Participatory action research and intersectionality: a critical dialogical reflection of a study with older adults

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Maaike Muntinga, Elena Bendien, Tineke Abma and Barbara Groot

Abstract

Purpose – *Researchers who work in partnership with older adults in participatory studies often experience various advantages, but also complex ethical questions or even encounter obstacles during the research process. This paper aims to provide insights into the value of an intersectional lens in participatory research to understand how power plays out within a mixed research team of academic and community co-researchers.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Four academic researchers reflected in a case-study approach in a dialogical way on two critical case examples with the most learning potential by written dialogical and via face-to-face meetings in duos or trios. This study used an intersectionality-informed analysis.*

Findings – *This study shows that the intersectional lens helped the authors to understand the interactions of key players in the study and their different social locations. Intersections of age, gender, ethnicity/class and professional status stood out as categories in conflict. In hindsight, forms of privilege and oppression became more apparent. The authors also understood that they reproduced traditional power dynamics within the group of co-researchers and between academic and community co-researchers that did not match their mission for horizontal relations. This study showed that academics, although they wanted to work toward social inclusion and equality, were bystanders and people who reproduced power relations at several crucial moments. This was disempowering for certain older individuals and social groups and marginalized their voices and interests.*

Originality/value – *Till now, not many scholars wrote in-depth about race- and age-related tensions in partnerships in participatory action research or related approaches, especially not about tensions in research with older people.*

Keywords *Intersectionality, Reflexivity, Older adults, Participatory action research, Community-based participatory research, Age-friendly*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

Worldwide, challenges in welfare systems around active and healthy aging demand new solutions. Policymakers emphasize the need for bottom-up approaches in care practice, community work and research to ensure the sustainability of positive changes and create an age-friendly community in which older adults play an active role (Lui *et al.*, 2009). Participatory approaches, such as participatory action research (PAR), contribute to developing co-creation in policy and practice (Abma *et al.*, 2017). PAR involves those whose lives or work are linked to the research topic in the full research cycle (Abma *et al.*, 2019). In research on aging, PAR is an up-and-coming research paradigm used by researchers committed to studies driven by the lived realities and needs of older people themselves (Barnes *et al.*, 2012). Aiming to bring about some form of collaborative change or action, PAR is promising because it creates space for democratic decision-making, mutual learning and collective action (Corrado *et al.*, 2020). Reviews have shown that the

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group of PAR scholars who work with older people in this way is relatively small and that older persons themselves are often not fully engaged in the research (James and Buffel, 2022).

Central to PAR are empowerment and egalitarian partnerships in research teams: all members, including older people, academic researchers and professionals in the institutional environment in which the study takes place, are considered co-researchers (Bindels *et al.*, 2014), and all are understood to contribute different forms of knowledge, expertise and skills. The redistribution of power by academic co-researchers is critical to this approach. Still, in everyday practice, sharing power and working in an egalitarian way are complex: PAR does not take place in a vacuum but is often embedded within hierarchical institutions, in which academic researchers have been socialized. Moreover, PAR researchers work on issues in the same sociopolitical environments that (re)produced those issues in the first place. Hence, co-researchers often face complex ethical questions and encounter obstacles during the participatory research process (Groot-Sluijsmans, 2021; Mikesell *et al.*, 2013). Some of these "everyday ethical issues" (Walker, 2007) concern power-related complexities (Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019). Everyday ethical issues are often not immediately felt or seen. Nonetheless, they are essential and require attention in the research process. However, so far, only a small number of scholars have shared their in-depth ethical reflections on the complexities of daily participatory research practice (Lenette *et al.*, 2019). Lately, participatory researchers have shared their everyday ethical issues in studies with older adults (Bendien *et al.*, 2022, 2023; Brannelly and Barnes, 2022; Buffel, 2018; Groot and Abma, 2018; Hand *et al.*, 2019). We embrace this culture of sharing ethical issues in PAR studies because we can learn from challenging situations in the past.

