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Participation: The Happiness Connection

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Participation: The Happiness Connection*

Chris Barker and Brian Martin

Abstract

Participation in decision-making has the potential to contribute to greater happiness. To explore this connection, we examine three areas: the family, the workplace and politics. In each of these areas, happiness research suggests that greater participation should increase happiness, most directly via the channels of personal relationships and helping others. There is some empirical research suggesting that participation contributes to happiness. It is useful to consider the connections between the three areas. In particular, examination of participation-happiness connections within families and workplaces can provide some insights for promoting a stronger connection at the level of politics.

KEYWORDS: happiness, participation, emotional democracy, families, work, citizenship

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Introduction

There is now a considerable body of empirical data concerning what kinds of activities give rise to happiness. In this paper we explore the relationship between findings from happiness research and social and political participation.

Philosophers across the ages have debated the meaning of the word happiness (McMahon, 2006). Rather than adding to that debate with a definition of happiness we rely on two approaches to the concept of happiness. Firstly, we use the word in the way that people do in ordinary language in the English-speaking world. Philosophically, we follow Wittgenstein in arguing that the meaning of the word happiness lies in its use. The study of happiness does not rely on defining the word in any absolute sense but rather engages in philosophy as the art of living (Dohmen, 2003). In that sense happiness is about well-being and flourishing. Secondly, we accept for our purposes here the self-assessments that subjects make in happiness research. What matters here is relative rankings rather than the meaning of happiness.

We begin by reviewing research on happiness. We then draw out the implications of this work for democracy and participation in the domains of personal relationships, work and citizenship. Most people spend the bulk of their lives with partners and families or at work, so happiness in those domains is central to overall happiness. If greater democracy in families or workplaces contributes to people's happiness, or vice versa, this would be of major significance. While few individuals spend long hours in the political process, everyone is affected by political decision-making, and the political arena is where issues of democracy have been most extensively discussed.

Research on Happiness

From the large body of research on happiness (e.g. Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Gilbert, 2006; Haidt, 2006; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Meyers & Diener, 1995; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Wallace & Shaprio, 2006), we focus here on factors most likely to be relevant to participation. It is useful to begin with things that usually do *not* have major effects on long-term happiness, including wealth, education, climate, race, and gender.

Contrary to popular belief, wealth is not crucial to happiness once basic material needs have been met (Frey et al., 2008). People's perceptions about money, particularly their feelings about relative wealth, are more significant in determining happiness than the amount of money they actually have. Furthermore, people who value money more than other goals are less satisfied with their incomes and their lives (Van Boven, 2005). People adapt to changes in their circumstances, such as income, climate and housing, so that after a while their happiness levels tend to revert to a personal "set point."

The most reliable way to change happiness levels over the long term is to change one's habitual behaviours and thoughts. The richer one's social world —

for example, strong ties to family and friends — the more likely one is to be happy. It is a consistent finding that happier people have stronger family and social networks. For example a survey (Diener & Seligman, 2004) lists relationships with children, spouses and family as the major source of happiness in respondents' lives. Happiness is built more through connections to other people than through individual achievement.

Happiness depends more on patterns of thinking than upon actual events. The implication is to deliberately cultivate particular ways of thinking, including fostering forgiveness and gratitude about the past, savouring the present moment, and looking to the future with hope and optimism. Happiness researchers (e.g., Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2002) suggest specific ways to do this.

Csikszentmihalyi (2002) recommends that people cultivate the condition of “flow” in which one is highly absorbed in a challenging activity. Flow emerges through concentration on a task that requires a degree of skill can be achieved, but not too easily. This gives a sense of control and effortless involvement, in which one's sense of self may vanish. Flow is a side effect of worthwhile action rather than the overt pursuit of pleasure.

Pursuing a good and meaningful life is a way to promote happiness (Seligman, 2002, 2011). This means using one's personal strengths in the service of something one values that is larger than oneself. This could be using a predisposition toward curiosity to carry out medical research that helps others or it could be deploying social skills to adeptly manage a business or a sports club. People have different strengths and varied values so what constitutes a “good and meaningful life” is context dependent. However, what is crucial and universal is that the good and meaningful life must be based on a person's own strengths and values. To be happy, people need to feel they are involved and not simply under the direction of others. Happiness studies suggest that helping others is major source of meaning and happiness. Thus, a well-directed search for happiness promotes altruism rather than the self absorption that is feared by some critics of happiness research (Ehrenreich, 2009).

