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I Am What I Am: The Role of Essentialist Beliefs and Neurodivergent Identification on Individuals' Self-Efficacy

Alexa Lebrón-Cruz[1] and Ariana Orvell[2]
[1] Child Study Center, Yale University
[2] Department of Psychology, Bryn Mawr College

Essentialism is the belief that members of particular categories (e.g., social and cultural) are united by an innate underlying essence. While such beliefs have been associated with negative outcomes such as stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice, minority group members can sometimes use essentialist beliefs to validate their identities. Here, we focus on people who identify as "neurodivergent"—individuals whose brains differ from typical neurology (such as those with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, etc.). We examined whether endorsing essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence serves a protective function among 316 neurodivergent-identifying individuals. As expected, endorsing essentialist beliefs was related to higher self-efficacy. This was especially true of people who highly identified as neurodivergent. These results illuminate how essentialist beliefs may empower a group that is often negatively stereotyped.

Public Significance Statement
The concept of "neurodivergence" refers to the belief that there are differences in people's brains that can affect their day-to-day experiences. People who identify as neurodivergent tend to have diagnosed disorders (e.g., autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and may have shared social experiences of stigma due to their condition(s). Here, we found that believing that neurodivergent individuals are united by a shared, innate essence (i.e., holding essentialist beliefs) was associated with greater self-efficacy, especially for people who identified more strongly as neurodivergent. These results add to a growing body of research highlighting how, under certain circumstances, holding essentialist beliefs is associated with protective outcomes for members of marginalized groups.

Keywords: essentialism, self-efficacy, neurodivergence, identity

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People have a fundamental tendency to categorize elements of their social world (Mervis & Rosch, 1981; Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). One process involved in categorization is "essentializing," believing that members of a category share innate, underlying features that are unchangeable (Gelman, 2004; Haslam & Whelan, 2008; Rhodes & Gelman, 2009). People can hold essentialist beliefs toward natural kinds (e.g., rivers) and living things (e.g., animals), but also social groups (e.g., races and genders). People are also driven by a fundamental need to belong, and the groups to which one belongs provide a means of constructing, validating, and supporting one's sense of self (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Although the majority of research has focused on the pernicious consequences of essentialism (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017; Yzerbyt et al., 2001), holding essentialist beliefs about one's own social group may affirm one's sense of self in certain contexts. Among members of social groups whose identities have been denied or stigmatized by majority group members, viewing aspects of one's identity as immutable, innate, and natural may provide a means to empowerment and identity validation (Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018). Here, we propose that individuals who strongly identify as "neurodivergent"—a person whose brain differs from typical neurology—and who endorse essentialist beliefs surrounding this social category, will report higher levels of self-efficacy.

There are nine dimensions of essentialist beliefs (Haslam et al., 2000) which can be parsimoniously grouped into two dimensions: *natural kinds*, which reflects the belief that group members have

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Ariana Orvell https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2574-2951
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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ariana Orvell, Department of Psychology, Bettws-y-Coed, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Avenue, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010-2899, United States. Email: aorvell@brynmawr.edu

existed across time, that the existence of the category is natural, and that characteristics of category members are unchanging (dimensions: discreteness, naturalness, immutability, stability, and necessity); and *homogeneity*, the belief that group members have inherent similarities that allow people to draw conclusions about the entire group (dimensions: uniformity, informativeness, inherence, exclusivity; Haslam et al., 2000). Research suggests that there is a widespread, cross-cultural tendency for people to essentialize certain social categories such as gender, race, and some aspects of ethnicity (Haslam et al., 2000; Prentice & Miller, 2007), although people essentialize a range of other social categories, as well (e.g., social class, Diesendruck & HaLevi, 2006). Importantly, pinpointing the "essence" that binds category members together is difficult and such beliefs are merely one's *impression* of the existence of an underlying essence; such essences do not necessarily reflect reality (Gelman, 2004).