An analysis of power, therefore, helps identify and answer ethical questions and aid in transformative practice of PAR. One theoretical and methodological lens often used to unfold complexities related to power and inequality is intersectionality (Calasanti, 2010; Crenshaw, 2017; Hankivsky, 2014). Grounded in feminist and anti-racist politics, intersectionality assumes that various forms of oppression (based on gender, sex, race/ethnicity, disability, age and class) are connected and mutually constitutive. An intersectional lens could expose different modes of power relations in PAR processes and enable researchers to analyze how the social identities of key players in a research process shape group interactions and participant experiences. Although intersectionality is an emerging framework in PAR (Bonu, 2022), few researchers have discussed it in depth (Fine *et al.*, 2021; Sallah, 2014; Schurr and Segebart, 2012), and it has rarely been used in PAR ageing research (Yoshizaki-Gibbons, 2023).

In this article, we share our intersectionality-informed analysis of the power dynamics that impacted a mixed research team of academic and community co-researchers during a PAR study with older people in a Dutch neighborhood. Zooming in on two turning point moments, we aim to retrospectively learn from the intersectional complexities of the research situations that we had previously overlooked. We hope to demonstrate the added value of an intersectional analysis when untangling everyday ethical tensions in PAR. Moreover, this article will demonstrate how a case study approach of ethical dilemmas and dialogue with peers may help to unpack ethical tensions related to the aspects of social identity that researchers experience.

Methods

Context

The context of this study was an age-friendly community project in a large city in The Netherlands. The project started in 2016 as a result of the city embracing the "Age-Friendly City" label of the World Health Organization in 2015. We started a PAR study with two co-research groups in two different suburbs. We focused on one of the most aging suburbs in

the city. The study aimed to examine the age-friendliness of the suburb from the perspective of older adults living there. Non-academic co-researchers, older adults who lived in this particular suburb, were involved in setting the research goals and questions, the methods of data gathering, analysis and dissemination of the results, and the actions resulting from the study. The aim of the PAR process was to foster a shared imagination of what "age-friendly" might look like for the neighborhood, to formulate common goals and concrete steps toward this aim and to implement age-friendly measure where possible. Hence, the process itself was also one of collaborative learning, reflection, and action.

Older adults as community co-researchers

While recruiting community members as co-researchers, we had already noticed that most applications came from highly educated white residents, even though the neighborhood was home to older people of various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. We, three female, white academic co-researchers, wanted to recruit as diverse a group of older adults as possible for the research team. However, this was challenging in practice. Eventually, we brought together a core team of 11 community co-researchers, and, during the project, four community co-researchers joined the group temporarily. See Table 1 for the characteristics of the team of community and academic co-researchers that we consider to be helpful for the following intersectionality-informed analysis.

Process of the participatory action research study

During the study period 2016–2017, we met once every two weeks ($n = 22$ moments, 120 min). During these meetings we discussed sampling strategies, shared tips about arranging and holding interviews and prepared the analysis of the generated data. Firstly, we discussed the topic of age friendliness within the research group to gather the insights of the group members and to develop a topic list for the interviews that would be held within the community. We then discussed the recruitment strategies and decided to combine purposeful sampling, in which we tried to select information-rich cases and snowball sampling (Thorogood and Green, 2018). After we agreed on methodology, the community co-researchers conducted individual or duo interviews ($n = 40$) with older adults in their homes or at the community center. The community and academic co-researchers also interviewed key persons in the suburb about collaboration in the neighborhood. The data analysis consisted of two intertwined processes:

1. a thematic analysis by academic co-researchers with the help of several community co-researchers in analysis sessions (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and
2. a creative collaborative hermeneutic analysis (van Lieshout and Cardiff, 2011) involving all the co-researchers.

The process was emergent, and a substantial amount of learning and action had already taken place within this process.

Moreover, we organized a dialogue session to validate the analysis with older neighborhood residents, representatives of formal and informal organizations, municipality officers and all the co-researchers of our team ($n = 58$). Finally, we prepared a report that contained narratives, photographs, visuals and a list of recommendations to increase the age-friendliness of the suburb. To ensure administrative and political support for the project, we invited the city councilor to attend meetings after six and 18 months and at the end of the study period. During those meetings, we asked the counselor for a partnership after the study period. At the end of the process, the municipality signed a partnership agreement developed by the co-researchers to continue the process and collaborate on the recommendations in the report. Now, in 2023, the group is still active, working to increase the age-friendliness of its community.

