



## **Dimensions of relationships of students with intellectual disabilities**

**Urea Ionela Roxana**<sup>a\*</sup>, University of Bucharest, Bulevardul Regina Elisabeta, București, Romania

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### **Abstract**

Constant investigations of the ways in which interpersonal relationships are structured has become necessary due to the complexity of interpersonal relationships that we notice in social groups including students. The aim of this research is to underline the specific manner that students with intellectual disabilities establish interpersonal relationships. This paper is based on a complex research on 112 preadolescents with intellectual disabilities and 98 teenagers with intellectual disabilities. We used "Choosing Alter's Test" (focused on revealing the criteria for choosing a friend); "Relations with others" (focused on revealing the criteria underlying the assessment of interpersonal relationships established with an authority), through non-directive interviews. This study advances the idea that the interpersonal relationships that students with intellectual disabilities establish within the school group, are developed based on the importance/significance attributed to each person with whom they interact, to the roles that each person plays in the students' lives and serve to satisfy their security' needs and to meet their contextual needs.

**Keywords:** interpersonal relationships, socialization, relational spaces, social perception process, teenagers and preadolescents with intellectual disabilities;

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\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Urea Ionela Roxana, University of Bucharest, Bulevardul Regina Elisabeta Nr. 4-12, București 030018, Romania  
E-mail address: [roxanaurea@yahoo.co](mailto:roxanaurea@yahoo.co)

## 1. Introduction

The complexity of the interpersonal relationships that we notice in social groups, and in particular in the labour field, with specific dynamics, both horizontally and vertically in each organization, depending on the field of activity and the type of activity performed, suggests the need of constantly investigating the ways in which the interpersonal relationships are structured ( Orehek, Forest & Barbaro, 2018). Around the world experts have conducted series of research to offer some milestones that colleagues can use during the therapeutic process of people with intellectual disabilities, aimed to make them responsible citizens. Some of the experts have narrowed the interpersonal relationships of intellectual disable persons with their state of health, of well-being (Asserman, Asch, Blustein & Putnam, 2016); others have been preoccupied with revealing the particularities of loneliness ( Heiman.& Margalit, 1998), of failing in love (Mattila, Uusiautti & Määttä, 2017), or of sexual relationships (see Lesseliers & Van Hove, 2002).

This study approaches the basic or derived processes connected with the wish to analyse the dimensions of interpersonal relationships of students with intellectual disabilities in relation with the persons that are developed. There is a real spiral of criticisms regarding the quality of the therapeutically and educational services provided with a real community awareness of the long- term implications resulting from the social policy. The analyses are focused on revealing the differences that are significant beyond the current information available about the process valorising the intellectual disables' remaining potential.

### 1.1 Conceptual analyses and background

One of the major features that define the human personality is the ability to establish interactions/ relations with other persons during his/her entire life (Durmuşçelebi & Kuşçuran, 2018). Each stage of a person 's development is marked by different types of human interactions, generically called social relationships. Probably, the most important social relationship type is the interpersonal one. But what does "interpersonal relationships" really mean? Answering the above question is a hard task, since the concept "interpersonal relationship" is no longer specific to the experts in psychology, pedagogy or social sciences. The experts from different domains use, the term "interpersonal relationships" in their vocabulary, because they are present in every kind of social group, in organizations and they are shaped by the specificity of each group, or organization.

Basically, interpersonal relationships designate those direct and reciprocal interactions between people, and they involve a conscious and direct psychological participation. There are different types of social relations, with manifestations and influences at all levels of social existence. In 2015, Cristea, revealed that the interpersonal relationships are present at different levels: a) "*at the psycho-individual level*" (p. 154), they are the direct expressions of psychic factors (cognitive, affective, motivational, etc.) through which interactions between partners are structured and carried; b) "*at the psycho-social level*" (p.154), they are the indispensable framework of interactive processes and phenomena. The influences exerted by the society on the individual as well as the influences that the individual exerts on the social groups can only take place based on a complex system of interpersonal relationships; c) "*at the social level*" (p.154), they appear as a functional infrastructure on which the development and performance of different subsystems depend economic, political, educational, religious.

