

Exploration of identity construction in the workplace: A review of the literature

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Abstract: The exploration of identity construction has always been a hot issue in social sciences. In pragmatics, the need to probe into the issue stems mainly from the desire to equip individuals with the necessary pragmatic knowledge to handle social interaction in various social contexts. The lack of consensus regarding how identity works in work settings in addition to the changes these workplaces have been witnessing due to globalization and technological advancement made the call to explore the issue of identity construction in workplaces more urgent than before. The present paper is an attempt to answer this call by trying to provide a plausible understanding of the concept. Based on the revised literature, the issue of identity construction in workplaces is better seen as a process of constant judging of oneself and others in interaction. These judgments are guided by the premise to bring profit and development for individuals and they also form the basis for attitudes, positions, roles, and values opted for by interlocutors in interaction. Hopefully, this exploration will help first solve the disagreement among researchers regarding how identity works in work settings and second, contribute to raising awareness of the importance of pragmatics knowledge in dealing with the challenges brought by globalization and advancement in technology.

Keywords: Pragmatic research, intercultural pragmatics, identity construction, workplace discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on identity construction in the workplace has attracted many researchers from different fields. Despite the diversity of perspectives, this line of research has always been related to the linguistic resources people in workplaces opt for in their attempts to construct and negotiate their identities. The researcher does not claim here that research on identity construction is limited to linguistic resources. This is rather to emphasize the centrality of the latter in any exploration of the issue.

Identity has been dealt with from different perspectives such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Ho, 2010). Consequently, identity has been conceptualized differently according to the framework in which it is used. The present paper is an attempt to review the literature on the issue of identity construction in the workplace. The main aim is not to pinpoint the theories upon which identity is based, nor to explore the linguistic resources opted for by individuals to construct their identities. But rather to examine the different constructs very often referred to whenever the issue of identity construction is brought up. Nevertheless, the present paper cannot do without providing the theoretical basics of the concept when considered necessary.

The need to approach identity this way stems, first, from the desire to ease the challenge of dealing with a controversial concept that has been dealt with intensively without reaching an agreement regarding its definition or how it works. It stems second from the need to suggest a starting point for researchers interested in embarking on collecting empirical evidence on identity construction in workplaces from a pragmatic perspective. Hopefully, this paper would contribute to reaching an agreement and providing a plausible understanding of the concept of identity construction. To do so, research on identity construction is first located in the field of pragmatics. Then, Some contexts in which identity construction is often referred to are examined.

2. PRAGMATICS RESEARCH

Despite the diversity in its conceptualization, pragmatics refers roughly speaking to the line of research interested in dealing with language use across social contexts. This body of research aims primarily at finding out what is and what is not appropriate in a given communicative situation (Kasper, 1999). In this context and from a language socialization perspective, Bluka-Kulka (1997) holds that pragmatics refers to "...use language in context in socially and culturally appropriate ways" (p.3). The language socialization approach to pragmatics deals with the acquisition of the linguistic and social knowledge of the target second language culture (Ochs, 1993; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011). The approach holds that when individuals acquire a second language they also acquire social and cultural knowledge with it, thus the label socialization. Yet, it seems important to add here that this newly acquired knowledge is believed to might be different from that of the target language community (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011). In other words, in their quest to learn a second language, it is not likely that individuals will always end up acquiring the social and cultural norms of the target culture. Instead, they may acquire norms that happen to be different or even contradictory to that of the target language.

The need to consider this pragmatics socialization perspective in the present exploration of identity construction stems from the fact that the former stresses the role of identity in the process of socialization (Hall, 2006; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011). In fact, proponents of this approach suggest that the discursive resources employed by individuals in social interactions do not only reflect the social and cultural features of the socialization process but most importantly features of their own identities (Hall, 2006). Proponents hold also that the task of identity construction in the socialization process is urged by individuals' need to recognize, adopt, and negotiate the cultural conventions for the sake of gaining legitimate membership in the target community (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011).

The present paper intends to contribute to finding out how employees construct and negotiate identities as members of the workplace discourse community. As an attempt to narrow down the scope of research as a first step to locate this present exploration of identity in the body of academic research, the researcher considers to move next to intercultural pragmatics. The latter is a subfield of pragmatics which has been gaining ground recently.

