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Coping with Territorial Stigma and Devalued Identities: How Do Social Representations of an Environmentally Degraded Place Affect Identity and Agency?

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Abstract: This article examines people-place relationships in a carbon-intensive area—i.e., heavily dependent on the steel industry and marked by severe environmental degradation—involved in the EU Just Transition Mechanism (Taranto, Italy). Drawing upon a psychosocial perspective grounded on social representations theory, this article focuses on intertwining the sense of place, identity processes, and agency to understand the dynamics of place stigma and identity devaluation. In-depth semi-structured interviews with active residents were thematically and discursively analyzed. The results suggest both theoretical and applied insights. Overall, they highlight a widely shared negative representation of the place related to territorial stigmatization, ambivalent place attachments, and devaluation of place-based and social identities. To cope with such processes and dynamics, identity processes seem to act as self-protective mechanisms both at a personal and social level. The article concludes by inviting a more comprehensive conceptualization of just transition, harm restoration, and related territorial planning to include the psychosocial processes underlying the community's well-being and identity.

Keywords: devaluation; discourse analysis; environmental degradation; just transition; place attachment; powerlessness; sense of place; social psychology; stigma; victimization

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1. Introduction

Addressing environmental problems needs transforming socio-ecological systems to achieve human well-being and simultaneously preserving ecosystem services and natural capital [1]. It requires a greater engagement of social sciences and humanities to understand better how people-place relationships influence socio-ecological processes and vice versa. Nonetheless, the deeper and slower variables underlying socio-ecological systems and orienting human actions, such as identity, norms, values, and beliefs, have been relatively undertheorized [2–6]. Research on sustainability transformations has relatively neglected the subjective human attributes, despite these being associated with a range of crucial issues (e.g., risk perception or environmental beliefs) that influence the human interpretation of the environment and, in turn, act as the drivers and outcomes of environmental change [7].

The sense of place—intended as the set of meanings and attachments attributed to a physical setting by individuals and groups, which express people-place relationships—is increasingly recognized as a promising research framework for two reasons: its ontology interconnects the social and natural world, and it is both an outcome and a driver of socio-ecological processes [4,5,8]. In this regard, the symbolic and socio-material aspects of places, i.e., the physical environments people directly experience and occupy, play an essential role in the development and maintenance of the personal and collective sense of self [9–11] as well as in promoting or hindering agency and adaptive capacity when coping with changes [12]. As suggested by Twigger-Ross and Uzzell [9], a place can affect individuals' distinctiveness (providing unique and distinguishing features for identity development and differentiation), continuity (acting as a link to the self-identity across time), self-esteem (reflecting individual values and norms and providing a positive or negative reinforcement), and self-efficacy (influencing personal agency, well-being, and lifestyle).

Although the people-place relationship has been considerably studied, most of the research has focused chiefly on how positive (characteristics of) places [13] affect attachments, identities, or responses to a range of place transformations—related to, for example, energy or tourism development, cf. [14,15]. Moreover, research has examined the role of sense of place almost exclusively regarding acute changes, considering its role in appraisal and coping responses (e.g., risk perception about new technologies, disaster coping, or place disruptions due to industrial projects [4,14,16,17]. This approach emphasizes how such transformations affect psychosocial structures and vice-versa. However, it neglects how gradual transformations, or the persistence of a particular socio-ecological state, may impede the recognition of the need for change or allow meanings, identities, and attachments to be maintained or restored [4,16].

Many scholars have noted that research has rarely examined the people-place relationship in negative or ambivalent places, including environmentally degraded contexts or hazardous environments [18–20], and even less how people cope with place stigma [21–23]. Such places can become repositories of negative memories, meanings, or events that can pose significant threats to identity and stimulate a wide range of cognitive and behavioral responses [9,24]. Nowadays, research is showing an increasing interest in territorial stigmatization processes—i.e., "the negative construction, representation, and government of certain geographical communities and places" [25] (p. 191). It often focuses on the psychosocial experience of people living in sacrifice zones where territories and related subaltern and oppressed social groups are economically exploited and also culturally stigmatized and undervalued in the name of economic development, cf. [26]. Empirical evidence demonstrated that place stigma could corrode the residents' sense of self, social relations, and capacity for collective action [27]. Individuals can suffer damage to their identity just by being associated with a stigmatized place, since this influences how others perceive them [10]. On the other hand, Venables et al. [28] suggest that people's response to locally stigmatized places may result in reinterpreting them in a positive light to create a strong sense of social cohesion and pride.

Awareness of environmental degradation can internalize a territorial stigma based on physical site contamination, which can weaken people-place bonds, undermine the continuity of identity, affect self-esteem, and bring about profound changes in identity structures and processes to adapt or resist territorial stigmatization cf. [29]. Social psychology has explored the people-place relationship, underlining how meanings people assign to material environments are psychologically constructed through interactions, communication, and representations, which are linked with collective processes of belonging, identification, and memory [9,30]. However, little is known about the effects of negative representations of places, characterized by extensive environmental degradation, on identity processes and agency.

Drawing upon these premises, this article investigates people-place relationships in a community heavily dependent on carbon-intensive industry, marked by severe environmental degradation, and currently interested in the European Just Transition Mechanism. This article aims to understand how people make sense of and cope with place degradation. Specifically, it conceptualizes the people-place relationship in light of the sense of place framework. It analyzes via in-depth interviews how industrial activity and presence shape meanings and attachments about the city and explores how these affect the expression of identities and agency in active residents. The findings can guide further research about the sense of place in carbon-intensive areas and provide insights to support policy interventions that promote just and sustainable transformations at the community level.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Sense of Place: An Overarching Concept for Capturing Cognitive and Emotional Dimensions of People-Place Relationships

Sense of place is an overarching concept deployed to describe the people-place relationship in terms of beliefs, meanings, interpretations, attitudes, and emotions people associate with a particular place [30]. As an umbrella term, sense of place encompasses emotional and cognitive dimensions of place experience. These are expressed in place attachment and place meanings, referring respectively to the emotional bond with a place and its cognitive descriptors (i.e., what kind of a place it is and which aspects are meaningful) [5]. According to some scholars [4,8], place attachment encompasses two subdimensions: place identity, referring to people's identity concerning the physical environment, and place dependence, referring to the perception that place can satisfy personal needs. Although place attachment and identity have received considerable attention from human geographers and environmental psychologists, place meanings have been relatively underemphasized in social-ecological research [5,8]. Nevertheless, place meanings can help understand what it is about a place people value and might want to preserve or enhance [31].