Table 1

Role in the study	*Pseudonym in this article*	*Gender*	*Age category*	*Ethnicity*	*Marital status and familya/sexuality*	*Eductional and work experiencea*
Community co-researcher	Mr Kenneth	Male	60–75	Black, Dutch with non-western migration background	Unknown	Unknown
	Mr Robert	Male	75–85	White and Dutch	Married with grown up children	University degree, retired from high-income/high status job
	Mr Henk	Male	85+	White and Dutch	Single, widowed with grown up child	
	Mr Paul	Male	75–85	White and Dutch	Married, children unknown	
	Mr Frank	Male	60–75	White with Czech migration background	Single	
	Ms Muriel	Female	60–75	Of color, Dutch with a non-Western migration background	Living apart together	Ex-university student, retired
	Ms Marianne	Female	60–75	White and Dutch	Same gender partnership, not married	Higher education, positions with responsibility
	Ms Petra	Female	60–75	White and Dutch	Married with grown up children	
	Ms Inge	Female	60–75	White and Dutch	Unknown	
	Ms Nicole	Female	75–85	White and Dutch	Married with grown up children	Unknown
	Ms Anita	Female	Unknown	White and Dutch	Unknown	Unknown
	Mr Wim (stepped in later and left after two sessions)	Male	60–75	White and Dutch	Unknown	Academic level, positions with responsibility
	Ms Karin (left the group after first meeting)	Female		White and Dutch	Unknown	Academic level, positions with responsibility
Academic co-researcher	Ms Patricia	Female	30–60	White and Dutch	Married with children	Academic level, researcher
	Ms Clara	Female	30–60	White, immigrant, non-European	Separated with child	Academic level, researcher
	Ms Carmen	Female	30–60	White and Dutch	Married same sex	Academic level, researcher
	Ms Obelia	Female	30–60	White and Dutch	Married with children	Academic level, professor

Note: [a] This information is based on remembrance of the stories people told themselves, not checked with the persons themselves
Source: Table by author

Dialogical reflections on case descriptions

Reflexivity, the extent to which PAR researchers acknowledge self-location, is considered an important quality indicator in PAR processes. Bradbury *et al.* (2019, p. 17) stated that reflective researchers "take a personal, involved and self-critical stance as reflected in clarity about their role in the action research process, clarity about the context in which the research takes place, and clarity about what led to their involvement in this research". The authors of this article are at this moment four senior researchers; three of them were academic co-researchers of the age-friendly community study and relative novices in PAR at the time. As a professor, one was responsible for the overall study design of the PAR study but was a relative outsider to the relational research process with the community co-researchers. See more details of our background in Table 1.

In 2016–2017, the three academic co-researchers had weekly reflective conversations about the PAR process. At that time, we did not log these conversations and did not write down experiences that were unrelated to the logistical or methodological part of the research. However, years later, we still felt the urgency to reflect on several cases in the study process, during which the academic co-researchers experienced complex everyday ethical issues. Between 2016 and 2022, all of us learned about intersectionality, applied it as a theoretical and methodological lens in our work and were inspired by its usefulness as a framework in which to explore, expose and analyze disparities and their structural drivers in health research (Muntinga *et al.*, 2016; Stuij *et al.*, 2020).

For this article, the second and last authors selected two critical case examples with the most learning potential (Abma and Stake, 2001). The first author confirmed that those moments were the most interesting for reflection and inserted its perspective in the written examples. The first, second and last authors wrote their perspective on the three case examples, then the third author added her perspective. From there, we reflected on that material in a written dialogical way, inspired by another parallel dialogical reflection (Groot *et al.*, 2023), by sending the material to each other in circles. During this process, we also held telephone calls about the text and case, mostly involving two of us ($n = 7$, mostly >30 min), informal gatherings ($n = 3$, >60 min) and a meeting with all of us ($n = 1$, 90 min). In these informal dialogical reflections, we reflected on our identities, those of the people involved and the possible power dynamics through an intersectional lens. The dialogical reflection took six months.

Results

In this section, we present two cases, followed by an analysis of the dialogical reflections of the team members.