How Essentialist Beliefs Relate to Divergent Consequences

Most research has focused on the negative associations of essentializing social categories. Holding certain essentialist beliefs about social categories is associated with viewing outgroup members as inferior (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2010; Zagefka et al., 2013), stereotyping, prejudice, and negative outgroup attitudes (e.g., Jayaratne et al., 2006; Leyens et al., 2001; Yzerbyt et al., 2001; Zagefka et al., 2013). Some research indicates essentialism can also be used to *justify* existing social hierarchies or prejudices, rather than leading to them (e.g., Haslam & Whelan, 2008; Mahalingam, 2003; Soylu Yalcinkaya et al., 2017). Yet, there are also contexts in which essentialist beliefs among majority group members are weakly linked with prejudice, if at all (e.g., Haslam et al., 2002), and cases in which they are linked with positive outcomes. For example, stronger essentialist beliefs regarding homosexuality have been associated with more positive attitudes toward gay people (e.g., Haslam & Levy, 2006). Here, endorsing essentialist beliefs that ascribe a biological basis to a group identity may alleviate people who hold that identity of personal responsibility in the eyes of outgroup members, while nonetheless maintaining a belief that they are undesirable (Peretz-Lange, 2021).

Research has also begun to explore the implications of holding essentialist beliefs among historically marginalized individuals. In some cases, endorsing essentialist beliefs, particularly those that are biologically based, about a group to which one belongs is associated with negative outcomes, such as endorsement of stereotypes (Coleman & Hong, 2008) or justification of oppression (Keller, 2005). However, there is emerging evidence that holding essentialist beliefs about one's identity can also be associated with positive outcomes (Morton & Postmes, 2009; Verkuyten & Brug, 2004; Yzerbyt et al., 2001). Members of minoritized groups may engage in essentialism to justify their group's existence and/or mobilize social action for policies that benefit them (Lickel et al., 2000; Mandalaywala, 2020; Verkuyten & Brug, 2004). Endorsing essentialist beliefs also alleviates personal or group responsibility from parts of one's identity that are relatively uncontrollable (Angermeyer et al., 2013; Aspinwall et al., 2012; Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018). Nevertheless, attributing group differences to biological factors is neither feasible nor adaptive for some social categories (e.g., attributing race to biological factors has historically been the basis for racism).

Most relevant to the present investigation, essentializing aspects of one's identity may foster positive beliefs about the self (Mandalaywala, 2020). To the extent that essentialism conveys that a particular category is "real" and that its members share an underlying yet intangible quality, holding such beliefs could validate one's identity. Such beliefs may contribute to the positive formation of group-based identity, which has implications for reflecting back messages about the self (Kachanoff et al., 2020; Mandalaywala, 2020). One possibility is that essentialism fosters self-efficacy, insofar as holding essentialist beliefs about the group to which one belongs provides a sense of affirmation, validation, and empowerment about the self.

Essentialist Beliefs and Neurodivergence

"Neurodiversity" refers to the range of differences in people's brain function, and the belief that these differences are normal (Singer et al., 1999). People with a range of disorders (including but not limited to autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], depression, and learning disabilities) may identify with the term "neurodivergent" (Armstrong, 2010; Doyle, 2020; Exceptional Individuals, 2022; Fenton & Krahn, 2007; Resnick, 2021).[1]

Neurodiversity is a relatively recent social category, and no work to our knowledge has examined the extent to which it is essentialized. As a point of comparison, we can look to literature on essentializing psychological disorders. Laypeople tend to essentialize psychological disorders more than mental health clinicians, and psychological disorders are essentialized less than medical ones (Ahn et al., 2006; Haslam et al., 2002). Among individuals who have psychological disorders, holding essentialist beliefs about them has been associated with "mixed blessings" (see Haslam & Kvaale, 2015, p. 400). Framing some psychological disorders as rooted in biological causes relieves individuals of blame, yet makes them feel less optimistic about their treatment (Lebowitz, 2014; Lebowitz et al. 2013, 2016).

