

# An Autoethnographic Reflection of Adult Learning and Paternal Grief

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**Abstract:** This study examined my experience as a doctoral student following the death of my son. The focus of this research is on the interaction of paternal grief and adult learning in the context of higher education. The central emphasis seeks to offer existential bearing to the interplay between the narrative identities of adult learner and paternal griever that is seldom considered in combination for adult learning scholarship. I employed the reflexive process of autoethnography through free writing and review of personal journals. I used the analytical lens of a dialogical narrator who held two opposing I-positions of the self, adult learner and grieving father. This methodological approach allowed the pursuit of adult learning to emerge into a position that promoted reorganization of my grief, bridging the divergence of loss and gain. This study placed focus on the dialogical I-positions of self as a vector for growth. The novelty of this research is the placement of andragogical considerations in adult learning following paternal grief. These considerations have capacity to endorse the paternal griever I-

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position to begin understanding grief transition through pursuit of knowledge. Characterizing the embodied transition is central to the bereavement process. Bringing the transition into dialogue with adult learning can provide educators with enhanced instructional

precision when planning and conducting learning activities in a grief environment.

**Keywords:** adult learning, paternal grief, I-position, autoethnography, murder

## Introduction

During my first semester of doctoral studies, my son was murdered. The courage to continue my education after Drew's death helped me survive a pain that words have no use for describing. The purpose of this autoethnographic reflection is to explore the emotional interplay a grieving father endured while negotiating doctoral education, and offer adult learning scholarship salient opportunities to plan and conduct learning activities in a grief environment. The central emphasis seeks to offer existential bearing on two intensely interwoven positions of

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self-identity—adult learner and grieving father—that is seldom considered in combination. H. J. Hermans (2001) refers to these positions of self-identity as I-positions, with each I-position having a specific voice and narrative interpretation within a multifaceted self. This is a story grounded in two I-positions that confront the narrative brain to make sense of a conflicted self. Each voice had a story about the experience. It is an inquiry of almost unmentionable anguish and academic discourse. The vulnerability was challenging and helped to explain difficulty some fathers have expressing grief, that for most is cognitive and solitary (Cook, 1988). This study contributes to adult learning scholarship from the perspective of transferring I-positions of the self through doctoral studies. On this basis, I was able to exercise agency over my grief, abandon my solitude, and tell this story.

### ***Background of Two Conflicting I-Positions of Self—Adult Learner and Grieving Father***

My wife and I were away for the weekend when my phone rang at 1:47 a.m. on a Sunday in November of 2017. My son's friend frightfully yelled: "Have you heard? Drew's been shot, he's in surgery!" The drive home that normally took 2 hours turned into 1 hour of anguished fear for my son's life. It was another agonizing hour before a police detective arrived at the hospital delivering the news that changed everything.

I had experienced grief before. I lost my father when he was young. I learned that a close death is life altering. I managed my grief with the understanding that death should be a hierarchy where a father's legacy is passed down to his son; an understanding that left me empty the second I lost my son. Countless times, I abruptly awoke between 1:30 a.m. and 2:00 a.m. that first year. I would turn on the TV to distract my mind. It was a shocking discovery to recognize murder embedded in "entertainment" everywhere. The sight of gunshots rendered a grieving father, alone, in the middle of the night, on his living room couch, weeping uncontrollably. Drew's

murder became my marionette; its strings connected to the emotions of my soul manipulated at will against any resistance. My initial grief was cloaked in suppressed guilt, manifested by my inability as a father to protect my own legacy. Prior to November, I had previously imagined suicide a manifestation of human weakness, a silly and shallow misconception that I now recognized upon its contemplation. I would be devoid of the strength to do anything really, much less continue my education; or so I thought. I returned to school 3 weeks later and defended my doctorate dissertation the day before the 3-year anniversary of my son's death.

### **Methodology**

This study used autoethnography as a method to examine myself through dialogical self-theory (Hermans, 2001) within the merged context of paternal grief and adult learning. In the aftermath of child loss, a parent's identity is often interpreted as a disorganization of self-positions—considered here as multiple self-identities—each with narratives that are normally a fundamental part of a person's cognition, affect, motivation, and social interaction (Barrera et al., 2007; Hermans, 2001). For this research, I narrate disparate self-positions to make meaning of the hidden sight of paternal grief while engaged in doctoral studies for adult learning scholarship.