2.1. Intercultural pragmatics

The recent development in the field of pragmatics led to the emergence of a new research area namely intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2004; 2008; 2017). This research field is concerned with the study of social encounters involving individuals who have different mother languages, these individuals, rely on a common language to communicate. The new field of inquiry came as a result of dissatisfaction with the contribution of cross-cultural pragmatics (Spencer-Oatey & Jiang (2003)) and interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper, 2001) to the field of pragmatics as a whole (Kecskes, 2017).

In fact, both of the approaches relatively limit their focus on the study of the similarities and differences in pragmatic strategies between two languages or cultures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Spencer-Oatey, 2000). The need to go beyond this level of analysis to shed light on how language systems are put into play by individuals in intercultural encounters led some researchers to establish a new line of research (Kecskes, 2012). This newly established line of research is primarily interested in the study of social interactions in intercultural environments. The main focus here is to understand how language structures are put into play in interactions involving individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This line of research is not only about the cases of misunderstanding but also about the factors involved in making intercultural encounters successful. The current paper intends to contribute to the already mentioned line of research by providing an exploration of the literature on the concept of identity construction in work settings.

Due to globalization and advancement in technologies, most workplaces around the world hire individuals from different countries, with different cultural backgrounds (Stephan, 2013). In addition to the benefits these individuals might enjoy in such workplaces, they have also to handle many challenges. For instance, most workplaces involve a hierarchy in their organization. There are always superiors who are in charge and subordinate workers who carry on duties and responsibilities implemented by the former.

Depending on the situation, the need to make someone do something or only to take part in communication between a group of individuals requires certain pragmatic knowledge (Van Dijk, 2008). It is also common for disagreement to occur between superiors and subordinates or between members of the same class. Regardless of whether there is harmony or disagreement, such encounters involve the use of linguistic and pragmatics resources which reflect the overall

relationships between individuals in a particular setting (Fairclough, 2003). These resources have always been a focal point for pragmatics to (as already been mentioned in the introduction) explore. The present paper is very much interested in exploring the way individuals in workplaces opt for various resources (linguistics and pragmatic) to index identities in interaction. Indeed, the present paper does not bring empirical evidence on the issue of identity construction in workplaces. It intends, instead, to review the literature on the issue to help contribute to reaching a plausible understanding of how identity construction works in workplaces.

After locating the exploration identity construction in the field of pragmatics, the researcher moves, next, to review the literature on the issue.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In Merriam Webster's Dictionary (2011) identity is defined as "the set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group. The distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity; individuality" (p. 245). Research indicates, as it will be demonstrated in this section, that the conceptualization of identity is much more complicated than the simple definition in Webster's Dictionary. To handle the challenge to define the concept, the researcher considers examining some concepts or constructs which have always been associated with the issue of identity. The idea here is instead of focussing on what is identity, let's review the contexts where identity is often referred to.

3.1. Identity construction

Identity has been dealt with in different research fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and applied linguistics. Consequently, identity has been conceptualized differently according to the framework in which it is used. Despite the diversity of conceptualizations, it is noted that the social constructionist perspective of identity provides a conceptualization of the issue which summarizes the results of most of the research on identity (De Fina et al. 2006; Korte, 2007).

In this context from a social constructionist viewpoint, Hall (2000, p. 17) holds that identity is established within the perception of self as derived from thoughtful reflection on communicative interactions. It is not static but rather evolves in ongoing social interaction (ibid). The social constructivist view is based on the principle that identity is a relational phenomenon (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). That is to say, identity is socially constructed by social actors in interaction (ibid). It also means that anyone's identity is always linked to people around him/her all the time. Identity construction from a constructivist view is a continuous process of assigning attributes and value to oneself and others in interaction. It seems crucial to highlight here that when individuals assign particular attributes to themselves they also present or project a particular perception of others around them. Identity construction in this sense is better seen as a mirror with two sides, one reflecting individuals' attributes and values and a second side reflecting the attributes of people around.