There is solid evidence of a link between social participation and happiness. Phillips (1967) reports on a study demonstrating that self-reports of happiness are strongly related to the extent of social participation. That said, the direction of causality was not clearly established.

In sum, research shows that social connections and participation in events with others are crucial factors in promoting happiness. A requirement for democratic participation is having relationships with others. Thus we can plausibly argue that democratic participation ought to promote happiness. Further, since happiness research suggests that happier people are more altruistic and relate better to others, we can envisage a positive cycle in which participation promotes happiness that in turn furthers public participation. We can also argue that participation in social and political affairs provides at least some people with a meaningful life, which the literature suggests is the key to happiness.

In the next three sections, we address participation and happiness in three areas: the family, the workplace and politics. In each of these areas, we firstly outline ideas about and practices of participation, secondly make connections with happiness research and finally discuss relevant findings. In the conclusion, we comment on the value of addressing the participation-happiness connection at these three disparate levels.

Emotional democracy

Although participatory democracy is a concept associated with political processes, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) introduced it into the sphere of family and personal relationships with the idea of “emotional democracy.” Emotional democracy is concerned with the communication processes involved in the management of love relationships. In particular, it entails negotiating the conduct of personal interactions within a culture of moral equality.

A collision between love, family and personal freedom has been changing the character of contemporary relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The markers of these changes in all Western countries include historically high divorce figures, a sharp rise in informal or de facto marriages and an increasing number of people who live alone. In Australia, for example, the family as constituted by a couple and children forms only 36% of families, a figure less than half that just 25 years earlier. Over ten per cent of families with a child under 18 are now recombinant families and a third of all marriages now involve at least one person who was married before. The number of single-parent families rose from 7% in 1969 to 22% in 2003 (de Vaus, 2004).

For some observers this represents the “decline of the family,” which is held responsible for juvenile crime, eating disorders, depression, drug abuse and other social problems (Popenoe, 1996). Others argue that the “standard” two-parent family can itself be the site of violence and emotional disorders (Hite, 1994) and suggest that it is primarily parental conflict and poverty that account for difficulties rather than changes in the family per se (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Stacey, 1996).

The transformation of intimacy

A counterpoint to the “family-in-decline” thesis is Giddens’ (1992) description of an increasingly egalitarian private sphere. In his expression “emotional democracy,” “democracy” refers to participation in processes of personal negotiation with approximate equality of status and power, in a loose parallel to participatory democracy in the political sphere.

Because contemporary relationships are less able than those of the past to be held together simply by law or tradition, Giddens argues that the defining characteristics of sustainable families increasingly involve respect for personal autonomy, negotiation, trust, reciprocity and equality. According to Giddens,

contemporary relationships involve greater demands for participatory organisation and the negotiation of emotional concerns. In particular, women have challenged the traditional, taken-for-granted cultural practices of male control and increasingly expect equality within relationships. In that context, relationships of greater equality stand or fall by their own internal mechanisms rather than being anchored in external forms of control. Giddens calls these more self-supporting relations the “pure relationship.”

Paradoxically, then, the individuation process that is dissolving traditional family ties may also be encouraging greater emotional democracy because the fluid character of contemporary relationships necessitates negotiation and reciprocity. The processes of individuation and the decline of external control over the family mean that people now have to *justify* the continuation of relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This requires negotiation and emotional intelligence.

In short, modern relationships demand greater participation and negotiation, based on equality, if they are to survive. Giddens argues that while this is not the case for all relationships, it is the direction in which contemporary relationships are heading.

There is debate about the level of emotional democracy in contemporary societies. Carol Smart (1997) suggests that while Giddens’ argument has merit, it is heavily overstated and that the legal frameworks of marriage and child support impede the development of equality in relationships. Similarly, Jamieson (1999) argues that Giddens’ optimism is far-fetched. She suggests that while popular discourse supports the view that heterosexual couples are more equal and intimate, research points to the fact that personal life remains structured by gender inequalities. On the other hand Gross & Simons (2002) and Kinnear (2002) offer empirical evidence of greater equality in contemporary relationships. That said, the more significant point for our argument is that where greater emotional democracy does exist, happiness seems to follow.

