

Some Dimensions of Altercasting *

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Altercasting is defined as projecting an identity, to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction, which is congruent with one's own goals. It is posited as a basic technique of interpersonal control. Rating scales measuring six dimensions of altercasting are devised and provide the raw data for a pilot investigation of the effects of assigned role and of alter's feedback on the altercasting process. While assigned role is not salient for college subjects, feedback differentials produce a consistent pattern. When confronted with negative and attacking responses, subjects tend to accord alter evaluative superiority at the task at hand and actively place the mantle of responsibility on his shoulders.

Among the most venerable notions in social psychology is the assumption that human behavior is goal directed. It is implicit in Plato and Aristotle, and explicit in the hedonistic calculus of Bentham, in motivational theory, and in psychoanalytic theory.¹ Yet the implications of this assumption for the analysis of social interaction have not been given a central place in sociologically oriented theories. It is only recently, in what might be termed a "new look" in role theory, that greater recognition has been given to the idea that people bring personal purposes into interaction.² The pursuit of these purposes rather than the automatic unfolding of role reciprocity according to a normatively written script is seen as the underlying texture of interaction.³

* Revised version of paper read at 1962 meetings of the American Sociological Association, Washington, D. C.

¹ Gordon W. Allport, "The Historical Background of Modern Social Psychology," in Gardner Lindzey, ed., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Cambridge: Addison Wesley, 1954.

² Samuel A. Stouffer, "An Analysis of Conflicting Social Norms," *American Sociological Review*, 24 (December, 1949), pp. 707-717; George C. Homans, "Social Behavior as Exchange," *American Journal of Sociology*, 63 (May, 1958), pp. 597-606; Howard S. Becker, "Notes on the Concept of Commitment," *American Journal of Sociology*, 66 (July, 1960), pp. 32-40; William J. Goode, "A Theory of Role Strain," *American Sociological Review*, 25 (August, 1960), pp. 483-496.

³ William J. Goode, "Norm Commitment and Conformity to Role-Status Obligations," *American Journal of Sociology*, 66 (November, 1960), pp. 246-258; Ralph Turner, "Role-Taking, Process Versus Conformity," *Human Behavior and Social Processes*, Arnold M. Rose, ed., Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1962.

If we accept the postulate that human behavior is goal directed, then the goal of any actor in a social encounter is capable of being stated in terms of some response from other participants in that encounter. For the purposes of this paper, (and following what has become institutionalized form in these matters) the actor shall henceforth be designated "Ego," and the other, whose response is the goal, as "Alter." All of Ego's behavior directed toward Alter shall be called "lines of action." The response of Alter they are intended to elicit will be termed "the interpersonal task."

Developing a typology of interpersonal tasks might prove a rewarding effort in itself. Tasks can differ in the direction of Alter's response—toward Ego ("Lend me five dollars") or toward some third party or object ("Stop beating your dog"). They can vary in the amount of effort required of Alter in making the response, in the overtness of the response, or in the degree to which the response is an end in itself or a means to evoke other responses more crucial to Ego. But whatever the task may be, the question must be raised: how are lines of action selected and elaborated in Ego's expressive behavior in order to elicit the desired response? We have brought *Homo Economicus* to the bargaining table of interaction.⁴ Now just how does he go about the business of getting others to feel or to do what he wants them to feel or do?

One important step toward dealing with this problem was taken by Goffman in his "dramaturgical analysis of encounters."⁵ For Goffman the critical intervening variable is the actor's definition of the situation. If we relate this concept specifically to the personal purposes of the actor, to define a situation is to take into account the symbolic cues present in a social encounter, to integrate them, and from this process to draw inferences about the interpersonal tasks that may be pursued and about the lines of action appropriate to these tasks. Similarly, roles become purposive as well as normative. In our terms a role is defined as a repertoire of lines of action structured around a specifiable set of interpersonal tasks. From the definition of the situation comes the decision-making process as to which role to play. To affect Alter's behavior in the desired direction, Ego must manipulate the cues in the encounter in order to influence selectively Alter's definition of the situation. If this process is effective, what is a task response for Ego will become a line of action for Alter.

