STRESS AND BURNOUT IN THE PUBLIC ORDER AND NATIONAL SECURITY SYSTEM

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Abstract
This study deals with the problem of professional stress and burnout regarding the police officers who carry out various activities within the field of Public Order and National Safety, at the level of Police Units. A number of 76 police officers, agents and various other officers have been included in this study, with an average accumulated service of 5 years in their respective fields. Two questionnaires have been used to carry out the research, with closed questions, by means of which the main coping strategies employed by police officers in their professional activity have been identified; another aspect taken into consideration was the analysis of the connection between the coping strategies employed and the emotional and physical exhaustion, pertaining to improper management of stress factors.

Introduction

The personnel working within the Ministry of Internal Affairs in general and within the Romanian Police Force in particular consists of employees who carry out their tasks under intense mental and emotional pressure and have to deal with stressful conditions on a daily basis which can arise, on the one hand, from their interactions with regular citizens and, on the other hand, from the specificity of the duties they have to carry out (bearing a firearm and ammunition, being exposed to or managing situations that have a strong emotional impact, maintaining a professional and neutral attitude while solving cases, acknowledging the permanent nature of police duty, handing in quality reports and paperwork and being quick in solving emergency-type situations etc.).

When dealing with daily challenges at the workplace, police officers, perceived as being "*resilient, strong and overqualified*" (Purda-Nicoară, V.L.A., Dorobanțu, M.R., 2012,

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p.45) have developed a series of strategies/mechanisms with the help of which they can manage potentially stressful situations in a much better fashion. Yet, constant exposure to various stress factors, together with certain underlying predispositions in the police officer's personality, may lead to the presence of emotional and physical exhaustion, decreased involvement, a diminished professional capacity and, ultimately, burnout as „*a negative consequence of professional stress"* (Zlate, M., 2007, p. 603).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 1 introduces theoretical aspects of the paper. Next, Section 2 presents the research methodology including hypotheses, the study group, instruments used. Section 4 provides principal results. Lastly, Section 5 presents concluding remarks and avenues for future research.

1. Review of the scientific literature

The study of specialized literature allows us to approximate the costs that are generated by efforts to diminish the negative consequences of professional stress inside the European Zone, which amounts to millions of Euros annually. Among all the professions that are most exposed to the risks of developing a burnout syndrome, there are those pertaining to the health system, welfare system, police force, work domains that involve human interactions, coupled with other numerous responsibilities.

The permanent action of stress factors upon the specialized personnel within the Romanian Police Force, which manifests itself in the form of complex tasks that need solutions, together with some insufficiently developed abilities to solve complex problems, the large volume of work at hand, the pressure of deadlines to manage some duties, the work carried out under stressful and risky conditions, all under the pressure of the competitiveness promoted by the Defense, Public Order and National Safety system, may lead to chronic exhaustion, to the appearance of emotional distress and to a diminished capacity to regulate cognitive and emotional processes.

Given the professional context outlined above, to successfully cope with challenges that may arise at the workplace, police officers have developed various coping strategies (both cognitive and emotional). From a conceptual perspective, Lazarus, R. S., and Folkman, S. (1984), quoted by Stanislawski, K., 2019, have made the first ever distinction between coping based on emotion and the one which is problem-oriented, therefore identifying some answers that concern "*the management and modification of the problem that causes distress*" and answers which are directed towards *"the regulation of emotional answers to the problem*". Further on, separating the strategies into these two categories has been considered too simplistic, thus enabling researchers to create various instruments with the help of which they measured the answers which were subject-specific when confronted with the requirements that surpass their individually available resources at any given moment (there has been an analysis of the sets of beliefs and behaviours that the individuals manifest when being involved in stress-generating situations). Because "*police officers are first responders to potentially stressful situations, their ability to successfully manage stress is critical not only to their own mental health but to the safety of society as a whole*" (Lester, D., Leitner, L. A., Posner, I., 1984 quoted by Patterson, G.T., Chung, I.W., Swan, P.G., 2012, p. 8).

