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## **Application of hermeneutic phenomenology in thesis writing**

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### **Abstract**

*Hermeneutic phenomenology is popularly used in the field of qualitative research these days. Many people use the term hermeneutic phenomenology but they bring the data random; narrative, descriptive and reflective as well. In the name of essence, researchers have been collecting opinions, feelings, ideas and dreams more than experiences. What actually is to search is not searched. And, what is not to search is searched and given name hermeneutic phenomenology. So, here I am going to elaborate first what phenomenology is and then the difference between hermeneutic phenomenology and other types of phenomenology; especially between hermeneutic phenomenology and transcendent or descriptive phenomenology and, finally the application of hermeneutic phenomenology in thesis writing. From my side, along with descriptions, I am giving much focus on examples as well.*

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, hermeneutic, leadership, lived experience, essence

### **Introduction**

In the field of qualitative research, phenomenology has gained its own popularity. Under it, hermeneutic phenomenology has its own space. Many people use hermeneutic phenomenology in their research works but they hardly justify how and why they use it. They just mention hermeneutic phenomenology, essence, bracketing, reflectivity and lived experiences. They collect the experiences, opinions, ideas, feelings and arguments; whatever they get, and conclude the research works. It makes learners more confused making hermeneutic phenomenology more complex and complicated at the same time. Therefore, I am going to give a short introduction to phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. More focus is laid on hermeneutic phenomenology; how it is different from others and, how do we apply it in our research works. I hope this article will be beneficial for the beginners and ongoing researchers in Masters', M. Phil, and PhD degrees.

Phenomenology is the lived experience of a person. Or, it is a method of learning about another person by listening to their descriptions of what their subjective world is like for them i.e. lived story. In other words, it studies the structure of consciousness as experienced from the first person point of view (Velmans, 1991). From the research perspective, meaning making is an essential part of phenomenology. According to Peoples (2021), a

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phenomenological research study is used to answer the question, "What is it like to experience a certain phenomenon, is phenomenology?" (p. 18).

German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered as the father of philosophical movement of phenomenology. He believes suspending or bracketing the pre-understanding of a researcher, one should research in a particular area. Varying phenomenology from natural science, Husserl insists that, phenomenology does not proceed from the collection of large amounts of data to general theory beyond the data itself, as in the scientific method of induction. Rather, it aims to look at particular examples without theoretical presuppositions before them discerning what is essential and necessary to these experiences (Moran, 2005). Later, gradually the philosopher like; Martin Heidegger, George Gadamer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre, Max Van Manen, Amedeo Giorgi, Mark D. Vagle etc. took its journey to the climax and made it more popular in the field of qualitative research. These days, phenomenology has been occupying a high space in human science research.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is an encounter with a phenomenon and we call it 'a never ending process' in social science research (Okunwaye, n. d.). It also describes how one orients lived experience. But, once hermeneutic phenomenology came in existence, it started describing how one interprets the 'texts' of life (Van Manen, 2016). It is also known as philosophical hermeneutics. And, Hans-Georg Gadamer is known as the founder of philosophical hermeneutics.

In the field of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl focused on Transcendental Phenomenology which sometimes we call descriptive oriented phenomenology. Husserl's one of the best students Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) propounded the theory of hermeneutic phenomenology which provides space for preoccupation or pre-understanding of something. A researcher should have a framework of that phenomenon before he/she conducts the research on that particular area. Later, Heidegger's idea of hermeneutic phenomenology is supported and made popular by Gadamer, Van Manen, Vagle, Peoples and some others.

According to hermeneuticians, more than the phenomenon, context is important (Peoples, 2021). Research design may include observation, field work, narration, interview or any others as well but the central part of hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretation and understanding (Vagle, 2018). In scientific research we explain nature but in human science we must understand the lived structure of meanings; not only what the informants say but also how they express (Churchill, 2018).