The development of interpersonal relationships is marked by the socialization process, by the primary social experience, by the level of personal attachment. In time, as Cristea pointed in 2015, those three processes contribute to the formation of a relational scheme, specific to each person who gradually becomes a matrix for all future interpersonal relations, and which is generically called the “*interpersonal relationship style*” (p.159). The interpersonal relationship style has as its core the model of primary relations, but its configuration depends on the tempera intellectual characteristic features of the individual; his/her social intelligence; the structure of the self and of the self -image; the nature and quality of the experience accumulated in ontogenesis; the socioeconomic status (personal and family); the characteristics of membership groups; models and socio-cultural norms which regulates social relations.

In classroom, (which is basically an educational group), the dynamics of interpersonal relationships occurs between two main actors: teachers and the students and have been studied: a) from the perspective of the effects that teachers have on students’ academic achievements (Martin, 2014), students’ motivation (Martin & Dowson, 2009), on students’ creativity development (Opić, 2016); b) their characteristics were highlighted in educational environment (Wubbels & all,2012). Generically, we can say that interpersonal relationships in classroom are structured on two directions: horizontal (between students), where they can be nuanced from simple interactions to friendships, and vertically (between teachers and students) where they are marked by authority, rigor and norms. Regardless of whether we are talking about vertical or horizontal interpersonal relationships, the existence of the interpersonal relationship style is noted both for teachers and students. The interactions between these styles can sometimes generate tense, conflicting situations.

Related to interpersonal relationship style, Cristea in 2015 also pointed its main dimensions: the attitude towards the partner: such as equality, consideration, openness, receptivity, sympathy / superiority, non-receptivity, hostility, the personal involvement in a relationship, the consistency which refers to those attitudes and interpersonal behaviour that are relatively constant, predictable or marked by inconstancy, imprecision. It has its own techniques of priming, maintaining and cultivating relationships such as excessive politeness, using flattery to maintain a relationship, using different means of impressing another person, etc. The interpersonal relationship style, spontaneously or cultivated, to a great extent, has been a condition of the person ‘s social performance, being an important factor in the development of the psychosocial environment. Various perception phenomena take place inside the psychological environment.

Baron and Bryne (2011), defined social perception as a segment of the cognitive process through which the individual arrives to form a self-image and, at the same time, he/she outlines impressions and appreciations about the others. Two aspects are involved in the ample process. First, the individual approaches the problem starting from the Self, and second, the representation of another is part of the vast process of self-perception. The social perception outcomes make any persons to stick a series of "labels" to facts, behaviour, events. In interpersonal relationships, the individual takes on a series of labels and classifications related to relationships with others, to psychic traits. Thus, the individual forms a brief intellectual representation, a representation stemming from the individual's need to "control" reality by reducing the complexity and the differences that make it up. Based on these representations, each person will get sets of criteria that will be used in classifying objects, phenomena, persons, situations in different categories. Moscovici (1998) reached to the following conclusions (p.27): “the ability to classify in a compartment, to categorize objects is an indispensable adaptation capacity..... Categorization favours simplification, and this in turn transforms the world into a more predictable and

more manageable place". (p. 30). As Baron and Bryne revealed (1991), categorization is involved, in social perception process, when social subjects make an impression on each other.

In 2012, analysing "The continuum model of impression" that Fiske and Neuberg (1990) developed to explain the Alter's social perception, I have reached the following conclusions: "a) the subject perceives the other as a unique continuum process of evaluating impressions; b) both assessments based on individual features and on categories constitute the two extremes of this model; c) the answers that have priority are those based on categories, not on individualized judgments; d) the movement along the continuum, from category-based responses to individual responses, relies on interpretation, motivation and attention factors." (p. 42). So, the subjects who perceive social reality meet, in a first stage, a target and automatically classify it as a part of a particular social group. In a second step, they consider personal targeting so categorized according to current interests, goals. If the target has only a minor interest, then the impression process will be shortened, and the evaluations will be essentially category-based. If the target is of major interest, the perceiving subject will activate all the personal attention resources to evaluate all the personal characteristics of the target, triggering the search for a more individualized impression.