Identity construction, therefore, consists of presenting oneself in particular ways. These ways differ from one context to another. Bob, for example, who is a layman would present himself as an English teacher in a lecture room. He would present himself as a loving dad in his daughter's birthday ceremony. He would also project the image of a gangster when he tries to stop a robbery in his house. Depending on the context individuals are likely to present themselves in many different ways. Identity construction involves also presenting others in different ways depending on the context. This process of presenting oneself and others is first, according to constructivists, reciprocal which means that it happens in all parts involved in the social interactions. Each of these parts is more than likely to perceive him/herself and the others around them differently depending on the context. Second, The process is under constant reshaping. That is to say, the ways individuals perceive themselves and others are not permanent. It is likely to change continuously according to how the interaction unfolds. In this context, for example, Bob might let go of the image of the instructor he firstly created for himself in the lecture to adopt the image of a football fan when one of his students initiates a discussion regarding a football match he/she watched the previous night. The whole class is likely to change their perceived images of themselves and their teacher when engaging in such a discussion.

Accordingly, the issue of identity construction might be symbolized by the simultaneous acts of building and reshaping an image. The latter here refers to identity. The acts refer to the social positions opted for by individuals in social interactions. Social positions might include but not limited to judgments, attitudes, values, and roles which individuals

identify with in interaction by using linguistic and pragmatics resources (De Fina et al. 2006). This Constructivist conceptualization of identity is often associated with the notion of subjectivity.

3.2. Subjectivity

In social sciences, the notion of subjectivity refers roughly speaking to how individuals come to know themselves as unique entities and the ways they experience the world accordingly. Norton and Toohey (2011) define subjectivity as “how language learner negotiates a sense of self within and across a range of sites at different points in time” (p. 417). It seems safe to claim that both of the concepts overlap to a certain extent. But this is not to limit our understanding of identity in the notion of subjectivity because as it will be highlighted in the coming sections, identity is also closely associated with other concepts. This section is meant to pave the way for the exploration of how individuals present themselves and make sense of the world around them in work settings which is presented in the coming sections.

Research on subjectivity seeks to conceptualize the relationship between individuals as social agents and the different subject positions they may occupy in social contexts (Norton Pierce, 1995). Ochs (1993) believes that it is through language that individuals understand and express their relationship to the world by establishing “the social identities of themselves and others through verbally performing certain social acts and verbally displaying certain stance” (p. 288). Accordingly, subjectivity might be conceptualized also as the various social positions that an individual takes in response to the works of power in a particular social context (Siegal, 1996).

Speakers use verbal interaction to perform certain social acts such as making a request, inviting someone, and contradicting an argument. Speakers, also, use language to perform certain social positions by displaying any point of view or attitude. No matter the reason, when individuals use the language they are, in fact, displaying identity features. The link between identity and language, therefore, is not direct. It is rather mediated by the different social acts, point of views, positions, and stances opted for by individuals (Hall, 2006). The linguistic resources used by individuals to perform these constructs are seen by interlocutors in interaction as identity markers and they are subjected to the process of decoding and explaining (Ochs, 1993).

In contrast to the essentialist view which holds that identity is fixed and does not change at all (Phillips, 2010), the constructivist view considers identity as fluid and open to change as a result of subjective evaluation by individuals at a particular time and space (Wenger 1998). Thus, identity is not one, it is rather multifaceted. In easier words, individuals are likely to project different identities in different contexts.

Identity, therefore, is personal when it pertains to the individual, and collective when it involves consideration of membership to a particular social group. Proponents of the constructivist view of identity believe that individuals may change their group identities if they find appealing options that can guarantee better chances for social and economic advancement outside their group (De Fina et al. 2006). Thus, the lifespan of a given identity, according to constructivists, depends on its ability to ensure security, social status, and economic benefits for its members (Korte, 2007). It is very common, in this regard, that a sports fan would switch to a relatively regular victorious team if his/her favorite sports team keeps loosing.