In general, hermeneutics focuses on manifestations where such manifestations come into being through intentional relations, which are always already in being interpreted. So, this type of researches is known as interpretive oriented research (Vagle, 1918). Let's see one example here; if there is tree near by a house, someone interested in scientific research, see its branches, leaves, its size, shape and colour but the hermeneuticians do not only try to represent the qualitative properties of the tree. Rather, they would be interested in how one finds himself/herself in relation to the tree; it can be friend, shelter, parent or anything. In this regard, Vagle (1918) argues, in hermeneutic phenomenology, we find ourselves-being-in-relation-with others and other things like; a good book, some bad news, our activity, an anxiety etc. (p. 48). Further, Vagle (2018) writes, Heidegger claims intended meanings are conceived in being and language, which are always found 'in' inter-subjective contextual relations (p. 79).

Therefore, language is not only the manifestation of a thing; it is the thing itself in hermeneutic phenomenology.

### **Basic Differences between Transcendental and Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Many differences are found in descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology. In comparison to descriptive phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology seems more complex with its temporality and being in the world. (Solan & Bowe, 2014, pp. 5-6)

Time is a main part in hermeneutic phenomenology. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology focuses on observer and phenomenon because the observer could transcend the phenomena and meanings being investigated to take a global view of the essences discovered.

On the other hand, Heidegger focuses on researcher and his/her background information. According to him the observer could not remove him or herself from the process of essence-identification that he or she existed with the phenomena and the essences.

The core difference between Transcendental or descriptive phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology is in bracketing. Husserl claims that in phenomenology, there must be bracketing or phenomenological reduction. Citing Carpenter (2007), Chan, Fung and Chien (2013, p. 1) write, "It is deliberately putting aside one's own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation. Similarly, Vagle (2018) writes, "The world should be bracketed so that the structures of the phenomenon could be carefully described as they were experienced in consciousness (p. 32). It means, they claim, to accurately describe the participants' life experiences, the researcher should put aside the prior knowledge, understanding, beliefs, values and experiences as well. On the other hand, in hermeneutic phenomenology, Heidegger rejects the idea of bracketing the researcher's pre-understanding. He says, language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human 'being-in-the world (Lavery, 2013) and to conduct any research in social science, pre-understanding is necessary. Presupposition is a part of reflexive journey. And, an individual is always connected meaningfully with everything in the world. So, hermeneutics always starts from the position that a person seeking to understand. "Phenomena are lived out interpretively in the world, and hence the world should not be bracketed but fully engaged in the phenomenological inquiry (Vagle, 2018, p. 32).

The second points are the consciousness and intentionality. They are the mental representation or the fact that is in mind. According to Vagle (2018, p. 58), consciousness is the inseparable connectedness between subject (i.e. human beings) and objects (i.e. all other things like things, ideas etc.). In descriptive phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty (1964, as cited in Vagle, 1918) writes, intentionality is the invisible thread that it connects humans to their surroundings meaningfully whether they are conscious of that connection or not. Here, in the descriptive phenomenology, the primary assumption is that phenomenological researchers are to be interested in determining universal truths that transcend time and space and which are also unaffected by social context, power and agency (p. 61). But, beyond the terms consciousness and intentionality, the hermeneutic phenomenology believes in interconnectedness, where the researcher should spend time with the phenomenon informally to get a good sense how it might manifest in the context in which he/she is exploring it. Any technique, process or tool is a fair game for hermeneutic phenomenology (Siewert, 2002).A

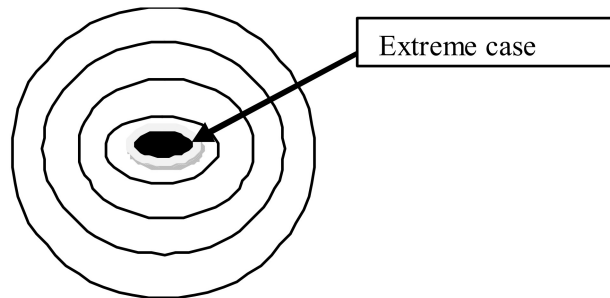
researcher can have a dialogue with the participants and say I want to understand your world through your eyes and your experiences so far as possible. This way we can enter into their world through intimate dialogue. It is called interconnectedness in hermeneutic phenomenological term.

