The Interview as a Relational Space

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Abstract: This text presents the difficulties encountered in an interview between two interviewers and an interviewee. It explains how the type of relation in the interview as well as the interviewee's use of the relational space give vital heuristic hints to understand latent aspects of the subject under research. What happened in the process of this special interview was a reduction of the potentially triadic inter-relational space to the level of a closed dyadic relationship. The wide loss in the scope of action and the liberty of thinking sharpened the interviewers' attention for similar situations in the research field. This text explains ideas such as inter-relational space, the researcher's methodically managed analysis of his *own experience and research supervision.*

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1. The Use of the Relational Space and the Researcher's Methodically Conducted Self Analysis as Means for Accessing the Latent Themes of the Research Interview

In her contribution "The Theme-Centred Interview", Ariane SCHORN summarised the research tradition of our institute (Institute for Psychology and Social Research at the University of Bremen) based on the depth-hermeneutic works of Thomas LEITHÄUSER and Birgit VOLMERG (1977, 1979, 1988) which has undergone diverse applications[1] and further development[2] over a period of time. In the present contribution, I illustrate by means of describing the initial sequences of a theme-centred interview including the events in the interview-relationship, as well as the use of the relational space by the interviewee, the meaning and importance these factors provide for tracing and understanding the latent aspects of the research themes. The focus lies within the explorative possibilities of the research relationship, as well as on the reflection of the communicative content of the interview situation. According to MRUCK (2000), this is often neglected in empirical studies. This is in contrast to the great consideration qualitative social research has given to the communication between the researcher and the researched, as a constitutive and reflection-worthy

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1 Amongst other projects, in two bigger research projects I was involved with (see LEITHÄUSER, LÖCHEL, SCHERER & TIETEL [1995] as well as LEITHÄUSER, SCHERER & TIETEL [1997].

2 See LÖCHEL 1997, STAHLKE 1999, and SCHORN 2000.

element for the process of understanding. Greater consideration is given to aspects of the inter-relationship during the research encounter, including scenic aspects of the inquiry situation as described by ARGELANDER (1970) and OGDEN (1995) using the psychoanalytic initial interview as an example. It marks a development of LORENZER's (1970), as well as LEITHÄUSER's and VOLMERG's (1988) concept of scenic understanding.[3] [1]

In our empirical research projects, we experienced that a mutual understanding between the interview partners increases the willingness of the interviewee to speak openly about the multiple aspects of his own experience and life, consequently yielding an extensive narrative. Furthermore, a good interview can generate details of an episode when the interviewer is receptive to the experience of the interviewee, and the latter can appreciate the interviewer's reflection and understanding. In such cases, the thinking and reflective space of the interviewee can encompass the understanding space of the interviewer. This results in a creative space that BION in therapeutic settings has termed "containment". This is supported by the circumstance, that the interviewee finds himself in a protected space in an interview. Often, he is speaking to an interviewer for whom the interviewee's specific cultural boundaries and rules (e.g. the norms, rituals and linguistic games of a firm) are not valid. Thus ideally, the interviewer attempts to offer a thoughtful and reflective culture differing greatly from the pressures of action and decision making, as well as the micro political structures and interests of the social world under discussion. [2]

However this quasi intercultural use of the interview's relational space whilst broadening the experience collides with the (often rather unconscious) efforts of the interviewee to add his own cultural work experiences, and even to repeat them thus transforming the unfamiliar interview situation into one which is familiar to him. Based on the research done on organisations, Franz WELLENDORF (1991, 1996) points out the fact that the members will always try to pull the researcher into the institutional dynamics. Furthermore, the dynamics, structure, and culture of an organisation are also expressed in the ways its employees build up their relationship with the researcher. According to WELLENDORF, they do this to fulfil certain roles and functions in formal and informal groups. They organise common tasks, try to create a setting agreeable for themselves, and establish their boundaries. They are open to certain questions, while partly or completely rejecting others. Apart from the specific information aimed at in the research discussion, the research relationship is as such, a type of projection surface for the hidden institutional dynamics, structures and culture of an organisation.[4] [3]

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3   For the different approaches of the scenic understanding, as well as the characteristics of the validation of scenic information see LÖCHEL (1997, pp.45ff and pp.69ff.).