In Goffman's analysis, the focus of the problem of influencing Alter's defini-

⁴ John W. Thibaut and Harold H. Kelley, *The Social Psychology of Groups*, New York: Wiley, 1959; George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961.

⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1959.

tion of the situation is Ego's presentation of himself. If Ego successfully presents the correct identity, Alter, in his responsive lines of action, will be obligated to deal with Ego as persons with such an identity have a right to expect. The source of Alter's obligation and Ego's right are unclear in Goffman's analysis. He makes the implicit assumption that they are functionally necessary for the maintenance of social encounters (and hence for the larger social system of which any encounter is a concrete expression). Presumably the constraints are normative, although the term "norm" is conspicuous by its rarity in his work.

Goffman goes on to concentrate on techniques and problems of self presentation. Little more is done with Alter's responses beyond indicating that they cannot explicitly reject Ego's projected identity if the interaction is to be long maintained. This tacit acceptance of Ego's projected identity (and Alter's as well) constitute what he terms a "working consensus." A working consensus, then, is a tacit agreement as to the roles the several participants will play out in the encounter.

But the tasks that can be pursued as well as the lines of action used to pursue them within the boundaries of a given working consensus will be many. How does Ego attempt to narrow down Alter's choice of roles and Alter's responsive lines of action within the repertoire of a given role? Self-presentation is one approach. But it might be equally fruitful to concentrate more directly on the implications of Ego's behavior for Alter's definition of the situation. Instead of looking at Ego's actions on the basis of the identity they create for him (self-presentation), it might be better to look at them on the basis of the identity they create for Alter. This latter perspective is termed *altercasting*—casting Alter into a particular identity or role type.

It is our contention that altercasting is a basic technique of interpersonal control. Goffman has remarked that Ego may be much more involved in his own projected image than in alter's identity. Although a successful projection may be an end in itself, in many instances self-presentation can be regarded as a special case of altercasting. "Coming on strong" in a particular identity may point out to Alter restrictions on the identities he can assume and still maintain a working consensus. However, the process of altercasting can be a good deal more direct. Ego may make explicit the identity he wishes Alter to assume and overtly make the task response an integral part of that identity ("Now Joe, as a good friend of mine, I know you would . . ."). Less direct, but still more closely related to altercasting than to self-presenting, are the multiform gestures of approval and disapproval Ego makes to Alter's responsive lines of action, which serve as signposts for the route he wishes Alter to take. Whether direct or indirect, altercasting

should supply a useful perspective for research, since it builds interaction directly into the analysis.

DIMENSIONS OF ALTERCASTING

The first question to be asked in trying to evolve measures of altercasting is, what are the important dimensions of the role into which Alter is being cast? Six such dimensions were formulated on the basis of theoretical considerations and holistic analysis of a series of role playing scenes. These dimensions, described below, are by no means exhaustive. They are defined without overlap, but their distinctness requires empirical investigation. For each, a seven point rating scale was developed. Student volunteers role-played three types of situations: establishment of a relationship; maintenance of a relationship under external threat; and maintenance of a relationship under internal strain.

1. *Structural Distance*: the position of relative authority Ego is directing Alter to play out in the current encounter. The qualification, "in the encounter," is important since there may be a number of positions Alter occupies vis-a-vis Ego. Moreover, as Anselm Strauss points out in his discussion of *status forcing*, Ego may attempt to switch Alter from one position to another in mid-encounter.⁶ A rating of 7 on this dimension indicated maximum authority ceded by Ego to Alter with a rating of 4 as structural parity.

2. *Evaluative Distance*: the relative evaluative status of Ego and Alter as presented selves, independent of the structural distance involved. One can be in a subordinate position and still, through skillful playing, cast Alter into a "one down" identity, making it clear that Alter is not as superior, holy or infallible as his position might imply. On the other hand, girls, starting from structural parity, have been known to cast their male Alters into near reverential identities. It is to this dimension that ploys and flattery, deference and derogation, are relevant. A rating of 7 indicates maximum worth ceded by Ego to Alter; a rating of 4, evaluative parity.