Existing research on the essentializing of psychological disorders has approached this question within the medical model, using diagnostic labels that may in and of themselves activate stigma regarding a person's condition (Garand et al., 2009; Hansson Halleröd et al., 2015). Self-labeling (i.e., voluntary labeling), on the other hand, can empower people (Galinsky et al., 2013; Ogbu, 2008; Rumbaut, 1994). Self-identifying with the neurodivergent label may thus be beneficial. One reason is because the concept of neurodivergence may carry a more positive, normative connotation than "psychological/neurological disorders" or "mental illness." It further encompasses multiple conditions, potentially contributing to its capacity to help people see themselves as connected to others in a larger group-based identity.[2]

The Present Study

Here, we examine how identifying as neurodivergent and holding essentialist beliefs about this category interact to influence self-efficacy, one's perceived ability to fulfill certain tasks to meet a desired goal (Bandura & Wessels, 1994; Bandura et al., 1999; Maddux, 1995). Based on prior literature demonstrating that members of marginalized groups can derive positive benefits from holding essentialist beliefs

[1] Although not everyone who has received (or suspects) a neurodivergent-affiliated diagnosis will personally identify with the term "neurodivergent."

[2] Some may even use the term as a prediagnostic label (i.e., before receiving a diagnosis, people may recognize neurodivergent traits and relate to those already identifying as neurodivergent).

(e.g., Morton & Postmes, 2009; Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), we predict a main effect of essentialism on self-efficacy. We expect this relationship to be stronger among people who identify more with the neurodivergent label, given that a stronger connection to this identity may strengthen the positive associations one gains from holding essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence. We examined this question in a sample of adults who identify as neurodivergent.

Transparency and Openness

This study was not preregistered. All materials, data, and analysis codes are available at https://osf.io/eb7a4/?view_only=725996822d9e4d00977679246ef29338 (Orvell & Lebrón-Cruz, 2023). We report all inclusion and exclusion criteria, provide details on recruitment procedures, and report statistical software used to conduct analyses. Participants completed open-ended questions at the end of the study; these data are being analyzed for a separate paper.

Constraints on Generality

Our population consisted of adults from a range of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds who self-identify as neurodivergent and have access to the internet. Our results may not generalize to the experiences of neurodivergent-identifying minors, those with higher support needs, those with communication differences, and those with limited internet access, among others. This research was conducted with the intention that neurodivergent individuals could share their perspectives directly with researchers, rather than having neurotypical/nondisabled family members and/or caregivers comment on their experiences.

Method

Participants

We received 602 responses from individuals recruited from Facebook and Reddit groups centered around neurodiversity (e.g., r/neurodiversity subreddit), disabilities (e.g., The Invisible Disability Support Group on Facebook), and specific disorders (e.g., r/dyslexia subreddit). Participants who dropped out of the study after only completing the screening questions were excluded ($n = 105$). Additional data quality exclusion criteria were applied (see supplemental material) and we retained a sample of 316 participants. Participants' demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Materials

Measures

Essentialist Beliefs. To measure essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence, participants completed nine items rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), adapted from Haslam et al. (2000). The original scale contains two subscales: "natural kinds/biological entities" and "viewing groups as homogeneous" (see the online supplemental material for all items). However, all nine items were reliable ($\alpha = .74$) and an exploratory factor analysis with a two-component solution did not reveal a two-factor solution which matched the subscales proposed by Haslam et al. (2000). Factor 1 contained six items (loadings: .45–.77); Factor 2 contained three items (loadings: .51–.75). Together, both factors explained 46% of the variance. The nine items were thus averaged to form a composite of essentialist beliefs ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.62$).[3]

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Included Sample

Characteristics	*n*	%	*M*	*SD*
Gender				
Male	111	35.1		
Female	117	37.0		
Self-describe	15	4.7		
Age	240		29.20	6.98
Ethnicity				
White non-Hispanic	118	37.3		
African American	49	15.5		
White Hispanic	37	11.7		
American Indian or Alaska Native	18	5.7		
Asian	14	4.4		
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	10	3.2		
Middle Eastern	7	2.2		
Other	8	2.5		
Income				
Earn below U.S. average	90	28.5		
Earn U.S. average	128	40.5		
Earn above U.S. average	24	7.6		

Note. Table provides demographic information reported by all participants included in the final sample. Percentages do not always sum to 100%, reflecting the fact that some participants did not report their demographics.