4   The reference to the (organisational) culture and the concept of culture implied in this are discussed in more depth in my habilitation work. I based it on the symbolic-interpretative cultural approaches in the tradition of GEERTZ (1987), as well as the more functionally oriented concepts, e.g. the organisational culture concepts of SCHEIN (1995).

Regarding the above mentioned aspects of the use of the relational space, one can imply that the scenic event is embedded in an interview in an oscillation between the interviewer's offer of an understanding-space, possibly reaching beyond the interviewee's direct experience and the interviewer's (more or less unconscious) attempt to shape the interview based on the dynamics of his own culture. [4]

According to our understanding of research, e.g. as discussed here in the context of the analysis of the culture of an organisation, methodologically led understanding of the unfamiliar cannot be separated from the self-analysis of the researcher (see TIETEL 1994). That is, the researcher has to analyse and understand his own situation and sensibilities when encountering the members of the organisation; be it during an informal encounter, while observing, or as in the present case during the course of a theme-centred interview. This does not only include the cognitive level of understanding, but special attention has to be given to affective reaction, to the feelings, fantasies and (counter) transferences that crop up in the researcher during his contact with the members of the organisation. To paraphrase WELLENDORF again: the affective reaction of the researcher, even when experienced as disagreeable, is not considered as a failure to be eliminated. Like observations, interview records and the decoding of institutional practices and habits, the affective reaction can be an important source, which when analysed, can give insight into the institutional problems. A precondition for this insight being that the researcher questions his affective reaction, in order to find out whether they are in fact an expression of an institutional conflict. Following DEVEREUX (1967), ERDHEIM and NADIG (1984 and 1988) plead for the necessity of redefining the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Furthermore, these researchers point to the indispensability of a self-analysis within the framework of the social sciences, which would allow the researchers the possibility of working through their experience. A further possibility is offered by the research supervision which, according to BAURIEDL (1993), helps the researcher to understand his motives and blind spots in the context of his field of research, to have a more differentiated view of the question being researched, as well as to have free and more open encounters during the research.[5] [5]

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5 According to clinical experience, not all of the therapist's feelings emerging in the contact with his client are to be traced back to the latter. Instead, the therapist's affects and counter transference on the client are accompanied by his own (always also conflictual, wish-and fear-led) readiness for transference. Furthermore, according to the clinical experience , the client does not only stage his conflictual self, but also reacts to the therapeutic framework, the therapeutic setting, and the therapist. In analogy to this clinical experience, a full description of the events of the interview's relational includes the respective parts of the interviewer which are not limited to providing the understanding space described here. Seen from this point of view, not only the interviewee but also the interviewer is part of a certain (scientific) culture, whose norms, rules, rituals, linguistic games, behaviours, cognitive habits and (often unconscious) basic assumptions of which he is only partly aware. I hope that my tendency for idealising the interviewer will be tolerated as it serves the process of focussing and the reduction of complexity.

2. Mismatched Encounters—An Example of the Starting Sequence of the Interview

In the course of a series of interviews with staff council members about their experience with the involvement of the employees in the introduction of new technologies, I conducted a theme-centred interview[6] with Mr. Meister, a staff council member of a medium-sized enterprise in southern Germany. Mr. Meister was a competent staff council member for questions concerning new technologies. In the course of the interview, he proved to have an extensive knowledge of the organisational, social, and personnel questions arising as a result of the introduction of the new technology. This he coupled with a power conscious and militant staff council attitude. For us, he was a fruitful interview-partner in regards to the contents of the interview; he yielded plenty of information concerning the safeguarding of interests in the introduction of the new technologies. Yet, I use this interview as an example because it pushed our competence to the limits. During most interviews in this series, there developed a conversational atmosphere that allowed the interviewees to go beyond the present decision-making pressures of the day to day business in the organisation. The dialogue with us enabled them to think about the challenges they faced in their job as staff council members, as well as the changes of their role in view of the employee's involvement in the introduction of new technologies. However, in the interview with Mr. Meister it proved difficult to cover these topics whilst maintaining empathy during the discussion. It left me with the feeling of a mismatched encounter which led to an unusual degree of doubt about myself. [6]