The social perception, as well the interpersonal relationship style, is marked by the person's features: age, the state of health, social experiences, type of activities, etc. At persons with intellectual deficiency, the influences upon interpersonal relationship style will come out from the specific traits of intellectual disabled personality. Previous research that the researcher of this current study performed related to social perception at preadolescence with intellectual disabilities have focus more to highlight the way in which the process of social perception of Alter is influenced by different personality traits. The results proved that:

- anxiety determines the structuring of behavioural montages which influences the social perception; the process is characterised by inertia, by surface criteria, by criteria with personal meaning, a meaning for here and now (Urea, 2007, p.67).

- the intellectual disables used in establishing social interrelationships Alter's psychological features focus especially on those that are the surface on and that ensure to intellectual disable preadolescents a certain position in social group (Urea, 2013, p.62).

## 2. Methods

"Choosing Alter's Test". It is a test created for students with intellectual disabilities and it is focused on revealing the criteria for choosing a friend. Each investigated subject was asked to underline from a list of 45 adjectives, those adjectives that characterize his/her friend. The test's features are internal consistency = .834, fidelity index = .727.

"Relations with others' questionnaire" was created for students with intellectual disabilities in 2014 and it is focused on revealing the criteria underlying the assessment of interpersonal relationships established with an authority and it has 30 statements. Each investigated subject was asked to assess each statement on a scale from 1 (not agree) to 5 (total agree). The questionnaire's features are internal consistency = .794, fidelity index = .762. The research also used in our research non-directive interviews. In our investigation, in order to analyse the collected data, we used IBM- SPSS 25 software.

## 2.1 Participants

The research was performed on 112 preadolescents with intellectual disabilities, coming from the urban environment, subjects aged 11-14 years, 58 boys and 54 girls (with  $m_1 = 12.7$  years and median = 12.9 years) (see figure no.1), with I.Q between 59-85. (with  $m_2 = 72$  and median 71), for the first sample. The participation of the preadolescents in this investigation was with their parents' consent. For the second sample, it consisted of ninety-eight (98) teenagers with intellectual disabilities, coming from the urban environment, subjects aged 15-18 years, 52 boys and 46 girls (with  $m_3 = 16.4$  years and median = 16.7 years) (see figure no.2), with I.Q between 56-85 (with  $m_4 = 74$  and median 73). The participation of the teenagers in this investigation was with their parents' consent. All students with intellectual disabilities that were subjects of our investigation came from schools with over 250 students enrolled, received at least two years of psycho-pedagogical assistance (itinerant teacher, speech therapist).

## 2.2 Procedure

This research respected the General Data Protection Regulation of U.E– GDPR. Each parent of investigated student was informed about the aim of the research, the tasks that child must fulfil during the research, about our intention to publish an article (by respecting the code of ethics) related to the aspects that we investigated, about our intention in sharing the collected data with third parties. We asked and obtained the parents' consent for collecting the data, for processing and analysing it, for publishing the article. We did not obtain their consents for sharing the collected data with third parties.

Our research had an initial testing procedure on 40 preadolescents with intellectual disabilities and 41 teenagers with intellectual disabilities and the obtained Cronbach Alpha indexes ( $\alpha_1 = .659$  at preadolescents with intellectual disabilities testing procedure and  $\alpha_2 = .687$  at teenagers with intellectual disabilities testing procedure) allowed us to proceed to extended research. The research also had an actual testing procedure on 210 students with intellectual disabilities: 112 preadolescents and 98 teenagers that had the following stages: a) revealing the specific manner of developing friendships; b) revealing the specific manner of establishing relationships with persons that have official authority. The research was not focused on revealing the specificity of the interpersonal relationships in relation to the gender of the subjects.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Investigation of specific manner of developing friendships

The- first objective of the research was aimed at revealing the specific criteria used by our investigated subjects in developing friendships. The data analyses process pointed that the distribution was uniform the skewness index valued from 1.248 to 2.504 and with standard error of skewness from .768 of 1.431, and kurtosis index values from .907 to 1.604, respectively standard error of kurtosis from 1.322 to 2.056.

We are further presenting the data related to the answers analysed on the following criteria: Friend's psychological characteristics, Friend's behaviour towards society, Friend's behaviour towards the person that choose, Friend's behaviour towards the learning process, and Friend's behaviour towards labour (table no1)

Table no 1. The criteria used by investigated mental disable subjects in characterized his/her friend.

