Realist vs. Idealist Facilities Managers in Facility Management: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Facility management (FM) is critical for the efficient operation and long-term sustainability of built environments. Facility managers play a crucial role in fulfilling organisational targets by making strategic decisions that optimise resource use, enhance operational efficiency, and align with broader goals such as environmental responsibility and stakeholder satisfaction. This paper explores the contrasting philosophical beliefs of realism and idealism in FM, highlighting their influence on managerial decision-making, organisational culture, and performance outcomes. A realist facility manager is action-orientated and data-driven, prioritising practicality, cost-effectiveness, and empirical evidence to enhance operational efficiency, optimise resources, and proactively manage risks for measurable outcomes. An idealist facility manager emphasises visionary goals, ethical values, and long-term sustainability, focussing on aligning organisational values with operational practices, fostering stakeholder engagement, and promoting a positive, innovative organisational culture. This paper compares realism and idealism in facility management, examining their principles, assumptions, and approaches. The paper aims to develop a comprehensive framework that integrates the principles of realism and idealism into FM practices. Thus, a conceptual framework is proposed to provide facility managers with actionable insights and strategies that balance the pragmatic, results-driven approach of realism with the visionary, value-orientated perspective of idealism. The proposed methods use a positivist approach with a cross-sectional design, stratified sampling, and structured questionnaires. Next, the data collected is proposed to be analysed using SPSS and SmartPLS, ensuring ethical standards. This methodology serves as a framework for future research to explore how philosophical beliefs influence FM practices. This paper concludes that realism and idealism offer distinct yet complementary beliefs in facility management. It provides a foundation for future empirical research to validate these concepts and their impact on organisational strategies.

Keywords: Facility Management, Facility Manager, Realist, Idealist, Conceptual Framework, Organisational Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Facility management (FM) plays a significant role in ensuring the efficient and effective operation of built environments, encompassing a diverse range of tasks from maintenance and security to space planning and sustainability initiatives (Alexander, 2013; Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Barrett & Baldry, 2003; Cotts, 1999; Cotts, Roper, & Payant, 2010). Within the context of FM, various philosophical approaches influence the decision-making processes, strategies, and organisational cultures adopted by facility managers. Two prominent philosophical beliefs that often shape managerial outlooks are realism and idealism. While realism tends to

prioritise practicality, pragmatism, and a focus on tangible outcomes, idealism emphasises visionary goals, values-driven decision-making, and the search of high aspirations (Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Barrett & Baldry, 2003).

Realism in FM is characterised by a focus on evidence-based practices, cost-effectiveness, and the optimisation of resources to meet organisational goals. Realist facility managers rely on empirical data and quantitative metrics to guide their decisions, aiming to enhance operational efficiency and maximise asset value (Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Barrett & Baldry, 2003; Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010). They prioritise immediate, practical solutions to address operational challenges and ensure the smooth functioning of facilities (Alexander, 2013; Barrett & Baldry, 2003; Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010).

On the other hand, idealism in FM is driven by a commitment to ethical values, long-term vision, and the creation of sustainable and harmonious built environments. Idealist facility managers emphasise the importance of aligning FM practices with organisational values and societal goals, fostering a culture of innovation, creativity, and social responsibility (Alexander, 2013; Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Barrett & Baldry, 2003). They prioritise stakeholder engagement, community collaboration, and environmental stewardship, aiming to achieve broader societal and environmental impacts beyond immediate operational needs.

Understanding the implications of these philosophical beliefs on FM practices is crucial for enhancing organisational performance and achieving strategic objectives. The different approaches of realist and idealist facility managers can significantly influence the effectiveness, sustainability, and overall success of initiatives. The conceptual framework proposed in this paper offers a foundation for future research and practical applications in the field of FM, promoting a balanced and comprehensive approach to managing built environments. It provides insights into how these beliefs shape managerial decision-making, organisational culture, and performance outcomes in the context of facility management. By examining the contrasting philosophies of realism and idealism, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of their roles in facility management. It highlights the importance of integrating both practical and visionary approaches to address the complex and dynamic challenges faced by facility managers.