Emotional democracy and happiness

Research suggests that emotional wellbeing, or happiness, is not simply a matter of family structure, since the “traditional” couple-plus-children model often proved to be a site of emotional neglect, but rather of the *quality* of the emotional relationships within the family (Hite, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Stacey, 1996).

Emotional democracy requires participants to develop the skills to perceive, understand, express and regulate emotion in themselves and others. Research into emotional intelligence in intimate relationships suggests that the ability to perceive and accurately recognise emotions, to understand and reason about emotions and to effectively regulate emotions are features of happier marriages (Fitness, 2001).

On the other side of the coin, a considerable body of research evidence (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Heavey et al., 1993) suggests that couples whose relationships are constituted by traditional unequal gender roles are more likely to separate and that conversely “Couples whose interactions are the reverse of these stereotyped roles experience increasing levels of satisfaction over time, presumably because they are able to avoid a vicious cycle of polarization and instead engage in more flexible and constructive problem solving.” (Heavey et al., 1993, p. 19).

Gross & Simons (2002) analysed over 3000 responses to a telephone survey of US English-speaking heterosexual adults. Their findings gave empirical support to the propositions that: (a) individuals in pure love relationships experience heightened feelings of autonomy; and (b) those in pure love relationships are happier with their partnerships. The quality of relationships is important not simply for couples but for their children. A great deal of psychological theory and empirical research argues that the quality of parenting is vital to human happiness (see for example Crowell & Treboux, 1995; Herman, 1992; Hite, 1994, Nussbaum, 2002). There is a very clear and apparently deterministic relationship between parenting and their children’s emotional health.

More than forty international studies have shown that a poor start in life increases the likelihood of poor physical and mental health, a disappointing record at school, low success in the job market, and greater involvement in crime ... in our highly mobile societies where families fragment, money is not the biggest driver in predicting social outcomes. Parenting is. (Deveson, 2003)

Barker (2007) shows clear correlations between the degree of emotional support men received in early family settings and (a) depression and drug abuse and (b) work success and relationship stability.

Thus more equal participation in family relationships promotes parental happiness, which furthers childhood happiness, which makes for better citizens, because happy people are more altruistic (Post, 2005; Seligman, 2002).

The traditional alternative to emotional democracy is a more unequal, authoritarian relationship. It is well known that this can be a site for abuse, exploitation and violence — all sources of unhappiness. Indeed, emotional democracy seems incompatible with serious, ongoing exploitation and abuse.

Worker participation

In the workplace, workers can have a low or high level of participation in decision-making about issues such as how to do the job, who does what job, what products are produced, who is employed, what wages are, how marketing is carried out and what investments are made. In an owner or management-

dominated workplace, worker decision-making is highly restricted, perhaps limited to how to undertake an assigned task or when to take breaks. On the other hand, labour activists and supporters have long advocated greater worker participation.

Sometimes participation is low-level and occasional, as when workers are consulted about proposed changes. High-level forms of participation include worker representatives sitting on boards of management. More sweeping forms of participation involve workers collectively making decisions about everything from rosters to marketing strategies. Various terms have been used to describe the more comprehensive visions of participation, including workers' self-management and workers' control (Blumberg, 1968; Carnoy & Shearer, 1980; Hunnius et al., 1973; Roberts, 1973; Vanek, 1975; Wilson, 1974). In some of these, decision-making hierarchies are entirely eliminated.

Initiatives for greater participation have come from several directions. A few employers have voluntarily relinquished control, gradually helping employees to take over decision-making; Ricardo Semler's initiatives at the Brazilian company Semco are a widely touted example (Semler, 1993). Workers sometimes buy out bankrupt firms and run them themselves. Some researchers have promoted worker participation as a means for greater productivity and satisfaction (Bolweg, 1976; Emery & Thorsrud, 1976), typically by obtaining agreements from both employers and workers. There is also a radical tradition of workers' movements seeking to take control of work in the face of hostile employers, usually in exceptional circumstances (Anweiler, 1974; Coates, 1981). A classic example is when workers at Lucas Aerospace in Britain came up with a plan for producing socially useful products (Wainwright & Elliott, 1982).