Scholars agree that a psychosocial approach to the sense of place may help engage concepts such as the identity of social-ecological systems and understand how social actors perceive and experience these systems. It may also help investigate the related desirable/undesirable states or transformations and the role of the people-place relationship in recognizing and responding to sustainability challenges [5,8] Masterson et al., 2019; [32].

Drawing upon a psychosocial perspective that accounts for the sense of place in its complexity (i.e., place meanings, attachment, identity, dependence), this study relies on theories and constructs of social representations [33,34], social identity [35], and human agency [36] to examine the construction of place meanings and the expression of identities and agency concerning the place. In line with this rationale, this article focuses on identity processes, representations of place, and agency as the crucial psychosocial dimensions to understand how communities dependent on carbon-intensive industries make sense of and cope with environmental degradation and place stigma. These dimensions are described more in-depth below to account for the conceptual background.

2.2. Social Representations

Social representations are socially elaborated and collectively shared forms of knowledge that enable individuals to make sense of, orient, and communicate about their social and material world [33].

Pivotal to SRT is the assumption that meaning-making about social objects is not an information process occurring in isolation and a vacuum. Knowledge is elaborated in self-other interactions—where the other can be generalized or specific [34]—and the social circumstances influence how individuals interpret events, understand the social and physical world, and act following this understanding.

Since people are exposed to competing versions of reality, SRT assumes contradiction and ambivalence as intrinsic to the human mind. This may occur for different reasons: due to "contradictions between different beliefs at the cognitive level, due to the mismatch between strong norms and lack of corresponding beliefs or feelings, or simply due to the moral and cognitive complexity of the decisions required" [37] (p. 170) cf. also [38]. This is cognitive polyphasia, where multiple and sometimes opposing rationalities co-exist in the same group or individual. It results from a multi-voiced self, possessing different knowledge systems from diverse spheres which people can draw from to deal with the complexity of social realities, depending on the particular circumstances and specific interests they held in a given time and place [39].

Social representations always imply a positioning of self and others and an assessment of the validity of competing representations. Identity processes thus can work as anchors for interpretative and communicative activity. Howarth [40] argued that "[w]ithout an understanding of identity, we could not explain why and how different people use representations to different ends to legitimize, to contest, to negate, to transform" (p. 78). Accordingly, social representations can signal inner tension and conflict and can also be strategically used to act in the world (positioning ourselves, claiming common identities and interests, defending or contesting a particular construction of reality).

In socio-environmental research, SRT has been broadly applied to understand how different publics make sense of places ranging from natural to anthropic environments. This research contributed to examining the role of place meanings in sustainability challenges, enlightening whose representations are reproduced in conflicts around competing place claims and their effects on sustainability e.g., [34,41–43].

2.3. Identity Processes

Individuals structure their self-concept through identification processes, i.e., the definition of self within given social categories or groups. Individuals' identity can vary along a continuum between personal and social identity; how much a social category is psychologically relevant in a social context will determine which social identities will be salient [35]. This influences how individuals think and behave in the intergroup context—for example, determining hostility towards people perceived as belonging to an outgroup.

Many psychosocial approaches have addressed the role of identity processes, particularly in collective action or coping with environmental change, studying the effects of identification with threatened or disadvantaged groups and places, and how these play a role in group-based appraisal and collective action—e.g., the perception of a common problematic situation could generate a collective identity, conducing to collective action if a shared belief that the group can change the status through collective mobilization is present [44]. More importantly, individuals' bonds with places can become a part of identity, influencing cognitions and actions. Research has suggested that bonds and identification with significant places can motivate people to participate, seek, stay in, protect, and improve them [45]. Place-based identification occurs when a place becomes a subjectively salient social category. This salience can depend on the perception of external threats. Place-based identification with a threatened environment can influence risk perceptions differently. It may increase risk sensitivity and the readiness to adopt protective actions, or, on the contrary, it can increase the tendency to deny the risk [46].

Moreover, the socio-political dimension of place can negatively influence attachment and identity, as attachment is influenced by group-level interests, leading to negative attachment and even the intention and desire to leave and escape from familiar places [13]. To the same extent, when the place is part of people's identity, individuals can be motivated to maintain the place-related positive distinctiveness and continuity over time [24]. Although place identity and attachment have been considerably studied, very little is known about how negative place meanings that are deeply sedimented affect the expression of local identities and limit people's agency to convey alternative place meanings [8,32].

2.4. Agency

Agency is critical in determining how individuals and society respond to environmental change. Although little consensus exists on what agency is in environmental literature, it resonates with other concepts, such as resilience or capacity, underlining how social and psychosocial factors affect people's capacity to respond (and adapt) to environmental stressors [12]. In this field, agency is related to "adaptive capacity", which is affected by cognitive belief structures that people form through experience, the individual perception of society, the environmental structures and circumstances, and surrounding agents [12]. Grothmann and Patt [47] argued that there had been little analysis of the psychological dimensions of adaptation, observing that motivation and perceived abilities are crucial determinants and stressing the importance of perceived adaptive capacity and possible maladaptation. The American Psychological Association defines agency as "the state of being active, usually in the service of a goal, or having the power and capability to produce an effect or exert influence". Thus, agency is related to psychosocial constructs such as self or collective efficacy beliefs, i.e., the perceived capacity to manage and control the events or change the situation through individual or collective action, or the locus of control, i.e., the subject's generalized expectation of control on the events.

Beyond this instrumental view of (sense of) agency, some scholars have claimed that meaning-making and narrative imagination are closely related to agency, providing concrete possibilities for action [36]. This view stresses individual agency in the signification process, such as accommodating new knowledge to pre-existent knowledge or conveying strategically oriented knowledge to what significant others think and value [48]. From this perspective, the examination of agency cannot be separated from the study of the language of agency or the agentive discourse, namely "discursive practices in which our agentive powers are manifested [. . .] in which we present ourselves as agents" [49] (p. 122).