Autoethnography is a qualitative form of reflective self-narration which researchers use "their own experience in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions" (Holt, 2003, p. 19). The self-other interaction explored in this study was my own dialogical I-positions of self (paternal griever) and other (adult learner). The shaping of the self is intertwined throughout our cultural and subcultural perspectives within our own societies (Hoppes, 2014; Ricoeur, 1998). This perspective of self is made up of characters (e.g., adult learner, student, parent, and father) that belong to narratives that can be represented as I-positions (H. J. Hermans, 2001). I attempted to foreground my I-positions for self-discovery to

better understand the role of adult learning in my story of paternal grief.

An individual's I-position is assumed as a specific character that creates a (sub)story of "who I am." I-positions are distinguished for being bound to a particular point in time and place but can alter in accordance with the evolution of time and place (H. J. M. Hermans & Olés, 2013). Each person may experience multiple I-positions simultaneously and during a lifetime. Some I-positions elevate to dominant characters and exchange evidence with other I-positions about their respective representations. I-positions facilitate meaning to a person's life. Drew's death left a dearth of meaning to a father's life which had once been bursting with living. This research is an autoethnographic reflection of my I-positions following Drew's death that creates a causal link between adult learning and paternal grief to inform a coherent sense of meaning.

Evolution of the self is a fluid process of centering and decentering I-positions of inner dialog (H. J. Hermans 2001). A person's frame of reference of who they have become varies with the experience of accumulating self-narratives—engendering a person's identity of self at that time and place (McAdams, 2013). On this basis, I started my autoethnography relying on memories in my head (Wall, 2008) to transport me "back in the place and situation, both physically and emotionally" to the murder of my son (Dashper, 2016, p. 219). I engaged the overwhelming pain of free-writing memories that bore grief, guilt, anger, and healing; exposed as truth to my experience (Lamott, 1994). I archived my memories to capture the linearity of my grief while writing for metacognitive insight of grief transition as it intersected my inner dialog of grieving father and adult learner. My initial intention was to only rely on my head notes and memories for analysis (Wall, 2008). However, this material seemed to suppress some of the rich data needed to explore my dialogical I-positions in the months following Drew's death. I attributed the suppression of explicit memories of that time to my current writing perspective where my new I-position(s) have, to some extent, subsumed my

pre-existing grief. Ellis (2004) would contribute this to "events in our past are interpreted from our current position" (p. 118).

With this in mind, I summoned the courage for a second data collection; three personal journals written from November 2017 to January of 2019, starting the day I wrote my son's obituary. Through the scribbles, markings, and rants of Hell, comparable patterns to my head notes and memories assembled. The polarizing categories of paternal griever and adult learner organized my data. These categories guided my research questions: how did paternal grief provoked me to construct barriers to my painful emotions through adult learning? And how did adult learning evoke me to deconstruct my painful emotions triggered by paternal grief? My stories are organized around how my two dialogical I-positions start as binary opposites and then evolve through an interpretivist viewpoint ushering progression through my doctoral studies.

## Reflection and Analysis

This section offers each of my I-position as a singular locus of narration to orient the reader. Vignettes illustrate myself within the context of the moment (paternal griever or adult learner) and position myself as a researcher (Pitard, 2016). This orients the reader within my internal observations, personal experiences, and sensemaking (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Notwithstanding, the reader must understand that allowing my self-positions to become visible has open-ended possibilities for interpretation and may be absent definitive research conclusions.

*Adult learner:* Since early adulthood I have had a strong I-position of learner. I was an average high school student. It turns out, not because I lacked the mental acuity, but more likely a product of spending my formative years in an East Texas trailer park. I briefly muddled around after high school taking an occasional class at the local junior college with little direction. A chance meeting with a man who I considered to be a "successful person" changed that. He oriented my perspective with the maxim:

"People choose to have and people choose to have not!" Since, I have chosen education as my path to *have* and completed my first doctorate at the age of 26; a fellowship by 28. Following years of clinical practice, I reengage academia in my late forties; not for career advancement, but the explicit motive of lifelong learning. I was still in the phase of trying to find my bearings 3 months into my doctoral studies when the unthinkable happened.