Persons that make the assessments	Friend's psychological characteristics (%)	Friend's behaviour towards society (%)	Friend's behaviour towards the person that choose (%)	Friend's behaviour towards the learning process (%)	Friend's behaviour towards labour (%)
<b>Preadolescents</b>	15	11	49	29	8
<b>Teenagers</b>	21	42	4	10	23

### 3.2. Investigation of specific manner of establishing relationships with persons that have official authority.

The second objective of the research was aimed at revealing the specific manner of establishing relationships with persons that have official authority by investigated subjects. The data analyses process pointed that the distribution was uniform, the skewness index values from 1.821 to 2.132 and with standard error of skewness from .817 of 1.533, and kurtosis index values from .928 to 1.850, respectively standard error of kurtosis from 1.371 to 1.958.

We are further presenting the data related to the the answers analysed on the following criteria: The Authority's psychological characteristics, the Authority's skills for solving the person 's problems, the Authority's reactivity to stressful situations, the Authority's behaviour towards the person that makes the assessment. (table no.2)

Table no 2. The criteria used by investigated mental disabled subjects in characterize interpersonal relationships established with an authority.

Persons that make the assessments	The Authority's psychological characteristics,	The Authority's skills for solving the person 's problems	The Authority's behaviour towards the person that makes the assessment	The Authority's reactivity to stressful situations
<b>Preadolescents</b>	23	31	49	9
<b>Teenagers</b>	19	41	12	25

### 3.3 Investigation of specific manner of developing friendships

Taking all the findings into consideration we can say: a) preadolescents with intellectual disabilities "use" in establishing interpersonal relations with a friend, infantile criteria related to satisfying personal security needs and increasing the status within social group; b) teenagers with intellectual disabilities "use", in establishing interpersonal relations with friend, subjective criteria related to satisfying their social needs and to developing their personal brand in a/the social group.

Table no 3 – The t test- on criteria used to characterize a friend at investigated subjects.

		Test Value = 0					
Lot type		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Teenagers	Alter' psychological characteristics	11.225	98	.000	5.6000	4.471	6.729
	Alter's behaviour towards society	16.174	98	.000	9.400	8.09	10.71
	Alter's behaviour towards the person that choose	11.356	98	.000	6.600	5.29	7.91
	Alter's behaviour towards the learning process	10.111	9	.000	5.100	3.96	6.24
	Alter's behaviour towards labour	11.207	98	.000	7.900	6.34	9.46
	Preadolescents	Alter's psychological characteristics	9.842	112	.000	5.3000	4.082
Alter's behaviour towards society		8.981	112	.000	6.8000	5.087	8.513
Alter's behaviour towards the person that choose		12.362	112	.000	8.200	6.70	9.70
Alter's behaviour towards labour		8.268	112	.000	5.200	3.78	6.62
Alter's behaviour towards the learning process		11.442	112	.000	7.8000	6.225	9.375

### 3.4 Investigation of specific manner of establishing relationships with persons that have official authority.

The criteria used in establishing an interpersonal relationship with a person that has an official authority by the investigated teenagers with intellectual disabilities are related to those used in choosing a friend. Using the Pearson 's correlation analysis, we were able to highlight significant correlations between the subjects that used the criterion "the Friend's behaviour towards society" also used the criterion "the Authority skills for solving the person 'problems" - direct, incredibly significant correlations ( $r=. 821$ ,  $p=.$

05); the subjects that used the criterion “the Friend’s behaviour towards labour” also used the criterion “the Authority reactivity to stressful situations” - direct, significant correlations ( $r = .784, p = .05$ ).

Table no 4 – The t test- on criteria used to characterize interpersonal relationships established with a person that has an official authority.