Following long-term exposure to the state of emotional overload at the workplace, coupled with the existence of weak abilities to manage professional stress and some

developments within the personality structure (for example, a tendency towards perfectionism), at the level of police officers who carry out activities that expose the personnel to psycho-social risks, one can notice symptoms which are typical to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, emotional distress etc.

Burnout is nowadays a fact which, within the ICD 11 (International Classification of Disease 11th Revision), is defined as being „*a syndrome which represents the result of chronic stress at the workplace which hasn't been managed properly. It is characterised by: exhaustion and lack of energy, mental distancing from the workplace or feelings of criticism and negativism regarding the workplace and a decrease in professional efficiency*". According to the quoted source, burnout is not a medical condition but refers to a phenomenon which is connected with the workplace and which shouldn't be extended to other aspects of an individual's life.

Burnout at work is a "*physical and psychological reaction in response to the demands of the professional environment*" (Ersayan, A. E., Çankaya, B., Erdem, G., Broers, N. J., & de Ruiter, C., 2022, p.728). It has been operationalized as the result of the interaction of three dimensions (Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W.B., Leiter, M., 2001, p.403): *emotional exhaustion* (loss of enthusiasm for work, significant decrease in professional motivation, change in attitude towards work in the sense of perceiving it as an activity that exceeds the capacity for response, loss of professional interest; professional demands are no longer appreciated as manageable), depersonalization (distancing from work and from those they provide services to/care for, irritability), *reduction of personal involvement* (feeling of personal inefficiency, diminished personal value).

The term "*burnout*" has undergone various reconceptualization over time, its essence being given by: loss of energy and enthusiasm towards the profession, as a result of working conditions; feeling of helplessness and impotence, cumulated with low self-esteem and negative attitude towards work, life and other people; irritability, marked, chronic fatigue that causes a decrease in professional performance; inability to mobilize resources; an accumulation of negative feelings/a condition resulting from carrying out too many professional tasks under the action of the time factor.

2. Research methodology

The scope of research

This study aims to identify the main coping strategies used by the personnel that carries out its activity in a professional environment of great mental pressure and to analyse the connection between the strategies of coping with professional stress and burnout with the purpose of achieving a better understanding of the specific ways in which individuals adapt to stress-generating factors which act upon the personnel that activates within the field of Public Order and National Security Sistem.

Hypotheses

We have estimated that there is a significant relationship between the coping strategies and the extent or level of burnout.

We have assumed that there is a significant statistical relationship between the coping strategies and the seniority and work experience of police officers who are part of the Public Order and National Safety Sistem.

We have estimated the presence of a significant relationship from a statistical point of view between the age of the respective respondents and burnout.

The Study Group

The total number of participants in the research was 76 police officers who carried out their activity within the specialised structures of the Romanian Police Force, out of which 52 were male (68,4%) and 24 were female (31,6%). The respondents were aged between 21 and 56 years old (55,3% are part of the 30-39 years old age group), with work experience ranging between 1 and 30 years, most of them being part of the group of 11-20 years of work experience (46,1%).

When talking about their educational background, more than half of the respondents had benefitted from higher education (52,6%); moreover, 25% of subjects had graduated post-high school and professional studies institutions within the field of police duty, while a percentage of 11,8% of them are MA or post-university studies graduates.

While monitoring their civil status, we saw that 38 of the subjects that took part in the study were married (50%), 26 were unmarried (34,2%) and the rest were either divorced (11,8%) or part of a consensual union (3,9%).

Instruments used

Within this research, according to protocol, the subjects were offered two questionnaires:

The cognitive-emotional coping questionnaire (CERQ):

This instrument is made up of 36 items which allow us to identify the types of functional, adaptive coping, as well as disfunctional, non-adaptive coping:

• *Self-blaming* – the subject's thoughts are oriented towards his own persona, considering himself/herself guilty for what had happened;

• *Acceptance* – the subject's thoughts are oriented towards a feeling of resignation, of acceptance without any struggle when undergoing a specific situation and of reconcilement with how things stand;

• *Rumination* – the persistence of some ideas and thoughts about past negative experiences;

• *Positive refocalization* – reorientation of various thoughts on some pleasant experiences and not on the negative event itself;

• *Refocalization on planning* – the subject's thoughts are centred on the steps that he has to take to deal with the situation;

• *Positive reevaluation* – reinterpreting the event in the sense of seeking a positive experience, its resignification towards providing it with a positive valency;

• *Putting things into perspective* – the thoughts are directed towards more serious events and, after a quick comparison, the result is minimizing the current negative event;

• *Catastrophizing* – emphasizing/exagerating issues/problems that had happened to the respective person;

• *Blaming others* – responsibility, blame is directed towards others for what had happened.