*Paternal griever:* I distinctly remember feeling embarrassed by the trembling in my voice when I called my advisor: "My son was shot and killed yesterday. I don't know when I'll be back, or if I'll be back." My desire to pursue learning was extinguished. I was uncertain if I even wanted to live.

I greeted each person the best a shattered father could at his son's funeral. Recognizable faces provoked memories of a dead son. Strangers were there, too. One of Drew's high school teachers who I had never met was intentional about telling me that he, too, lost a son. He told me a story I had never known. Drew had handwritten him a letter of sorrow and sustenance after his son was killed, a letter he kept and still cherished. He told me the indelible impression Drew had on a teacher and how proud I should be as a father. I was proud, and sad beyond any measure of comprehension. In this moment, I realized my new identity was the father who had lost a son.

My realization was interrupted when I noticed one of my professors approaching me. I was not expecting anyone from school; they were acquaintances at best. Dr. Andrea Ellinger grabbed my lifeless hand. She demonstrated the perfect combination of empathy and reassurance that my position as an adult learner would await the self-discovery needed for a return to doctoral education.

*Adult learner:* I was in agony the days and weeks following Drew's death, disconnected from any definition of life I had imagined. Haunted by unanswered whys and the why nots. The emptiness of the words "things happen for a reason" that were vocalized had mere fullness

in their stupidity. I started noticing the world converge with onlookers postured to avoid uncomfortable interactions. To parody Einstein, grief looks like "curves in the fabric of space-time"; around each curve stood psychological prompts transporting me back into the black hole. I was miserable. I had to do something.

I opened my computer to distract my hands from (metaphorically) squeezing out what little existence I had left. My effort to log into my student account was merely a mindless task of muscle memory. I read emails from classmates and awkwardly thought about them instead of my son. I defaulted to reviewing my missed statistics assignments; a place I discovered where grief was temporarily avoided. The revelation provided relief and evoked confusion. "Am I dishonoring Drew with a distraction?" "Is grief avoidance unhealthy?" "Would engaging my doctorate studies be an act of abandonment towards my wife and remaining children?" I did not have the capacity to formulate answers, but I wrote these words on a piece of paper that I taped to my desk: "have the courage to learn and you will have the courage to live." I reengaged my professors and started back to school.

*Paternal griever:* A few months after Drew's death, I participated in an academic conference. At dinner, I sat next to a woman who I did not know. Pleasantries traversed the typical path while waiting for our meal. Then, a question I had answered many times appeared like a lurking demon in my peripheral. "So, do you have children?" she asked. That question so unexpectedly disordered me. "How do I answer this question?" "I have two children, but I had three." "Do I still *have* three?" "How does a parent define 'have' in this situation?" "What is wrong with me?" After what must have been uncomfortable silence, I simply answered "yes" and swallowed the rest of my words with a drink of water. The remaining evening was vacant of any substance, my embarrassment insulated any value I could have added to the table.

It was a restless night—the question echoing in my head. I regretted unconscionably imposing my grief during an encounter with a colleague. I

felt ashamed only answering “yes” and not honoring my son with the conversation he deserved. Reflecting on this experience, I realized I needed to better prepare for experiences triggering unforgivable reactions cloaked in paternal grief. I discerned the necessity to be able to tell the potentially untellable. Next morning, clutching the security of a coffee cup, I noticed my dinner colleague’s glance trying its best to go unnoticed. I delivered a half-defeated smile and walked her direction. I summoned the courage to apologize and explained why our dinner exchange was uncomfortable. I told her the story of a son like a proud father should whilst she offered the support of an empathetic mother.

*Adult learner.* On April 23, 2018, I wrote in my journal: “I didn’t remember! Why did I forget?” For the most part of the previous day, I had class. I participated. I presented. I laughed. I socialized at lunch. I never once thought about Drew. “SHAME!” also, in large letters on the page. The university environment had denied consciousness to my grief.