Agentive discourse is a vehicle by which individuals navigate the space of "possibility relationship" to the world and themselves [36]. Thus, the issue of agency also refers to symbolic recognition, namely the concrete possibility for groups and individuals to convey legitimated knowledge and identities [50], participating in knowledge production and, in turn, developing feelings of individual and collective effectiveness [51–53]. It stresses that any agency theory should consider how circumstances and conditions constrain imagination and knowledge production. In this regard, spatial imaginaries [54] acquire relevance, particularly the ability to envision spatial transformation imaginaries that can push, shape, and legitimize place transformations toward a more desirable future and re-establish a positive sense of place cf. [55,56].

3. Aims

The general purpose of this study is to investigate the people-place relationship in an environmentally degraded context by examining the intertwining of social representations of place, identity processes (i.e., personal, social, and place identity), and agency. The research questions are guided by theoretical and applied interests (e.g., local governance and policy recommendations). Specifically:

a. How do, if any, identity processes influence the representation of place? How do place representations provide salience to the expression of particular identities? Are these identities coherent, or do they generate inconsistencies understandable as cognitive polyphasia?
b. How do identity processes aimed at preserving agency and a positive perception of oneself act in a highly critical context? In other words, do identity processes promote impulses for change or, on the contrary, defensive factors (e.g., problem denial or downsizing), victimization, or stigmatization?
c. How do identity processes relate to individual and community agency? Namely, how do identity processes favor or hinder the sense of responsibility, the ability to (re)act, and the ability to imagine and promote alternative future scenarios?

4. Case Study

Taranto is a coastal city of around 200,000 inhabitants in Southern Italy (Apulia region). The city hosts a sizeable industrial settlement (cf. Figure 1), developed during the 1960s as a consequence of a governmental program for industrialization and modernization in Southern Italy (Cassa del Mezzogiorno), which includes the largest steel plant in Europe (the Ilva).

The Ilva plant rapidly reached an extension of around 1500 hectares (more extensive than the city center area); it employed more than 10,000 workers (including steelworkers, employees, and managers), which rose to over 20,000, considering associated services [57]. Industrialization corresponded with a radical transformation of the city's social, economic, and urban fabric: Taranto rapidly became "the capital of steel", one of the most thriving and appealing industrial hubs in Southern Italy; pre-existing economic sectors based on agriculture and fishing were almost abandoned; urban space and planning were redesigned accordingly. However, a strategic developmental plan for the surrounding area did not effectively accompany the increasing productive capacity; the territory thus became dependent on the steel industry, with the almost complete disappearance of endogenous activities [58].

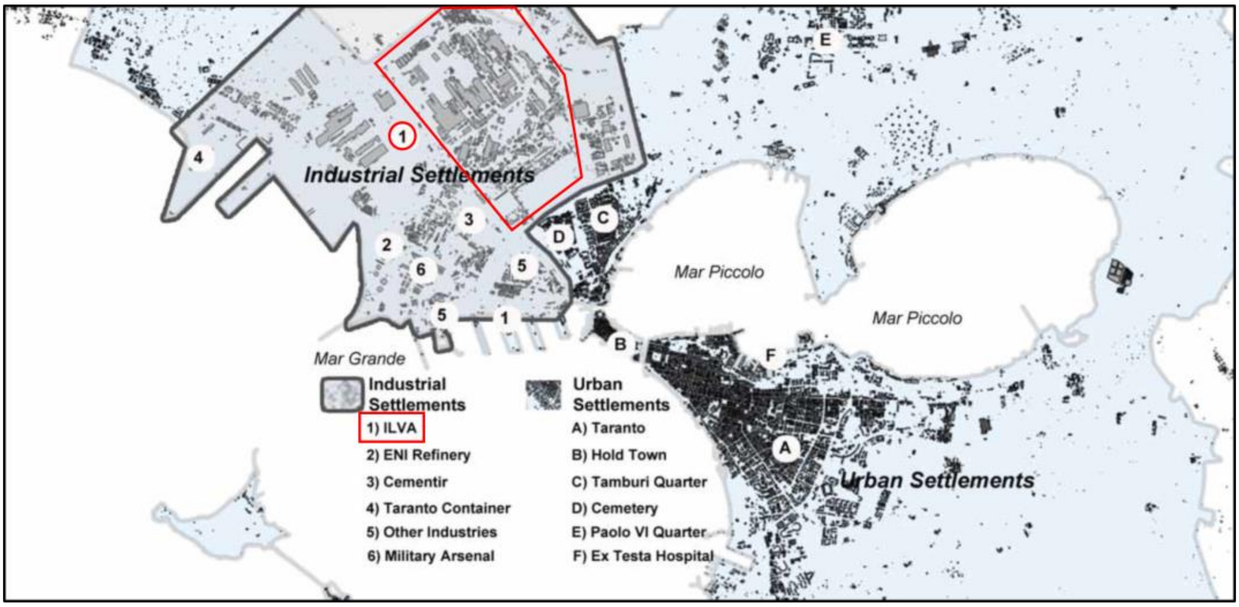
Industrial Settlements
Mar Piccolo
Mar Piccolo
Mar Grande
Urban Settlements
Industrial Settlements
1) ILVA
2) ENI Refinery
3) Cementir
4) Taranto Container
5) Other Industries
6) Military Arsenal
Urban Settlements
A) Taranto
B) Hold Town
C) Tamburi Quarter
D) Cemetery
E) Paolo VI Quarter
F) Ex Testa Hospital
1
2
3
4
5
6
A
B
C
D
E
F

Figure 1. Taranto and its industrial area. Adapted from: Camarda, Rotondo, and Selicato (2015).

Over the years, the Ilva plant has been subject to national interest following legal, political, and health events that still affect the community of Taranto. In the 1990s, the Italian Government declared Taranto an “area at high risk of environmental crisis” and a “contaminated site of national interest” due to the high toxic emissions of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and dioxin by the steel plant, which correlated to an abnormal incidence of leukemia, myelomas, and lymphomas in the area (https://download.repubblica.it/pdf/repubblica-bari/2012/ilva_Relazione_conclusioni.pdf, accessed on 30 November 2022). Subsequent inquiries by the European Pollutant Emission Register and PeaceLink NGO in the early 2000s confirmed this picture or provided an even worse scenario.