Each of the 9 coping strategies includes a number of 4 items; the 36 statements are assessed by the subjects with the help of 5 steps (*"(almost) never", "sometimes",*

"usually", "often" "(almost) always") depending on the extent to which these go with the way they had behaved in the difficult, stressful situations they had experienced in the past.

Inventory of Professional Exhaustion Assessment (research option) IEEP (IPEA):

The instruments, which are applicable to and valid for the Romanian population, are made up of a number of 6 dimensions:

• *Exhaustion* – *"severe lack or loss of energy, both physical and mental"* (Schaufeli, W.B., Desart, S., De Witte, H., 2020),

• *Mental distancing* – the attitude of distancing oneself from the workplace, the decrease in personal involvement,

• *Emotional control affectation* – (reduced) capacity to tune/keep under control various negative emotions and feelings,

• *Cognitive control affectation* – (reduced) capacity to tune cognitive processes (for example, the prosaic function, memory etc.),

• *Mental distress* – emotional detachment from the workplace,

• *Psychosomatic symptoms* (for example: headache, stomachache etc.)

The instruments consisted in a number of 33 statements and the subjects were asked to analyse each of them with the help of the 5 steps scale (*1-"never", 2-"rarely", 3-"sometimes", 4-"often", 5-"always"*). Each dimension was made up of a number of 4 to 8 items.

Handing out the questionnaire, data collection, data analyses and interpretation took place between August and September 2024.

The research instruments were calculated based on Alpha Crombach coefficients and these are given in Table no. 1.

Table no. 1. Alpha Crombach coefficients

Scale	Subscale	Alpha Crombach
CERQ	Self-blaming	.66
	Acceptance	.76
	Rumination	.88
	Catastrophizing	.62
	Blaming others	.76
	Positive refocalization	.83
	Refocalization on planning	.76
	Positive reevaluation	.86
	Putting things into perspective	.82
	TOTAL CERQ	.92
IEEP	Exhaustion	.85
	Mental distancing	.64
	Emotional control affectation	.57
	Cognitive control affectation	.67
	Mental distress	.71
	Psychosomatic symptoms	.73
	TOTAL IEEP	.91

Source: Own assessment

3. Results and discussions
Descriptive analysis

In Table no. 2 we present the results of the primary data analysis by using the answers provided by the 76 subjects who have taken part in this survey.

Table no. 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Total Number of Respondents	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistical	Statistical	Statistical
Self-blaming	76	8,47	3,09
Acceptance	76	12,00	4,33
Rumination	76	10,26	4,67
Catastrophizing	76	5,86	2,42
Blaming others	76	6,04	2,52
Positive refocalization	76	12,84	4,57
Refocalization on planning	76	15,74	3,40
Positive reevaluation	76	16,96	3,18
Putting things into perspective	76	13,20	4,92
Exhaustion	76	13,18	4,74
Mental distancing	76	7,17	2,77
Emotional control affectation	76	5,34	1,58
Cognitive control affectation	76	6,42	1,92
Mental distress	76	8,87	2,95
Psychosomatic symptoms	76	6,91	2,19

Source: Own assessment

By analyzing the data presented above through the lense of the CERQ questionnaire, we were led to conclude that the highest scores were obtained at the level of adaptive coping strategies like: refocalization on planning (M=15,74), positive reevaluation (M=16,96) and putting things into perspective (M=13,20).

Positive reevaluation is a strategy employed to cope with potential situations that can generate stress and which is utilised by the personnel that carries out operational activities; it can be explained by the fact that adopting a positive attitude, an optimistic view in professional contexts is the expression of the experience one has gained (both in life and the profession) and may influence the police officer in keeping the situation under control when he has to intervene with efficiency and professionalism.