The awareness of repressed grief was an important discernment. I started embracing the inner dialogue of my I-positions (H. J. Hermans, 2001); less conflicted by shame—embracing the relief. I navigated myself from behavioral reinforcement of statistics to construct deeper meaning of my other subjects. I became an increasingly competent participant in my education. I was substituting my loss with learning; I found comfort in that. Neimeyer et al. (2010) wrote to “accommodate to [our] loss by reorganizing, deepening, and expanding [our] beliefs and self-narrative to embrace the reality of [our] loss” (p. 74). My self-narratives were transforming. My ability to cognize became clearer—my professors were less self-conscious of prompting sorrow. I objectively considered feedback without getting lost in the subjective feelings it once triggered. Grief was present, but my inner dialogue agreed grief was only a piece of me, not all of me. I gained more authority over my grief which validated my adult learner I-position. My progression was not linear by any means. I had moments (and still do) when the dominance of

grief paralyzed me, but I managed to achieve some degree of power over grief through the pursuit of knowledge. And the cognitive capacity required completing my dissertation.

## Constructing Meaning

The processes of paternal grieving and adult learning will undoubtedly remain vacant a certain scope of understanding. However, owning each I-position simultaneously gave me the opportunity to construct meaning from the dialogical context. Following Drew’s murder, I felt devoid of any sense of meaning or existence. Kauffman (2011) writes “[t]he initial shock of death’s omnipotence knocks the self unconscious” (p. 5). I relate to this by describing my emptiness as a childlike view; stripped of the experiences that constructed my adulthood up to that point—left to “learn it all over again” as if Piaget’s (1970) stages of childhood development restarted. My vignettes describe stages that served to reorient the development of my I-positions similar to how Daloz (2012) draws from research (e.g., Gilligan, 1993; Kegan, 1998; Kohlberg, 1969) in adult development that offers three stage progressions: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. The focus of the pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional stages are survival, acceptance, and critical reflection, respectively. Adopting these stages as it related to the transition of my dialogical I-positions provided valuable insight to frame the orientation of how I learned at each stage and the subsequent andragogical considerations.

The findings suggest that I assumed the I-position of paternal griever in my pre-conventional stage. Drew’s murder rendered obscure any prior I-position of adult learner. Death can give authority to the bereaved to lose sight of goals, values, or identity (Klass, 2001). Yet, the behavior of logging into my student account for the first time following Drew’s death provided an opportunity to do something more mindful in that moment. Mindfulness has the power to reconstruct stressful events and transform them into positive meaning (Garland et al., 2015). The awareness that engaged learning disengaged my grief was



important in my pre-conventional stage. It prompted a course of operant conditioning; a self-protective orientation that reinforced my need to distance myself from grief. Engaged learning became Pavlovian and what behaviorism theorists could contribute to learning explained by combining external conditions in a stepwise order based upon a set of controlled stimuli (Skinner, 1974). The repetition of controlled stimuli slowly re-enforced a change in my behavior. My adult learner I-position was rescuing my paternal griever I-position by systematically adjusting my stimuli through course of study. I began to gain confidence as my adult learner I-position arranged the “contingencies of reinforcement in the learner’s immediate environment” (Leonard, 2002, p. 16).

It was not the cognitive learning, but the behavior of learning that aptly served to progress my ability to marginally engage. I infer this from the fact that I completed my statistics class that semester, but I received the grade of incomplete for two classes that required research papers as a final project. Engaging the depth of cognitive complexity required to complete them was impossible. However, my statistics class required daily participation to keep up with the progression of content. The daily check-ins served as a conditional behavior to disengage from my grief for short periods. Over time, this repetitive behavior gave me confidence to adopt a strategy to make personal meaning of my adult learning experience. This cognitive process linked my two I-positions together to make sense of their acceptance—a progression to the conventional stage of development where I was able to complete the two research papers the following semester.

My conventional stage was a key element for developing cognitive procedures and schemas to deconstruct my dialogical I-positions. Talbott (1997) describes grieving parents in two categories: perpetual grievers and survivors. Parents who become survivors often find meaning and purpose in life after a child’s death. For me, finding meaning and purpose started when I began to understand that my I-positions could have a commingled existence. I could be a griever and

a learner—I did not need to be one or the other (Klass, 2013). For example, I could engage in an academic conference and at the same time feel discouraged by an unforeseen display of grieving behavior. The cognitive dissonance roused me to spend more time on solving this problem and have better insight. I began to emphasize the importance of evolving myself and my grief perspective. I took opportunities to reconcile my reality and transform my learning. Cognitive theorists would interpret this as a reasoning practice where learning occurs through recognized experiences by making sense of environmental inputs (Ertmer & Newby, 2013).

