, devotion to national territory, sense of belonging to national community, feelings towards compatriots and a number of social emotions such as national pride, shame, guilt, etc. (Barrett, Wilson & Lyons, 2003; Barrett, 2007).

According to Smith & Bond (1998), the most important function of national identity is that it **provides knowledge to the people as to who they are, who the others are and where they are from**. During the process of socialisation, people develop devotion to nation and support for a unique culture, share values, symbols, traditions and meanings. According to M. Billig (Billig, 1995), the term

“national identity” is a social term which covers customs, beliefs and behaviour from the social life with a strong emotional component. This part of identity is expressed in everyday life although this is not often recognised.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Bulgaria, Italy and Ukraine are historically different countries. Ukraine became independent only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and it is still not a member of EU. Italy is one of the founding states of EU, and Bulgaria was admitted to the Union on 1 January 2007. The data was collected in Palermo, Kharkiv and in Sofia, respectively.

The purpose of the present study was to analyse developmental aspects and differences in national, European and local identities between children/adolescents living in Bulgaria, Italy and Ukraine, as measured by self-categorisation, relative subjective importance and degree of identification.

We expected to find context-related differences between Bulgarian, Italian and Ukrainian children, which could be summarised as follows:

Bulgarian and Italian children used more easily national and regional identities than the Ukrainian ones.

Italian adolescents used more easily the European identity than the Ukrainian and Bulgarian ones.

There was no difference between Bulgarians, Italians and Ukrainians with reference to the local identity.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 541 children of Bulgarian, Ukrainian and Italian origin aged 6, 9, 12 and 15 years: 162 of Bulgarian origin, 159 of Ukrainian origin and 220 of Italian origin. There was approximately the same number of children at each age: 129 6 years old, 139 9 years old, 127 12 years old and 146 15 years old. 281 children were male, and 260 were female.

From **Bulgaria**, there participated in the investigation: 40 children 6 years old, 41 children 9 years old, 40 children 12 years old and 41 children 15 years old. Totally 89 children were male, and 73 were female.

From **Ukraine**, there participated in the investigation: 37 children 6 years old, 40 children 9 years old, 27 children 12 years old and 53 children 15 years old. Totally 75 children were male, and 84 were female.

From **Italy**, there participated in the investigation: 52 children 6 years old, 58 children 9 years old, 58 children 12 years old and 52 children 15 years old. Totally 117 children were male, and 103 were female.

PROCEDURE AND MATERIAL

Participants were interviewed individually.

The following measures were used.

- ‡ **Self-categorisation.** Participants' self-categorisations were measured using a set of cards with the name of specific self-descriptors: (a) *Bulgarian/Italian/Ukrainian* for national groups; (b) *European* card; (c) *inhabitant of Sofia/Palermo/Kharkiv* for local groups; (d) *6 years old, 9 years old, 12 years old* and *15 years old* for age; (e) *boy* and *girl* for gender. Two boxes labeled 'Me' and 'Not Me' were used. Interviewer spread the set of cards out in front of the participants in a different randomised order. The latter had to put the cards which described them in the 'Me' box and all the ones which did not describe them in the 'Not Me' box. A score of 1 was assigned to each card chosen.
- ‡ **Relative subjective importance.** All cards in the 'Me' box were placed face up on the table and children/adolescents were asked to choose just one card which was the most important to them. Then, participants were asked to choose the next most important card again. The procedure was repeated until only one card remained. Scoring was the following. The first-ranked card = 1, the second = 2, and so on. The value assigned to each of the cards not chosen from the total set of 5 cards was the average of the remaining ranks up to rank 5.
- ‡ **Degree of identification.** The extent of participants' identification with *national category* was measured using 1 set of 4 cards. With reference to the set concerning national identity, children were presented with the following four cards: *very Bulgarian/Italian/Ukrainian, a little bit Bulgarian/Italian/Ukrainian, not at all Bulgarian/Italian/Ukrainian* and *don't know*. The participant was asked: "Which one of these cards do you think best describes you?". Scoring was as follows: *very* = 3, *a little bit* = 2, *not at all* = 1.

RESULTS

SELF-CATEGORISATION

In order to examine the relative importance ascribed to each of the five categories by countries, different statistical analyses were made. The mean values obtained are presented in Table 1, with the smaller values reflecting greater importance of the respective category, and the superscript letters show if there is a difference between scores for different ethnoses (see notes below the table).

