

Ethical Perspectives on Sámi School Research

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Abstract

What is topical in indigenous research is to view ethical guidelines and principles from their own premises and discuss the control over research activities and research findings when it comes to various disciplines and methods. The article is based on an ethnographic study that was focused on the Sámi classroom culture in Norway. The purpose of this article is to discuss those common, special ethical viewpoints that a researcher has to take into consideration when conducting Sámi educational and schooling research. The focus is on the following questions: how to secure the Sámi's position and voices in the research of Sámi pedagogy and education in a way that is just, valuable, and good-producing and does not harm members of indigenous peoples or have a malign influence on the phenomenon studied. This study encourages implementing child research and helps researchers to notice ethical challenges in the various phases of indigenous education research.

Keywords: Ethics; Research with indigenous people; Sámi pedagogy; Sámi children; Sámi research; Sámi School; Ethnography

1. Introduction

When the purpose is to rethink schooling from the perspective of indigenous peoples' own needs, it is worth asking how research, educational practices, and curriculum have to change to recognize and incorporate local forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. Along research, the importance of indigenous knowledge is being realized (Murillo, 2009)—even to the extent where methods of collecting, analyzing, and presenting data characterize the western academic tradition as well as indigenous ways of knowing, communicating and sharing knowledge (Webster & John, 2010).

Sámi research is expected to be committed to benefit Sámi communities. Before, the lappological tradition affected Sámi research. However, the lappological research was conducted by outsiders of the Sámi community in order to build their cultural identities simultaneously creating a picture of the Sámi as the opposite and other without any possibilities to survive in the modern world. During the past decades, Sámi research has moved toward intercultural approach: the intent has been to replace the term lappology with a new appellation multidisciplinary Sámi research representing research in which the Sámi are proactive (Carpelan et al., 2004).

The research contexts of indigenous peoples and Sámi education are versatile. The diversity of the Sámi School originates in the tradition of colonization and the decolonization process that follows it. The Sámi's political awakening, *sámi lihkadus*, and cooperation with indigenous peoples in international political field embodies this awakening. Sámi communities are relatively wide and scattered because of the geographical reach of their settlement. Inner, cultural, and livelihood-related differences are also great. In addition, the diversity manifests itself as multilingualism. Local multiculturalism consists not only of the Sámi, Finns, Norwegians, and Kvens, but also other ethnic minorities: all these languages increase the language-sociological richness in the everyday life at the Sámi School. Moreover, the political situation including legislation and human rights has to be taken into consideration.

Recently, more attention has been paid on how the western education has affected individuals, and local cultures and knowledge (see e.g., Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). In the school context, ecological and cultural factors affect students' cognitive, affective, and social development (Seitamo, 1991). Linguistic and cultural diversity provides that teaching arrangements are student-sensitive. This refers, for example, to such activities where the teacher notices students as individuals and encourages them to develop their thinking (Zahorik, 1975). This kind of collaboration turns into a communal and individual construction process of skills and knowledge enabling cultural participation.

School, teaching, and learning have been studied abundantly through ethnography. Ethnography can be defined in many ways. According to Clifford Geertz (1973), ethnography is thick description about culture (see also James, 2001); whereas Beverley Skeggs (1999) defined it as a way of seeing otherwise. Paul Atkinson and Martin Hammersley (1994) compared it with an expedition during which the researcher works with unstructured material and is interested in the research phenomenon. This article discusses ethical challenges in

Sámi education and is focused especially on research conducted in schools where members of indigenous peoples act as research partners (see, e.g., Sarivaara, 2012). This article is based on Pigga Keskitalo's doctoral research (2010) and our further studies on the features of ethnographic research (see also Keskitalo & Määttä, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d).

One of the main goals of Keskitalo's (2010) study was to enhance the cultural sensitivity of Sámi education and strengthen the special traits of the Sámi culture. In order to develop teaching, curricula and learning materials in use were reviewed. The way teaching practices supported various emphases of the Sámi culture was illustrated. These emphases are, among others, the Sámi conception of time, place, and knowledge that teaching could be based on. The clash of cultural enculturation and societal socialization and mediating structures between them were analyzed. The conclusion was that the enculturation effect of Sámi schools remained minimal because school practices were tied to the western conception of time, space, and knowledge.