Refocalization on planning determines the subjects to reorient themselves towards the steps needed to be undertaken to solve the problems they are confornted with. Putting things into perspective refers to a person's conscious coping efforts which analyze the current negative perspective, from a comparative point of view, with potentially worse situations, the result being a minimizing of the current situation effects.

Catastrophizing and blaming others are the dimensions that obtained the lowest scores: M=5,86 and M=6,04. The results thus obtained within these scales are in accordance with what has been mentioned previously, therefore the exaggeration of problems which the subjects are confronted with is a strategy that police officers employ with a low frequency, therefore not supporting other individuals in solving problematic situations.

The strategies of rumination and self-blaming register average scores (M=10,26 and M=8,47 respectively) and can be assessed as being preliminary strategies to the highly adaptive ones; attributing responsibilities to oneself for solving personal problems together with the persistence of those thoughts that are directed towards negative effects can be interpreted as an intermediary stage towards the implementation of adaptive coping strategies.

Statistically, we haven't registered significant differences between the representatives of the two genders (the registered significance threshold is higher than 0,05) regarding the coping strategies employed; this lack of a significant difference is somewhat in tune with the policies that were promoted during the police officers' years of education, a period in which gender equality is emphasized and in which there is a necessity for physical and tactical training that is similar to both genders, therefore enabling the police officers to efficiently handle and solve any crisis that arises.

Nevertheless, there were significant differences in the way in which strategies were employed: self-blaming (t=-2,73, p<0,05) and catastrophizing (t=-4,80, p<0,01) between the police officers who have just started their professional career (1-5 years interval) and the personnel that are reaching the end of their career (21-30 years interval).

Catastrophizing, as a coping strategy, shows significant differences between police officers who are at the beginning of their career (1-5 years) and those who have accumulated some average experience at the workplace (6-10 years)-(t=4,80, p<0,01). Blaming others is another coping strategy regarding which, at a certain significance threshold (p<0,01), there have been differences between the personnel whose years at the workplace fall within the interval of 1-5 years and the personnel with an average work experience of 6-10 years.

When we discuss about burnout, the data analyses presented in Table no. 2, exhaustion, and lack of mental energy appear to be significant (M=13,18), being followed by "mental distress" (M=8,87).

Testing the hypotheses

We have estimated that there is a significant relationship between the coping strategies and the dimension or level of burnout.

Table no. 3. Correlations between the disfunctional coping strategies and burnout

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1.	Self-blaming	-										
2.	Acceptance	.377**										
3.	Rumination	.464**	.467**									
4.	Catastrophizing	.438**	.004	.305**								
5.	Blaming others	.267**	.167	.504**	.281**							

No.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6.	Exhaustion	.160	.21	.223	.036	.157					
7.	Mental distancing	.133	.153	.041	.240**	.216	.667**				
8.	Cognitive control affectation	.194	.190	.115	.148	.206	.652**	.619**			
9.	Emotional control affectation	.188	.038	.140	.174	.242*	.662**	.537**	.304**		
10.	Mental distress	.043	.116	.157	.87	.110	.737**	.547**	.499**	.629**	
11.	Psychosomatic symptoms	.144	.153	.057	.090	.121	.451**	.265*	.342**	.379**	.586**

** correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed)
* correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (2-tailed)
Source: Own assessment

By analysing the correlation indeces above we could underline that there is partial validation for the first hypothesis, meaning that there is confirmation for the connection between catastrophizing as a coping mechanism and emotional distancing (r=.240, p<0,05), as well as between blaming others as a strategy to deal with stressful situations and emotional control affectation (r=.242, p<0,05). It's rather easy to understand the first significant connection, given that fueling thoughts with the most negative scenarios tied to the problematic situations will only defocalize the subject from the essence of the said situations that he or she is confronted with, thus producing „*emotional distancing*". When it comes to the second correlation we have identified, we consider that blaming others exclusively for any problematic situation is closely connected to a diminished capacity to regulate emotions and reactions effectively in order not to fuel unwanted behaviours.

One can notice that the absolute value of the correlation coefficient does not surpass the value of 0,30 which indicates that, although we can identify a statistically relevant connection, the relationship between the two dimensions/levels is weak.