TABLE 1. MEAN VALUES OF THE IMPORTANCE ASCRIBED TO EACH OF THE FIVE CATEGORIES BROKEN DOWN BY COUNTRY

| Identity | Mean | | |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Bulgaria | Ukraine | Italy |
| Age | 2.80 ^b | 2.78 ^b | 2.92 ^b |
| Gender | 2.36 ^a | 1.89 ^a | 2.02 ^a |
| City | 3.35 ^c | 2.75 ^b | 2.82 ^b |
| Nationality | 2.30 ^a | 2.32 ^c | 2.96 ^b |
| Europe | 4.19 ^d | 4.31 ^d | 4.28 ^c |
| | * | * | * |

Notes: Low scores represent high relevant importance, and high score represent low relevant importance; (1 – minimum, 5 – maximum); where there is a statistically significant effect of category, an asterisk appears beneath the relevant column of five figures, and the specific location of the significant difference within the column of five figures is shown using superscript letters, with mean scores which do not differ significantly from one another sharing the same superscript letter; data analysed using Kruskal-Wallis tests and Bonferroni-corrected post hoc Mann-Whitney tests.

In order to investigate if statistically significant differences are observed between children from the three countries in the importance they ascribe to the five identities examined, the Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed for each age group. The data is presented in Table 2.

With the *6-year-old children* from the three countries, no statistically significant differences are observed in the choice of gender and local (which city they are from) identity. The “age” category is of greater importance to children from Ukraine in comparison with children from Bulgaria. National identity is more often chosen by Bulgarians and Italians and definitely more seldom chosen by Ukrainians. European identity is most important to children from Ukraine and most unimportant to children from Italy.

With all *9-year-old children* studied, the five categories examined are statistically significant. The age identity is most important to children from Ukraine and most unimportant to children from Italy. Gender and local (which city you are from) identities are most important to children from Ukraine and Italy and most insignificant to children from Bulgaria. Opposite is the trend that is observed in national and European identities. They are of greatest importance to Bulgarians and most insignificant to Ukrainians and Italians.

With all *12-year-old children* studied, no statistically significant differences are observed in the choice of age, local (which city you are from) and European identity. Gender identity is most important to children from Ukraine and most unimportant to children from Bulgaria. National identity is most important to Bulgarians and least significant to Ukrainians and Italians.

TABLE 2. MEAN VALUES OF THE IMPORTANCE ASCRIBED TO EACH OF THE FIVE CATEGORIES BROKEN DOWN BY COUNTRY AND AGE

| Age group/country | Mean | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | Age | Gender | City | Nationality | Europe |
| 6 years old | | | | | |
| Bulgaria | 2.75 ^b | 2.03 | 3.03 | 2.75 ^a | 4.45 ^{a,b} |
| Ukraine | 1.68 ^a | 2.43 | 2.95 | 3.86 ^b | 4.14 ^a |
| Italy | 2.25 ^{a,b} | 2.15 | 2.79 | 3.04 ^a | 4.77 ^b |
| Mean | 2.24 | 2.19 | 2.91 | 3.19 | 4.49 |
| | * | | | * | * |
| 9 years old | | | | | |
| Bulgaria | 2.71 ^{a,b} | 2.95 ^b | 3.56 ^b | 1.78 ^a | 4.00 ^a |
| Ukraine | 2.23 ^a | 2.18 ^a | 2.75 ^a | 3.20 ^b | 4.70 ^b |
| Italy | 3.28 ^b | 2.14 ^a | 2.36 ^a | 2.78 ^b | 4.45 ^b |
| Mean | 2.81 | 2.39 | 2.83 | 2.60 | 4.39 |
| | * | * | * | * | * |
| 12 years old | | | | | |
| Bulgaria | 3.00 | 2.35 ^b | 3.33 | 2.28 ^a | 4.05 |
| Ukraine | 3.24 | 1.45 ^a | 2.97 | 3.10 ^b | 4.34 |
| Italy | 3.43 | 1.91 ^{a,b} | 2.97 | 3.03 ^b | 3.72 |
| Mean | 3.25 | 1.94 | 3.08 | 2.81 | 3.97 |
| | | * | | * | |
| 15 years old | | | | | |
| Bulgaria | 2.73 ^a | 2.12 ^b | 3.46 ^b | 2.41 ^a | 4.27 |
| Ukraine | 3.72 ^b | 1.53 ^a | 2.49 ^a | 3.15 ^b | 4.11 |
| Italy | 2.63 ^a | 1.87 ^{a,b} | 3.19 ^b | 3.02 ^b | 4.23 |
| Mean | 3.05 | 1.82 | 3.01 | 2.90 | 4.20 |
| | * | * | * | * | |
| Total | | | | | |
| Bulgaria | 2.80 | 2.36 ^b | 3.35 ^b | 2.30 ^a | 4.19 |
| Ukraine | 2.78 | 1.89 ^a | 2.75 ^a | 3.32 ^c | 4.31 |
| Italy | 2.92 | 2.02 ^a | 2.82 ^a | 2.96 ^b | 4.28 |
| Mean | 2.84 | 2.08 | 2.96 | 2.87 | 4.26 |
| | | * | * | * | |