In this article, we discuss the ethical challenges of Sámi school ethnography and how to conduct ethnically sustainable research among indigenous people. Ethical viewpoints are contemplated here from the point of view of the choices and omissions made by the researcher. Special attention is paid on indigenous children as research partners. Ethical choices in Sámi education research relate to the following themes: choosing the research theme, data collection, and the research relationship between the western/indigenous researcher and indigenous research partners and between adult and child in an indigenous context. Ethnographic research necessitates a responsible role from teacher-researchers as they have to be able to notice Sámi children's and people's rights and special cultural features and to be in close collaboration with the Sámi community—on the Sámi's own initiative and terms.

Conducting research in the Sámi classroom among Sámi children is challenging but also of primary importance. At its best, ethnographic research can bring out indigenous peoples' voices and self-expression, and the prevailing power relations. Thus, it can affect the course of actions and strengthen Sámi people's position (Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2011a). When researching school, teaching, and learning, children's rights as research partners have been strongly addressed with research (Alderson, 2001; Mayall, 2000). In addition, child research has its own special features that differ from adult research (Punch, 2002). Our study offers an example of negotiating and enacting ethical principles for research involving a marginalized population: children who are members of an indigenous people.

2. The purpose of this article: To discuss ethical principles of ethnographic research in the indigenous classroom

“Relevance, respect, relationships, and reciprocity are valued characteristics of ethical practice in all social research” (Ball, 2012, p. 1). Moreover, the ethicality of a research has been compared with the purpose of aiming at finding moral principles that prevent from harm

and injustice and promote goodness, reliability, and honesty (Sieber, 1993). Ethicality as a concept includes, among other things, defined moral principles and dominant rules, such as autonomy, privacy, reciprocity, and equity as commonly recognized principles (see, e.g., Morrow & Richards, 1996). These principles do not exhaust all of the ethical concerns relevant to educational indigenous research, but they are probably the main ones.

Thus, research on indigenous children involves numerous ethical tensions. It is especially important to notice factors that relate to the selection of the research theme (Flewitt, 2005; Ford, Sankey, & Crisp, 2007), how representative a sample children in that particular study make (Hill, 1997), the autonomous space given to each child in the research (Moss & Petrie, 2002), and data collection methods and the framework for data analysis (Grover, 2004). In this article, these factors are discussed in reference to the original study (see Keskitalo, 2010), especially from the viewpoint of indigenous research. Being aware of that we have not solved these issues for good, we want to discuss and introduce our own procedures and assumptions. These issues are topical and worth contemplating by researchers who are doing research among sensitive groups such as children and indigenous peoples (cf. Peltokorpi, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2012).

In Keskitalo's (2010) original research, the research material comprised observation data and a research diary about education provided in the Sámi and Norwegian speaking classes in six Sámi schools in Norway between 2001 and 2007, Sámi teacher interviews (N=15), entries in the research journal, and school documents such as annual plans and curricula. Through the ethnographic approach, classroom teaching practices and methods were studied.

When conducting research in an indigenous classroom, a researcher has a great responsibility. He or she must not harm pupils and the surrounding indigenous community in any way (see Graue & Walsh, 1998). Indeed, ethical choices are generally accentuated in this kind of child research. In addition, children as research participants are heterogeneous when it comes to their sensitivity, skills, and learning abilities (see Boekaerts, 1995). Moreover, according to Jelena Porsanger, certain basic requirements concern indigenous peoples' methodologies and research ethics. These requirements appear in the relationship between researchers and research participants and these questions are relevant to Sámi epistemology, methodology planning and implementation in Sámi research projects (Porsanger, 2007). Furthermore, interaction with research partners has a salient role.

The specific questions that we will discuss in this article are the following:

- (1) What are central conditions that direct ethical choices in educational ethnographic research among Sámi children?
- (2) How to obtain research data in an ethically sustainable manner in educational ethnographic research among Sámi children?
- (3) What is the researcher's ethical responsibility when conducting ethnographic research in the Sámi classroom?