Third, let's discuss on 'essence and manifestations'. Essence is central in descriptive phenomenology. Essence is a structure of essential meaning that explicates a central phenomenon of interest. It is the point that makes the phenomenon to be that very phenomenon otherwise it is no more a phenomenon. For example, let's see a coconut. There is outer cover. After that there is coir; middle fibrous coat of the coconut. Then there comes a shell; the inner hard coat of the fruit. After breaking it, there comes a coconut and its milk sometimes. The coconut is the essence of this fruit not the shell and fibrous coat. So, in phenomenology also the researchers should not get fussed just in fibrous coat and bring hard shell and come to say phenomenology. The phenomenon must be taken out in any cost.

According to Dahlberg (2009) its nature is hidden and when we experience the world, we see essence. Further he gives a beautiful example here; essence is already there in the phenomena. We have perceived them. Something about them is already there in our mind and accordingly we perceive them. To say a horse 'a horse' we need to have a concept of horse in our mind. Same is the case in 'tree', 'mountain', 'accident', 'happenings' and other lived experiences. So, it is essence which enables us to make a scaffolding of (something) everything in our mind.

Linking with intentionality, further Dahlberg (2009) says, when the phenomenon presents itself as something, it presents its essence. Being intentional means seeing phenomena, their meanings, and their essences, in one way, or another. In Merleau-Ponty(1995) view, essences are not something that we as researchers explicitly add to the research. They are there already, in the intentional relationship between the phenomena and us (as cited in Dahlberg, 2009). Vagle (2018) says, "It is like onion; peel it (p. 66). In the same book; citing Merleau-Ponty (1964) Vagle writes, "Intentionality is the invisible thread that connects human to their surroundings meaningfully whether they are conscious of that connection or not" (p.71).

Extreme case

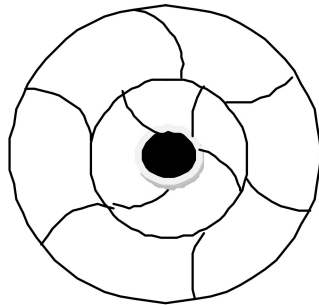


*Figure 1. Essential Core*

Manifestation is the action or fact of showing something. It is the way of unfolding of human experience and bring into reorganization. According to Bauer (2012); self-manifestation and self-reorganization are the ongoing existential and developmental tasks of

Human being. They are ongoing in human life. If it makes human aware of something, then it is an awareness in itself. Naturally it happens in human beings as a human child learns or acquires knowledge from his/her parents, relatives and friends. The appearance of phenomena is the natural unfolding human task of experiencing the light of awareness within and through phenomena.

Vagle (2018) states that, hermeneutic phenomenology believes in hermeneutic spiral which signifies how interpreted meanings are always in motion, and that these meanings circulate. We as researchers and readers entering into a dialogue with these meanings, rather than describing an essence of these meanings. It is dependent upon contexts, situations, and the partial. There is no core, just multiple meanings are there and they are always in motion. And, intended meanings are generated from intentional relationships. Here is figure;



*Figure 2. Hermeneutic Spiral*

Vagle believes, there is no 'pure' interpretation of text. Narration can be a technique in phenomenology (p. 44). There is no core but multiple meanings are there and they are always in motion. So, researcher need not to peel here; just come back and forth to make, remake, do and undo the meanings. In the book *Crafting Phenomenological Research*, Vagle (2018) states, "The phenomenologist is not studying the individual but is studying how a particular phenomenon manifests and appears in the life world (p. 56). Even a thirty second video clip in a film can provide us with opening to potential phenomenon to explore.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, Heidegger believes, all human lives in the world as an interpretative being and the world is continuously interpreted. No theoretical assumption would work on this human world. Calling bracketing the backward looking theory, Vagle (2018) uses bridling as an interpretative phenomenology or hermeneutic phenomenology (p. 120). He calls it a forward-looking theory. It is quite reflexive and pedagogic.