Background

Realism, as a philosophical perspective, is rooted in the belief that the world exists independently of human perception and is governed by objective laws and principles (Honderich, 2005; Nagel, 1986). In the context of FM, realist approaches prioritise evidence-based decision-making, data-driven analysis, and a focus on practical solutions to immediate challenges (Cotts et al., 2010). Realist facility managers often emphasise efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and the optimisation of resources to meet organisational goals (Barrett & Baldry, 2003). They rely on empirical evidence and measurable outcomes to assess the success of their initiatives, viewing FM as a means to enhance operational efficiency and maximise the value of assets (Shiem-Shin Then, 2000). For instance, realist facility managers might employ key performance indicators (KPIs) such as cost per square meter, maintenance response times, and energy consumption levels to objectively evaluate and improve their operations (Cotts et al., 2010).

On the other hand, idealism suggests that reality is shaped by human consciousness and subjective interpretations, with an emphasis on the pursuit of moral and ethical values (Honderich, 2005). Idealist facility managers are driven by a vision of creating harmonious and sustainable built environments that align with organisational values and societal aspirations. They prioritise long-term goals, social responsibility, and the cultivation of positive organisational cultures that foster innovation, creativity, and employee engagement (Alexander, 2013; Atkin & Brooks, 2021). Idealist approaches to FM often involve stakeholder collaboration, community engagement, and a commitment to environmental stewardship and corporate social responsibility (Elmualim, Shockley, Valle, Ludlow, & Shah, 2010). For example, an idealist facility manager might focus on implementing green building initiatives, promoting employee well-being programs, and engaging with the local community to ensure that the facilities contribute positively to broader societal goals (Alexander, 2013; Barrett & Baldry, 2003; Hodges, 2005; Opoku & Lee, 2022).

Understanding the implications of these philosophical beliefs on FM practices is crucial for enhancing

organisational performance and achieving strategic objectives. The realist approach's focus on efficiency and practicality ensures that immediate operational challenges are met effectively, thereby supporting the organisation's core functions and maintaining continuity (Ali et al., 2023; Cotts et al., 2010; Nouban & Abazid, 2024). In contrast, the idealist approach's emphasis on ethical values and long-term sustainability fosters an inclusive and forward-thinking organisational culture, which can lead to increased innovation and stakeholder satisfaction (Hodges, 2005; Yang, Shen, Drew, & Ho, 2009). The interaction between these two philosophical beliefs can provide a balanced framework for FM, where the practical benefits of realism are complemented by the visionary goals of idealism.

This interaction is especially relevant in the current context, where facility managers must navigate complex challenges that require both immediate practical solutions and long-term strategic thinking (Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Nouban & Abazid, 2024; Opoku & Lee, 2022). For instance, the integration of smart building technologies (a realist approach) can be combined with sustainable design principles (an idealist approach) to create facilities that are both efficient and environmentally responsible (Ali et al., 2023; Ali, Nawi, Hamid, Jalil, & Hussain, 2021; Elmualim et al., 2010).

Rationale

While realism and idealism represent distinct philosophical paradigms, their implications for FM practices have not been comprehensively explored within the existing literature. Understanding how these philosophical beliefs influence decision-making processes, organisational cultures, and performance outcomes in FM is essential for informing strategic management practices and facilitating continuous improvement initiatives. By conducting a comparative analysis of realism and idealism in the context of FM, this paper seeks to bridge this gap in knowledge and contribute to a deeper understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of facility management.

Given the evolving demands and expectations placed on facility managers, especially in an era marked by rapid technological advancements and heightened awareness of sustainability, it is essential to understand how differing philosophical beliefs can impact FM practices. Realist facility managers might excel in leveraging data analytics and predictive maintenance technologies to optimise facility operations, while idealist facility managers could lead in creating value-driven initiatives that promote social equity and environmental responsibility (Alexander, 2013; Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Barrett & Baldry, 2003; Cotts et al., 2010).