Accordingly, based on the constructivist view, identity is personal and collective. Second, it is changeable, can be reformulated, and manipulated. Besides, identity is a site for struggle for interlocutors in social interaction, a view shared with Norton Pierce (1995). The linguistic choices are used strategically by interlocutors to construct and negotiate identity features, which reflects the struggle over the fulfillment of the already mentioned needs namely security, social status, and economic benefits. Identity work, thus, stresses the crucial contribution of the interlocutors by emphasizing their agency in manipulating the available linguistic resources to enact, construct, and negotiate their identities in a social context (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010).

It is worth noting here that the issue of subjectivity which, as already been mentioned, establishes the link between the individual as a social agent and the social context has recently been reconceptualized under a new label namely intersubjectivity (Ochs & Schieffeling, 2011). The new conceptualization rejects the older assumption that L2 socialization ends up only in one way which is the acquisition of the target language culture (ibid). Instead, Intersubjectivity suggests that individuals might follow many paths in their way to learn a target language. These paths include according to Duff (2008) “resistance, the transgression of norms, incomplete reproduction or attainment of demonstrated norms, or the

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development of hybridized (syncretic) or multiple codes/practices, subject positions, and cultures" (p. 10). The way individuals would end up in their way of socialization to learn the target language is rather, accordingly, unpredictable. This is what makes any new exploration of the issue of identity construction in intercultural settings unique since it is likely to provide unprecedented and unpredictable new evidence.

To better understand identity work which involves first, the individual as an active agent responsible for manipulating the linguistic resources to index his/her identities. Second, the context of the communicative situation which might offer the active agents better changes for development. To better explain this connection the researcher considers exploring the discursive view of identity in the next section.

3.3. Identity and discourse

Bucholtz & Hall (2005) conceptualized identity as "the social positioning of self and others" (p. 586). That is to say, how individuals project certain images of themselves and others in social contexts. For instance, in a lecture hall, a professor would opt for linguistic and pragmatics resources to present him/herself as an authority and expert in an academic field which would automatically present his/her audience as relatively of less authority or expertise in the same field. The students, on the other hand, would try to individually present themselves in a particular way, and as a conclusion they would project particular images for their professor too. Depending on the context, these attempts to present themselves, and their professor would differ from one student to another. It is through discourse that these presented images of themselves are presented first and reshaped and negotiated later on in interaction among themselves and with their professor.

This discursive view calls for the conceptualization of identity as a practice that involves presenting oneself and, as a consequence, others too in social contexts (Davies & Harré, 1990). Ochs (1993) holds that the linguistic constructions of grammar and discourse are but indicators of social identity. It seems safe to claim, thus, that the linguistic and discursive choices made by individuals in an ongoing talk are but reflections of their strategic manipulation of language to construct identity dimensions. It is, also, evidence of identity work already examined in the previous section.

In this vein, Fairclough (2003, p. 159) states that "who you are is partly a matter of how you speak, how you write, as well as a matter of embodiment-how you hold yourself, how you move, and so forth." Language is one of the most basic ways people use to establish their own identity. Social identity, in return, is seen as a crucial dimension of the social meaning of a particular linguistic construction (Ochs, 1993).

It seems necessary to stress here the fact that it is not very often that identity dimensions are clearly and directly encoded by linguistic structures, they are rather usually inferred from the linguistic choices made by the speakers and the interlocutors (ibid). The previously mentioned quote establishes the interplay between language and identity, it also strengthens the already formulated claim that individuals construct their identity in ongoing interactions through their strategic manipulation of linguistic and discursive resources.

As already mentioned, people use language to influence their interlocutor's interpretation of their identity. The language used to display identity features is interpreted and decoded by the interlocutor, which allows them to judge the identity of the speaker. It is more than likely, thus, that both of the speaker and the interlocutor manipulate their language purposefully in order, respectively, to change certain identity features being displayed and to adapt to the interpretation of the linguistic signals. Through language, people can highlight certain features of their identities, hide others, and invent certain features to influence their interlocutor's interpretation of the identities they are displaying through linguistic signals (Turner, 1987).