Notes: Low scores represent high relevant importance, and high score represent low relevant importance; (1 – minimum, 5 – maximum); where there is a statistically significant effect of country, an asterisk appears beneath the relevant column of three figures, and the specific location of the significant difference within the column of three figures is shown using superscript letters, with mean scores which do not differ significantly from one another sharing the same superscript letter; data analysed using Kruskal-Wallis tests and Bonferroni-corrected post hoc Mann-Whitney tests.

With all *15-year-old children* studied, statistically significant differences are not observed only in the European identity. The "age" category is most important to children from Bulgaria and Italy and most insignificant to children from Ukraine. Gender identity is most important to Ukrainians and of least significance to children from Bulgaria. Local (which city you are from) identity is most important to children from Ukraine and most insignificant to children from the other two countries. National identity is most important to Bulgarians and less significant to Ukrainians and Italians.

When examining the *mean values* of the children from the four age groups from the three countries, it becomes clear that no statistically significant differences in terms of age are observed in the choice of age and European identity. Gender and local (which city you are from) identities are most important to children from Ukraine and Italy and least significant to Bulgarians. In the choice of national identity, the children from Bulgaria, Ukraine and Italy form three independent and unrelated groups. National identity is of greater importance to Bulgarians, there follow children from Italy, and it is of least significance to children from Ukraine.

NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION BY COUNTRY AND BY AGE GROUP

In order to establish if the level of national identity is different for children from Bulgaria, Ukraine and Italy, chi-square analyses were made and the Pearson coefficient was calculated. Results from Table 3 show that there are statistically significant differences in the structure of answers to the question of national identity with children from the three countries ($\chi^2=83.75$, $df=6$, $p<0.001$, $N=541$, $Phi=0.278$).

TABLE 3. NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION BROKEN DOWN BY COUNTRY

| Answer | Bulgaria | Ukraine | Italy |
|--------------|----------|---------|-------|
| Not at all | 3 | 24 | 4 |
| A little bit | 9 | 45 | 44 |
| Very | 147 | 79 | 166 |
| Don't know | 3 | 11 | 6 |
| | | | |
| Total | 162 | 159 | 220 |

Results presented in Table 3 show the different way in which children from Bulgaria, Ukraine and Italy perceive their national identity. The majority of children from the three countries feel their national identity clearly expressed. In the second place, children from Ukraine and Italy feel *a little bit* Ukrainians/Italians. It is the fact that a considerable part of Ukrainians do not perceive themselves at all as Ukrainians that the differences between the answers that children from the

three countries give are expressed in. The number of the *don't know* answers is also different for children from the three countries. Children from Ukraine show it most often.

Results of national identity of children studied from the three countries, broken down by age, are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4. NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION BROKEN DOWN BY COUNTRY AND AGE GROUP

| Country | National identification | | | | |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| | 6 years old | 9 years old | 12 years old | 15 years old | Total |
| Bulgaria | 2.75 ^b | 3.00 ^b | 2.95 ^c | 2.93 ^b | 2.91^c |
| Ukraine | 1.81 ^a | 2.10 ^a | 2.55 ^a | 2.77 ^b | 2.37^a |
| Italy | 2.77 ^b | 2.76 ^b | 2.84 ^b | 2.65 ^a | 2.76^b |
| Mean | 2.54 | 2.64 | 2.80 | 2.77 | 2.69 |
| | * | * | * | * | * |

Notes: The lower scores show the less importance of the national identification (1 – minimum, 3 – maximum); where there is a statistically significant effect of age on a national identification, an asterisk appears beneath the relevant column of three figures, and the specific location of the significant difference within the column of three figures is shown using superscript letters, with mean scores which do not differ significantly from one another sharing the same superscript letter; data analyses using ANOVA and Tukey's HSD post hoc tests.

