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Qualitative Research in Criminology

Cutting-Edge Methods

 Springer

Chapter 14

“Being” Ethical in Research



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Ethics: Is It Worth Reading About It – Again?

At this point, most readers of this book have already learned something about ethics. Furthermore, many have probably already submitted one or more projects for ethical clearance by IRBs or ethics commissions or were asked about ethics protocols when submitting a paper for publication. So, is it worth reading another piece on ethics which will, more likely than not, reaffirm the same old guidelines of “do no harm” to participants, make sure to get informed consent, and guarantee their anonymity?

Well, I would advise reading this piece. This chapter will identify and discuss some of the ethical challenges underlined throughout this edited collection, highlighting continuities and changes in ethics applied to cutting-edge qualitative criminological inquiry. It will also argue for the need for researchers to be trained in solving ethical dilemmas and “being” ethical, instead of considering ethics a mere box-ticking exercise. Furthermore, I will argue that ethical considerations about participants and research may help in analyzing disruptive phenomena and crises such as the ones that have been witnessed lately.

Nonetheless, this is also the appropriate moment to offer the much-needed definition of what ethics is and why social science research, especially using qualitative methods and studying crime and victimization-related topics, needs to pay attention to it.

Braswell, considers ethics to be the study of right and wrong, good and evil (2020, p. 3) and claims that exploring ethics leads to people becoming more aware of and open to moral and ethical issues, while simultaneously helping in the

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development of critical thinking and analytical skills, so that they become personally more responsible and particularly able to understand the coercion taking place in the criminal justice system. In a more philosophical and abstract positioning, ethics can be considered from a utilitarian and consequentialist perspective or from a deontological one (Gold & DeValve, 2020). For Anderson and Corneli (2018), ethical decision-making refers to the process of identifying, evaluating, and choosing among options regarding problems impacting humans. The authors go on to include research ethics as a form of applied ethics, with rules about what ought to be done in the very specific context of research. Not wanting to take sides on whether ethical considerations and actions should be done in accordance with their consequences or their intentions, it is a no-brainer that ethics is closely entrenched with the activity of collecting data from and with human participants – the sort of activities frequent in the social sciences and, moreover, in criminology. Thus, the need to consider ethical reasoning when conducting criminological research.

Notwithstanding the relevance of social science in knowledge production and the amelioration of social problems and challenges, one ought to ask if empirical research can be conducted at any cost to the participants. Is the advancement of the overall scientific knowledge more relevant than the well-being of particular participants? Obviously not, and the Nuremberg code (1947), subsequent to the calling out of the Nazi experiments with prisoners, was the first attempt to identify the need for science to have rules and regulations about what is right or wrong to do with human participants. Particularly, the code came to demand that participants in research provided their voluntary consent while limiting experiments that can cause physical and emotional harm.

However, other examples abound of the types of harms participants can suffer from taking part in the research. Some well-known cases can be easily searched for on Google and have contributed to abundant literature and commentaries, but the Milgram experiment in 1963 and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment in 1973 are usually used as cautionary tales in criminology and other social sciences (Anderson & Corneli, 2018). These examples pinpoint, again, the failure to get informed consent from participants as well as the harmful consequences they suffered from participating in the creation of scientific knowledge related to crime and crime control or obedience.

More recently, there have been concerns about avoiding harms for all those involved in research and not only for participants in research. Following Jupp et al., Noaks and Winkup consider that "ethics is about the standards to be adopted towards others in carrying out research" (p. 37–38), thus considering wider categories of third parties eventually impacted by research, including colleagues, organizations for which research results are relevant (e.g., police forces), or communities from which samples of participants are drawn. Overall, then, researchers ought to consider the risk or probability of harm research may inflict on participants or other people. Moreover, researchers have to be aware that potential harms stemming from participating in research can include physical, psychological, economic, legal, social, and even dignitary harms (Anderson & Corneli, 2018).

Considerations about risks for participants and devising mechanisms for minimizing unnecessary harm must be developed from the onset of the research and throughout its development: “prior, during and after [the] scholarly endeavour” (Bacon & Sanders, 2017, p. 159). Risk assessment strategies (Noaks & Winkup, 2004) must be devised in order to guarantee the most important ethical principles in research: no harm or non-maleficence, autonomy, beneficence, and justice, which, overall, materialize into ethical procedures such as obtaining informed consent from participants, and guaranteeing their privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality (Anderson and Corneli, 2018; Isreal & Gelsthrope, 2017; Noaks & Winkup, 2004).