		Test Value = 0				95%	Confidence
Tip del lot		T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Interval of the Lower	Difference Upper
Teenagers	the Authority's behaviour towards the person that makes the assessment	6.678	98	.000	4.200	2.78	5.62
	the Authority's skills in solving the person's problems	15.917	98	.000	6.300	5.40	7.20
	the Authority's psychological characteristics,	9.000	98	.000	3.300	2.47	4.13
	the Authority's reactivity to stress	7.442	98	.000	4.000	2.78	5.22
Preadolescents	the Authority's behaviour towards the person that makes the assessment	13.615	112	.000	5.900	4.92	6.88
	the Authority's skills in solving the person's problems	16.102	112	.000	5.500	4.73	6.27
	the Authority's psychological characteristics	12.333	112	.000	3.700	3.02	4.38
	the Authority's reactivity to stress	4.824	112	.001	3.200	1.70	4.70

Based on statistical data analysis (t test for independent sample), we found that the analysed data are significant for the groups of the investigated subjects. (table no 4).



## **4. Discussions**

### **4.1. Investigation of specific manner of developing friendships**

From the data collected in table no1, we found that the investigated preadolescents with intellectual disabilities' primary criterion for choosing a friend was "the friend's behaviour towards the person that chooses him/ her". Using this criterion reflects, in a clear manner, the intellectual disabilities specific egocentrism. In fact, the process of choosing a friend and establishing interpersonal relationships with him/her by intellectually disabled preadolescents, is made based on genetic viscosity, in order to satisfy the needs related to personal security (Ozden-Yildirim, 2018).

The second criterion that the investigated intellectually disabled preadolescents used in choosing a friend was "the friend's behaviour towards the learning process". The use of this criterion for choosing a friend by the investigated intellectually disabled preadolescents offers a new perspective for understanding their entire interpersonal relationship process.

The investigated preadolescents subjects, from the perspective of satisfying their own needs, can identify "the strengths, the weaknesses of an individual" (Asayesh et al.,2020) "to validate" those persons who can help them solve their learning issues (problematic situations). On the other hand, establishing an interpersonal relationship with a "strong friend" helps to improve the status that he / she has within the social group.

From the research, we see that the investigated teenagers with intellectual disabilities used as a primary criterion for choosing a friend: "the friend's behaviour towards society". Using this criterion denotes the concern of the investigated subjects over the social image they can gain by means of their friend. In fact, we can say that the concern for their social image is the result of the complex educational recovery program that they benefit from, but at the same time it constitutes the premise for the formation of the "personal brand".

The second criterion used by our investigated teenagers with intellectual disabilities for choosing friend is: "the friend's behaviour towards labour" and it completes the first criterion. Thus, it revealed the desire to improve their social status through the social interrelationships they make (Demirok et al., 2019). A closer analysis of the significance of the second criterion used by those investigated subjects, in choosing a friend allows us to talk about the objectifying of the "need of social recognition" of their social image; to notice the formation of the primary elements of theirs "professional brand".

### **4.2 Investigation of specific manner of establishing relationships with persons that have official authority.**

The data synthesized in table no 2. allowed us to see that the investigated preadolescents pointed as primary criterion in establishing interpersonal relationships with a person that has an official authority, his/her behaviour towards the person that makes the assessment. The situation can be explained if we take into consideration that, at this age, the subjects with intellectual disabilities are characterized by egocentrism, which puts its mark on the way of interacting with persons that have authority. In other words, the person that has authority is perceived in terms of "punishments that he/ she can apply " (highlighted in 61% of the 98 non-directive interviews conducted with investigated preadolescents). Due to the limited character of the proximal development area, our investigated

preadolescents are not able of understanding the social utility of the activities that a person with an official authority accomplishes (Abdullahi, 2020).

The second criterion that our investigated preadolescents used in establishing interpersonal relationships with a person that has official authority was: his/her skills for solving the person's problems. In fact, by using this criterion, they underline that "their problems are the most important" (highlighted in 58% of the 98 non-directive interviews conducted with investigated preadolescents), "that they have priority" (highlighted in 51 of the 98 non-directive interviews conducted with investigated preadolescents), "that they must be resolved quickly" (regardless of their nature" (highlighted in 44% of the 98 non-directive interviews conducted investigated preadolescents) – which are also a clear expression of their egocentrism (Davulcu & Tezer, 2020).

The criteria used in establishing an interpersonal relationship with a person that has an official authority by the investigated preadolescents with intellectual disabilities are related to those used in choosing a friend. Using the Pearson 's correlation analysis, we were able to highlight significant correlations between the subjects that used the criterion "the/ a Friend's behaviour towards the person that chooses him/her ". They also used the criterion "the Authority's behaviour towards the person that that makes the assessment" - direct, significant correlations ( $r = .808, p = .05$ ); the subjects that used the criterion "the/ a Friend's behaviour towards the learning process" also used the criterion "the Authority's skills for solving the person 's problems" - direct, significant correlations ( $r = .784, p = .05$ ).