At the less radical end of the spectrum, there have been innumerable efforts to increase worker participation, especially as a means of increasing productivity, most famously with Japanese techniques of encouraging all workers to contribute ideas for improvement. The popular management literature is filled with encouragement for empowerment of workers (e.g., Manz & Sims, 1993), though the practical reality seldom measures up to the hype. Advocates of worker participation present a range of rationales, including greater productivity, higher commitment, lower turnover and greater accountability.

Worker participation and happiness

What then is the connection between worker participation and happiness? The most obvious link is via relationships. One reason that unemployment reduces life satisfaction is being cut off from workplace relationships.

For adults, the basis for satisfying friendships commonly involves intimacy, trust, acceptance, sharing and caring (Miller & Perlman, 2009, p. 215). In many workplaces, these conditions are harder to attain than outside work — especially relations with bosses. Sharing and intimacy with a boss can raise difficulties when the boss has to make personnel decisions based, or seen to be

based, on merit or formal procedures. Close friendships among workers at similar rank are less problematical. When bosses are eliminated, as in workers' control, this increases the prospects for satisfying relationships. The word "solidarity," often used in relation to workers' movements, captures the sense of mutual commitment that can be a source of great satisfaction.

Managers sometimes try to promote mutual commitment but they are more likely to call it team spirit than solidarity. There is a huge management literature about developing and harnessing workers' commitment to joint enterprise.

Another important factor for happiness at work is flow, the experience gained when tackling a challenging task using well-developed skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Workplaces are, in principle, an ideal venue for achieving flow, given that workers spend long hours on the job and may be expected to develop and deploy complex skills.

The reality in many workplaces, however, is that workers' capabilities are not fully stretched, most obviously when tasks are routinised and workers deskilled. Worker participation offers an avenue for matching workers to jobs to maximise prospects for satisfying work — especially when workers help decide allocation of jobs and the way jobs are configured. Individuals are usually well placed to decide how to make their own jobs satisfying; worker participation makes it easier for these preferences to shape the work experience.

Worker participation has another link with happiness: it allows workers to help each other. Those given a say in how work is done or what products are produced often think of others: their co-workers, the consumers of their enterprise's goods and services, and the wider society and environment. Helping others is a source of satisfaction. Lucas Aerospace workers came up with a corporate plan that included developing products that served human needs (Wainwright & Elliott, 1982).

The contrast with hierarchical organisations with limited participation is stark. Personal relationships between people at different levels in the hierarchy are less likely to be supportive; most bullying at work is by bosses against subordinates. In many organisations, shame is a central emotion: the entire organisation is structured around emotional abuse (Wyatt & Hare, 1997). Workers have little commitment to the organisation. They are likely to see work as a means of making money rather than obtaining satisfaction. Unions, taking an adversarial relationship with management (commonly reciprocated), focus on wages and conditions. This union emphasis needs to be juxtaposed with one of the central findings of happiness research, namely that material conditions, such as income and possessions, seldom make a significant ongoing contribution to happiness.

The traditional workplace, in which workers are managed, rather than as partners in a common enterprise, thus seems an unfruitful venue for fostering happiness. Nevertheless, it is quite possible for workers in even the most routine of jobs to be happy, especially given that research shows that circumstances —

such as money, climate and health — make only a relatively small contribution to happiness.

In summary, *a priori* considerations suggest that participation is a way to increase satisfaction at work. This is compatible with a wide range of studies that collectively show that worker participation increases job satisfaction (Miller & Monge, 1986). However, empirical evidence concerning more radical participatory alternatives is limited.

Citizen participation

The most familiar and widely touted form of citizen participation in political processes is voting for elected representatives. However, in most places this is only an occasional event with limited choices. Advocates of citizen participation look to a much wider range of ways that citizens can be involved in contributing towards choices that affect their lives (Barber, 1984; Lummis, 1996).