However, many authors consider that, currently, the bureaucratization of ethics, or ‘ethics creep’ (Haggerty, 2004), through ethical clearance procedures obtained from ethics committees or IRB may hinder the more edgy research methods, particularly ethnographic and qualitative overall, as well as any critical approaches (Winlow & Measham, 2017). Particularly, some authors have considered that the growing regulation of research ethics may have counterproductive effects by protecting powerful agencies from scrutiny and by making it harder to research powerful actors and agencies, even at the expense of the researcher’s well-being and freedom due to the interference of powerful people during the research process (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte, 2018; Faria & Eski, 2018; Israel & Gelsthrope, 2017; Petintseva et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, it is crucial that students, novice researchers, research commissioners, and funders, as well as different audiences or users of science (e.g., the media), realize that criminological research is not as simple as asking survey participants if they like Pepsi or Coke the better, or if they prefer to buy online or to take a walk to the mall to purchase what they need.

Informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality should be carefully addressed when conducting research on crime and crime control-related topics. Criminological inquiry revolves around ethics for several reasons:

- Probable harms caused by criminological research may be manyfold, considering that very often criminological inquiry delves into participants’ traumatic experiences of victimization, violence and abuse, drug use and stigmatization, poverty, and structural inequalities. Psychological harm is, thus, likely to happen just by asking participants to recall past experiences or to position themselves about their future, especially when data is collected with and from victims of crime and trauma, and from vulnerable populations.
- Legal harms may arise considering that a myriad of criminological research consists in asking about self-reported criminal behavior, sometimes even witnessing a crime and deviant behavior (as in the case of ethnographic studies). Asking about sensitive topics, such as crime commission or the suffering of harms, is frequently the Gordian knot of criminological inquiry. The fact that respondents may have been or are in a prison setting does not limit this consideration, as criminal behavior different from the one that caused respondents to be sentenced may be revealed to researchers. Furthermore, more recently, ethics codes clearly state that researchers have a legal obligation to report some types of crimes or

suspected crimes, such as information regarding acts of terrorism, money laundering, child neglect, or abuse (Statement of Ethics of the British Society of Criminology).¹

- Frequently, researchers collect data from participants who are already curtailed in their freedom, such as detainees and prisoners, institutionalized youngsters, asylum seekers in refugee camps, drug users in drug clinics, and so on. Such situations demand extra care in considering how people can voluntarily consent to participate in criminological research (Anderson & Corneli, 2018), particularly because there is a tragic history of the prison setting being used to conduct unethical research (Moore & Wahidin, 2017). Moreover, research results may, if ethical compliance is lacking, deepen some groups' and communities' experiences of stigmatization and exclusion, thus creating further social and economic harms.
- The involvement of youth and children in research is particularly challenging because they have been considered vulnerable populations, deserving extra ethical precautions (Anderson & Corneli, 2018). A series of ethical issues arise regarding procedures to get informed consent in terms children can in fact understand, the potential of children being explored by gatekeepers during research, or difficulties arising in assuring confidentiality and anonymity (Girling, 2017). While many of these issues are not unique to criminological research, one must admit that, when researching crime and crime-related topics, protecting the most vulnerable becomes a pressing topic because, more often than not, they are being asked about their experiences with crime, violence, and abuse or with witnessing violence and abuse in their surroundings (Hackett, 2017).

In sum, criminological inquiry, quite often, includes asking people (frequently from vulnerable groups) about sensitive behavior, including victimization and traumatic experiences, crime commission, deviant behavior, or the effects of structural harms. This, in turn, can pose multiple harms for participants or for communities, and researchers are asked to anticipate the risks of such harms taking place, devising the necessary compliance measures to assure basic principles such as “do no harm.” History has taught us that research, as any other human activity, cannot be conducted no matter what or at the expense of the well-being of all those involved (directly and indirectly in the research process). Furthermore, as any other social activity, research is not immune to bias, manipulation and excesses, and misconduct (Faria, 2018). Some may argue that harms can also be felt and that risks exist for researchers themselves, especially when conducting a critical analysis of powerful actors and institutions (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte, 2018; Faria & Eski, 2018).