3. *Emotional Distance*: the "primariness" or "secondariness" of Alter's relationship with Ego as projected by Ego. To what extent is Alter cast into a role in which he is presumed to be involved with Ego's feelings, needs, and everyday concerns? One's awareness of this dimension tends to be evoked when there is dissonance. Someone is perceived as "coming too close" when he casts you into the undesired role of intimate or confidant, reveals intimate information about himself, seeks it from you, or simply affirms the

⁶ Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959, pp. 76-84.

strength of emotional ties which are actually unilateral at best. A rating of 1 indicates maximum involvement or intimacy.

4. *Support vs. Support Seeking*: Ego's indications to Alter that Alter is in an identity requiring Ego's help or assistance (a rating of 1) or, at the other extreme, being required to give aid and comfort to Ego (a rating of 7). Self-presentation and altercasting clearly merge on this dimension. Casting one's self in a succorant role tends automatically to place Alter in the nurturant reciprocal. The simple affirmation that one is in difficulty acts as a demand upon Alter without the necessity of a specific request for assistance from him. (Sometimes the request is vehemently denied by Ego.) The reverse, while not as apparent, also holds. Witness the discomfiture we feel when approached by another who "comes on" full of unrequested assistance, conveying, by implication, a picture of ourselves as incapable of dealing with the business at hand.

5. *Interdependence vs. Autonomy*: the extent to which Ego projects Alter as being tied to him by bonds of common fate, perspective, or concurrence of interests. A rating of 1 indicates complete identity, a rating of 7 complete separateness.

6. *Degree of Freedom Allowed Alter*: the range of behavior Ego allows Alter within the encounter. Strictly speaking, this dimension does not characterize Alter's role but the altercasting process itself. Of course, all lines of action are ultimately directed at narrowing Alter's choice of responses so as to increase the probability of eliciting the task response. However, the strength of the constraints placed on Alter to assume the projected role as well as the techniques used for constraining can vary a great deal.

One approach to restricting Alter's degree of freedom is to communicate that certain of one's own responses (presumably desired by him) are contingent upon his assuming the identity projected for him. In the more coercive forms of altercasting, the relationship between Ego and Alter may be "laid on the line." Other approaches focus not on Ego's evaluation of Alter but on Alter's self evaluation. Ego may project a representation of Alter with which the desired behavior would be consonant. Often, this role is framed in symbols Alter is felt to value. Thus Alter, if he rejects the role, is put in the position of also rejecting or being inconsistent with his ideal conception of himself. A rating of 7 on this dimension indicates maximum range given Alter by Ego, while a rating of 1 would be indicative of extreme coercion.

THE PILOT EXPERIMENT

In order to explore the usefulness of this approach for analyzing interaction, a pilot experiment was undertaken. It was designed to investigate the effects of two situational variables on Ego's altercasting activity. The first

was the role he was formally assigned to play. The second was the feedback he received from Alter (i.e., Alter's Altercasting).

Students in a class in Introductory Sociology were told they would be participating in a class project investigating campus attitudes toward various minority groups. The grade each was to receive on this project was to constitute ten per cent of his final grade for the course. Eighteen randomly selected students in the class (the experimental subjects) were told they would be working on questionnaire construction. The questionnaire was to consist of three parts: one each on attitudes toward Negroes, Chinese, and Jews. Appointments for three work sessions of one half hour each were then made for each subject. When the subject arrived he was introduced to his work partner (in each case another student who was a trained confederate of the experimenter). The pair was told that they would be working together this session on attitudes toward Negroes, but in subsequent sessions would be working on different attitude areas with different partners.

In order to vary assigned role, the subject was told in one session that he was appointed group leader and had final authority regarding any issues of wording or item inclusion. He was responsible for seeing that the job was done. In another session the confederate was appointed group leader, and in another session no appointment of a group leader was made. In all sessions the pair was informed that they would both be graded on their joint product.

The confederates provided the feedback variation. In one session the subject received feedback from a confederate instructed to give responses which consistently attacked the subject's suggestions and ability; in one session consistently supportive feedback was given; and in one session mixed supportive and attacking feedback was given.

Confederates were also trained to maintain their assigned roles and not to use the words "we" or "us." In the earlier work, we had noted that "we" tends to be one of the most seductive of English words. Its appearance almost automatically heralds a relationship structured in terms of mutuality and interdependence. The feedback and role conditions were ordered according to a Latin Square such that each subject received each assigned role and each type of feedback once. The design was replicated for each sex, with order of role and feedback combinations and sex of alter also systematically varied to produce the complete design.