Neurodivergent Identification. Participants completed a modified four-item version of group identification (Doosje et al., 1995) to assess the strength of their identification with neurodivergence (e.g., *I feel strong ties with neurodivergent people*) on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*; see the online supplemental material for all items). These items were reliable ($\alpha = .74$) and were averaged to form a composite of neurodivergent identification ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.87$).

Self-Efficacy. We administered two measures of self-efficacy, in random order (see the online supplemental material). One eight-item scale focused on perceptions of performance and success (e.g., *I believe I can succeed at most any endeavor to which I set my mind*, Chen et al., 2001). The other nine-item scale concentrated on perceptions of coping and problem-solving (e.g., *I remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities*, Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Items for both scales were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Responses to items across both scales were reliable ($\alpha = .92$); thus, we created a composite of self-efficacy ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.68$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited for a research study on neurodivergence and personal attitudes. To determine eligibility, participants were asked to indicate whether they identify as neurodivergent based on the study's definition (see the online supplemental materials). Prospective participants were also provided a list of disorders that may fall under the neurodivergent umbrella (see the online supplemental materials). Participants who identified as neurodivergent and provided electronic consent began the study. Participants

[3] Results were conceptually similar when the two subscales of essentialism were entered as separate predictors, suggesting that neither naturalness nor homogeneity components are driving the observed relationships.

completed the neurodivergent identification measure, essentialism measure, self-efficacy measures (counterbalanced), and stigmatization measure (see the online supplemental materials), in this order. They were then asked to complete open-ended questions about their lived experiences (see the online supplemental materials) and demographic information (see the online supplemental materials).

Results

All available data were used for all analyses. To investigate whether participants' essentialist beliefs and neurodivergent identification predicted self-efficacy, we performed a regression analysis using PROCESS Model Macro Model 1 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples to test for moderation (Hayes, 2013). Essentialist beliefs, neurodivergent identification, and their interaction were entered as predictors (mean-centered) of self-efficacy. When significant interactions emerged ($p < .05$) between essentialist beliefs and neurodivergent identification, we tested simple slopes to examine associations at low (−1 *SD* below the mean), moderate (mean), and high (+1 *SD* above the mean) levels of neurodivergent identification. Plots were created in R Studio using the Interactions package (Long, 2019).

We observed a main effect of essentialist beliefs, such that higher endorsement of essentialist beliefs was associated with increased self-efficacy ($b = 0.43$, 95% CI [0.31, 0.56]), $t(298) = 6.82$, $p < .001$. There was no main effect of neurodivergent identification on self-efficacy ($b = 0.04$, 95% CI [−0.05, 0.13]), $t(298) = 0.90$, $p = .367$. However, as expected, the relationship between essentialism and self-efficacy depended on participants' levels of neurodivergent identification ($b = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.38]), $t(298) = 4.25$, $p < .001$.

In testing simple slopes, we found that there were significant relationships between essentialist beliefs and self-efficacy at low ($b = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.37]), $t(298) = 2.48$, $p = .014$, mean ($b = 0.43$, [0.31, 0.56]), $t(289) = 6.82$, $p < .001$, and high ($b = 0.65$, [0.50, 0.81]), $t(298) = 8.17$, $p < .001$, levels of neurodivergent identification. As illustrated in Figure 1, the relationship between essentialist beliefs and self-efficacy was stronger among people who identified more strongly as neurodivergent.