In short, "Phenomenology is concerned with finding the essence of the things, whereas hermeneutics sees that everything has its being in language and interpretation" (Kakkori, 2009, p. 20)

### **Application of Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Thesis Writing**

Leena Kakkori, a university professor of Finland, writes, researchers generally lack a common understanding of what hermeneutic method actually is (2010). She explains this

as a process and art of interpretation (p. 19). Finally agreeing with Van Manen (1990), Kakkori)writes, "Not all the educational scientists and researchers have to be philosophers, even if they do use hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology (p. 19).

According to People (2012) in thesis writing, if we are to use hermeneutic phenomenology, all the things should be hermeneutic; from problem statement to research question, and methodology to result and discussion. Everywhere experience should be explored. Understanding and interpreting the multiple parameter of the experience, researcher should focus on the essence of the phenomenon. If hermeneutic is the key methodology, it should shape how the research structures and how the researcher frames his/her involvement within the essence making process.

In Van Manen's understanding, the purpose of hermeneutic reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of phenomenon. This method consists of the ability to understand the language, in the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak (2016).

So, in thesis writing in Master's level, it is not necessary to stick tightly in all the rules and regulations of hermeneutic phenomenology. Even in M. Phil. and PhD as well, Kakkori (2009) suggests, not to emphasize more on very big issue, namely the question of the truth. The question of the truth is connected to the question of essence and the whole idea of human research is general. In human science, no truth is fixed (p. 26).

But, Vagle (2018), Van Manen (2016) and Peoples (2021) focus on pre-understanding or pre occupation of researcher on phenomenon. They suggest the researcher to establish a framework i.e. the scaffolding for the phenomenon and go the informants to search the information. Information is to adjust and establish in the scaffolding in hermeneutic phenomenology as in Vygotsky's social constructivism; knowledge is co-constructed engaging in the learning process. Therefore, before one starts using the hermeneutic phenomenology, he/she should write his/her thrust to choose this methodology to show his/her preoccupation.

#### **What is Thrust and How to Write it Phenomenology?**

A thrust is a passion in research study because of which the researcher chooses the particular field. In other word, it is a drive to go towards this research area. Generally the thrust is generated with the interest of researcher, availability of resource and infrastructure, and societal and global challenge. It is written generally exploring the researcher's current status and reason for choosing the particular field/phenomenon.

Here is an example;

*I am the student of ELT and doing my M Phil in English language teaching/learning and leadership. I completed my school level education in 1997 form a village of Magdi district, Nepal. At that time, the requirement for a secondary level teacher was B. Ed. but, we were taught English by the teacher who had completed just I. Ed. The reason behind it was the lack of English language teachers in the village areas; we used to listen from the parents and the head teacher.*

*The teacher was very smart and strict. All the students used to be scared of him. We never knew how many words had mispronounced and how many grammatical errors were occurred in writings. If such was the condition in my time, how was the condition in my teachers' time! And, how did they struggle to reach to the leadership position of the*

*universities? This was my passion to search during my research. I will be looking for their experience of struggle, pains and pleasures as well*

This the example of thrust. From this it is clear that why this researcher choses this particular field of study. How this study supports in researcher's career and what his/her current status is, is clear from his data presentation. In a sense, it gives a background information about the researcher as well.

### **Exploration of Data Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Phenomenological research does not prefer the term 'data collection'. It writes exploration of data (Peoples, 2021); Vagle, 2012; Van Manen, 2016). In surface level, phenomenology means just a lived experience of a person. But, in deeper level its varieties and ways of studies are varied.

If we call phenomenology and collect data randomly, it becomes *khachidi* (porridge) in reality. So, following Creswell (1998) and, Solan and Bowe (2014) one can choose hermeneutic phenomenology. They write, use of language and the interpretation of a person's 'meaning-making' is important in phenomenology. They give much focus in preoccupation of the researcher and language. They mean language is not independent in the world. In human existence, the world is represented by language and language is only real within which world is represented.

Any method is authentic in data collection in hermeneutic phenomenology; narration, observation, document analysis, text analysis, picture analysis and so on. The central motive is to explore the lived experience and present them in sensible way.