Every individual has a personal identity that is related specifically to oneself (Stryker and Buke, 2000). At the same time, every individual has various group identities (Hogg and Ridgeway, 2003), this is because individuals belong simultaneously to various social groups. The following are but examples of these social groups; a classroom, inhabitants of a particular place, and fans of a sports team. Membership to these social groups is enacted by individuals through their use of language (Wenger, 1998). In fact, the linguistic choices made by an individual in a piece of interaction are but clues for the interlocutor to build their judgment regarding the extent to which the speaker belongs to a particular social group.

Individuals may use language to express their full, partial, or non-membership to a group (Turner, 1978). Individuals using the linguistic resources available to them may choose to build and enhance the relationship between them and their interlocutors or to widen the social distance between themselves. In both cases, the linguistic choices made by the speaker are read by their interlocutor as identity markers. At the same time, the linguistic structures used by the interlocutor to react to the speaker's linguistic signals are also interpreted by the latter as identity markers. The ability to index and to decode their identities markers in work settings is likely to be of paramount importance for individuals in such settings. In fact, Whether they manage to make their workplaces enjoyable and even enhance their chances for advancement and development is believed to be dependent to a large extent on their ability to successfully handle identity markers in interactions (Stephen, 2013)

As indicated in the title, the present paper explores the issue of identity in the workplace aiming at providing a plausible understanding of the concept in work settings. Therefore, it seems crucial to deal, next, with workplace discourse.

3.4. Workplace discourse

The term workplace discourse refers generally to texts and talks constructed in workplaces. Workplace discourse is also referred to as professional discourse, institutional discourse, or business discourse (Koester, 2006, Wenger, 1998). Although some researchers (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011; 1995; Iedema, 2008) distinguish these terms, they all relatively refer to texts and talks which are constituted in a workplace, an institution, or a business environment. These texts and talks are all related to the interchange of services, goods, or information within one of the already mentioned environments.

From a socially constructed point of view, the workplace is naturally constructed through linguistic tools (Koester, 2006). In this context, Grant et al., (2004) conceptualize workplace discourse as

“structured collections of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing (as well as a wide variety of visual representations and cultural artifacts) that bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed” (p. 3).

Accordingly, the existence of workplaces is dependent on the construction of discourse. This entails that to say that a particular work setting exists there should be the construction of discourse among the people within this setting, otherwise it doesn't exist. Workplace discourse, according to the social constructionist perspective, is the “principal mean by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are” (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 181). This conceptualization suggests that in workplaces individuals exist only within groups. In every group, some individuals are placed in the center and others are placed in the peripheral. This classification is enacted through language and determined by the level of commitment to the norms of the group (Paltridge, 2006). Needless to say, every workplace has its specificity and organization. Yet, it is through discourse practices that individuals enact and construct their membership to a particular group in every work setting.

Recently, workplaces have undergone tremendous changes (Schnurr, 2013). In fact, with the advancement of technology and the widespread use of internet lifelong learning, mobility, and diversity have become the characteristic of almost every workplace setting (ibid). Commonly, workplaces hire individuals from different countries. These individuals have likely more differences than common features. These transnational workplaces employ people who are multilingual and who are willing to move from one job to another (Kecskes, 2004). These changes, as Fairclough (1993) already suggested, are likely to influence workplace practices and eventually workplace discourse. In this vein, individuals have to efficiently manipulate pragmatic and discourse strategies to gain membership within these transnational workplaces. The more they are perceived as legitimate members of the workplace, the more their experiences would be enjoyable, and the more chances for them to stay and vice versa (Mumby & Clair, 1997). These workplaces may indeed offer opportunities for development especially for those who manage to gain membership within them. Yet, they are also a site for a struggle that requires constant negotiation of identity and membership (Kecskes, 2004). The recent technological advances in the globalized workplaces have stimulated calls for further exploration of workplace discourse to contribute to the development of the communicative and pragmatic competence within the various workplace environments.

The main aims of the recent workplace discourse studies are, thus, to highlight the influence and to address the challenges brought by the new technological advances. It is the intention of the present exploration of identity to contribute to the

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above-mentioned line of research by providing a plausible understanding of the issue. Hopefully, this exploration will allow first, to help employees to become more aware of the identity practices they are more than likely to find themselves constantly involved in such challenging work settings. Second, to pave the way for follow up research to provide insights from different perspectives. Despite the extensive research in the field, there are increasing demands for the exploration of workplace discourse. These increasing demands reflect the recognition of the contribution of workplace discourse studies in the development of pragmatic competence in particular and the English language in general.