These results shook public opinion, leading the people of Taranto to progressively increase awareness of industrial air pollution’s risks. Over the last decades, many grassroots associations and movements have been formed involving citizens, workers, and trade unions, pursuing different goals, such as the right to health, the right to work in safe conditions, the need for urban regeneration, tackling pollution, and ensuring social and environmental justice. A troubled and arduous environmental restoration and remediation process began in 2012, marked by trials, convictions, plant seizures, state commissioners, international tenders, and sales to private companies. From that moment on, numerous reports reiterated that decades of air pollution had compromised people’s health, observing a high incidence of cancer mortality and severe chronic respiratory diseases, e.g., [59]. Another report defined Taranto as a “sacrifice zone”, i.e., an “extremely contaminated area where vulnerable and marginalized groups bear a disproportionate burden of the health, human rights, and environmental consequences of exposure to pollution and hazardous substances”. However, the Italian Government implemented special legislative decrees that allowed the plant to continue operating, despite the European Court of Human Rights—appealed twice by the Italian citizens—having sentenced the State for violating the Convention.

Nowadays, Taranto is a beneficiary of the Just Transition Fund, a special fund within the European Union’s Cohesion Policy framework allocated for enabling carbon-intensive regions to mitigate the social, economic, and environmental impact of decarbonization.

5. Method

5.1. Participants and Instruments

Eleven participants (three women and eight men) from a target population of active residents took part in the study, agreeing to an interview. They were activists in local movements, independent journalists, trade unionists, and steelworkers. They were selected following a background ethnography, which involved consulting official reports, blogs, and social media to acquire information, master local history, and identify crucial actors.

The semi-structured in-depth interview was chosen among the various forms of interview [60,61]. This interview is often used in studies theoretically framed in SRT as it allows researchers to understand a wide range of issues related to the object of analysis, providing ample freedom of expression. The interview protocol was developed to elicit, in-depth, the participants' viewpoints regarding their representations of place and the potential actions envisaged to repair the harm suffered.

As part of a broader set of prompts (cf. the Appendix A for the entire interview outline), the participants were requested to talk about: (a) Taranto's recent history, including its environmental and socio-economic condition and related social responsibilities; (b) their feelings and experience regarding the situation; (c) personal and community forms of coping and expectations of change.

5.2. Procedure and Analysis

Participants were recruited with private messages through the movements' social network pages or e-mails. Despite guaranteed anonymity, several steelworkers denied participation, considering their involvement potentially harmful to their work (the period of data collection coincided with an episode that received national media attention: a steelworker was fired for a post on a social network, where he contested the pollution caused by the plant).

The interviews were conducted between July and October 2021, both face-to-face in different settings (i.e., participants' houses, associations/committees' offices, cafés) and online via the Zoom platform: six interviews were individual, one was with a couple, and one was with a small group of three workers and activists. Table 1 summarizes the interviews' details.

Table 1. Interviews' details.

Participant ID	Role	Date	Duration (Minutes)	Mode
I_1	Activist, Movement_1	21 July 2021	60	Face-to-face
I_2	Activist, Movement_2	16 August 2021	60	Face-to-face
I_3	Activist, Movement_3	24 August 2021	140	Face-to-face
I_4	Activist, Movement_3	24 August 2021	140	Face-to-face
I_5	Journalist	23 August 2021	90	Online
I_6	Activist, Movement_4	24 September 2021	100	Online
I_7	Trade unionist	28 September 2021	100	Online
I_8	Activist, Movement_5	1 October 2021	70	Online
I_9	Steelworker and activist, Movement_4	1 October 2021	120	Online
I_10	Steelworker and activist, Movement_4	1 October 2021	120	Online
I_11	Steelworker and activist, Movement_4	1 October 2021	120	Online

All participants read and signed an informed consent form. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

The interview transcriptions were subjected to two consecutive forms of analysis. A preliminary qualitative content analysis adopting the principles of inductive thematic analysis (cf. [62]) was followed by a more fine-grained investigation through the lens of discourse analysis.

The thematic analysis was performed with the support of the MAXQDA software. The conversational turn was chosen as a unit of analysis. The coding process focused on explicit and implicit meanings and shared and contested patterns. It followed an iterative path integrating theory-driven prompts and data-driven insights based on the interview outline and sensitizing concepts reflecting the focus of the study, i.e., identity, social representations, and forms of agency [63]. Specifically, the coding scheme consisted of some main macro-themes attributable to the topics covered during the interview (i.e., risk and harm perception, self-perception of oneself as victim, active participation, and expectations for the future). For each of these main macro-themes, a psychosocial reading guided by the sensitizing concepts examined was provided. The text portions were coded inductively and collated to outline place representations, identity positioning and related connotation, as well as forms of agency in terms of symbolic and behavioral coping. Particular attention was paid to the various levels within which identity emerged according to the salience of the narrative production in diverse moments of the interview, moving from personal identity to different forms of social identity (i.e., activist, environmentalist, citizen, etc.).

Particular attention was paid to the discursive intertwining of these dimensions and the various levels within which identity emerged according to the salience of the narrative production in the diverse moments of the interview, moving from personal identity to different forms of social identity (i.e., activist, environmentalist, citizen, etc.). Indeed, after generating initial codes we searched for themes by examining the interrelation between codes and the related extracts, carrying out an in-depth discourse analysis of the coded segments (see Table 2 summarizing the analytical process and reporting codes and emerging themes from the analysis). Discourse analysis concerns how language constructs and mediates social and psychological realities, focusing on its performative properties in achieving specific aims [64]. This assumption emphasizes that identity and self can be discursively produced relationally and dynamically through positioning in communication—i.e., "doing identities", which can be seen as "positions in relation to social representations" [65] (p. 14). Specifically, this study draws on the analytical concepts of social representing [66] and subject positioning [67] to identify the discursive practices through which representations and identities are constructed by and for individuals/groups and what these do and mean in socio-political and psychological realities [68].

One of the authors was the main person responsible for the interview coding. The analytical process involved an iterative cycle of coding, analytical supervision, and discussion to ensure agreement between researchers since the generation of initial codes in the first interviews. Therefore, the codes, the resulting themes collating the codes, and the relation between coded extracts and themes were discussed within the team to ensure the coding reliability and promote reflexivity and dialogue, cf. [61].

Table 2. Sensitizing concepts, inductive codes, and emerging themes from the analysis.