By exploring these contrasting yet potentially complementary approaches, the proposed conceptual framework will guide facility managers in balancing the pragmatic demands of operational efficiency with the aspirational goals of sustainability and social responsibility. This comparative analysis will not only shed light on the philosophical foundations of FM but also offer practical insights for enhancing organisational performance and achieving strategic objectives in diverse facility management contexts.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to compare and contrast the application of realism and idealism in FM practices. The paper aims to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates the principles of realism and idealism into FM practices. This includes examining how realist and idealist facility managers approach decision-making, resource allocation, risk management, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability initiatives. By elucidating these principles and assumptions, the paper seeks to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that highlights the strengths and limitations of each philosophical belief and provides actionable insights for facility managers aiming to integrate these beliefs into their practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of FM, understanding the philosophical beliefs of facility managers provides valuable insights into their decision-making processes, strategies, and overall management practices. Two prominent philosophical beliefs, realism and idealism, significantly influence the outlook and actions of facility managers. This literature review delves into the principles and assumptions underlying these beliefs, exposing their implications for facility management.

Realism in Facility Management

1) Principle of Practicality: Realism in FM emphasises practical solutions and tangible outcomes. Realist facility managers prioritise the implementation of strategies that yield measurable results and address immediate operational challenges (Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010; Lee & Scott, 2009). This principle reflects a pragmatic approach to decision-making, where the focus is on achieving operational efficiency and effectiveness within resource constraints. Realist managers are often seen as action-orientated and results-driven, striving to ensure that their decisions lead to practical, actionable outcomes (Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010; Lee & Scott, 2009).

2) Assumption of Objectivity: Realism assumes that there is an objective reality independent of human perception. Realist facility managers rely on empirical evidence and data-driven analysis to inform decision-making processes (Barrett & Baldry, 2003). They prioritise the use of quantitative metrics and performance indicators to evaluate FM performance objectively, ensuring that decisions are grounded in objective information rather than subjective opinions. This reliance on data and empirical evidence helps realist managers to make informed decisions that are aligned with organisational goals and performance metrics (Barrett & Baldry, 2003).

3) Focus on Cost-effectiveness: Realism prioritises efficiency and cost-effectiveness in resource allocation and operational decision-making. Realist facility managers seek to optimise resource utilisation and minimise wastage to achieve organisational goals within budgetary constraints (Loosemore & Hsin, 2001). This focus on cost-effectiveness reflects a practical concern for maximising the value of assets and resources to enhance organisational performance. By implementing cost-effective measures, realist managers aim to ensure the sustainability and profitability of their facilities (Loosemore & Hsin, 2001).

4) Emphasis on Risk Management: Realism acknowledges the existence of risks and uncertainties in FM operations. Realist facility managers adopt proactive risk management strategies to identify, assess, and mitigate potential threats to organisational performance (Zou, Zhang, & Wang, 2007). They prioritise risk assessment and contingency planning to minimise the impact of unexpected events on facility operations and continuity. By being proactive in their approach to risk management, realist managers can better prepare for and respond to potential disruptions (Zou et al., 2007).

5) Utilisation of Quantitative Metrics: Realism relies on quantitative metrics and performance indicators to evaluate FM performance and effectiveness. Realist facility managers use key performance indicators (KPIs) such as cost per square meter, maintenance response time, and energy consumption levels to monitor and measure the performance of FM services (Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010). This quantitative approach enables realist facility managers to assess performance objectively and identify areas for improvement. Furthermore. by focussing on measurable outcomes, realist managers can continuously enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their facilities (Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010).

Idealism in Facility Management

1) Principle of Vision and Values: Idealism in FM emphasises visionary goals and alignment with organisational values. Idealist facility managers are motivated by a sense of purpose and strive to achieve excellence and sustainability (McLennan, 2004; Thompson, 2017). They aim to create built environments that reflect values such as social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and innovation, inspiring higher performance levels within their teams (McLennan, 2004; Thompson, 2017).