We shall represent what was mentioned previously in the following graphs (no. 1).
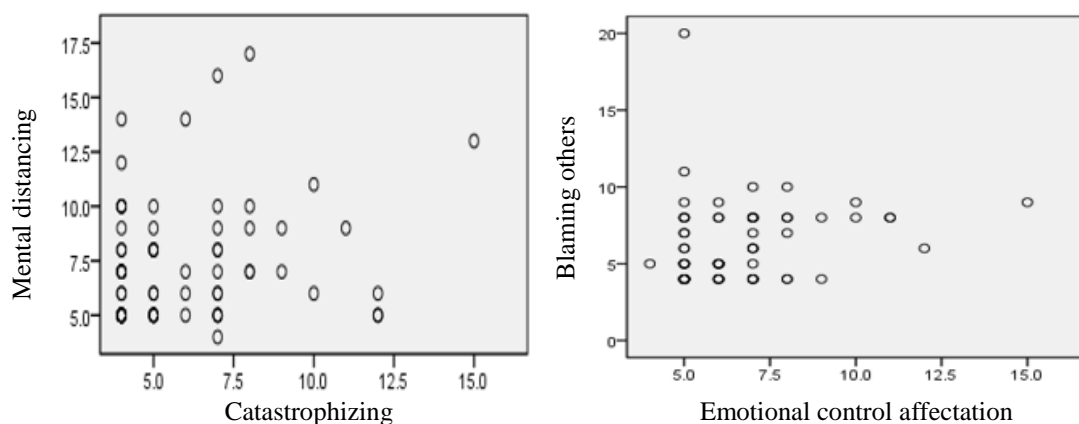
Graphic no. 1. Statistically relevant correlation between the disfunctional coping strategies and burnout

Source: Own assessment

By analyzing the data mentioned above, we are able to identify a statistically relevant correlation between the level of putting things into perspective as a functional coping strategy and the level of burnout: exhaustion (r+.333, p<0,05), distancing (r=.267, p<0,05), emotional control affectation (r=.247, p<0,05), mental distress (r=.276, p<0,05). We also notice that there are directly proportional correlations between variables, even though for the majority of them the strength is low, except for the link between exhaustion and the coping strategy under scrutiny, which is average. It is possible that putting things into perspective happens after the specific manifestations of burnout, which helps in reducing the seriousness of the event the subject has to manage.

Table no. 4. Correlations between the functional coping strategies and burnout

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1.	Positive refocalization	-									
2.	Refocalization on planning	.526**									
3.	Positive reevaluation	.603**	.678**								
4.	Putting things into perspective	.506**	.0580**	.611**							
5.	Exhaustion	.298**	.194	.240**	.333*						
6.	Mental distancing	.154	.171	.111	.267*	.667**					

7.	Cognitive control affectation	.186	.086	.108	.206	.652**	.619**				
8.	Emotional control affectation	.190	.074	.081	.247*	.662**	.537**	.604**			
9.	Mental distress	.206	.073	.077	.276*	.737**	.547**	.499**	.629**		
10.	Psychosomatic symptoms	.066	.025	.017	0,201	0,451**	0,256*	0,342**	0,379**	0,586**	

** correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed)
* correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (2-tailed)
Source: Own assessment

The connections between exhaustion and positive refocalization (r=.298, p<0,01) and between exhaustion and positive reevaluation (r=.240, p<0,05) respectively are statistically relevant. This allows us to state that there is a connection between a decrease in the body's functional capacity and a positive meaning given to the event, and between exhaustion and the individual's cognitive orientation respectively, regarding the events from which they have extracted positive lessons; such correlations can solidify one's belief in the control over problematic situations.

We have assumed the existence of a statistically relevant relationship between the coping strategies and the work experience of the police officers who operate within The Public Order system.

Given this hypothesis, we register a statistically relevant connection, which is inversely proportional between the work experience of the respondent at the workplace and acceptance as a means to manage stressful situations (r=.238, p<0,01), a connection that determines us to estimate that, once the individual has gained some useful experience within a certain work domain, resignation when dealing with certain situations and the acceptance that they cannot be changed or solved are stress coping strategies which are less employed by police officers.