3. Ethical questions of Sámi research

3.1 *The special terms of Sámi research*

Researchers have to consider certain fundamental conditions. We divided them into three viewpoints that frame the actual implementation of ethnographic research at an indigenous school context. Here, they are discussed using the Sámi context as an example: indigenous research partners' rights in general, children's rights as research partners, and indigenous culture as research context. Ethnography can become a form of co-operation based on which action research is built when the purpose is to enhance change in indigenous schooling.

3.1.1 Research partners' right to be proactive, and commit to and withdraw from the research

Research is the power of definition, which may lead to political power, says Tove Bull (2002). Under the title *Knocking on heaven's door* Marit Myrvold (2002) described her confrontation with the question: "Will the village have me?" Likewise, "getting in" is difficult in school research. In research ethics, it is common to think about individual consent. However, not only individuals but also groups may be entitled to—and need—protection. On the other hand, Anne Barron (2002) focused her contribution *Traditional Knowledge, Indigenous Culture and Intellectual Property Rights* to the discussion of intellectual property rights. Patents, copy-rights, and brands are examples of legal instruments to regulate right to a certain type of knowledge but which do not seem best suited to protect indigenous rights. She discussed other possible options to protect such rights (see also Porsanger & Guttorm, 2011).

Consequently, researchers are decision-makers who choose their foci, define their methods of data collection, analyze and interpret the data, and develop plans of action based on their analysis (Mills, 2007). Naturally, the initiative can be introduced by the indigenous community as well. When a research theme is very sensitive, plenty of obstacles to participation can occur. Sensitivity in this case may mean that the study involves some questionable elements, such as issues related to intimacy, stress, and religion, or the research can bring out revealing and stigmatizing or blaming information. In such case, the sensitivity widely affects the whole research process, such as ethical choices, the recruiting of research participants, and research procedures (Powell & Smith, 2009).

The sensitivity of the research theme is connected to the agreement to participate in research. Mary Ann Powell and Anne B. Smith (2009) have argued that in most studies, ethical approval is the same as agreement but in child research the perspective has to be turned into children's participation and their assenting to it. If the research can have a traumatizing effect on the child, it may become an obstacle to the child's participation. Minimizing this assumption starts from the researcher's ethical choices that aim at increasing research participants' feeling of security and removing those factors that can possibly harm children and the indigenous people they represent.

In the research on which this article is based on, the researcher was a member of the Sámi people and therefore realized that she was not an outsider or neutral. In the classroom

research, the researcher's own basic values were strongly present. The request for participating in the research was not directly addressed to Sámi children although, according to studies, children are fully capable of giving their own assent (cf., Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). On the other hand, the study was merely focused on the everyday practices and operation of the classroom and the researcher's task was to reflect and evaluate it. Naturally, the permission for the research was asked from the Sámi children's parents and also the school and *Norsk Datatilsynet* regarding the video data. Along the research process, various partners' participation and commitment to the research became a natural part of the everyday life at school.

According to Beverley Skeggs (1999), ethnography is a research process where the researcher brings forth his or her relation to power questions, ethics, and researcher's responsibility. Ethnography aims at describing and understanding cultural experiences such as classroom situations in indigenous schools. Revealing and contemplating the power relations are important themes in the discourse about indigenous peoples; for example, researching the limitations, order, and practices at the Sámi School. The meanings can be analyzed by conceptualizing the context where the school functions in daily life. It is also worth noticing that in indigenous research, negotiations with the local community at various phases of the research are important.

3.1.2 Indigenous children's rights and protection

In child research, ethicality has been dissected among other things from the perspective of children's rights (Alderson, 2001; Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Mayall, 2000). The role of ethicality is especially important when using research methods that involve intimate atmosphere (Young & Barrett, 2001). This is also the case in ethnographic research that is carried out in the classroom by a researcher who is simultaneously a member of an indigenous people or indigenous pupils' teacher (Mills, 2007). Naturally, there is always the great danger that indigenous children are treated as a homogenous group although every child has different experiences and points of view, and they might quite well be aware of the matters in their surrounding life (see Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2009).