2) Assumption of Subjectivity: Idealism posits that reality is shaped by human consciousness and subjective interpretations (Barrett & Baldry, 2003). Idealist facility managers acknowledge the influence of individual perceptions and organisational culture on decision-making and operational practices, thereby addressing diverse stakeholder needs more effectively (Barrett & Baldry, 2003).

3) Emphasis on Stakeholder Engagement: Idealism prioritises collaboration and partnership with stakeholders in FM. Managers involve stakeholders in decision-making processes, seeking input and feedback to foster transparency and mutual understanding (Yang et al., 2009). This approach enhances organisational performance

and satisfaction through stronger relationships and inclusive decision-making.

4) Commitment to Sustainability: Idealism advocates for sustainable practices aligned with environmental and social responsibility goals (McLennan, 2004; Thompson, 2017). Facility managers promote initiatives like energy efficiency and green building design to minimise environmental impact and support long-term sustainability efforts.

5) Promotion of Organisational Culture: Idealism underscores the role of organisational culture in FM. Managers cultivate environments that encourage innovation, creativity, and employee engagement, fostering positive cultures conducive to strategic success (Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010).

Table 2.1: Summarises the key principles and assumptions of realism in facility management

Principle / Aspect	Description	Source
Principle of Practicality	Emphasises practical solutions and tangible outcomes; prioritises strategies that yield measurable results and address immediate operational challenges.	(Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010; Lee & Scott, 2009)
Assumption of Objectivity	Assumes an objective reality independent of human perception; relies on empirical evidence and data-driven analysis for decision-making.	(Barrett & Baldry, 2003; Pati, Park, & Augenbroe, 2009)
Focus on Cost-effectiveness	Prioritises efficiency and cost-effectiveness in resource allocation; aims to optimise resource utilisation and minimise wastage.	(Loosemore & Hsin, 2001)
Emphasis on Risk Management	Acknowledges risks and uncertainties; adopts proactive risk management strategies to identify, assess, and mitigate potential threats.	(Zou et al., 2007)
Utilisation of Quantitative Metrics	Relies on quantitative metrics to evaluate performance; uses key performance indicators to monitor and measure facility management services.	(Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010; Jensen, Voordt, & Coenen, 2012)

Table 2.2: Summarises the key principles and assumptions of idealism in facility management

Principle / Aspect	Description	Source
Principle of Vision and Values	Focusses on visionary goals and alignment with organisational values; guided by purpose and commitment to excellence and sustainability.	(McLennan, 2004; Thompson, 2017)
Assumption of Subjectivity	Suggests that reality is shaped by human consciousness and subjective interpretations; recognises the influence of perceptions and values.	(Barrett & Baldry, 2003)
Emphasis on Stakeholder Engagement	Prioritises collaboration and partnership with stakeholders; involves stakeholders in decision-making and strives for inclusive environments.	(Yang et al., 2009)
Commitment to Sustainability	Advocates for sustainable practices aligned with environmental and social responsibility goals; prioritises	(McLennan, 2004; Thompson, 2017)

	initiates like energy efficiency and waste reduction.	(Kats, 2003); (Elkington, 2004)
Promotion of Organisational Culture	Emphasises the importance of organisational culture; strives to foster innovation, creativity, and employee engagement.	(Cotts, 1999; Cotts et al., 2010; Warren & Dinnie, 2018)