Case study I: group dynamic, tolerance and diversity

We set up the initial meeting with 12 potential community co-researchers. The aim of the first meeting was to enable us to become acquainted with each other and share the basic idea of the project. Before this meeting, we had individual meetings with co-researchers at the place they preferred. We believed it was crucial to get to know each of the co-researchers personally and establish a rapport of trust. Mr Jozsef, Mr Kenneth and Ms Muriel (pseudonyms) were people with a first- or second-generation migration background. Jozsef was white European, but Kenneth and Muriel were of color of non-European ancestry. We were keen to keep them all in the PAR team because we wanted a diverse group. After the initial meeting, ten neighborhood residents decided to participate as community co-researchers, including Jozsef, Kenneth and Muriel.

The following meetings with the core group occurred either in the community center or at the university, close to the neighborhood. During the first meetings, the co-researchers

tested each other, looking for similarities in opinions and forming alliances. We created room for a conversation, which the group's most outspoken members quickly occupied. As academic co-researchers, we sought ways to prevent members from leaving the group allowing the co-researchers space and time to become a group and start the actual research.

During the second meeting, the atmosphere had become more tense, which is not unusual at that PAR stage (Bendien *et al.*, 2023). For this meeting, Robert, a white, male co-researcher, who had been taking up quite some space in the conversations, interrupted Kenneth several times. At one point, when discussing email etiquette, Robert made it clear that he was not at all pleased by the emails Kenneth had sent to the group after email addresses had been shared the previous meeting – some members had since been exchanging documents and stories about the neighborhood, carbon copying everyone. A brief, collective silence followed Robert's words. No one, including us, spoke up to either agree with Robert or stand up for Kenneth. Although, as academic co-researchers, we were supposed to facilitate communication within the group, at that moment, we froze and did not intervene. Still determining what was happening, and what we should do, we understood that the way in which Robert gave Kenneth feedback was not pleasant. However, we wondered, was such strife not part of the natural group process and thus the whole group's responsibility? We did not think we were implicated. We remained silent and let it go. The next day, we received an email from Kenneth, informing us he had decided to quit the project.

Dialogical reflections on this case. When analyzing this case, we used intersectionality to peel back the layers of social difference between Robert, Kenneth, ourselves and the others in the room. We observed that accounting for the structural positions of everyone involved, and thus for the power dynamics underlying the group dynamics, helped us to gain a deeper understanding of what may have been tangled up in the interaction between the two men during the meeting, what could explain the collective silence of the other team members and how this could have eventuated in Kenneth discontinuing his participation.

We understood the events leading up to Kenneth quitting the project to be informed by intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, class and ability. First, both men had immediately assumed a dominant position within the group. Kenneth and Robert had been active as volunteers or community researchers before; their intention when deciding to participate had been to exercise some influence over how things were done in the neighborhood, and they had clear ideas for change. Although they were not the only ones with a strong vision, as able-bodied men who acted in a normatively masculine way they often spoke first at the expense of others. They were not challenged by any other male group members, who were older, had a mobility impairment and a hearing disability, or were of a non-native background. The other men often needed active encouragement to contribute their perspective to the conversation, and in some cases they sought us out after the meeting to make their point. The social status and identity differences allowed for a hegemonic-subordinate hierarchy among the male participants that favored Robert and Kenneth.

At the same time, the relationship between Robert and Kenneth was highly ethnicized and classed. This structural dynamic showed up in, for instance, the language that was used. Robert, speaking with a posh accent and embodying the white-Dutch enlightenment ideal of self-control and reason, weaponized his mastery of boardroom language against Kenneth, who spoke with a "foreign" accent, used emotionally rich language and did not use abstract terminology. In the context of The Netherlands, the cultural message was clear: the native Dutchman knew how things should be done, and the man with a foreign background did not. Robert made himself appear capable and logical to the rest of the group, while framing Kenneth as irresponsible and unfit as a leader. Our silence in that moment – and thus our complicity – revealed our social locations. As white, high-educated women, we were socialized to accept and internalize the dominant status of white men,

especially older white men. In addition, we had grown up in a world in which hegemonic whiteness is the norm, and where white people and systems get away with inflicting violence upon black bodies, ideas and lives. Simply put, witnessing Robert degrade Kenneth might not have stood out for us as out of the ordinary. Moreover, our privilege allowed us to ignore the impact of racism; excusing ourselves from being responsible for the injustice against Kenneth, we did not need to acknowledge nor respond to it (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2023). Along with the other (white) women in the group, we remained silent.