Work sessions took place in the office of the instructor while he was absent. The sessions were tape recorded with a concealed recorder and microphone. The altercasting ratings were made directly from tapes.

This study is not designed to test whether altercasting takes place, nor is any attempt made to dissociate altercasting from self presentation or similar interpersonal processes. It is assumed that altercasting is taking place;

that Ego's actions are casting Alter into some desired identity. This assumption is then incorporated directly into the ratings. Thus the ratings involve the rater in a role-taking process, and it is Alter's role that is being taken. The perspective taken by the rater is: "If I were Alter, what kinds of responses do Ego's acts seem to be directing me to make?" "Kinds of responses" are then summarily described by ratings on the first five dimensions; the heaviness of Ego's direction on the sixth. The procedure is admittedly crude, and a good deal is dependent on the sensitivity of the rater. On the other hand, if coherent results are found, further refinement would be encouraged.

Except for twelve tapes used in training sessions, the ratings were made independently by two persons. The first was second author, the second a graduate student from another department who had not been previously exposed to the theoretical perspective and who was not aware of the purpose of the experiment or that situational conditions were being experimentally varied. His ratings provided the basis for assessing inter-rater agreement and for avoiding contamination of the ratings by knowledge of the experimental conditions in each case. They are the ones incorporated into all subsequent analyses.

In addition to the altercasting ratings, the tapes were used to derive pronoun counts. These provided us with a less "subjective measure of the subject's behavior in each session. The pronouns "I," "We," and "You," and their respective possessives were tabulated for each subject in each session. To eliminate the effect of variability in total verbal productivity each frequency was expressed as a proportion of the total pronoun usage. Correlations with the altercasting ratings were computed in order to test three specific hypotheses. Relative frequency of "I" was expected to be high when Alter was cast into a subordinate role (low score on Structural Distance). "We" was predicted to be relatively frequent in altercasting of interdependence, and "You" was expected to be preponderant in cases in which heavy constraints were placed on Alter (a low Degree of Freedom rating).

To test the reliability of confederate performance, and of the feedback differentials as experienced by the subjects, at the end of the experiment the subjects were asked to rate their partners (on a five point scale) for each session, on "cooperativeness" and "likeability," and to grade the adequacy of their own performance for each session.

FINDINGS

Altercasting ratings. One of the experiment's purposes was to evaluate the altercasting ratings themselves. Inter-rater reliability was estimated by having a sample of 30 sessions rated independently by two raters working directly

from the tapes. Each taped session was rated on all six dimensions, and product moment correlations computed for each of the six sets. These appear in the diagonal of Table 1. They are not comfortably high, averaging about .70, but compare favorably with global ratings found in the literature.

Our main concern in examining the intercorrelations among the ratings was the possibility of "halo effect." The ratings show some overlap, but in only one case is the existence of separate dimensions questionable. Casting Alter into a superordinate role goes hand in hand with according him higher status in the encounter.

TABLE 1

Intercorrelations Among Altercasting Dimensions,^a and Inter-rater Reliabilities^b

Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Structural distance	(.84) ^c					
2. Evaluative distance	.60	(.73)				
3. Emotional distance	.14	.01	(.66)			
4. Support-support seeking	.31	.43	.12	(.73)		
5. Interdependence-autonomy	.02	-.04	.47	.21	(.73)	
6. Degrees of freedom	-.10	.13	-.29	-.10	-.08	(.64)

^a $n=54$, $r(.05)=.27$.

^b $n=30$, $r(.03)=.36$.

^c Inter-rater correlations on the diagonal.

The other statistically significant correlations make interpretive sense if we view them simply as a model of the rater's judgmental processes rather than assuming that they reflect real relationships present in the observed interaction. Structuring the relationship along secondary lines should be associated with the projection of greater autonomy. It is also associated with placing heavier constraints upon Alter. Finally, it is reasonable that seeking support from Alter should go along with ceding superordination and evaluative worth to him.