Table 2.1 and Table 2.2 above summarise the key principles and assumptions of realism and idealism in FM, providing a clear comparison between the two philosophical beliefs along with relevant sources. These detailed justifications provide a comprehensive understanding of the key principles and assumptions underlying realism and idealism in FM. Drawing on relevant literature and theoretical perspectives, this review explains the contrasting philosophical beliefs and their implications for managerial practices and organisational outcomes. By comparing the approaches of realist and idealist facility managers, this conceptual framework may contribute to a deeper understanding of how these philosophical beliefs influence FM in diverse organisational contexts.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This paper focusses on comparing the philosophical beliefs of realism and idealism within the context of FM. Realism emphasises practicality, empirical evidence, and objective outcomes, while idealism prioritises visionary goals, values-driven decision-making, and sustainability. It is important to acknowledge that this paper has certain limitations. Firstly, it primarily explores the comparison between realism and idealism and may not encompass all philosophical beliefs relevant to FM. Secondly, the research relies on self-reported data obtained through questionnaire surveys, which can introduce response biases and limitations inherent to survey methodologies. Despite efforts to mitigate these challenges through rigorous survey design and analysis, the accuracy and reliability of the data collected may be influenced by respondent perceptions and interpretations. Furthermore, the findings of this research may have limited generalisability beyond the specific contexts studied. Variations in cultural, institutional, and contextual factors across different sectors could impact the application of realism and idealism in FM practices. By conducting a comparative analysis, this research seeks to deepen understanding of these philosophical influences on FM and stimulate further exploration into this underexplored area of research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For future studies exploring the comparison between realism and idealism in FM, this conceptual framework recommends adopting a positivist research paradigm and employing a quantitative approach. The positivist paradigm is particularly suitable for this study due to its focus on objective measurement and empirical evidence (Mansell, Philbin, & Konstantinou, 2020; van Rijn, Raab, Roosma, & Achterberg, 2024), which are crucial for systematically comparing the contrasting philosophical beliefs of realism and idealism in FM. Positivism emphasises the use of observable, quantifiable data to uncover truths and establish generalisable findings, aligning well with the study's goal of developing a comprehensive framework that integrates these philosophies into FM practices. The recommended methodology involves managing a structured questionnaire survey to gather data from FM professionals across various sectors, focussing on their perceptions and practices related to realism and idealism in FM. A cross-sectional research design is suggested to capture a snapshot of current FM practices within organisational settings. A representative sample of FM professionals from diverse sectors can be selected using stratified random sampling technique to ensure broad representation across different organisational contexts and geographical locations.

Data collection should be conducted electronically, utilising online survey platforms or email invitations, to facilitate efficient data collection while maintaining ethical standards (Soni et al., 2024; Ufner, Sakshaug, Zins, & Globisch, 2024). Respondents should receive clear instructions regarding the research's purpose, confidentiality of responses, and voluntary participation, ensuring ethical compliance throughout the research process. For data analysis, statistical software such as the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) can be utilised. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) can be figured to summarise sample characteristics and key variables related to realism and idealism in FM. Inferential statistical

techniques, including correlation analysis, t-tests, and regression analysis, can be employed to explore relationships between variables, test hypotheses derived from research objectives, and identify significant predictors of FM practices and performance outcomes. It is crucial to support ethical considerations throughout the research process to protect respondents' rights and confidentiality (Kaewkungwal & Adams, 2019). Informed consent should be obtained from all respondents before data collection, and measures should be implemented to ensure anonymity and privacy in accordance with ethical guidelines. This recommended methodology serves as a framework for future empirical studies aiming to deepen understanding of how philosophical beliefs influence FM practices. Given the conceptual nature of this paper, these recommendations provide guidance for potential research activities in this underexplored area of research.

Table 4.1: Proposed research philosophical assumptions and methodology

Methodological Component	Description
Research Paradigm	Positivist approach, emphasising quantitative analysis to investigate the comparison between realism and idealism in facility management (FM).
Research Design	Cross-sectional design to capture current perceptions and practices of FM professionals regarding realism and idealism across various organisational sectors.
Sampling Technique	Stratified random sampling to ensure representative samples from diverse sectors within facility management.
Data Collection	Administration of structured questionnaire surveys electronically (via online platforms or email) to FM professionals, ensuring ethical standards are upheld.
Data Analysis	Utilisation of statistical software (e.g., SPSS) for descriptive and inferential analysis, including frequencies, percentages, correlations, t-tests, and regressions. SEM using SmartPLS for structural modelling.
Ethical Considerations	Strict adherence to informed consent procedures, confidentiality of responses, and privacy protection throughout the research process.

Recommended Research Instruments (Questionnaire Survey)

Table 4.2 outlines recommended research instruments for a questionnaire survey, designed to assess key aspects and principles, reflecting the practical and visionary approaches in decision-making within FM.