Finally, researchers conducting qualitative research have been alerting that ethical regulation by ethics commissions or IRBs often curtail the possibility of using a series of research methodologies but most especially ethnography. As Bacon & Sanders (2017, p. 159) argue, “The nature of criminological studies is that qualitative research entails morally ambiguous situations and often falls into the generic

¹ Statement of Ethics of the British Society of Criminology, retrieved from <https://www.britsoc-crim.org/ethics/>

category of ‘risky research’.” Due to their naturalistic approach, qualitative methods, as opposed to more numerical approaches (particularly experimental methods), are conducted by means of researchers closely interacting with participants in environments which are familiar to the latter, and for extended periods of time. This close interaction with people, groups, places, this shared experience of sounds, languages, smells, and activities, and the immersion in the field and in social practices may be so dense and intense that researchers may be perceived as insiders (Bucerius, 2015; Petintseva et al., 2020). More recently, due to its shared and interactive nature where research and participants collaborate in knowledge production, research has been reframed to be considered co-creation or co-production of knowledge, deeply embedded in reflexivity (for an overview, see Armstrong et al., 2017; Noaks & Winkup, 2004). Moreover, qualitative research can bring about situations of ambiguity in ethical decision-making, considering that the research protocol, differently from protocols which are tributary to the medical and natural sciences, has to include some degree of flexibility to accommodate “on the spot” surprises, newness, and changes, which are, after all, natural features of everyday social practices, being conveyed by participants exerting their freedom to change their minds, the script and the circumstances. The dynamic nature of interactions, social negotiation and some degree of arbitrariness and novelty, decision-making processes and adaptation to situational and structural conditions of existence and living, all this and much more is, in many stances, the exact focus of attention from qualitative researchers – no wonder, then, that many ethical decisions have to be taken “on the spot,” as research progresses and researchers delve deeper into the topic, the field and in social interactions with participants.

Cutting-Edge Methods and Ethical Dilemmas

Many of the previous chapters of this edited book have revealed how ethical reflection goes hand in hand with the criminological project of conducting empirical research on crime and crime-related topics. Not only have new approaches to qualitative methods been discussed, but also authors have addressed the ethical dilemmas some methodological choices carried or, on the contrary, how ethical considerations limited methodological options. These chapters are exemplary in manifesting ethical reasoning that tries to apply the guiding ethical principles to the volatile conditions of data collection and results dissemination. They show how, with thorough ponderation or “gut feeling” at the moment, qualitative researchers frequently deal with ethical dilemmas at several stages of the research. What is more, the chapters in this book clearly show how relevant is for qualitative criminology the “do no harm” principle.

In their essay, Copes and Davis clearly illustrate the emotional impact and trauma that research can have for participants and, obviously, how researchers react to signs of negative impact, furthermore when photographs about people’s lives are being used. However, they conclude that there is a therapeutic effect of research on those

they have studied and accompanied, especially because researchers were very careful in avoiding all sorts of exploitation of the participants' lives, rather allowing them to choose how to participate in the research, namely by choosing materials to elicit interviews, by switching power dynamics between participants and researchers and by reducing researcher bias on what is considered relevant. Furthermore, in the dissemination stage, results were deliberately presented in such a way as to show the participants and their lives as examples of struggle and empowerment. The authors claimed to have achieved this through empathy, sensitivity, and awareness raising, being particularly careful to offer context and present the complexity of these people's stories of drug use and violence. However, once the pictures became public, there was a risk of further stigmatizing participants and the communities they were sampled from. A risk that the authors believe was not likely as the results were framed as alternative ways of seeing the realities documented, of turning the invisible visible, and even by cultivating viewers about the need to develop a humanizing lens to look at the results. In the end, the paper by Copes and Davis not only reveals methodological choices – using photographs to elicit responses and to disseminate research results – but also offers epistemological considerations about the 'ownership' of data, as well as ethical considerations about potential benefits and risks others may experience due to the research using photographs on and with marginalized communities. The authors conclude that "Photographs make it harder to ignore the complexity in people's lives. We see them and their surroundings. We can empathize and connect with them."