Here is one example how the researcher enters into the phenomenon and explores the data;

*I had a historicality and preoccupation in my mind that probably, there was a lack of teachers in my teachers' time. They might have felt the English language very difficult and irritating. Even these days, almost fifty percent students are failed in SEE in English. That time, possibly, my teacher leaders would have also faced challenges to pass the SLC exam. And, it might be very difficult to reach to the leadership role.*

*Many of my teachers and coworkers in the organization revealed that the leaders in the universities are chosen from the political basis. I wanted to know, whether it was truth or not. Whether they were appointed as academic administrative leaders only because of their political affiliation or, something else beyond that is there. It was the preoccupation in my mind.*

It is like Reocour's Theory of interpretation (as cited in Tan, Wilson & Olver, 2009); it starts form a scaffolding, a frame is already there in researcher's mind in which he/she fits the information and adjust his/her frame with the information. In this sense, Vygotsky's Scaffolding theory, theory of Zone of Proximal Development and Darwin's theory of Adaptation can be matched in data collection and data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology.

Without knowing anything a researcher cannot reach to the informants. Vagle (2018) writes, research cannot take place in a vacuum. Having some pre-understanding, the researcher goes to the field and collects the information. Completely bracketing himself/herself also, the researcher cannot bring out the meaning of the response of the respondents. More than essence, manifestation is necessary.

Meaning is context and content oriented. In different contexts, a same informant can express his experience in a completely different ways. For example, when a baby is giving trouble to a mother, the mother may shout at the child and say, "May you die!" Here this statement does not mean the mother wants her baby to die. So, the hermeneutic researcher should not only collect the words but also the context, and the way of expression as well. Once the collected information is triangulated to the informants, they must accept it. Otherwise, it becomes meaningless. It is called intentional meaning in hermeneutic phenomenology (Peoples, 2021).

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Katarzyna Peoples (2021) opines the hermeneutic phenomenology does not favor the term 'Data Analysis'. Analysis means 'to break down into parts'. While breaking the data, it loses its central meaning. So, rather it seeks to understand the phenomenon as a whole (p. 52).

In Vagle's opinion (2018), we all are phenomenologists and hermeneuticians. Hermeneutics believes in art of description so, the artists are more hermeneutics than other common people. He believes, poets, story writers and painters are creative and they write beautiful hermeneutical texts. Instead of analysis, Vagle also writes, 'Explication' should be used. It means, investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon keeping the context of the whole.

Data are recursive. They can be emerged and changed during analysis as well. Like other methods of analysis, its aim is also to interpret and understand the meanings remaining under the criteria of discussion and reflection of the phenomenon. While seeking the in-depth understanding of the researched phenomenon, it suggests, researcher to enter into the descriptive world of the informants' in an empathetic way; as they were the researcher's own data.

Though hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes in subjective interpretations of the text, art, culture, social phenomena and thinking, it focuses in thick description and theme generation. It wants, essential themes of the experience should be generated which should be comprehensible and identifiable to anyone who reads the text.

Here are some steps for data explication given in Peoples (2021, p. 53) as;

- Read the entire transcript and take out unnecessary language
- Generate preliminary meaning units
- Generate final meaning units for each interview/survey question
- Synthesize final meaning units into situated narratives under each interview/survey question
- Synthesize situated narratives into general narratives (major themes)
- Generate general description.

Let's see a short part of data collected and analyzed in an anonymous dissertation as;

*...Reflecting on their experience, the informants feel proud to reach to the leadership position of the university in Nepal. Coming from the middle class family of the remote areas of the country, they said, it is their pride to be in the leading position of the university. "Many of the VCs have reached to the police custody because of corruption in the universities but, I was never called there! I was fair. I never misused a single coin of the university! Now, I am happy and satisfied to be here. I can walk openly and proudly say, I have done a lot in my tenure." With a sweet smile, one of the participants (VC) had said.*



*"What we sow is what we reap. Even Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) could not do anything. But, the political game that happens in the universities of Nepal is really annoying and maddening! I faced lots of problems without any reason." Another participant had said. Though all of the leaders were appointed politically, none of them like the political marathon in the universities.*

### **Writing Result in Hermeneutics**

A quality result chapter in phenomenological dissertation differs from other qualitative dissertations in that it needs to be grounded in phenomenological philosophy (Peoples, 2021, p. 60). In hermeneutic phenomenology, it is not necessary that the framework the researcher makes before the actual research should fit to the findings. It is only a lens through which the researcher looks the world of the informants and enters into the data to explore. It is like Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development; what we know before we meet the informants and more we add from them, and adopt the information gradually and theorize systematically.