I became more conscious of my internal processes when confronted with external conditions seeking acceptance that my dialogical I-positions would “fit in.” I created space for them to have conversations among themselves and to actively construct their knowledge (Valsiner, 2005). I engaged for longer periods of time in the cognitively complex tasks of doctoral studies; and I felt peaceful about my time away from grief. My position as an adult learner became more interpretive and recursive—I accepted grief was a part of me, not my part. I started to experience greater fluidity in the internal representation of my I-positions of self. To understand the learning that was taking place, I critically examined my actual experience (Bednar et al., 1992) and purposefully compartmentalized each I-position (Grimell, 2016). The compartmentalization allowed my adult learner I-position to complement the level of knowledge needed to complete my dissertation with the level of cognitive processing required for the task.

My post-conventional stage culminates here with this paper. This stage of adult development consists of amplified cognitive capacity, emotional understanding, interpersonal awareness, and more empathic reflection (Gilmore & Durkin, 2001; Kegan, 1998). This stage of adult development also correlates with effective leadership (McCauley et al., 2006; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009). Although my dialogical I-positions of self remain an intrinsic part of my existence, my adult learner I-position became

dominant and took a leadership role in actively constructing my current knowledge of self. My adult learner I-position validated an experience that gave me authority over my grief. Constructivism theorists would classify this as an internal cognitive process through which, when confronted by paternal grief, modified my learning schemas through a reflective practice to construct a new meaning from my new perspective. The cognitive discourse of my conflicting I-positions after Drew's murder served as my vector for learning and constructing new meaning. A constructivist view of learning maintains that learning is a process of making sense and meaning of lived experiences (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). This study of self is my attempt to codify my experience as meaning. This autoethnographic probe facilitates my acknowledgment of paternal struggles and "permits a necessarily ambiguous and messy in-depth exploration" of my lived experience (Stirling, 2016, p. 279). My intention to reflect on my painful experience has helped me to discover "an identifiable self somewhere in the chaos" (Riches & Dawson, 1996, p. 12). My post-conventional stage allowed me to begin deconstructing the barriers that I had constructed around my painful emotions and not only make friends with my paternal grief but understand that it is not my core identity. I am an adult learner who continues to learn about my grief.

## Discussion

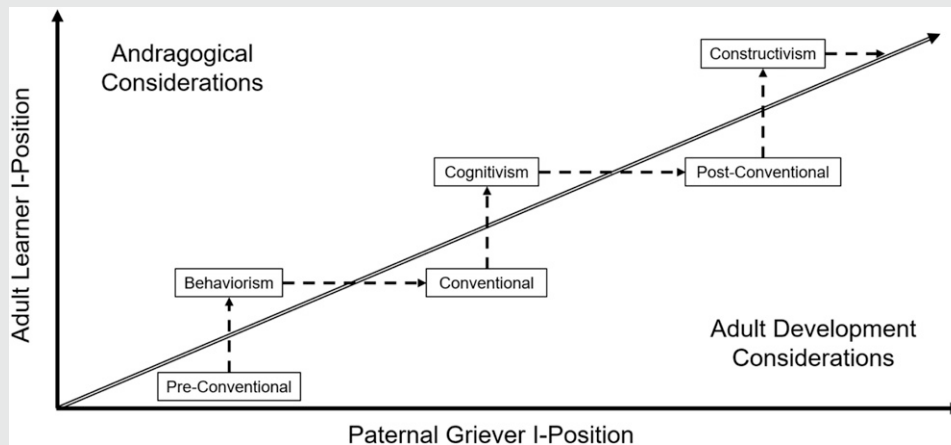
This study produced insight that my concurrent dialogical voices of loss (grief) and gain (learning) progressed through a continuum of adult development that restarted when I heard the words "Drew has been shot." The physical and emotional agony that I initially felt was unbearable to the point of my wanting to choose death (Harper et al., 2011). I was no longer in control of my I-positions of self; I withdrew back to a childlike stage (Piaget, 1970). It was like grief had rendered obscure any prior appearance of adult sensemaking (Murphy, 2000). I was in a pre-conventional stage of survival.