The concept of rights is derived from the effect of the society and its conformance with the law. The society produces certain kinds of citizens' and children's rights which may appear in the field of social sciences so that researchers may become encouraged to use more participatory approaches in their studies. As children's societal rights seemingly hint of their ethical and moral excellence, the researcher may find it difficult to regard ethnographic research with criticism (Nind, 2011).

In ethnographic research, a child is no longer a research target "possessed" by the adult but an active actor of an indigenous community. But how does this appear in practice? In the sample study of this article, children could participate in the actual doing and express their opinions in learning situations. Yet, the practical reality in the Sámi school world dictated the methods that a researcher could use. Is it possible to pay attention to all pupils and draw a reliable picture of everything that happens in a teaching situation? Who are being noticed through observation?

The researcher's voice inevitably is intermingled with the research because information is produced in a socio-constructivist manner. This is a typical trait of ethnographic research but one that has to be realized. Furthermore, the researcher has to be selective and choose a research theme to determine the perspective of his or her observation. Therefore, pupils and teachers could have had special attention, for example, based on their Sámi language proficiency. It is reasonable to ask how children's individuality is recognized in the research if all who are willing are not allowed to participate. Or, do we assume that some Sámi children speak for all Sámi?

Research that is focused on children and Sámi people may represent a process of understanding dissimilarity. The process involves questions that relate to ethicality and those roles and tools that are used when studying select participants with the purpose of learning about the school culture. It means that the research contains various proportions of children's voices and reflection which emerges from the researcher being present in the indigenous school world.

The ethics in child research can be divided into three main categories: informed consent, confidentiality, and protection. Informed consent is connected to the research approaches created by adults or researchers and that respect children and treat them justly and honestly (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Furthermore, the researcher-child relationship contains various power structures—also, if indigenous perspectives are included (e.g., whether the researchers is a member of an indigenous people or not, etc.). A researcher can use his or her power to selecting techniques that allow children to feel a part of the research process (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

3.1.3 The special nature of the Sámi culture

When it comes to Sámi research, research ethics is connected not only to general research ethics but also Sámi research policy and ethics. It means that Sámi research should, for example, benefit the Sámi society or disseminate information about Sáminess (see also Länsman, 2008). Indeed, special ethical situation- and context-based challenges embody Sámi research.

According to Bull (2002), a researcher has to be familiar with the Sámi's history, traditions, culture, and language in order to be able to research the Sámi society. Ethical requirements that concern research among indigenous peoples are, for example, responsibility for disseminating information and local participation. In addition, the researcher has to respect local traditions, values, languages, people, and families. All information has to be handled in confidence. Furthermore, participants have to approve the research (Porsanger, 2007). In other words, it is important to build and cherish trust between the researcher and research participants. The researcher has to be aware that he or she will meet the research participants later on as well (Nystad, 2003).

3.2 *Ethically sustainable ethnographic research*

It is essential that the researcher evaluates how select research methods and techniques—including methodological choices, ethical practices, and data analysis and

interpretation—can bring out Sámi children’s voices and draw picture of Sámi education. A researcher who studies children should choose such a data collection method that will not harm children psychologically or emotionally (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Tomal, 2003) or make children feel anxious in any way (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Neither should the method affect the pupils’ learning environment in the classroom negatively (Tomal, 2003). The researcher’s fears, expectations, prejudices, and opinions on children may have an influence on methodological choices (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). It is possible, for example, when the question is about researching people or issues that are close to the researcher (see Young & Barrett, 2001).

In this research, the data were collected through a combination of methods. They were utilized to reach the special traits of the Sámi education. According to our findings, multiple techniques should be employed in ethnographic research because the research phenomenon is so versatile and because they allow research participants to express themselves in various ways. Next, we will discuss three methods: observation, interviews, and a researcher’s research diary.

3.2.1 Direct observation

One data collection method in the sample research of this article was direct observation. The clear advantage of it is that the researcher can acquire first-hand information. The method was chosen because it enabled the researcher to collect research data from the real-life situations which cannot be acquired from secondary sources (see also Tomal, 2003). The observation method has a long tradition in small children research (Clark, 2005).