In the category of representative politics, one group of ways is to participate in the political process through election campaigning, for example canvassing door-to-door, holding public meetings, raising money and stimulating media coverage. Other ways centre on influencing politicians, including by writing letters, lobbying, and organising protests. Joining a political party is an option, and many party members participate in a range of ways.

An additional audience for political activities is the population as a whole. The same sorts of activities may be used — letter-writing, meetings, media work, public protest — with the orientation towards changing public opinion and stimulating action. This is a common approach in social movements, such as the feminist and environmental movements, which can be conceived as forms of mobilisation for political participation, with political used here in the broad sense of involving the exercise of power in society, not always through the formal political system.

In systems of representative government, citizen participation is widely lauded but in practice often discouraged when it goes beyond voting and electioneering (Ginsberg, 1982). The most common additional forms of action are low rungs in the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969), namely manipulation, in which participation is all appearance and no substance (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), and consultation, such as invitations to make submissions about development proposals or policy documents.

There is another possible level of citizen participation: direct decision-making. One example is systems of initiative, petition and referendum, allowing a direct citizen voice on specific proposals (Butler & Ranney, 1994). Others are town meetings, in which small groups of citizens debate and decide specific proposals, and citizens' juries, in which small groups of citizens, sometimes chosen randomly, deliberate over specific issues and make recommendations (Carson & Martin, 1999).

The question is, do these forms of participation make citizens happier? There is a long-standing debate over whether citizens actually want to participate (e.g. Eliasoph, 1998), but that can be set aside, because things that people want do not necessarily make them happier. The issue here is: if people do participate, does that make them happier? A related question: do happier people participate more?

Participation might increase happiness via creating and deepening relationships. Civic involvement builds personal connections that are in addition to the usual ones associated with family, work and leisure-time activities. So it can be expected that forms of participation that involve ongoing interaction on matters of mutual interest will increase individual satisfaction. This is most likely in political organisations, such as parties, and in social movement organisations.

Another connection with happiness comes through the possibility of helping others in the context of a meaningful life. Some civic engagement is self-interested, especially when the spoils of office are at stake, but in many cases citizens have little or nothing to gain personally: they believe in a cause and may make sacrifices to support it. This factor is most prominent in social movements.

As well as creating satisfaction through involvement, civic participation can increase collective happiness through outcomes. The most obvious effect is through helping those in greatest need. Making incomes more equal increases overall happiness because of the declining marginal utility of income: an income increase for someone earning very little has a greater effect than an equivalent decrease for a rich person. Furthermore, equality itself can increase collective satisfaction, at least in some polities.

Some social movements can contribute to greater happiness through outcomes achieved. The labour movement does this when it protects those workers most exploited and creates greater equality. Likewise, the feminist movement has assisted women who are abused and exploited. Anti-racist movements have challenged discrimination and exploitation. The peace movement, to the extent that it has prevented or ameliorated war (Wittner, 1992–2003), has reduced human suffering and thus enabled greater happiness.

Though it is plausible that civic participation increases happiness through the process of involvement and, in some cases, through outcomes, the evidence supporting these presumptions is limited — very few relevant studies have been carried out. Activists are commonly driven by a commitment to justice or freedom, not a quest for personal happiness. Some activists enjoy life, including activism, but others seem more driven by anger and resentment. The gains made by one generation of campaigners may be taken for granted by the next; the well-documented process of adaptation may minimise the benefits of social change in terms of happiness levels.

Some empirical evidence

Of the few attempts to demonstrate a link between political participation and happiness or subjective well-being, notable is Frey and Stutzer's work on Swiss voting behaviour (Frey & Stutzer, 2000, 2002, 2005; Frey et al., 2008; Stutzer & Frey, 2006). They offer evidence that people who have more opportunities for participation in democratic processes are more satisfied with their lives than those without such opportunities; in particular, Swiss citizens in cantons with higher opportunities for participation report significantly greater levels of happiness. Frey and Stutzer find that the opportunity to participate matters more than actual participation. However, their work has been subject to criticism (Dorn et al., 2008), so their conclusions remain under question.