Hill and Potter, in face of a similar dilemma about the dissemination of photography and images of active offenders (poachers), decided differently and opted not to use such images. The images were created and used throughout the research process, particularly as notetaking, as a reward for participants and for elicitation. Photos of "palaces," kids learning to hunt with bows and arrows, and images illustrating structural inequalities are just some of the examples presented in the chapter. However, the fact that illegal activities (or remaining symbols of such illegal activities) were taking place, together with the need to minimize personal harm to research participants and to comply with the non-maleficence principle, made the authors choose not to publicly display the photographs, particularly because, as they argue, "The risk of criminal justice intervention is clearly a risk of harm to participants who may face not just loss of liberty through incarceration, but other, often long-lasting, harms associated with criminalization." Further considerations of stigmatization of communities or of bystanders (i.e., people not involved in illegal activities but presented in photos) invited the authors to ethically reason about the public display of such images, defending the need for group privacy.

Sidoti-Pasquazi's paper deals broadly with virtual ethnography and how online environments have become new anthropological spaces. Overall, the author presents existing arguments according to which anonymity and confidentiality in virtual ethnography should be reconsidered. According to the author of the chapter, "online interactions are completely different from face-to-face encounters with research subjects. Researchers may lack the necessary sensibility when approaching virtually, especially (...) dealing with possible vulnerable groups." However, care for

participants and respect for the "do no harm" guiding principle, should be kept when studying people on online social media, particularly when they are carrying out illegal activities. In other words, the classical considerations of criminological research take place both in offline and online research, especially when researching vulnerable populations and participants that risk legal consequences for conducting the exact same illegal activity one wishes to know more about. However, probable risks for the researcher also have to be considered, and "researchers need to think thoroughly before they immerse and interact with their participants" as the frontiers between virtual and physical sites of research, online and offline behaviors and participants, can be quite blurred. Likewise, Mardones-Bravo, by thoroughly presenting the pros and cons of online methods in criminology, recognizes that ethical considerations need to be addressed when researching in the online world. Covert research in social media and getting consent from participants are some of the main ethical dimensions to consider in such cases.

Emotional risks for researchers can also exist, and when that is the case, ethical considerations and reflexivity come together to make sense of the research process of designing a study, collecting data, and presenting results. Particularly because, as Kilty and Fayter show, professional detachment, usually attributed to deontological consideration of ethical rules, may need reconsideration when criminologists with lived experiences of criminalization conduct research on and with incarcerated people. In such cases, the impact of sensitive topics, commonly associated with criminological inquiry, as well as the recalling of traumatic events, may occur on not only the research participant but also the researcher. Or as the author describes, "for those who lived experience of incarceration, critical prison research can be harrowing in that observing carceral sites and practices and/or speaking with criminalized people can lead to a host of difficult feelings and emotions." However, as it happens with participants, not only are negative feelings acknowledged, but also, more often than not, research impacts positively on the participants and on the researcher, with feelings of camaraderie and solidarity being reported. Likewise, the authors claim, morals and ethics intertwine in the potential for healing that research in such contexts promotes. Likewise, Herrity, Schmidt, and Warr consider that sensory methodologies add an extra dimension of "ethical care in research practice," in the sense that such methodologies enhance research participants' agency and control, which, according to the authors, allows participants to better navigate emotionally sensitive topics, putting them in control of the direction of the research and of communication more broadly. The co-construction of knowledge and renegotiation of science's authority is also acknowledged by Natali, South, McClanahan, and Brisman's piece that shows how methodological, ethical, and epistemological considerations are intertwined in some of the most recent and innovative empirical endeavors or creating criminological knowledge.

The chapters of this book also address the role of ethics committees and IRBs for empirical criminological research, Briggs' paper in Part I of the book, for instance, offers a critical perspective about the current environment where research is taking place, particularly how ethnography is being frowned upon by ethics committees which, as the author argues, are more concerned with liability in risky contexts

(such as in the interstices of drug use and drug trafficking), and share an overall unacceptance of covert research. The author's account of ethnographic research freed from the shackles of academic capitalism is one of ethical decision-making and reasoning despite the mandatory ticking of boxes imposed by ethics committees; of fluid and rapid adjustments to pressing social events such as the refugee crisis and their internal routes in Europe; and of systematic observation and data collection on vulnerable populations of drug users and sex workers; of retaining the moral purpose of knowledge creation through self-funded ethnography, compliant with ethical requisites and critical of the institutional and organizational existing conditions of higher education.