Data from Table 4 are statistically significant for all children of the four age groups. At the *age of 6 and 9 years*, national identity is most important to children from Bulgaria and Italy and less significant to Ukrainians. At the *age of 12 years*, children from the three countries form three independent groups, with the Bulgarians ascribing greatest importance to national identity, there follow the Italians, and it is of least significance to children from Ukraine. The same is the order when determining the importance of national identity by means of *mean values* of the answers given from the three countries. With the children aged 15 years, it is most important to Bulgarians and Ukrainians and of least significance to children from Italy.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

From the comparative study of children from Bulgaria, Ukraine and Italy it becomes clear that to all of them *gender identity* is most important, with the Bulgarian children also emphasising the big importance they ascribe to their *nationality*. Children from Italy categorise themselves more often with their European iden-

tity than children from Bulgaria and Ukraine. In their early childhood the Italians ascribe greater importance to their regional (which city you are from) identity than children from Ukraine. At the age of 15 years, children from Ukraine and Italy show similarity in choices made. Logically, to all 15-year-old children studied, most important category is *gender*.

In the process of formation of national identity of the children studied from Bulgaria, Ukraine and Italy, following three clearly expressed trends are observed. With children from Ukraine, with the increase of age, the importance they ascribe of national identity also increases. To children from Bulgaria, most important proves to be national identity at the age of 9 years, when it marks its peak, and with children from Italy, this happens at the age of 12 years, whereupon a slight falling trend is observed.

Ukraine is a relatively new state that formed after the dissolution of the former USSR in 1991. This fact explains the differences that are observed in the answers given by children from Ukraine and Italy with respect to their national and European identity. Ukraine is still not a member of EU unlike Italy that is a full member since its establishment. It is this fact that explains the choices made by children from the two countries. From results obtained, it may be concluded that during middle childhood, differences in identification of children are observed according to cultural environment in which they socialise and develop, and in the period of adolescence, similar psychological constructs are observed for all children studied.

As a whole, national identity is most important to children from Bulgaria, then to children from Italy and in the third place to children from Ukraine. Only the Bulgarian children are unanimous in their answers and categorise themselves as *very Bulgarian*. The main part of children from Italy categorise themselves as *very Italian*, and another part of them show that they are *a little bit Italian*. Children from Ukraine, a newly formed state, logically show that they categorise themselves through their national identity to a great extent, a great part of them state that they feel Ukrainians to a low extent, and a part of them do not feel Ukrainians at all.

In brief, these findings seem to support our hypotheses that: (a) Bulgarian children use more easily national identity than the Italian and Ukrainian ones; (b) Italian adolescents use more easily the European identity than the Ukrainian and Bulgarian ones; (c) Italian and Ukrainian children use more easily local identity than the Bulgarian ones or the local identity become the most salient and important for Ukrainian and Italian children and adolescents, showing different scores compared to Bulgarians. Thus, it seems that during childhood and early adolescence there are differences in the identification processes according to the cultural context in which the people grow up, whereas some common psychological patterns seem to emerge in middle adolescence.

Among the main factors that influence the acquisition of knowledge of own nationality are factors from the social environment such as *the school, the school subjects that are taught in it, the family, the overseas trips, the books, the mass media and the circle of classmates and teachers* (Barrett, 2007). Sociopsychological studies with adults show that the degree of national identification changes under the influence of a number of factors such as intergroup relations, presence of conflicts on ethnic or national basis and the way in which the social situation, in which the in-group is, is received (Brown, 1995; Oaks, Haslam & Turner, 1994). Something more, in laboratory studies performed, it has been established that these variables are found in and influence children, too (Bigler, 1995; Nesdale, 2001). Since these are studies performed in a laboratory, it should be borne in mind that the variables are close in terms of value. It is necessary for us to know to what extent the reasons directly influence the formation of national identity and to what extent they are transferred through the social environment and the notions that the adults keep of the national group of belonging.

The development of national identity understood as a complex system of knowledge, beliefs and feelings takes place for years, encompassing the period of childhood and adolescence, and is retained during adulthood/whole path of life. To build and keep positive national identity, to include qualities such as equality, tolerance and co-operation into their values, to overcome prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination on national basis, children need the support by teachers and family. Cultural pluralism that is characterised by mutual regard and respect between two or more ethnic or national groups is the road to future peaceful co-existence on the planet.

In conclusion, a big challenge to social knowledge is the performance of studies in intercultural aspect. The problems of multiethnic societies with the interrelations between ethnic and national groups will be increasingly interesting and topical from scholarly point of view.

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