Instead, the investigated teenagers pointed as primary criterion in establishing interpersonal relationships with a person that has official authority: his/her skill in solving the person's problems and it is completed by the second criterion: "the Authority reactivity to stressful situations". So, the situation has raised a question: What does the association of those two criteria in the process of establishing an interpersonal relationship with a person that has official authority mean? To answer this question, we applied 79 non-directive interviews and we found that the association of those two criteria signified: - "She/he always knows how to solve problems" (founded at 74% of nondirective interviews); "She/ he was always nice to me" (founded at 69% of nondirective interviews); "She/ he always found the mistakes I made" (founded at 59% of nondirective interviews); "She/ he has to help me" (founded at 44% of nondirective interviews).

These answers reflect that the interpersonal relationships that they have established with a person that has authority are based on previous interactions with that person, on "personal history" and are geared to solving their own problems. So, we can state that egocentrism in the case of the investigated teenagers (amid the extensive educational recovery process that these subjects receive), which has narrowed itself as an area of objectivity, from a generalized behavioural level to a contextual one.

Taking all the findings into consideration, we can say that in the case of interpersonal relations established with a person who has an official authority, a process of social modelling of the criteria occurs from criteria marked exclusively by egocentrism (specific to intellectual disable preadolescents) to a criterion marked by contextual social decisions (specific to intellectual disable teenagers) (Romanova et al., 2021).

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

This research had the goal to reveal specific ways in which students with intellectual disabilities structured their interpersonal relationships. In our investigation we used specific and adapted instruments. With the help of statistical analysis, we found that the Cronbach's Alpha is .854.

Subsequently, the results proved that:

- i. The interpersonal relationships structured at intellectually disabled students are marked by the **specific traits of the intellectual disabled personality**.
- ii. A specific typology in structuring the interpersonal relationships at intellectual disabled preadolescents:
  - Type A is represented by the subjects that: a) establish a friendship relation based on criterion "the Friend's behaviour towards the person that choose"; b) establish a relation with a person that has an official authority based on the criterion "the Authority's behaviour towards the person that make the assessment".
  - Type B is represented by the subjects that: a) establish a friendship relation based on criterion "the Friend's behaviour towards the learning process": b) establish a relation with a person that has an official authority based on the criterion "the Authority' skills for solving the person's 'problems".
- iii. A specific typology in structuring the interpersonal relationships of intellectually disabled teenagers:- Type A is represented by the subjects that: a) establish a friendship relation based on criterion "the friend's behaviour towards society "; b) establish a relation with a person that has an official authority based on the criterion "the Authority's skills for solving the person 'problems.- Type B is represented by the subjects that: a) establish a friendship relation based on criterion "the Friend's behaviour towards labour "; b) establish a relation with a person that has an official authority based on choice. In the formal space, a person that has an established relation with a person that has an official authority based on the criterion "the Authority' is prone to stressful situations".

## 6. Recommendation

The assumption of our research was confirmed. Our findings can be useful for teachers in order to:

- a) develop secure learning /educational climate for students with intellectual disabilities.
- b) create efficient learning team between normal students and students with intellectual disabilities:
- c) develop suitable patterns to stimulate the students' social relations with other persons according with their role and status.
- d) develop efficient strategies, role play games for reinforcing the classmates' feeling.
- e) diminish the bullying phenomenon of students with intellectual disabilities from normal students and increase the tolerance between them.

We can also use the previous conclusions for:

- increasing the quality of relationships establish among the therapeutically program between the intellectual disables and experts involved in.
- improving the quality of the services provided to students with intellectual disabilities.

- developing, on short time or on long time, specific educational programs meant to form, at preadolescents and adolescents with intellectual disabilities: teamwork abilities, vertical relationship skills, social evaluation patterns of Alters.
- developing strategies to combat the phenomena of exclusion from the different social groups of people with intellectual disabilities.
- stimulating the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in community' activities.

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