The engagement of coursework triggered mindfulness that adult learning could act to thwart paternal grief. Although this initial engagement, for the most part, was behavioristic in its distraction, it offered an important step for unpacking my grief experience. I recognized that I was able to construct a grief barrier through this behavior. I used the repetition of statistics assignments to generate new reinforcements on my cognitive condition. I deepened my capacity over time and situated my cognition by reorganizing my experience and attributing meaning (Neimeyer et al., 2006). I emerged from a pre-conventional stage to a conventional stage. The voice of grief began to dampen, if only for fleeing moments. I evolved to a position of self that seemed to give permission for my professors to expect knowledge progression without fear of intruding on a grieving father. Eventually, my adult learner I-position took a leadership role and enhanced my capacity to think critically about my experience. This constructivist orientation was the evolution of my continuum of development that prompted reorganization of my conflicting I-positions into a third position—a composite self-perspective—bridging the divergence of loss and gain.

## Implications and Recommendations

The implications of this research places emphasis on reorienting dialogical I-positions of the self through adult learning following the death of a son. Deriving implications from this broadly psychodynamic matter for adult learning scholarship evolved to include a focus on conventional stages of adult development (Daloz, 2012). That is, within the context of adult learning, each stage occasioned on the continuum of adult development (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional) required the corresponding instructional theory (behavior, cognitive, and constructivist) necessary to pose the best opportunity to occupy the bereaved emotion of the student in that moment of time (Figure 1). Drawing on research that highlights the

**Figure 1.** Continuum of dialogical I-positions—paternal griever and adult learner. *Note:* Andragogical considerations at each stage of adult development for students with dialogical I-positions of paternal griever and adult learner.



importance of emotional experience with the context of adult learning, “[h]elping learners understand and make sense of these emotion-laden experiences within the context of the curriculum represents one of the most important and most challenging tasks for adult educators” (Dirkx, 2008, p. 9).

This research adds to the adult learning literature by affirming the cognitive appraisal of the grieving self, in the context of adult learning, is linked to a qualitative shift in I-position—a progression where the adult learner I-position evolves as dominant over the paternal griever I-position. From this viewpoint, adult learning environments can characterize both the internal experience of grief progression and the external construction of curricular states required to pose the best opportunity to occupy the bereaved emotional state of the student.

Implicit in this discussion is the need for adult learning educators to recognize intrapersonal aspects of paternal grief as a reoriented continuum of conventional stages of adult development, irrespective of the student’s stage prior to the loss. These findings have potential to deepen an instructor’s capacity to match the demands of an educational task with the instruction theory required for each level of

cognitive processing on the continuum. This moment is where the importance of the findings allows educators to navigate paternal grief. By engaging the instructional theory associated with the paternal griever’s conventional stage—the degree of cognitive processing required for each task—adult learning educators offer the optimal means for achieving positive stage outcomes. These implications could provide educators with enhanced curriculum development and instructional precision when planning and conducting learning activities in a grief environment. Without this precision to orient adult educators, opportunities for a grieving student to engage the I-position of an adult learner are less likely to occur.

## Limitations

A limitation of this autoethnography research is that it does not benefit from multiple participants and only considers the author’s personal experience. Furthermore, this method may enhance meaning from personal analysis; however, it is not a universal approach (Forber-Pratt, 2015). Paternal grief is remarkably painful to relive through this study of self. My rigid attachment to a traumatic experience includes



cognitive bias and should raise concern for any generalization.

## Conclusion

This study was born out of the love of a son and the love of adult learning. Its intent placed focus on the dialogical I-positions of self as a vector for growth through learning. The novelty of this study is the placement of andragogical considerations for adult learning educators following a student's paternal grief experience. These considerations could have capacity to endorse the I-position of paternal griever to open the door to understanding grief transition through pursuit of knowledge. Characterizing the embodied transition is central to the bereavement process. Bringing the transition into dialog with adult learning can provide adult educators with enhanced instructional precision when planning and conducting learning activities in a grief environment.

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