Table 4.2: Recommended Research Instruments

Aspect/Principle	Statement
Realism: Principle of Practicality	**Practical solutions** are essential for achieving facility management goals.
	I prioritise strategies that yield **measurable results** in my facility management practices.
	Addressing **immediate operational challenges** is a priority in my decision-making processes.
	I systematically **evaluate the feasibility** of proposed solutions in my facility management practices.
	I rely on **empirical evidence** in my facility management decision-making.

Realism: Assumption of Objectivity	**Data-driven analysis** informs my facility management strategies.
	I prioritise the use of **quantitative metrics** and performance indicators in evaluating facility management performance.
	I regularly update my decision-making processes based on **objective data analysis**.
Realism: Focus on Cost-effectiveness	**Efficiency in resource allocation** is crucial for achieving facility management objectives.
	I seek to **optimise resource utilisation** within budgetary constraints.
	Cost-effectiveness is a consideration in my operational decision-making processes.
	I conduct **cost-benefit analyses** to assess the financial impact of facility management decisions.
Realism: Emphasis on Risk Management	I conduct **risk assessments** regularly in my facility management operations.
	Proactive risk management strategies are adopted to mitigate potential threats.
	Risk management is essential for **ensuring the continuity** of facility operations.
	I develop **contingency plans** to address identified risks in facility management.
Idealism: Principle of Vision and Values	Facility management practices should align with **organisational values**.
	Visionary goals are considered in my facility management decision-making.
	I strive to create built environments that **reflect organisational values**.
	I incorporate **ethical considerations** into facility management strategies.
Idealism: Assumption of Subjectivity	Individual **perceptions influence** facility management practices in my organisation.
	Decisions are influenced by **subjective factors** such as organisational culture and employee motivation.
	Subjective interpretations are considered in facility management decision-making.
	I promote **open communication** channels to capture diverse viewpoints in decision-making processes.
Idealism: Emphasis on Stakeholder Engagement	**Stakeholders are involved** in facility management decision-making processes.
	Input and feedback from stakeholders are solicited in my facility management practices.
	Stakeholder engagement is essential for achieving facility management goals.
	I **collaborate with stakeholders** to create facility management strategies.
	Sustainability initiatives are important in facility management.
	I **prioritise sustainability practices** such as energy efficiency and waste reduction.

Idealism: Commitment to Sustainability	**Environmental and social implications** of facility management actions are considered regularly.
	I **integrate sustainable development goals** into facility management practices.
Idealism: Promotion of Organisational Culture	**Organisational culture shapes** facility management practices in my organisation.
	Values such as **collaboration and continuous improvement** are promoted.
	Environments fostering **innovation and employee engagement** are created regularly.
	I encourage a culture of **learning and adaptation** in facility management practices.

Respondents can respond to each statement using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," providing valuable insights into the alignment of FM practices with the principles of realism and idealism. This scale allows for meaningful assessments of how deeply embedded these philosophical beliefs are within FM strategies and decision-making processes. This approach not only facilitates a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical underpinnings guiding FM practices but also enables comparisons between perceptions and actual implementation within the field.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper has examined the foundational concepts of realism and idealism within FM. Realism emphasises practicality, empirical evidence, and efficiency in optimising resource utilisation and operational outcomes. In contrast, idealism prioritises visionary goals, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability practices to foster innovation and organisational values within FM. Methodologically, this paper has laid the groundwork for future empirical studies to systematically validate these philosophical beliefs across diverse organisational contexts. By outlining the core principles of realism and idealism in FM, this framework explains how these beliefs shape decision-making and organisational strategies.

While this paper marks the initial theoretical exploration, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, particularly the absence of empirical data and specific case studies. Future research should empirically investigate the impact of realism and idealism on FM practices across various industries and geographic settings. The framework serves as a valuable tool for both theoretical and practical advancements in FM. It guides practitioners in enhancing operational efficiency and sustainability, while providing scholars with a foundation for advancing FM theory and empirical research. Ultimately, the framework contributes to the development of more effective, ethical, and innovative FM practices, driving progress in the field.

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