This unsuccessful encounter begins with the fact that Mr. Meister only finds out through us on the day of the interview, that he has not been invited to the focus group with the other staff council members, leaving him feeling rejected. Mr. Meister was not invited to the focus group as he along with some other members were suppose to take part in an in-depth interview rather than in a focus group. This misunderstanding is based on unclear information from our contact person in the council. We get the impression that he feels rejected, and he voices the fear that we will use the council members' point of views against one another. Herewith, we have possibly created a situation often experienced in the staff council in the context of political power games, which leaves the staff council very suspicious of all situations involving 'singling-out' of certain members. Arriving punctually for the interview, Mr. Meister, in marked contrast to the other interviewees, expresses his discontent by taking a seat at the long table, which is furthest away from us. Having established this spatial distance in the setting, he informs us firmly and decisively that he only has an hour and will be leaving punctually (it in fact had been announced that the interview could last from 1-11/2 hours). Mr. Meister frowns as he sees the audio tape and microphone, 'this had not been mentioned' 'had he known he would have requested to see the questions beforehand'. It could be said that up to this point, both, Mr. Meister as well as the researchers were suffering from the fact that our contact person in the

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6   The theme-centred interview is based on the guidelines for the implementation and analysis of the theme-centred group discussion developed by LEITHÄUSER and VOLMERG (1979, 1988). Also see LÖCHEL (1997, pp.53ff) and SCHORN (2000).

council had failed to appropriately inform Mr. Meister of the proceedings (as described in the project description which was previously provided) and to obtain a proper consent from her colleagues. Therefore we dispensed with our usual consultation concerning the theme and the research framework of the interview, partly because we were glad to have been relieved of this time consuming duty, and partly because our contact person in the council vehemently declared this consultation as unnecessary and we feared that any further action on our part would be seen as an offence. In any case, because of the recording instruments Mr. Meister is once again faced with a situation he finds uncomfortable, and we do not feel anymore comfortable than Mr. Meister does. [7]

We describe the purpose of the recording and want to approach the content of our project by asking in a friendly manner: "You have received the summary description of our project?" He retorts a short and decisive "No!" Well, so we try again. We had been informed that Mr. Meister is the technical expert in the staff association, so I ask: "We heard that you are responsible for all the IT and technical questions". Again he answers in a dry manner: "that's wrong". Only a few minutes have gone by, yet I feel that I am getting stuck in a hopeless situation. Mr. Meister seems to detect an irritation spreading on our side and makes the following offer: "perhaps I should tell you a little about myself so that you are more oriented". We readily accept this offer as it frees us from our embarrassment, but viewed scenically this offer can also be understood as 'it is not you who will tell me what I have and who I am. I will do this. If anyone is giving directions here, then it is me.' [8]

It does not cross his mind to introduce himself. He first wants to establish his position towards us: "first of all, it would be of interest to me to know what you do, when you are not working on research projects for the university. Do you have a post as a Ph.D. student or are you a lecturer?" Obviously our answer does not enable him to have a clear picture of us and he broaches the topic again by asking whether we have a full-time contract. I get the impression that it is not only through the perspective of a man constantly occupied with working contracts that he is interested in our working contracts in an institution such as the university, but that the interest lies more in trying to rank us: are we (only) Ph.D. students, have we only got a time-limited contract, perhaps even only a part-time job, or are we 'whole' scientists, to be taken seriously? [9]

At this point, I can not stop myself from explaining that I already have a PhD and have a full-time contract, whereas I can not bring myself to mention that it is time-limited (after all, a comfortable 6 years). [10]

The strange ambivalence that has accompanied the initial moments of the interview pervades his next statement: "Then you must consider yourself an extremely happy person amongst your kind. I have a few social scientists as acquaintances who are all either unemployed or have gone through an occupational retraining, as they had no choice: only limited working contracts in universities, in the public administration sector, also a few psychologists. They are often unemployed or have other jobs". [11]