This hypothesis also enables us to analyse the statistical results which confirm the existence of a positive connection, with an average strength (r=.504, p<0,05), between two variables and between catastrophizing as a strategy to manage stress and the experience of the respondent within the work field. The second connection which we have identified is closely linked to the first one, where we can state that once the period in which the subject has carried out activities that pertain to a certain work domain when the police officer was required to deal with stressful events due to the vast number of cases he/she had to solve, there is an increase in the probability of updating potentially negative events, which leads, in its turn, to an exacerbation of the importance of the current situation.

Although it wasn't part of our work hypothesis, we have analysed from a statistical point of view and by using the t-test for independent groups whether the variable aspect

of the experience at the workplace influences the use of various stress coping strategies and the results show that police officers who are close to the end of their professional career appeal more to the strategy of blaming others compared to the respondents with an average work experience (6-10 years) (t=-2.077, p<0,05). Moreover, we have registered differences between the police officers who are at the beginning of their professional career (1-5 years) and those with average work experience, meaning that the former use this strategy with a greater frequency to deal with problematic situations compared to the latter category. When talking about other coping strategies, the data analysis does not allow the identification of significant differences based on the respondents' work experience.

Table no. 5. Differences in coping strategies

„BLAMING OTHERS"			
Subjects with work experience between 6 and 10 years	Test value „t" t = -2,007	Significance threshold p = 0,043	Average 4,91
Subjects with a work experience between 11 and 20 years			Average 6,14
Subjects with a work experience between 1 and 5 years	Test value „t" t = 3,251	Significance threshold p = 0,03	Average 6,89
Subjects with a work experience between 6 and 10 years			Average 4,91

Source: Own assessment

We have estimated the existence of a statistically relevant relationship between the respondents' age and burnout.

Table no. 6. Correlations between the respondents' age and burnout

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1.	Exhaustion	-						
2.	Mental distancing	.667**						
3.	Cognitive control affectation	.652**	.619**					
4.	Emotional control affectation	.662**	.537**	.604**				
5.	Mental distress	.737**	.547**	.499**	.629**			
6.	Psychosomatic symptoms	.451**	.256*	.342**	.379**	.586**		

| 7. | Respondents' age | -.166 | -.013 | -.069 | -.019 | .019 | -.008 | |

** correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed)
* correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (2-tailed)

Source: Own assessment

The above mentioned table consists of information that has been obtained after statistical data interpretation and we notice that the hypothesis under scrutiny is not confirmed, which means that we haven't identified a statistically relevant connection which would allow us to state that there is a correlation between the police officer's age and burnout/its level.

Conclusions

This study has enabled us to statistically analyse the coping strategies used by police officers who carry out their activity in a Police subunit and to highlight the fact that, when exerting their work duties, they appeal to adaptive ways of coping with professional stress (refocalization on planning, positive reevaluation and putting things into perspective). The study does not confirm the presence of statistically relevant differences between the representatives of the two genders, which is by the values and beliefs being promoted by the specific Police Force organizational culture.

There have been statistically relevant differences in employing various disfunctional coping strategies between police officers with different work experience (catastrophizing and self-blaming).

We have identified statistically relevant differences between the level of burnout (emotional distancing, emotional control affectation) and the disfunctional coping strategies (catastrophizing, blaming others) as well as between the level of burnout (exhaustion, emotional distancing, emotional control affectation) and the adaptive coping mechanisms (putting things into perspective) on the one hand and on the other hand, between exhaustion as a particular aspect of burnout and reevaluation and positive refocalization respectively, as a coping strategy.

The experience of police officers in the work field is one variable that influences how they handle stress-generating situations; therefore, this study has revealed an inversely proportional connection between the work experience of the respondents and acceptance, as well as a direct connection between catastrophizing and the subjects' experience in their line of work.

Furthermore, after an analysis of the correlation indeces, we haven't identified a connection between the participants' age and (the level of) burnout.

This paper has focused only on a part of "burnout reality". It is necessary to continue the research of burnout, for example, to understand if all personality types experience the same way burnout and if have the same symptoms or if burnout depends on the work environment (e.g. job demand).

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