Here is a short portion of finding taken from the same anonymous dissertation as;

*In my study, what I had expected was not exactly the same to the informants. I got the reality different from my expectation. Their experience was more different than I had expected. Even in the past; thirty five years ago, there were good teachers in English in Nepal.*

*The regions near to Indian boarder and Capital City of Nepal; Kathmandu were well facilitated with good English Subject teachers but such teachers were lacking in other areas like; northern Mountain and Hilly regions. The teachers near to Indian boarders said, they used to feel Nepali language as foreign language in their childhood; Nepali language was very difficult to read, write and understand. In comparison to others teachers, their English subject teachers were very kind, smart and loving for them.*

*Though English was difficult subject at that time in hilly and mountain regions, none of my informants were failed in English subject in their school level and university level as well. I found almost all the teachers entered into the English Subject major not because of their choice but by chance. Some wanted to study Science, but it was late to join while coming to Kathmandu. Some teachers joined in English because of their trainings in teaching career in school level. And, some others joined in English because of friends' company and so on.*

*Regarding their leadership journey, none of the informants have got any leadership training in their career. They accept that the appointment in leadership position is political in Nepal but they deny that they are not the political cadres of the political party. They can have some affiliation and faith in one ideology but more than that they have some potentialities which enforce others to choose them in leadership position.*

*Their research articles, journal writings, affiliation to other universities of the world, scholarship awards, work experience in Department, Subject committee, Curriculum design and development, Books writing and editing, Campus chief and Assistant-Campus chief along with some other experiences, and most importantly the access of English language supported them to reach to the leadership position. Their motivation, commitment and dedication, all were evaluated by the friends and encouraged them to handle the position. And, they did it.*

### Writing Conclusion

In thesis writing, conclusion is necessary. Some people get confused in writing conclusion. Sometimes they write it very lengthy and clumsy as well. So, here I suggest the researchers not to write examples in conclusion. Restating the topic the researcher should summarize the main points in conclusion.

It is not necessary to begin the paragraph with 'in summery...' it becomes redundant in writing. Avoiding repetition and including the most relevant information and significance, a good researcher should synthesize the information in clear and concise way. Let's see this example;

*In Nepal's context, it was very difficult to get the English language teachers in the past in Mountain and Hilly regions; especially in rural areas but the teachers were easily available in Capital city and boarder areas of India and Terai region. Leadership journey and experience of the ELT teachers were very exciting and encouraging for all the ELT learners but the political 'tug of war' is the main factor to create challenges in the institutions. Any of the methodology would be fine to study such type of experience but for the student of ELT and leadership, hermeneutic phenomenology would be the best fit for he/she cannot bracket himself/herself while working with the teacher leaders who had taught him/her for several years in the university.*

### Conclusion

Phenomenology and hermeneutics are two different terms. Their history, aims and orientations are quite different. Different philosophers and writers have contributed well from their different sides, still lots of confusions and contradictions are there in readers. And, writers do not have common understanding as well (Kakkori, 2009).

According to Kakkori (2009), phenomenology focuses on universal and absolute essences whereas hermeneutics focuses on historical and relative meanings. In the field of thesis writing, when I was guiding, I found many of the students are in confusion. They use phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and narrative inquiry and so on. But, way of presentation are all similar; opinion collection. So, I have presented this article. I have tried my best to give the examples from my own studies. Thus, in the conclusion, I say, hermeneutic phenomenology is a research method used popularly in the field of qualitative research especially in the field of education, health and other human sciences. If it is used well, it sounds beautiful otherwise, just a word collection.

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