I am well aware of the difficulties social scientists face in the job market. Yet, his statement does not lead me to count myself as one of those "really happy people". Instead, I get a strange guilty feeling; as though I was faced with the question of whether I really deserved not to belong to those people who have precarious working contracts. I suspect him to be envious, and this registers a feeling of rivalry in me. Envy in the sense that Mr. Meister realises that in addition to holding an academic title, I also have a contract for a full time position. Whilst Mr. Meister gains confidence, I feel increasingly devalued and do not feel respected in my professional independence, after all, one knows people like me, and has several in one's group of acquaintances. He returns to his offer of telling us more about himself by listing numerous important activities and stages that have marked his career in the firm: he had "worked through the entire breadth of data processing", "developed IT-systems myself", "done investigations of organisations", "introduced numerous software", "done very intensively" this, "very actively" that, "developed things anew" and "reorganised", "often been in charge of" etc. Mr. Meister concludes with the same ambiguous message that irritated us since the start, that he was "in fact the wrong contact person for us", that he could nevertheless "tell us a couple of things about our topic" as he is "considered very competent in the field". [12]

A glance at the time shows me that one quarter of the hour at our disposition has gone by. After a short break Mr. Meister says: "Well then, ask your questions". This request leads the way to another failed sequence: contrary to his expectation of a research interview we do not begin with preconceived questions but, as we are interested in an introductory narration satiated with details, we start with a relatively open question about the organisational consequences of the introduction of the new technical devices from the point of view of the staff council, and what he experienced in regards to the participation of the employees. In retrospect, looking at the progression of the dialogue so far, we can only wonder at our inflexibility and failure in adapting our interview-program to the situation. We obviously felt (put) under so much pressure, neither did we quickly organise ourselves, nor did we anticipate the 'disaster' we could slip into with our question. Whilst our previous interview partners answered our introductory questions in a multifaceted way, here, the Ping-Pong game carried on: "So I could talk through an entire cassette. I could give you a half-hour speech on this topic. I believe we won't get far this way. You have to ask more precise questions as I've only got an hour. At 14:00 I have my next appointment. Really this is of no use!" Looking back at this now I can see this also (!) as a bid for precision and I wonder whether considering the complexity of the topic, our open questions did not simply create difficulties for him; but back then I felt like a silly little boy who had been reprimanded. And whilst I search for words to possibly try anew, he already continues: "I can really, as I am also involved in a research project, and have a leading role in it, a project I have initiated myself, which is concerned with exactly these types of questions. Therefore I could really say a lot about this. There are people such as yourself, sitting in the firm for a period of two years watching all the proceedings, according to a method, which we have thought about before hand, how it could be changed for the better ...". Again I feel a clear devaluation and rivalry. I feel rivalry not only when he says

that he is in fact also an expert, and researching "such questions", but also in that he obstinately rejects our way of leading the interview. I feel devalued in the declaration that he has "people such as yourself" working for him, who furthermore do not just pop by for an interview, but who are "sitting in the firm for a period of two years" and watch everything properly and in detail. [13]

I decide to change my strategy now and leave out questions which I had originally planned on asking. The interview changes tendency at this point; after a few more failed attempts and despite our effort for more concrete and precise questioning (he then prefers not to say anything wrong to everything which he believes he does not know precisely and surely), I openly admit being at a loss: "I have also just thought: what can we ask you which is of relevance. I find it difficult to find that out". After this Mr. Meister tells us about his store of knowledge and experience mentioned at the beginning and portrays some conflictual episodes and 'turning points', so that we finally leave quite satisfied with the contents of our tape. [14]

3. The Postscript, the Reflection in the Team, and the Research Supervision

Once the interview is completed, our next methodical step is to compile a postscript, in which everything which has attracted our attention is noted down from the moment we met the interviewee to the moment he leaves: things about the interview situation and relationship to the interviewee, and especially about ourselves. We pay particular attention to the feelings, irritations, fantasies, and bodily sensations, interpretations and thoughts, which we had not expressed during the interview. Herewith, a first attempt is made in the direction of the analysis of the material, which we try to see in a more differentiated way through the discussions within the research team. The research supervision following this step gives a new view point on the material. The supervision differentiates itself from the thinking done within the research team, because it is a methodically controlled setting in which we can portray the events of the interview to an experienced and a supportive supervisor. This setting allows the recognition and understanding of the emerging scenic reproductions of the dynamics of the interview. Particular importance is given to the disclosure of themes, and to the configurations of relationships that are excluded from the content of the narration, and from the manifest occurrences of the interactions. This means that during the process of interpretation, one must pay particular attention to a type of perception that leads to more focussing and therefore reducing complexity. The over-determination of the material under consideration[7] in the context of the research question can only be managed in a productive manner, if the open and free-floating attention given to latent processes[8] is withdrawn in the course of the