Sensitizing Concepts	Initial Codes	Emerging Themes
Identity processes (positioning and connotation)	• Us, Taranto's residents (deprived and harmed) • Us, Activists (sharing and fighting) • Them, Environmentalists (ideological) • Us/Them, workers (ungrateful or uncaring) • Us, Citizens (holders of rights and duties) • Them, Victims (unable to cope)	• Stigma spillover: negative distinctiveness of city residents • Movements as safe spaces • Workers' and environmentalist identity impairment (uncaring, ungrateful) • Citizens and violated rights of democratic functioning • Self-distancing from real victims (children and dead people)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Sensitizing Concepts	Initial Codes	Emerging Themes
Place representation (risk, harm, vulnerability)	• Unhealthy and risky • Vulnerable and dependent due to industrial monoculture • Poor of prospects (limited life project/capability) • Contaminated and obscuring beauty • Morally damaging	• No denial as health impact is embodied in victims' bodies • Close psychological distance of ill risks in space and time • Ambivalent place meanings between environmental stigma and pride • Economic exploitation and social-ecological contamination devalue human life
Responsibility attribution and agency	• Advocacy for silenced voices (workers, children, dead) • Legal action for representing the interest of the whole community against sectorial interest (unions, environmentalism) • Coalition building for envisioning and planning a different future based on a common interest and identity	• Activism to deal with emotional distress and preserve a positive sense of self (reacting to powerlessness, victimization and responding to the moral obligation to act) • Fragmented protest due to interest struggles and delegitimating dynamics • Mobilizing a superordinate identity to cope with community division, and identity impairment

6. Results

The results emerging from the analyses will be presented here by placing the considered sensitizing concepts and their reciprocal relationships in the foreground. In the following sections, therefore, the results will be described by highlighting the way in which place representations are constructed and their implications in terms of both expression of particular identities and agency.

6.1. "This City Is a Metastasizing Tumor": Place Representations, Territorial Stigma, and Ambivalent Place Attachments

Regarding the discursive construction of the sense of place (i.e., place meanings, attachment, and identity), all interviewees represented the city with negative attributes, revealing a strong internalized stigma grounded in collective history and memory of place exploitation and contamination. The place is often described through rhetorical figures portraying some forms of clinical or social disease ("a metastasizing tumor", "enraged city"), stressing the symbiotic and destructive relationship between place and industry ("cathedral in the desert", an Italian expression for "white elephant") and the resulting experience of alienation.

> *We're alienated from this reality.* [I_2]

In Harner's view [10], being associated with a stigmatized place can damage a person's identity since it influences how others perceive them. To cope with territorial stigma, the interviewees attempted to reinterpret and represent the place with positive elements of distinctiveness about its history and natural aesthetics to restore the self-esteem and pride related to the place.

> *Whenever I meet someone, I talk about Taranto, and I do so with love. Because I've studied history, I've read many books, and I could tell you everything about the history of Taranto. I wish I could've the right to speak exclusively about the city's beauty, not about the ugliness.* [I_3]

However, how individuals represent the place positively and restore their identity in terms of distinctiveness is constrained by its meta-representation (i.e., how the interviewees think that others view the place, cf. [48]), coinciding with an internalized place stigma. The resulting place attachment and identity seem characterized by conflicting emotions.

> *Do you know what happens in Taranto? Most of us love our city, so we're ready to sacrifice ourselves. We should leave, but we love this city too much. I don't know what's happening inside our heads.* [I_5]

Overall, the interviewees showed an ambivalent bond with the place characterized by an inner tension: leaving the place and protecting the self or staying to enhance and protect the place at the expense of the self. It is also stressed in discourses that exemplify and personify negative attachment, ruptures of bonds with the place, and self-distancing by people who migrate and leave the city.

> *The Ilva emptied the city of all the people who didn't want to work in the plant, all the young people who could leave. So, today we find ourselves with a massive shortage of people who could do for the city. It's the essential thing: it has destroyed the desire to stay in the area (...) Ilva has emptied the city; it has destroyed it culturally.* [I_7]

Industrial activity is portrayed as contaminating the place both physically and socially: the sense of loss is related to the place and, more deeply, to the community [69]. The interviewee claims that disruption to place identity and attachment has been caused by the industrial activities and impacts, determining a loss of human capital represented in the outward migration of younger and educated people and coinciding with an impediment to local development and change that condemns the place. This assumption reveals a place-based identity as deprived, socially harmed, and tending toward a negative view about a possible recovery of the place in the future.

In line with Wakefield and Elliot [70], the interviewees oscillate between a cynical pessimism and a sustained optimism, showing that positive attachment fosters the desire to see something new happen to the place [17].

> *There's a distinct fervor in the city (...) because people gradually look for an alternative. Obviously, these are very long processes, so I hope to see them through.* [I_2]

Overall, change ambition is conceived as a diversified development of the area, replacing the symbol of stigma and harm and creating a new economic identity for the place, which is crucial for coping and survival.

To summarize, the findings show that the internalization of place stigma seems to contribute to ambivalent place attachments and the expression of place identities as simultaneously deprived, harmed, and devalued.

6.2. "I Don't Feel like a Victim; Victims Are the Others": Personal Identity, Victim Hierarchy, and Victimization Denial

Regarding personal identity in relation to the place's environmental degradation, participants' positioning and identification as victims were deliberately refused though acknowledging the damage suffered. It resonates with the literature on victim experiences reporting the mismatch between the rhetoric and the reality of being a victim [71]).

At a superficial level, the emergent representation of the victim is based on the damage suffered passively.

> *No, I don't feel like a victim. The victims are the many children who unfortunately didn't make it because of Ilva and those who are no longer with us. I feel more like the voice of the victims.* [I_1]

This representation identifies the victims as those who suffer health impairment and cannot recognize their rights, thus characterized by a low level of agency and a missed self-realization possibility. Children and dead people are placed in a sort of hierarchy of victimhood, becoming a benchmark for victimization processes. In this way, being alive—a survivor—confers an ethical and moral obligation to act and distance oneself from identifying as a victim. As stressed by Christie [72], no experience of victimization automatically confers the status of the victim. Instead, victimization is a dynamic process that may or may not converge into victim positioning. Interviewee I_4, for example, initially refuses the victim's positioning, but, immediately after, she contradicts this by positioning herself as a "damaged person" and mirroring the victim's definition.