The intersection of ethnicity, educational level, gender and age formed a knot that Kenneth could not untie alone. As facilitators who were supposed to care for all the participants, we left him and the group to deal with it on their own. As a result, power was exercised by a white, heterosexual, highly educated Dutch male at the expense of the other people in the group with marginalized identities. This power was never made explicit or questioned. However, it did create unequal relationships between the participants, with practical consequences. The three academic researchers actively, albeit inadvertently, were complicit in this dynamic. We did not know what to do and lacked the tools to analyze the situation. As a result, we did not choose to question how Robert exercised his unchecked privilege. The only person who did was a person of color when he withdrew from the group.

Case study II: getting to the core vs embracing diversity

We started the final data analysis after ten months and 16 research team meetings. The co-researchers experienced the thematic analysis as too challenging. Although they tried their best, they were exhausted by the tedious work of reading and coding dozens of pages of transcribed interviews. After several analytical sessions, two of us academic co-researchers took over and finished the coding. After three sessions, combining our codes with the findings of the creative analysis, we developed five overarching themes. We had significantly condensed the list of codes and topics, and presented the outcomes of our analysis to the team. The co-researchers seemed satisfied at first, except for Robert, who during the meeting explicitly expressed his dissatisfaction with the results. Later that week he also emailed us about it, explaining that he thought the summary was too minimalist. Robert, (now) a self-proclaimed and unchallenged group leader, had imagined many more themes and recommendations for the neighborhood. As academic co-researchers, Robert's discontent made us wonder whether we had done the right thing to aggregate the data, and if it had been a good idea to present the findings as concisely and, perhaps, too academically. In contrast to Robert's outspokenness, the other group members remained silent about the issue. Some quietly agreed with Robert, but most did not react to the new controversy. They abstained from aligning either with Robert or with us.

In the end, with the group, we decided to restructure the data by following the co-researchers' initial suggestions. This exercise eventually led to a report with 56 recommendations of varying importance. Most co-researchers said they were delighted with this list. However, one of us remembers feeling frustrated about how things had played out. Why, she wondered, did the group members not want to choose to only report the most important recommendations? The recommendations surely did not have equal weight in her opinion, but she also observed that the group members were invested in their recommendations regardless of their importance in the bigger picture. Perhaps, she thought, the long list is some concession, a fragile equilibrium in which power is allocated equally to everyone in the shape of a recommendation: if X's recommendation remains on the list, than Y's recommendation also has to remain. However, although with the various individual interests of the co-researchers at stake it was not easy to proceed, in the end all co-researchers took ownership of the 56 recommendations.

Dialogical reflections on this case. The second case focuses on the power relations between the academic and community co-researchers on the one hand and the power play within the group on the other. The conflict spirals around the intersection between age(-ing),

professional status, and gender. Three female researchers, younger than the co-researchers and who represented the official research facility, first came into opposition with an older male self-appointed group leader, retired but active anyway. The researchers were driven by deadlines and efficiency motives and were somewhat rushed in the analysis phase. They included the collaborative analysis in the report. This resulted in the fact that they owned the results, which did not contribute to the ownership of the data and insights of the community co-researchers. Principles of empowerment and transformation of PAR were at stake. Besides, it was felt that Robert could not allow this.

The group first took a position of neutral observant, which meant that the status of the researchers outweighed their possible doubts and silenced them. Robert disagreed openly. He had a point on a content level and prepared his own list of results. He used his experience (age) and dominant position as a white male leader to secure his win. The group members shifted their position toward his point of view because that position gave them precisely what PAR promised to do: the ownership of the project and the power to decide what results would be relevant to the neighborhood. Many categories of difference are relevant in this case. The community researchers' experience (=age) outweighed their status and gender. Together, the community researchers showed the academic researchers, where the project went wrong: we relied too much on our status as knowers.