Observation provides many-sided information as it is a combination of listening, watching, reflecting, and evaluating. Certainly, it is possible that a researcher becomes blind to some classroom phenomena—especially, if the researcher is committed and well familiar with the research field and the dominating basic values. As a member of the indigenous people, the Sámi, the researcher of our sample study had a certain standing point which could have biased her observation. Yet, her familiarity with the Sámi language and the Sámi culture made it possible to notice how such traits of the Sámi culture that would have remained unnoticed by a western researcher were included or omitted in teaching situations.

However, child observation has also its limits: What should be the relationship between a researcher who is doing the observation and the child observed? Some researchers think that adults can do research by adopting only the researcher’s role because adults’ and children’s worlds are so different, and that age and authority hinder them to fully participate in children’s world (see Goode, 1986; Mandell, 1991). Furthermore, adults are claimed to be unable to participate in children’s social world because in reality they are not children ever again (Hill, 1997). Thus, it is the most crucial to critically reflect and reason the select methods and procedures and how they can be implement in research focusing on indigenous children’s contexts (Barker & Waller, 2003; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010).

3.2.2 Interviews

According to Bryony Beresford (1997), interview is one of the best methods when

applied in the context of daily life. In this research, Sámi teachers and pupils were supposed to express their opinions and perceptions in interviews. Interviews were to function as a support to deciphering the research theme (see also Tomal, 2003).

Interviews make it possible to a researcher to check whether his or her interpretations of the reality are equivalent with the actors he or she observed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the fact that the researcher and children had a similar cultural background was considered an advantage. Still, when addressing children, there are certain principles that are important to the ethicality but also to the reliability of the study. For example, interview questions have to be designed in a child-friendly manner in order to be suitable for small children (see also Fargas-Malet et al., 2010).

3.2.3 A researcher's diary

Research diary is a tool for making notes about pupils' and teachers' actions and teaching and learning practices. In practice, direct observation implemented in this research is a practical method that, according to Daniel R. Tomal (2003) is easily convertible into an anecdotal form. When anecdotal notes are made in the classroom, the key factor is fast observation on the important behavior which is relevant to the research (see Mills, 2007).

However, making notes or videoing during lessons may activate pupils in a particular way. Tomal (2003) warns about this: people can become motivated to perform better when being observed. That is the so-called Hawthorne effect. That is why the researcher is encouraged to minimize participants' awareness of participating in the research and, thus, the learning environment at the Sámi School was maintained as natural as possible. A research diary complements an ethnographic study and data in many ways, helps to remember happenings in the field, and, first and foremost, functions as a means to reflect the researcher's position in the study.

3.3 A researcher's ethical responsibility in Sámi research

3.3.1 Sensitivity to notice events in a Sámi classroom

A researcher wishing to study Sámi education encounters a complex world that is not easy to enter. The role of an ethnography researcher involves high-level reflectivity and sensitivity. In the research described in the article, deep learning resulted from combining reflection and practice (Somekh, 2006). At the same time, the researcher's self-comprehension developed which is particularly important in ethnographical research because data analysis and the process of interpreting the significance of development happens through the researcher's self which also functions as the research instrument. The development of self-comprehension improved the quality of research so that the researcher began to realize how individual factors, values, and presumptions molded the research results (see also Peltokorpi, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2012).

In indigenous research, ethnographers have to be able to adopt several roles (Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2011a). First, they must pay attention to cultural sensitivity. The western school system dominates instruction in the Sámi School and is connected to the assimilation,

power relations, and socialization process that the Sámi have experienced. Students are not socialized into their own cultures. Instead, the Sámi School is organized based on the prevailing values.

Second, the school ethnographer needs to describe otherness. Ethnography and anthropological research tradition have been criticized especially for their focus on otherness and pursue of defining primitiveness (Kuokkanen, 2000). Research subjects are described as others, exciting, and different. The concept of otherness can be changed along with the change in ethnography. In this study of Sámi education, “the other” lives in the ethnographer’s experiences and is researchable, interpretable, and understandable.

Research in general and indigenous research in particular necessitates the ability to reflect on teaching events. In most educational research, reflection is defined as a useful and necessary method enhancing the critical analysis of teaching and school environment. Reflection helps researchers to demonstrate their own action, maturing, and values and to reflect on them in relation to the change (e.g., Oser et al., 1992). When researchers reflect on action profoundly and frequently, they may, in a manner of speaking, lose their grip of the core concept of the research. Therefore, reflection is a dialogue between questions and answers that researchers pose to themselves.