Sun and Benson, on the contrary, show how ethics committees can be fundamental to maintain stability in times of deep changes, as it happened with the unprecedented lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemics. The suspension of face-to-face data collection led the authors to revisit research protocols and reconsider ethical guidelines, particularly on how participants would provide informed consent to take part in the research, which had moved to an online format. Keeping communication open with ethics committees seemed to have been extremely relevant for the conclusion of the original study in absolutely new conditions. The authors argue that "the IRB is duty-bound to follow and enforce regulations regarding research with human subjects, but IRBs also have an interest in seeing that research progresses in their institutions." However, the last reference that Sun and Benson leave is towards research participants and how, even when researchers find themselves pressured to conduct and finish the study, the most relevant thing to do is to communicate with and be transparent with participants, keeping them informed about how the research is going, what to expect, and "be open to continuing communication," in a practical form of caring for, supporting, and protecting participants, especially during one of the most life-changing events of the last decades.

"Being" Ethical in Criminological Research

Considering the guiding ethical principles presented previously, as well as the several ethical considerations and reflections offered by the authors of this edited book and by authors referenced in other relevant literature, as well as my own experience of over 10 years in ethics committees, I would like to further stress some ideas pertaining to ethics in criminology.

From my perspective, training and experience in ethical reasoning are extremely important. As it happens with research methods, the best way to learn about it is by doing it. In the case of ethics, this means knowing the guiding principles and applying them to solve particular dilemmas. In fact, thinking about ethical dilemmas may be simultaneously very challenging, especially for novice researchers, and very fruitful. The consideration that there are hardly any reified responses to ethical dilemmas is one of the first intellectual challenges researchers can endure. Take, for instance, anonymity and the need to guarantee that data from participants is kept

protected from public scrutiny. Now consider empirical research on crimes of the powerful, such as case studies on major financial swindles or corruption by well-known public figures – in such cases, anonymity is virtually impossible to maintain, and I would further argue that may not be desirable to ensure. Furthermore, the Statement of Ethics of the British Society of Criminology states that the responsibility to minimize personal harm to research participants may not be applied where researchers are uncovering corruption or pollution and that "Researchers need not work to minimize harm to the corporate or institutional entities responsible for the damage." In sum, ethical dilemmas exist, and just as important as training researchers on ethical principles is training researchers on recognizing and solving ethical dilemmas.

Ethical dilemmas arise when researchers need to apply abstract principles and guidelines to concrete and practical research situations, such as accessing the field, contacting gatekeepers, or deciding if they are using photographs for the public dissemination of results. Sound ethical reasoning refers to the ability that researchers develop in carefully considering the risks and harms, together with the overall benefits, of making particular methodological choices. From the research question to the sampling design, to the recruitment and data gathering, to the moment the researcher leaves the field and attempts to publish results, in all research stages and steps, ethical considerations are due and ethical dilemmas are being solved. And while, for some situations, researchers already know, beforehand, how such dilemmas were solved, for other, particularly when using innovative methods or when trying to adapt traditional methodologies to critical and profoundly changing social phenomena, existing familiar ethical solutions may be lacking. This means researchers need to develop the ability to use ethical reasoning. Or, in other words, researchers need to learn how to "be" ethical and how to integrate ethical decision-making into all steps of the research process. Furthermore, not all countries and institutions give the same relevance to ethics committees or devise ethical compliance mechanisms.

While authors from Anglo-Saxon countries have been publishing extensively on the works of such ethics committees or IRBs, much is yet to be known about what are (if any) the ethics governance mechanisms in other countries, particularly the more peripheric ones or where criminological research is in its early stages. In many countries, ethics committees for criminological research may not exist. Or they may not be sufficiently developed. Or they may be mere forms of window dressing for institutions to "look ethical" despite continued disrespect for researchers, participants, and the particularities of criminological inquiry. In such situations, when ethics is not carefully considered and cared for at the institutional or organizational level, it is crucial that researchers develop ethical reasoning.