Blais & Gelineau (2007) use data from a Canadian survey to demonstrate that voting in an election increases individual satisfaction levels. However Dolan, Metcalfe & Powdthavee (2008) do not find that the outcomes of elections had any effect on satisfaction levels of British voters. They do find that people with higher levels of subjective wellbeing are more likely to vote.

Evidence presented by Weitz-Shapiro & Winters (2008) suggests that people who vote in South American presidential elections report greater life satisfaction than those who do not. They confirm the sense that it is the opportunity to vote rather than voting behaviour that is significant. Their reading of the evidence is that participation is an effect of happiness rather than being an action that generates happiness. They also find that the happiness connection is less evident where voting is compulsory. They do not find any robust connection between happiness and other kinds of political activity.

The link between political participation and happiness is suggestive (Pacek, 2009) but far from airtight. The evidence on the other side of the spectrum is more dramatic. There is convincing evidence of a strong correlation between living under democratic political conditions and levels of reported happiness. The link is so strong that according to Inglehart (2009) it can be interpreted as accounting for over half of the total variation in a society's level of happiness. In countries that have witnessed a democratising process there is evidence that happiness levels do increase, but that after time they tend to decline again (Inglehart, 2009). This is consistent with the notion reported in happiness studies that people adjust their happiness levels to new circumstances.

Political systems without significant citizen participation can be called autocratic, and include fascism, state socialism and military dictatorship. Repression is often a feature of these sorts of systems and may include surveillance, threats, arrest, detention, beatings, torture and killing. These sorts of mechanisms of social control are destructive of happiness both for those targeted and for others, who may live in fear.

Repression can also occur in societies with participation, but participation, and the tools to facilitate it — a free media and opportunities to express opinions and mobilise support — are likely to limit it. Another source of widespread

unhappiness, famine, seems only to occur where there is no free media (Article 19, 1990), namely without the full capacity for civic engagement.

In summary, there is some evidence suggesting both that living in liberal democracies promotes happiness and stronger evidence that happier people participate more in the political process and furthermore that people value participation for its own sake. This suggests that it would be worthwhile to promote happiness as a means of fostering participation. More obviously, in societies without participation, there is a much greater likelihood of repression, oppression and exploitation, with associated unhappiness.

Conclusion

According to happiness research, it is plausible that participation in families, workplaces and political systems will increase levels of happiness. The most significant process in this relationship is likely to be building and maintaining social relationships, well established as a promoter of happiness. Other processes are helping others and, in the case of work, the experience of flow from undertaking a challenging task.

There is some empirical evidence supporting these connections, but it is limited. There is stronger evidence that happy people participate more in democratic processes.

From this analysis we can extract a few suggestions for strengthening the participation-happiness connection at the political level. From the study of emotional democracy, a key message is that participating in relationships as equals is satisfying. Close personal relationships are typically intense and ongoing. However, at the political level only a small proportion of the population is actively engaged more than sporadically. Therefore, one way to increase satisfaction with political participation is to create opportunities for fostering close and ongoing personal relationships.

A variety of organisations and social structures facilitate participation, such as political parties, social movement organisations, the jury system, and systems for referendums. Organisations can contribute to satisfaction from participation by becoming more egalitarian: political parties and social movement organisations are workplaces as well as platforms for civic engagement. Organisations and social structures can also foster more attractive opportunities for others to participate. This of course is the usual prescription for participatory democracy. The additional implication from happiness research is that by emphasising the role of relationships in this participation, people involved will more likely be satisfied, thereby making them more willing to participate even further.

In workplaces, flow can be a major contributor to improved happiness. The implication for political participation is to create opportunities for citizens to develop and exercise skills. For example, members of citizens' juries develop

skills in grasping complex issues and developing and negotiating recommendations. However, experience on such juries is hardly ever ongoing. To increase opportunities for people to experience flow in their roles as citizens — what might be called citizen flow — creative ideas are needed for ways to enable people to gradually improve and exercise their participatory skills.

The other side of the picture is that happy people are more likely to participate in political activities. Fostering happiness and participation thus are mutually reinforcing, a connection that can be strengthened in a range of domains, from the local scale of personal interactions to the large scale of national politics. This is another way to interpret the slogan “the personal is political.”

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