Table 2 contains the correlations between relative frequency of pronoun usage and the altercasting ratings. The prediction that high frequency of "I's" would be related to claiming superordinate status was not borne out. The other two hypotheses were confirmed. "We" was associated with greater projection of interdependence. The correlation between frequent usage of "you" and attempting to impose greater restrictions on Alter's responsive behavior exceeded our expectations. Even when allowance is made for the possibility

TABLE 2

Correlations between Relative Frequency of Pronoun Usage and Altercasting Dimensions

Dimension	I	We	You
Structural distance	.06	.03	-.01
Evaluative distance	-.03	.12	-.02
Emotional distance	-.19	.17	.39
Support-support seeking	-.07	-.06	.12
Autonomy-interdependence	-.05	-.36	.32
Degrees of freedom	.28	.19	-.74

$r(.05) = .27.$

that the correlation is in part an artifact of the rating process, "you" appears to be an oft-used tool for those who would "muscle" social relationships.

Treatment differentials. Assigned role and feedback were the two main experimental variables to be related to altercasting. Before proceeding with a discussion of these findings, however, it is important to estimate the degree to which we were successful in securing adequate differentials in treatment levels. Analyses of variance for responses to the post-experimental questionnaire are summarized in Table 3. The subjects made significant discriminations in grading their partners on cooperativeness and likeability, and grading themselves on adequacy of performance according to the assigned feedback stance of those partners. Thus, it may be safely assumed that the necessary differentials in feedback were represented in the experiment.⁷

TABLE 3

Subjects' Judgments of Alter's Cooperativeness, Likeability, and Their Own Adequacy of Performance, by Assigned Feedback Stance of Alter

Mean Score On:	Feedback Stance			P
	Attack	Mixed	Support	
1. Cooperativeness	2.58	4.06	4.61	.01
2. Likeability	2.56	3.92	4.19	.01
3. Own Adequacy	3.00	3.94	4.39	.01

⁷ Further analysis revealed, however, that one of the confederates (responsible for nine sessions of mixed feedback) apparently did not meet the specifications for performance, weighting the entire experiment in the direction of supportive feedback conditions at the cost of beclouding the effects of mixed feedback on altercasting behavior.

An analysis of the cooperation, likeability, and adequacy of own performance scores by assigned role revealed no statistically significant differences, raising the question of just how seriously the subjects took their assigned roles. Yet, there is some evidence (to be discussed later) that role differentials were experienced as such by the subjects.

Sex. To test the role, feedback, and sex of subject main effects, an analysis of variance was performed on the subjects' scores on each of the six dimensions. A sample of this procedure is given in Table 5. In addition, the relation-

TABLE 4

Sample Analysis of Variance for "Degree of Freedom" Dimension

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
<i>Between Subjects</i>	40.6	17			
Sex	7.4	1	7.40	3.43	<.10
Groups	5.3	2	2.65	1.23	—
Sex x Groups	2.0	2	1.00	.46	—
Subjects within groups	25.9	12	2.16		
<i>Within Subjects</i>					
Role	7.4	2	3.70	2.14	—
Feedback	10.1	2	5.05	2.91	<.10
Role x Feedback	8.3	2	4.15	2.40	—
Sex x Role (w)	1.2	2	.60	.35	—
Sex x Feedback (w)	0.5	2	.25	.14	—
Sex x Role x Feedback	10.5	2	5.25	3.03	<.10
Error (within)	41.4	24	1.73		

ship of order of experimental conditions, sex of Alter, and the sex composition of the dyad to each of the altercasting dimensions was explored in separate analyses.

In no case was there a significant order effect. Furthermore, in no case did sex of Alter or sex composition of the dyad have a significant effect, nor were there significant interactions of these variables with other situational conditions.

However, as can be seen from Table 5, the sex of subject effect approached significance in two instances. Boys tended to structure the relationship in more primary terms. This went so far, in one instance, as attempting to suggest an even closer relationship to a female confederate who was giving supportive feedback on the attitude items. It may be of some practical interest to know that the female side-stepped the offer neatly.