3.5. Discourse community

Paltridge (2006) defines discourse community as “a group of individuals involved in the same activity or belonging to the same association and participating in regular meetings, e.g. a group of call operators in a call center” (p. 24). Members of a discourse community, thus, share certain characteristics which include but not limited to

- a. Shared values, goals or beliefs.
- b. Particular ways of communicating with each other.
- c. Particular genres, lexis and specialized language.
- d. Similar activities and expertise.

(Swales, 1990)

Every individual, based on Paltridge’s (1997) definition, is likely to belong to various discourse communities. In fact, an individual can be a Ph.D. candidate who belongs to the researchers’ discourse community. The candidate might also be a lecturer at a college where he/she belongs to the teachers’ community. Besides, the same individual might be a martial art practitioner who belongs to a particular sports community. In short, every individual is likely to belong to different discourse communities that have different characterized features (ibid). Furthermore, members of a particular discourse community are likely to vary in their degree of membership to the community. Membership to these various discourse communities depends, according to Swales (1990, pp. 25-27), on the degree of agreement on the shared goals, the level of proficiency in mastering the discursal templates and the specific lexical items appropriate to the shared genres, and the level of knowledge of the content and discursal expertise.

As far as identity construction is concerned, membership is more a matter of investment (Norton Pierce, 1995) than a matter of conformity to the norms of a particular discourse community (Swales, 1990). The notion of investment is of close importance to the concept of identity construction. The notion of investment is originally linked to the concept of identity in Bourdieu’s (1991) work on Habitus. A brief description of the latter seems necessary to explore the link between the two notions. Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of habitus refers to the set of ‘dispositions’ individuals acquire due to longitudinal and intense engagement and participation in social life. Dispositions include but not limited to knowledge, prior experiences, attitudes, judgments, and values. Habitus is believed to be responsible for guiding individuals’ physical and verbal behaviors including the way they perceive themselves and others (Norton Pierce, 1995). In this sense, habitus serves as a steering wheel that directs all individuals’ actions and attitudes. It is the job of habitus to ensure that all individuals’ actions and attitudes result in beneficial yields, thus the use of the economic term investment.

Having Bourdieu’s notion of investment in mind, it seems safe to say that the issue of identity construction is a matter of judgments towards oneself and others around. In fact, in his/her attempt to enact his/her identity the individual makes judgments regarding what attributes, positions, or roles he should identify with. This attempt is largely done through the strategic manipulation of pragmatics and linguistics resources and it is driven by the need to gain profit and development. While within a community, individuals are faced with the challenge to position themselves and others. The decision to take a particular position and to position others are based on the act of investing for the sake of gaining advancement and profits. Of course, the investment is not going to be always profitable or successful. In other words, the strategic manipulation of the resources is not going to result always in gaining membership or any other goal or profit. To deal with such a scenario and others in which the judgment made happens to be a total failure, individuals have to reconstruct their original judgments and opt for other alternatives.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the literature explored above, the following conceptualization of the issue is provided. Identity construction in the workplace is better seen as a discursive practice, manifested itself in the strategic manipulation of linguistic and pragmatics resources in social interaction. This practice involves constant reconstruction of judgments due, first, to the nature of workplace discourse often characterized by tension (Fairclough, 1993). Second, due to the underlying principle which guides these judgments namely gain and profit. Identity construction in workplaces is, also, better seen as unpredictable. Therefore, any exploration of the issue would more likely bring new evidence about the issue from a new setting.

This new conceptualization of identity might be beneficial in many ways. First, it adds to the abandoned literature on the issue of identity by providing a new conceptualization of the issue from a pragmatic perspective. Second, such an exploration of identity is helpful to raise awareness about the new challenges especially newcomers to transnational workplaces are likely to face. Identity construction is one of these challenges. Third, the present paper is a call for research on identity construction in the workplace to bring empirical evidence on the issue.

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