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7   The term over-determination originally comes from FREUD and expresses the fact that both the interview text created within a social interaction, and the registered scenic information point to numerous determinating factors (see LAPLANCHE and PONTALIS 1972, pp.546ff).

8   This dual perception is based on STERBA's (1934) therapeutic self-schism (ICH-SPALTUNG), as well as on BION's model of the "Binocular Vision (see KREJCI 1999). Without declaring it as a criteria for exclusion, a personal methodological (e.g. therapeutic) self-experience is a good precondition, not only for the understanding of the themes and the inter-relationship in the

analysis in order to come to a final interpretation which only concerns the research theme. This concretely means that despite the possible presence of a quantity of usable clinical material, we have to ignore both the conspicuous traits of character of the interviewees, and the personal peculiarities of the interviewer that emerge in every research encounter, at least in so far that it would exceed the professional reflection of the role of the interview. The fundamental attitude practised in Balint Groups[9], serves us well here: everything happening in the relational-space of the interview is in relation to the theme of research. It is the methodical duty and difficulty of the interpretation to find and represent this relation in a comprehensible and plausible way. [15]

4. The Reduction of the Relational Space and the Loss of Personal Freedom and Flexibility

The postscript established after the interview with Mr. Meister helped me to get 'rid' of the feelings I had been sitting on since, and during the interview which I had endeavoured to lead in a tolerably professional way in order to get the information for which we had arranged this interview. In that sense, the postscript is always also a container in written form for the feelings of transference and counter-transference present in an interview, and which the interviewer at the time of the interview keeps within himself, in other words, feelings which were not acted out.[10] By writing it down I could get rid of all the anger the interview had caused, as well as the feelings of rejection, reprudiation, degradation and the questioning of my competence I had experienced with Mr. Meister (and which I remembered in a milder form when listening to the tape for corrections of the transcript). Thoughts such as "find a rescue boat", "don't drown" are noted in the postscript as reminders. It was seldom, that in an interview I was "happy that the interview was over". I took a deep breath as Mr. Meister walked out of the room. [16]

That which preoccupied us in the team discussion as well as in the supervision, was what had had been experienced in the relationship as the exclusion of a third; the reduction of a triangular relational-space to a closed dyadic relational-level. Not only had it been difficult to combine both Mr. Meister's as well as our expectation of an interview (to make a little space for ourselves) but also to create a space in which Mr. Meister's thematic outlook on the introduction of technique, his involvement, and works council duties could be taken into consideration and discussed. As well as this, the room for action between my colleague and I was nearly lost. While we usually have no problems taking each other into

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interview, but also to shape these actively and at the same time to be aware of the latent (unconscious) events, and ones own affects and fantasies.

9   According to Balint Group principles, the (unconscious) group processes amongst the members, and between the members and the group leader are in the service of the case study, therefore are used to understand the case discussed and are not to be used by the members as self-experience (see ARGELANDER 1972).

10 This stance of the interviewer concerning his own affects as well as the affects and projections of the person being questioned is similar to that of the psychodynamically trained counsellor. Both are receptecals for these affects, both endure them, and use them as instruments for further understanding. The difference being that it is not part of the research interview to use this understanding for directed intervention, or to offer this understanding for further processes (see TIETEL 2000).