Furthermore, as depicted in Figure 2, the slope of essentialism predicting self-efficacy at low levels of neurodivergent identification was significantly different from the slope at high levels of neurodivergent identification, as indicated by the nonoverlapping confidence intervals (Cumming, 2009). Of note, the results held when both self-efficacy scales were examined as separate dependent variables (see the online supplemental materials).

Discussion

Supporting our predictions, essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence were associated with higher self-efficacy, especially for people who identified more as neurodivergent. Neurodivergent identification on its own was not associated with self-efficacy. These findings converge with prior research suggesting that, under some circumstances, essentializing aspects of one's identity serves a protective function for members of subordinated groups (Mandalaywala, 2020; Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018).

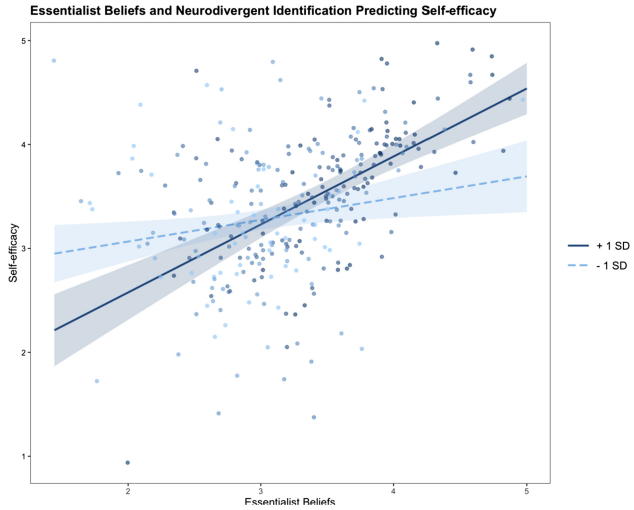
Endorsing essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence may allow members of the neurodivergent community to affirm their own and/or other group members' existence, as well as bolster group- and self-esteem by strengthening ties among people to whom they relate. Indeed, people are motivated to derive support, belonging, and self-esteem from the groups to which they belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Endorsing essentialist beliefs may also alleviate possible feelings of self-blame or self-stigma from one's disability (Kachanoff et al., 2020; Lebowitz, 2014; Lebowitz et al., 2013, 2016). Future research should explore these potential underlying mechanisms.

It may be surprising that neurodivergence is essentialized, given that it encompasses a variety of conditions and disorders. However, the very concept of "neurodivergence" may lend itself to essentialist beliefs, as it reflects the idea that diversity in the neurology of individuals is *natural*. It is also possible that the concept of neurodivergence affords inferences of homogeneity based on shared social experiences (e.g., being bullied), rather than symptomology, among people who identify with this label.

Although the primary purpose of our study was to home in on positive relationships between holding essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence and self-efficacy, there may be instances in which being neurodivergent and holding essentialist beliefs about one's condition(s) is harmful. Essentialist beliefs related to discreteness (i.e., clear boundaries demarcating group membership) and informativeness (i.e., certain traits allowing for inferences about a person) may increase internalization of stereotypes. Holding essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence when one does *not* identify as neurodivergent may also be harmful. For example, "neurotypical" or non-neurodivergent individuals who endorse biogenetic explanations for disabilities and disorders tend to be more rejecting toward, fearful of, and desiring of greater distance from people with them (see Dietrich