> *No, I don't like to feel like a victim, I definitely feel like a damaged person: so, in those terms, yes, I'm a victim, but I retain entirely the idea that I've rights. I don't give them up. It's the strength that I recognize in myself. In this sense, "victim", i.e., "the one who suffers", isn't. "The one who has been harmed and who suffers harm" definitely, yes. That succumbs no, possibly.* [I_4]

However, by introducing elements of agency incoherent with the definition that conceives the victim as the person who suffers passively and succumbs, the interviewee distances herself from victim positioning. Accordingly, she implicitly reports a distinction between "injury" and "suffering" in line with the Chivian et al. conceptualization [73]: injury deals with "any effect that results in altered structure or impaired function, or represents the beginnings of a sequence of events leading to altered structure or function". In this perspective, the damage persists, as well as the person that feels like "a damaged person". On the other hand, suffering implies less acute general experiences that might be tolerated without actual injury [74]. In the participants' discourses, comparison strategies appear strategically functional to preserve a positive and safe representation of the self so that the sense of agency is not compromised. Distancing themselves from those who died or became ill seems to be functional to protect the self from fears or fatalism. The fear of illness and death, if not experienced, is often present, representing the risk of falling ill as around the corner and referring to experienced damage in terms of psychological stress and well-being.

> *There's the fear of falling ill. Every time you undergo an exam, you're terrified (...). As a citizen, you live in fear (...). Prevention is undoubtedly a handy tool, but it's also a tool we approach with a great deal of fear.* [I_6]

> *In terms of health, you know that you're always like under an atomic bomb that today can explode, and if it doesn't explode today, it'll explode tomorrow.* [I_2]

In the interview setting, participants were elicited to respond to the label and positioning of a victim. In this circumstance, interviewee I_8 recognized that he suffered damage but, at the same time, refused a forced positioning in line with a stereotyped victim identity [58]. It is motivated by the need to experience a sense of control over their personal life that allows them not to succumb.

> *The concept of "victim" is a strong one because, as a victim, it's easier to cry than to grow up. To say: "Poor me, how unlucky I was to grow up in this city". Thus, you do something. Thus, I feel like a victim, but I'm a victim, knowing that I may not be a victim and that it depends significantly on me.* [I_8]

The intrinsic contradiction between affective (*I feel like a victim*) and cognitive aspects (*but I'm a victim, knowing that I may not be a victim*) of the representation are managed. What is refused is not the experience of "being a victim" but the cognitive aspects of "victimhood" derived from their self-concept. Positioning and representing themselves as victims is often related to feelings of disempowerment and passivity. Distancing from this positioning has the function of protecting the self, maintaining a positive representation, and preserving a sense of self-efficacy to exercise some control over their functioning and environmental events.

The awareness of being citizens living in a democratic society seems to allow them to reject victimhood and act to claim recognition of their rights. Violations, in this sense, imply a reduction of the right to develop as a human being, limiting people's capability [75].

> *Your rights aren't protected, recognized, or guaranteed. You're a victim. However, the concept of "victim" isn't to victimize yourself. It's to say: "Do I have the right to live my*

> *life freely, get up in the morning without thinking that my headache is a tumor? No". And then I'm a victim.* [I_8]

Overall, the results show that the discursive positioning as a victim becomes salient when self-continuity and self-esteem can be preserved. It is achieved through agentive discourse, which allows the emergence of harm experience and simultaneously counteracts the victimization process. Conversely, victim positioning is rejected as a form of victimization denial through functional strategies, such as social comparison with more disadvantaged individuals or those suffering passively from their conditions—i.e., those unable to fight for their rights and their core capabilities, such as bodily health and political and material control over their environment, cf. [75].

To summarize these findings, at the personal level, the identification as a victim is purposefully refused with different sense-making strategies that counteract victimization and annihilation processes to preserve self-continuity and self-esteem. In this regard, activism and related identity positioning help them avoid succumbing and viewing themselves as victims.

6.3. "Whiteflies, Murderous Steelworkers, and Ideological Environmentalists": Identity Coping with Stigma, Devaluation, and Powerlessness

Living in a situation of environmental degradation and occupational crisis, during interviews, participants positioned themselves by mobilizing different types of collective identity (workers, activists, or citizens) related to processes of group appraisal and mobilization characterized by shared beliefs and interests [44].

As for the case of personal identity and victim positioning, the identity associated with being an activist or worker seems to be a dynamic and ambivalent process in which beliefs and feelings somehow conflict with each other.

Positioning as an activist enables individuals to functionally react to the awareness of living in a "sacrifice zone" (cf. [26]) and cope with the emotional damage of environmental degradation. Some participants identifying as activists presented their movement as a sort of "home" or "family", allowing them to express and share views and feelings and reduce the distress caused by perceived threats and uncertainties.

> *I tried to channel my activism instead of being a maverick (. . .) I think that living all this within a movement, regardless of whether it's the one I belong to, is a lighter burden.* [I_2]

In some instances, affiliation and identification with the movement acquire political relevance that allows the political to become a personal identity project, namely a politicization of social identity, cf. [76].

Interview I_8, for example, through the "father-son" similitude, reports how the movement pervaded his life to become an extension of self.

> *For me, the movement is like a son (. . .) I've never stopped living in symbiosis with the movement.* [I_8]

In other words, the movement identity and sense of belonging are embedded into the self-concept, resulting in blurred boundaries between the self and the group of reference [77], which is functional to alleviate feelings of mental distress, exert some control over the environment, and achieve common goals.

However, when participants use agentive discourses, i.e., positioning themselves as active agents of change, their discourse often reveals a tendency to interpret the consequences of their actions as attributable to external forces, i.e., compliance with socio-political systems (i.e., external locus of control and external efficacy), cf. [78].

> *The European Court of Human Rights appeal was well thought out because we couldn't afford a negative result. It was a big responsibility, but we set it up, so we had a high probability of being right. And, by the way, the European Court also boasts of this result as an important example. Luckily, it worked out well for us.* [I_1]

Nevertheless, the compliance of the social system after years of struggles and failures has led to a learned hopefulness and the belief that one can exert some control over events through collective action, cf. [78].