Besides the power dynamic between the researchers and the older co-researchers, a power dynamic was also unfolding within the group of older co-researchers. Robert protested against the researchers taking over the analysis, and, with him taking the lead, we saw how the hierarchy in the group was enacted. Robert gave the impression that he spoke on behalf of the whole group as if it were a homogeneous group and he had an overview of all their interests. But did he? His act of speaking up for the group also silenced the differences within the group. It may have been the case that particular interests and voices were silenced. The older women? Older people of color and with a migrant background? Older people who earned less income? Those who were less vital and possibly sick and disabled? Or people with another sexual orientation? In retrospect, we should have been more alert to the intersections of gender, race, class and disability within our group (Calasanti, 2010).

Furthermore, after Robert's intervention, a power game arose within the group in which everyone wanted to see their recommendation included in the final report for the municipality. In retrospect, we are now more aware of the need to determine who decides what does or does not appear on the list of recommendations. We might have intervened to prevent the reproduction of established interests and power relations.

Discussion

This study shows the importance of an intersectional lens and dialogical reflection in PAR. This lens helped us to understand the key players' interactions in the research and their different social locations. The ethical issues occurred at the intersections of the categories of age, gender, ethnicity, class, socioeconomic status, disability and professional status. In hindsight, we saw forms of privilege and oppression much more clearly. We also understood that we reproduced the traditional power dynamics among the co-researchers and between academic and community co-researchers, which did not match our mission for social justice, equality and horizontal relations. Often, reflexivity in research remains restricted to psychological inwardness, leading to inertness (the non-performativity of reflexivity). Using the intersectionality lens introduces the added value of intersectional reflexivity. Engaging in intersectional reflexivity allows self-reflexivity beyond individualized politics and could facilitate broad-based social change (Jones, 2010). This study showed that the academics, although they wanted to work toward social inclusion and equality, were bystanders and people who reproduced power relations at several crucial moments. This was disempowering for specific older individuals and social groups and marginalized

their voices and interests. We are still deliberating what would have happened in these cases if the academic co-researchers had been engaged in intersectional reflexivity before or during the study. What we did see is that critically analyzing these troublesome cases through a lens of intersectionality now, after many years, still had value for the researchers, enabling them to learn from the situations and to recognize and acknowledge the role of power and social inequality in the future (Verdonk, 2015).

Over the years, we have become more aware of our identity, privileges, ignorance, failings, and vulnerabilities. As researchers/authors, we are often a unilateral group. In this study, we were middle aged, female, white, highly educated, with gendered care responsibilities. We may have overlooked specific experiences and voices and recognized them only partly, for example, the tension between the two men in the first case example or not being aware of our own expert status. In the future, we would be more sensitive concerning whom we represent and how, start reciprocal collaborative relations with, for instance, older people with a migrant background, and give voice to marginalized groups. Intersectionality also leads to deconstruction of older people being a "vital" or "vulnerable" group. Social groups cannot be defined as homogeneous, oppressive or suppressed. Social inequalities and processes of power are more complex than that.

Only a few scholars have written in depth about race- and age-related tensions in partnerships in PAR. Some pleaded for a nuanced understanding of the complex partnerships in participatory research (Muhammad *et al.*, 2015; Wallerstein *et al.*, 2019). Others concluded that race- and age-related tensions could undermine efforts to build trust and collaboration in racially heterogeneous partnerships (Chandanabhumma *et al.*, 2023). Our study is one of the first PAR studies to have analyzed cases from all different angles of the intersectionality lens in studies with older people. Muhammad *et al.* (2015) advised seeking to include academic team members whose identities (i.e. gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and class) intersect with those of the community co-researchers. However, in participatory research with older adults, finding academic team members whose identities intersect can be difficult. Different means are required to deal with such ethical tensions as this article describes.

Finally, this article shows that a case study approach of ethical dilemmas and dialogue with peers can help unpack the ethical tensions researchers encounter. This paper shows that even a late reflection contributes to learning and can open the debate within the academic community. Sharing these stories required mutual trust and safety because sharing and reflecting can feel uncomfortable. Writing collaboratively with the community co-researchers was, for this subject, a step too far, although PAR-teams value collaborative writing about ethical issues around responsibilities and epistemic justice (Groot *et al.*, 2019). Based on our experience in this article, we propose focusing more on professionals' personal development and moral sensitivity through reflections and dialogue with peers.

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