Girls tended to place heavier constraints on the relationship. This tendency seemed to come less from active manipulation than from a kind of aggressive

TABLE 5

Probability Levels of Results for Sex, Role and Feedback Main Effects

Experimental Variable	Dimension					
	Structural Distance	Evaluative Distance	Emotional Distance	Support-Support Seeking	Inter-dependence Autonomy	Degree of Freedom
Sex	—	—	<.10	—	—	<.10
Role	—	—	—	—	<.01	—
Feedback	<.01	<.10	—	—	<.001	<.10

passivity. It would be interesting to know whether this is a general tendency for middle class girls. They are more normatively limited than boys in the range of roles they are allowed to play and are made conscious, during socialization, of being held accountable for the kinds of relationships they do enter. Perhaps, in turn, they are more limiting in their interaction.

Role. Findings for the principal effects are found in Table 5. One noteworthy pattern is the failure of assigned role as an important situational variable in this experiment. This finding could be interpreted as the failure of the experimenter to altercast the subject into the experimentally desired role. In retrospect, the explanation appears simple. First, the altercasting of the experimenter was directed at the role the subject was to assume toward a third party, and was on a "one shot" rather than a continuous basis. Furthermore, superordination over one's fellow students, whether delegated from on high or not, is foreign to the student culture. The results for Structural Distance show that where role differences should have been built in by the experimenter's instructions, it was feedback rather than assigned role that was the critical variable.

On only one dimension did the assigned role have a significant effect. When the confederate was in a superordinate position, his altercasting ran counter to normal undergraduate expectations. The subjects coped with this behavior ingeniously, not by challenging the authority of the confederate, but by emphasizing the mutual interdependence between them. Here we have an extension of the theory of coalitions in the triad.⁸ Offers of coalitions should come most frequently from those with least power. Subjects were quite inventive in finding someone against whom to form a dyadic coalition. "He" (the experimenter) or "they" (the student who would be taking the questionnaire) were the usual foils for the subject's proposed "we."

Feedback. The most striking results are found for feedback. In four of the

⁸ Theodore M. Mills, "Power Relations in Three-Person Groups," *American Sociological Review*, 18 (August, 1953), pp. 351-357.

six cases, feedback differentials achieved or approached statistical significance. In each case, the main contrast was between wholly supportive feedback and any negative feedback (either mixed or consistently attacking). Students working on a joint task are not apt to expect open criticism, certainly not without some sugar coating. The negative elements in mixed feedback are likely to have stood out in the subject's perception, so that he experienced this condition as attack.

The feedback results form a consistent pattern. Regardless of assigned role, subjects under attack cast their Alters into positions of subordinate responsibility. They accord Alter evaluative superiority in the task at hand, and project a picture of the relationship in which Alter's desires, rather than cooperation and mutual involvement, are primary. Furthermore, they tend to constrain their Alters to play this and no other role. Under attack, the main thrust of Ego's acts is to tell Alter, "You take over."

CONCLUSIONS

Accounting for the processes involved in interpersonal control is basic to understanding interaction. We have attempted to deal with this problem by assuming that control is carried out through altercasting—creating an identity for the other congruent with one's goals. The research undertaken had two main purposes. The first was to test the feasibility of this approach; the second, to test its utility in yielding theoretically meaningful results.

The methodological findings were promising in relation to the first purpose. The reliability coefficients indicate the possibility of close agreement among independent observers and suggest that the rating techniques are readily communicable. Intercorrelations among the dimensions reveal little "halo effect," with one possible exception, and the pronoun count correlations show that the ratings are significantly related to a more "objective" behavioral index.

Although it is safe to assume that the necessary feedback differentials were secured for the experiment as a whole, no such assumption can be made about role assignment. The evidence from the post-experimental questionnaire seems to indicate that assigned role carried little saliency for the subjects. However, the finding that offers of coalition were initiated almost exclusively by subordinates makes little sense unless the subjects were aware of their positions in the encounters and were acting on the basis of that awareness.

The research turned up findings of substantive interest. The typical response to attack in a peer relationship was to place the mantle of responsibility on the other's shoulders. It would be interesting to know how situationally general this tendency is. The same question may be asked concerning the observed sex differences in altercasting patterns.

In sum, this maiden voyage shows some promise for the interpersonal task approach. In this approach, acts are analyzed on the basis of their potential consequences for limiting others' responsive lines of action. This pilot study represents a beginning toward operationalizing functionalism in social psychology.

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