consideration, and taking turns in leading the interview herewith creating a triangular constellation, in this interview I fought to have the threads in my own hands—and as far as that succeeded to keep them in my hands. From time to time I fought for my standing as the lonesome rider; the female researcher hardly got a word in, and was excluded from the rivalry of the men.[11] In the relational-space of this interview it was almost impossible for those speaking about a topic to develop something together, to create something new through the interview. On the contrary, comparable to BION's rule, that there exists two possible reactions to unfamiliar situations, namely one being: "here is something I don't understand—I have to find out about it", the other being: "Here is something I don't understand—I have to kill it" (cited in WELLENDORF 1995, p.253), one can say that in this interview all the thematic and relational behaviour which was open, unfamiliar, undefined, and not based on hard facts was excluded and removed. [17]

As emerged from the work done in the supervision, the blatant lack of a common room for action on the inter-subjective level of the research relation as well as on the level of the research theme corresponds on the intra-subjective level to the loss of my own inner room for action and the flexibility of my thoughts. I lost to a great extent the skill to distance myself and to keep a little inner space within myself so as to understand what was happening in the interview, and herewith, free myself of my restricting impressions. I obviously identified so much with the projections and transferences (projective-identifications, see OGDEN 1988) of my vis-à-vis that as in SCHOENHALS' (1993, p.199) description of the "not-thinking" therapist I became a "not-thinking" interviewer.[12] This subjective experience can be seen as a further proof of the difficulty of creating, and maintaining a triangular relational space and a thematic space in an interview. [18]

The realisation, to which extent the relational space of this interview was shaped into a sort of 'not-space', or even a 'negative-space', in which my/our efforts for a dialogue and joint attention to the theme were destroyed (and I was also robbed of the greater part of my thinking-space), permits a new perspective on the events of the relationship in the initial phase of the interview. While I first thought the problem was in the rivalry between Mr. Meister and me, now I see that behind the theme of competition there emerges a further theme fundamental for the relation in the interview as well as the research-question. The obvious (manifest) theme of rivalry covers the problem which is only scenically perceivable: that there is apparently no room for action, no space for experience as well as no acknowledgement of the differentiation between the actors, in which something (always potentially productive) unforeseen could take place. It is now clearer (in the described interview-sequence) that the staff council on one hand and the researchers on the other, both with different background and knowledge, can

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11 It should be touched upon here that a similar relationship constellation was established in the supervision and was discussed there. In the supervision we also discussed the fact that we started the interview with Mr. Meister on the base of an exclusion when we did not allow him to participate in the group discussion with his colleagues.

12 From this another function of the supervision becomes apparent: it can be a place in which one's own emotional enmeshments and cognitive entanglements which get established in a research relationship can be solved. Thus a reflective distance and more room for thought can be gained.

hardly agree on a topic for which both associate different things. It also becomes visible how little the relational space of the interview is used with curiosity and tolerance, in order to work on and translate reciprocally the thematic and cultural peculiarities. The space for the possible intercultural encounter in the relational-space of the interview, which MORGENTHALER summarises brilliantly in the sentence: "look, I am a foreigner", is constantly annihilated in favour of preferring what is familiar. During the interview, Mr. Meister made a point to let the researchers know that he was familiar with the hierarchy involved in academia and the struggles social scientists face in getting 'real' jobs. In such a case it can only and must be decided who is the better amongst the equals and who has control over the situation. [19]

Finally, it should be indicated that through this interview we did not only get a direct impression of the distrust permeating the culture of this firm, but through the scenic interpretation of the usage of the relational-space in the interview with Mr. Meister, we also sharpened our perception of specific behaviours and position of the work council concerning the introduction of new technology especially in view of the involvement of the workers who are directly being affected by it. Considering that this technology can produce a huge amount of information the staff council was trying—through concrete and precise directives—to force the employer into a very narrow range of action which according to us, did not only involve a counterproductive fixation and restriction of the room for action for the employees, but also constrained the staff-council's room for action. Especially in view of the employees' participation, we became aware through the scenic events described above, how little room for action and decision making the involved employees engaged in the introduction of the new technology had, for what concerned them technically and organisationally. In a few specific critical points of the introductory processes, the staff council annulled the triadic relationship between the management, staff council, and participants. It used a narrow interpretation of the legal co-determination and herewith limited the room for political negotiation to the classical dichotomy of employer and employee representatives and left a little space for opening a different perspective for a third group of actors, and for a learning process encompassing the entire organisation. [20]

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