Figure 1

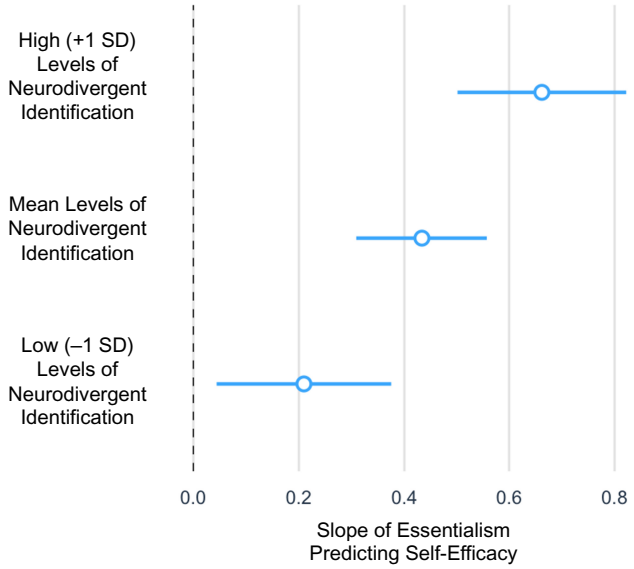
Essentialist Beliefs and Neurodivergent Identification Predicting Self-Efficacy



Note. Figure depicts the relationship between essentialist beliefs and self-efficacy for individuals 1 *SD* above (+1 *SD*) and below (−1 *SD*) the mean in neurodivergent identification; 95% confidence intervals are depicted with shaded bands. Predictors were mean-centered in the analysis but are not mean-centered in the figure, to aid interpretability. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Figure 2

Slopes of Essentialism Predicting Self-Efficacy at Varying Levels of Neurodivergent Identification



Note. Figure depicts the slope of essentialism predicting self-efficacy at low, mean, and high levels of neurodivergent identification. The blue lines indicate 95% confidence intervals of slope estimates. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

et al., 2004; Haslam & Kvaale, 2015; Kvaale et al., 2013). Indeed, when majority group members already have negative attitudes toward individuals with such conditions, explaining that they were "born that way" does not seem to change how they feel toward them (see Peretz-Lange, 2021). A more accepting form of essentialist beliefs may instead involve the idea that such identities are natural (Peretz-Lange, 2021).

Considerations for Future Research

This research engages with people who identify as neurodivergent to begin to understand how being a part of the neurodivergent community is related to one's sense of self and broader well-being. This approach is distinct from extant literature, which tends to focus on how neurodivergent individuals affect *others* (e.g., family members, Lamsal & Ungar, 2021; Neely-Barnes & Dia, 2008; Reichman et al., 2008). Future research can expand beyond representation by actively inviting self-identified neurodivergents into the study's development.

Our sample reflects the fact that people from a range of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and with a range of disorders identify as neurodivergent. However, the neurodivergent experience is complex. Individuals who are neurodivergent and hold other marginalized identities may face "double discrimination" (or "double disadvantage," see Fuentes et al., 2023). People with certain disorders may also face distinct barriers when it comes to their experiences. Future studies with larger samples should systematically examine the nuances of intersectionality when it comes to identifying as neurodivergent, and whether our results generalize across different disorders. Research can also examine who may be included (by oneself and others) in the neurodivergent community.

Lastly, our results cannot establish causality (i.e., whether holding essentialist beliefs engenders self-efficacy or vice versa). We believe it is possible that essentialism engenders self-efficacy, given prior research illustrating that essentialist beliefs can, at times, be used strategically to empower certain groups. One consequence of empowerment may be higher self-efficacy. Based on social identity theory, people whose neurodivergent identity is more central to them may benefit more from holding such beliefs. Future research could directly assess the underlying causal relationship.

Closing Statement

These findings illustrate how essentialist beliefs about neurodivergence are associated with greater self-efficacy, especially among people for whom neurodivergence is an important part of their identity. Our aim is not to erase the existence of disability or to turn it into a "superpower"; we aim to explore whether and how identification with the social label of "neurodivergence" and endorsement of essentialist beliefs are associated with self-efficacy. Possessing essentialist beliefs about kinds or social categories is not inherently good or bad; these beliefs can have divergent consequences depending on the context, the identity of the person holding the essentialist beliefs, the group that is being essentialized, and the individual's motivations (Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018). Further, neurodivergent people continue to experience stigma and stereotypes (e.g., Namkung & Carr, 2020; Serchuk et al., 2021). To reduce barriers for neurodivergents and create a more equitable society, structural and institutional changes are necessary.

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