In line with Klandermans [44], participants' identification as activists seems guided by the desire to modify the circumstances, belong to a group, and give meaning to personal life. However, most explicitly refused the activist or environmentalist label, preferring to position themselves as "citizens defending their rights".

> *Environmentalists? Here we aren't environmentalists. Here we've simply defended two rights [work and health], and they call us environmentalists.* [I_5]

By referring to elements of deprivation and interest shared by the larger community, this discourse and positioning make salient a superordinate identity that potentially enables the inclusion of and identification by the broader community. This identity salience is related to a representation of place as a context of physical, moral, and ecological violation, compromising health, work, and safety. Collective action and interest are represented as unrelated to environmental motives (environmental protection) or actions of a distinct societal group (activists) but rather as a collective defense against violations common to the community—thus mobilizing a broader collective identity and positioning citizens as deprived of basic needs and rights and with a sense of grievance about their suffered injustice. By refusing to identify and position themselves as activists or environmentalists, interviewees positioned alternatively as citizens or workers in line with a hierarchy of identity salience depending on how these identities are perceived and valued by others in the community.

> *We're citizens first and workers later.* [I_8]

This positioning seems related to a stigma and impairment of identities due to community divisions and conflict. Identity stigma has to do with the representations circulating in the community, which devalue, misrecognize, and delegitimize particular identities by portraying workers as people protecting their interests (at the expense of the rest of the community) and environmentalists as not capable of perspective-taking and caring for the workers' community (disregarding their point of view and well-being).

> *Labeling workers as murderers has been a severe act of Taranto's environmentalism. Put yourself in his shoes, give him an alternative and see if that murderous worker wants to be a worker or if he prefers to open a delicatessen or to study.* [I_7]

Thus, identification with workers or environmentalists can be perceived as a source of discredit and devaluation. This result resonates with recent studies on conflicting identities in environmental conflicts and community division, where opposition to the industry can be conceived as an opposition to one's destiny and views about what is right, cf. [79,80]. In addition, workers are often silenced or excluded from having a voice in the mass media and public sphere due to their precarious relationship in-between the community and industrial interest.

> *We, as a movement, are used to willingly leaving statements, especially from the workers, because their condition is hardly ever reported.* [I_6]

Positioning and identification as citizens mobilize a superordinate identity that seems strategic to manage the stigmatization of worker, environmentalist, and activist groups and identities. It allows individuals to distance themselves from the source of stigma and protect their identity against discredit, misrecognition, and devaluation operated by representations circulating in the community context. Moreover, this positioning strategically refers to moral norms about social rights promoting human capability in democratic societies, allowing them a more agentive and legitimated positioning than activists and workers.

Positioning as a worker and activist at the same time seems, in this context, not possible nor desirable.

> *We were whiteflies; we're still today. Because they tell us that we bite the hand that feeds us, which is a terrible thing because it makes you feel bad. How many times we've asked ourselves: "Are we really the problem?". Because if you hear people thinking like that, then the problem can be you.* [I_9]

Workers' identity seems stigmatized by the different barricades of the conflict. Workers engaging in collective action against the industry are often accused of ingratitude by co-workers. In contrast, those not engaging in collective action are accused of not caring for the community. In both cases, workers' identity suffers an impairment that makes it challenging to develop a valued collective identity, consciousness, and action frame within the community. Overall, it is possible to detect how several stigmatization processes conduct to internalize stigma and question the positive value of distinctiveness in the social identity of activist workers. Their distinctiveness and uniqueness co-exist with hopelessness and helplessness due to their attachment to jobs, leading to self-rupture. At the same time, positioning themselves as different ("whiteflies") allows them to preserve self-coherence. To conclude, activist positioning and identification are a way to preserve agency and counter feelings of powerlessness and victimization. Affiliation with local movements is configured to restore a sense of self-efficacy, deal with emotional distress, and experience personal satisfaction and collective belonging.

At the same time, affiliation with movements—involving multifaceted positioning as both an activist/environmentalist and a worker—is reported as a source of stigma due to community dynamics of conflict. To cope with stigma, participants discursively implement a superordinate identification process, suppressing worker or activist identities and making the identity of citizens as owners of violated rights salient.

It seems a functional strategy that allows participants not to transfer the stereotypical and devalued group characteristics vehiculated in public discourse to preserve self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-continuity. It resonates with the idea of a structural self-concept, where identities are arranged in a hierarchy of salience, cf. [81].

Activists' and workers' identities converge into the superordinate citizen identity, which is the only one that does not have explicit references to stigma and allows them to convey meanings and act in line with previous identities and group interests more legitimately. Re-positioning themselves seems to limit differences between ingroup-outgroup and functional to preserve and restore a more positive and legitimated identity.

To conclude, identification and affiliation with local movements allow participants to handle negative feelings and restore a sense of agency. The dynamics of community conflict produced the devaluation and stigmatization of environmentalists and workers' groups and related identities. This can explain why interviewees made salient the superordinate identity of citizens in re-positioning themselves. This study hypothesizes that mobilizing such identity in context has a psychological (coping with identity stigma) and socio-political purpose (developing a shared and legitimated identity and collective action frame).

7. Limitations and Future Research

The study presents some limitations that can be considered for future research in areas or contexts characterized by industrial dependence and environmental degradation.

The first regards the representativeness of our findings to the entire population in the area. This study relied on a limited sample of active residents due to their limited availability to participate in the research, especially from the working sector, which can be explained by the intense conflicts and claims between industry and workers characterizing the period the research was conducted. Increasing the size of the sample with heterogeneous active residents may produce richer insights into the processes enlightened. Moreover, including the general public might produce different results in how people cope with territorial degradation and stigma and disprove surprising results, such as the absence of denial or minimization mechanisms about harm or finding other maladaptive coping mechanisms when psychologically adapting to persistent environmental harms and risks. Other studies with different research designs and larger samples could also assess more precisely the reciprocal link between place meanings and place attachments and explain how place meanings determine various symbolic and behavioral coping mechanisms.

Second, our study took place just before the territorial planning foreseen by the Just Transition Mechanism, offering a snapshot of the situation at the time and showing conditions of psychosocial loss and vulnerability in the community. Future research can examine how spatial imaginaries influence the unfolding of territorial planning and transformation and whether these enhance the long-term people-place relationship, particularly place attachment, dependence, and identities.