As mentioned, the first step for that to happen is to recognize that there are no "one size fits all" solutions, even though similar situations may lead to similar ethical decisions. However, acknowledging that dilemmas may and probably will exist at some point in the research helps researchers to be ready to react when that happens. Especially because, as already considered, many ethical decisions are taken "on the spot" when interacting directly with (prospective) participants. Additionally,

researchers ought to be aware of and know in some detail the existing rules, including ethics codes or data protection guidelines, of their respective institutions, countries, or the ones used by research sponsors. Next, researchers ought to know whom to turn to to ask for support and help in solving ethical dilemmas. All researchers will deal with ethical dilemmas sooner or later, which means that, besides ethics committees, researchers can turn to their colleagues or supervisors, instill debate on ethical decision-making, and learn from their peers' experiences. This can happen in more or less private meetings, but it can also take place during research seminars or even by looking at what has come up in journals or conferences. I thus argue that it would probably be incredibly valuable for researchers to have access to colleagues' previous experience with ethical dilemmas and to debates on ethics through frequently published papers and presentations at conferences with research ethics, overall, being given more visibility than it actually is. However, as Dodge and Parker show in a different chapter of this book, publishing qualitative research may be particularly challenging, let alone when authors wish to discuss or present methodological and ethical details.

Ethical Considerations in Contemporary Crises

The knowledge of overarching ethical rules and the development of ethical reasoning and the skills to make ethical decisions – “being” ethical – are particularly important in critical moments in history. Many of the chapters of this edited collection mention this need to adapt ethical requirements to, for instance, unprecedented lockdowns. Rapidly changing social practices and individual experiences mean, for instance, that risks and harms that researchers should account for also change rapidly. Just consider the recent potential for information and data going viral and traveling throughout the world; or how images and words (which can be research data or research results) are quickly shared on social media. But despite this velocity of events, many people still struggle to benefit from the right to be forgotten, meaning that past events can still be accessible online (and become research data) despite the fact that the respective authors have ceased to consent to have them publicly available.

Anonymity and privacy have new meanings and need to be reconsidered in the online world, where people can manage their alias or virtual characters. Demographic and personal data may not have correspondence in the online and the offline world for some research participants. However, online actions happening to virtual identities (e.g., hate crimes, insults, bullying) can have real consequences and harms to real people in the offline world.

Current social developments should also bring new ethical (and further methodological) considerations. While ethics, in this paper, has been mostly directed towards human participants, the growing body of work on green criminology, together with the pressing need to study the causes of the current climate emergency and ways to ameliorate them, may mean that criminological research may need to

consider animal well-being as well. The interaction with nonhuman suffering (e.g., illegal wildlife trading, poaching, illegal fishing) and criminological research may pose new ethical dilemmas regarding how researchers avoid doing harm to nonhuman research participants. Simultaneously, this probably merits broadening the perspective on who/what should be considered a research participant.

Political unrest and polarization in many current societies demand new ways of considering how to collect and analyze data. The complexity, richness, and depth of qualitative inquiry may need to be readjusted to the study of realities based on fake news and “black and white” debates. The seeming lack of nuances in public debates on relevant issues, together with extremist and extreme political discourses, may lead qualitative research to readjust its data collection techniques or data analysis procedures. Simultaneously, this poses ethical dilemmas as research results can risk creating further divides and real or symbolical political barricades.

Finally, one last comment about the conditions that allow the existence of sound ethical reasoning. Ethics and ethical analysis and consideration are more likely to exist in just and ethical institutions. Demanding researchers to care for participants while researchers themselves work in and for institutions who do not care about them; mandating researchers to do no harm to participants while working in institutions where researchers are frequently bullied, are gaslighted, or work in precariousness; and upholding researchers to the higher ethical standards while, simultaneously, offering working conditions that do practically nothing to avoid burnout and other mental health issues or that prevent individuals from working in dignified conditions – all this is condemning ethics to be just a box-ticking exercise to get research money, publications and high ranks in universities’ assessments. Being ethical is only possible if researchers are given the chance of working ethically in ethical institutions.

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