In ethnographic research, working in the field, in indigenous communities, is a central concept. Therefore, the ethnographer has to take over the school field. An ethnographer who researches the Sámi School has a structurally wide field to study: it includes students, teachers, text books, teaching arrangements, and the community outside the school. By focusing on the everyday life at school, it is possible to understand the daily practices and processes. The ethnographer follows the events and teaching in the classroom by observation. Yet, it is impossible to observe everything that takes place in the field. Therefore, it is important that the researcher defines the limits for analysis carefully.

The abundance of phenomena in indigenous people’s education and teaching situations requires of the ethnographer the ability to pull together the various sides of school. The connection between the teacher, teaching, guiding, and learning is complicated. Yet, the aim of classroom research is to perceive and analyze this connection.

3.3.2 Reporting the results

One side of ethicality is how truthfully a researcher reports the results (see Fontana & Frey, 2005). The researcher must present those interpretations and conclusions that the results give reason for as rigorously as possible. Specifically, the interpretation part should be as scarce and non-speculative as possible. Deduction should be based on those facts that the research elicited. Interpreting the results is the researcher’s privilege and responsibility—or even a moral demand (see Heikkilä, 2002).

In Keskitalo’s (2010) study, the researcher tried to be as careful as possible when reporting the results. The researcher assumed that describing and explaining the research in detail would give the reader an insight of the participants’ original experiences and bring out actuality of the Sámi School.

Moreover, the ethnographer has to work in co-operation with the indigenous community at various phases of the research. Otherwise, it is not possible to develop indigenous education (see also Lipka, Mohatt, & the Ciulistet Group, 1998). Research results have to be returned to the society where the study was carried out. After handing the findings to the use of teachers and schools, the researcher has redeemed one ethical principle of quality research on indigenous peoples; namely, return the findings to the use of research partners (Barron, 2002; Bull, 2002).

4. Conclusion

In educational anthropology and ethnography, interest has been focused on, for example, institutionalized education, learning of rituals, and the study of cultural and social structures (e.g., Ford, 1997; Pollock, 1997; Sindell, 1997; Spindler & Spindler, 1997a, 1997b). Ethnography can look for answers to cultural encounters. In Sámi education and research, the main attention is paid on the relationship between socialization and enculturation because the reconciliation of the traditional school culture and informal rearing and culture is a central problem of formal education. Sámi education and research are striving for finding versatile cultural-sensitive tools in the post-colonialist field of science. In this sense, ethnography can contribute to Sámi research quite considerably because the purpose of this research approach has initially been to study marginal groups and imbalanced power structures.

New kinds of approaches are needed to canvassing and figuring out the societal power structure. For example, James Collins (2009) argues that we have to consider multiple levels of social and institutional structure as well as micro-analytic communicative processes and cultural practices in education and society with new kinds of tools. Indigenous peoples' have indigenous knowledge, value, and ontological theories. Indigenous peoples define what is necessary to know based on a special understanding about the world and life. Nevertheless, not even ontology and ethics are common to all indigenous peoples. According to Nils Oskal (2008), it is not possible to have a special and tenable methodology. Hermeneutically enriched research requires scientific humbleness, openness, and courage—and indigenous peoples' worldviews cannot be ignored either.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith dissects critically the western research philosophy and history. According to Smith, it is necessary to decolonize research methods because of the European imperialism and Smith does represent some options that could enable moving from imperialism toward post-colonization and abandoning western paradigms. Indigenous peoples' research should help peoples to attain self-governance through empowerment, survival, development, mobilization, changing, and decolonization (Smith, 1999). There is a need to decolonize the Sámi School—or turn it toward Sáminess, as Asta Balto (2008) claims.

The epistemological starting point in this research was founded on the principles of minority research. According to these principles, everyone has knowledge of something and it is always produced in cooperation with others. The question is about various ideas of

knowledge (Mohanty, 1994). In this study, methodological points of view were closely connected with the information production, diversity, power relations, and paradigmatic questions.

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