Future research could examine how place meanings shape spatial imaginaries and the unfolding of territorial plans and transformation, or by adopting a longitudinal design, whether they can enhance the relationship between people and places, notably place attachment, dependency, and identity.

8. Conclusions

This study investigates the interlink of people-place relationships, identity processes, and agency to understand how communities heavily dependent on carbon-intensive industry make sense of and cope with environmental degradation. Specifically, based on interviews with active residents, it examined an urban case study (Taranto, Italy) highly contaminated by the steel industry. Building upon scholars' suggestions [18,31], it explored the expression of local identities, their disruption, and reasons for conflicts in transformative change, using the concepts of the sense of place and stigma.

Overall, the results show the presence of widely shared and highly negative meanings of place, contributing to territorial stigma caused by contamination. Internalization of the stigma contributes to ambivalent place attachments and disrupted place identities due to compromised self-esteem, distinctiveness, and self-efficacy. Contrary to expectations, this study found no evidence of denial or minimization mechanisms to cope with emotional and mental distress caused by environmental threats and stigma. Instead, coping happens through identity processes and agency, enabling self-protection and restoring continuity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and positive distinctiveness. Moreover, identity processes do not produce different positionings for social representations of place, as meanings are anchored to the "objective" and material experience of socio-ecological degradation, embodied in victims' bodies and perceived close in time and space. Agency and identity are crucial self-protective mechanisms when dealing with fear and fatalism caused by this indisputable truth.

At the personal level, self-concept is characterized by cognitive polyphasia, a contradiction between the emotional experience of feeling like a victim and the cognitive one of victimhood. Individuals cope with the victim stigma through self-distancing from the 'real victims'—i.e., those who cannot speak or act to protect themselves, such as the dead, sick people, or children—which constitutes an ethical and moral obligation to act, rejecting victimhood and related identity-agency link.

At the social level, activist identification and movement affiliation are strategies to survive and preserve agency. However, as stressed by Castán Broto et al. [18] (p. 963), "in establishing a moral baseline, they may demean other forms of identity". This unintended consequence is palpable in how some identities are devalued and stigmatized in the community. The people-place relationship is characterized by antinomies (i.e., health-occupation, environmental protection-human well-being) that permeate public discourse and community dynamics, influencing how social identities are represented, valued, and mobilized. Environmentalist and activist identities are often rejected for an assumed ideological stance uncaring of community economic well-being.

On the other hand, steelworkers are accused of the different barricades of the conflict (ungrateful toward the employer or community murderers), suffering the victim-perpetrator dilemma and occupational moral taint—cf. [79]. The stigmatization of these identities contributes to the fragmentation of collective action, creating difficulties in elaborating a community identity characterized by a common interest and vision and thus hindering coalition-building and advocacy. To cope with identity devaluation and group misrecognition, active residents re-position themselves by adopting the superordinate identity of "citizens protecting their rights". This more legitimated and inclusive identity allows them to reinterpret the claims of heterogeneous interest groups and represent the place as the object of moral, bodily, and ecological violation.

These findings are highly relevant since the case study examined is undergoing a decarbonization pathway supported by the EU Just Transition Mechanism. Nowadays, Just Transition is a concept that is harshly debated. Its policy operationalization remains primarily informed by an economic vision that emphasizes labor impacts and labor market transition [82].

Many scholars warn against this reductionist focus that risks failing to address pre-existing structural drivers of injustice and point out that conceptual boundaries of Just Transition have to expand and address recognition-based injustices, more complex and subtle restorative needs, and the historical legacies of power relationships and resulting inequalities [83–86]. This suggests that any injustice should be rectified for a just transition and be part of preventive and forward-looking action, responding to the damage that already occurred, repairing it, and restoring the dignity and well-being of the people involved [87].

Just Transition Territorial Plans cannot ignore actions of involvement and accompaniment from a restorative and regenerative perspective, addressing the dimensions of loss and vulnerability, even at the psychosocial level.

From an applied perspective, our findings show that injustice goes beyond the unequal distributions of hazards and unfair political processes, encompassing devaluation and misrecognition of particular identities and groups due to territorial stigma and related socio-political struggles. Our results suggest that place transformations should encompass changes affecting: (a) the physical setting and infrastructure, altering the source of environmental threat (e.g., by decarbonizing industrial working processes, restoring contaminated places); (b) the symbolic domain, modifying the symbols of territorial stigma and developing a new economic identity for the place (e.g., by designing new uses for polluted places and reconverting local economy and occupational opportunities); (c) the socio-political domain of sustainability transition, developing a politics of emotion and identity for designing and accompanying transformations encompassing the disruption of place histories and memories captured in the sites, and supporting the creation of new identities and vision for the place, cf. [88].

In designing such a transformative pathway, a capability approach to justice and sustainability—e.g., [89]—is likely to provide a way of anticipating externalities from the transformation and conflicting capabilities, that is, elucidating the interconnection between human well-being, the socio-ecological, and socio-technical systems.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study guaranteeing their anonymity and privacy protection.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Interview Outline.

General Topic	Specific Areas	Guiding Questions
0. Introduction: Research presentation		
1. Personal and social identities	Objectives, actions, perceived supports, etc.	- What are the movement's goals? What are the main activities you carry out within the movement you belong to? - How was the movement formed? How long has the movement existed? How long have you been a member of it? - Do you perceive yourself as a victim? - Do you feel a sense of isolation? (by institutions, citizens, . . .)
2. Risk perception	Risk knowledge, perceived severity, acceptance degree, etc.	- What is the pollution caused by steel production due to? - What actions have not been taken to protect the territory and the resident population? - In your opinion, how do citizens perceive the risks deriving from exposure?
3. Harm perception	Health, consequences, etc.	- In your opinion, what are the other negative consequences besides the health harm? - What is your idea of health, in relation to the area in which you live? - In addition to being a proven source of industrial pollution, what does the ex-Ilva represent in the area?
4. Responsibilities assessment	Involved actors or stakeholders	- Who do you hold responsible for the environmental disaster in the city of Taranto?
5. Change expectations	Local development, required actions, restoration and remediation process, agency vs. fatalism, etc.	- In your opinion, what actions should be implemented by the institutions to start a remediation process? - What do you think will happen after the last verdict? - Do you think a different future is possible for Taranto?

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