Summary

The art of juggling

Time use in the Netherlands and its relationship with quality of life

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Summary

S.1 Background

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) has a long tradition in time use research. That is no coincidence: time use data provide an insight into the behaviour of Dutch citizens in all kinds of areas of life. Time is a scarce commodity, and the way people spend the hours and minutes they have available says a lot about their interests, opportunities and constraints. Information on people's time use also offers a unique perspective on societal changes.

As with other SCP research, the main emphasis in this report is on the perspective of the citizen. As a result, the topics addressed in the report all impinge on the themes and domains on which SCP carries out research. However, the report also offers a broader perspective in two respects. First, the Time Use Survey (TBO) is one of the longest-running data series held by SCP, making it possible to look back in time over several decades – as far back as 1975, to be precise. According to reports in the media, daily life is changing at a dizzying pace and we are busier than ever before (see e.g. AD/Groene Hart 2014; Kervezee 2015; Vrij Nederland 2015; Dinther 2018; NOS 2018; Vrouw 2018). At the same time, those reports are often based on impressions, signals and expectations, sometimes without any clear empirical substantiation. The consequence is that we do not know with any certainty whether today, around the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the pace of life in the Netherlands is indeed faster than in the past. Data on time use can shed some light on this.

This report throws the 'bigger picture' into sharper relief in a second way, too, by incorporating information on all areas of life: work, care, leisure time, school, volunteering, and so on. This makes it possible to investigate the interaction and interfaces between these domains and to explore how they all come together in the lives of individual citizens.

This publication is the main report of the most recent data from the Time Use Survey (TBO), which were collected throughout 2016. The report describes how the Dutch spend their time, but also carries out analyses by examining social differences in people's time use and exploring trends in time use over recent decades. In this edition of the Time Use Report we also look at quality of life, investigating to what extent the way people configure their time is related to how they rate their quality of life. Specifically, in this report we examine whether particular time use patterns can be detected which coincide with a high level of satisfaction and higher perceived time pressure.

S.2 The Time Use Survey (TBO)

For this edition of the Time Use Survey, 1,893 respondents kept a diary detailing their activities during one week in 2016. As well as keeping the diary, respondents also completed a separate questionnaire, with questions on how they experienced their time use and on

their quality of life. The drawing of the sample was aimed at achieving a representative reflection of all Dutch citizens aged 10 years and older (people living in institutions such as residential care homes were left out of consideration).
This survey was carried out using a consistent methodology every five years between 1975 and 2005, and provides an impression of changes in time use over recent decades. In 2006, for the first time the TBO was carried out in accordance with the Harmonised European Time Use Survey (HETUS) guidelines. Switching to this method brought several advantages, such as making it easier to compare Dutch data with data from elsewhere in Europe. It has also been possible since 2006 to ascertain who people spend time with. At the same time, the introduction of the new guidelines had some disadvantages. The most important of these is the reduced comparability over time: as the data collection method differs in several respects from that used prior to 2006, the data gathered before and after that year cannot be compared on a one-to-one basis.

S.3 Summary of findings

S.3.1 How do the Dutch spend their time?

The study distinguishes between 'obligatory' time, personal time and leisure time. 'Obligatory' time refers to time spent on paid work, but also on care tasks (also referred to as 'unpaid work') and education (Cloïn 2013). Personal time includes time spent sleeping, eating and drinking, showering, washing, and so on. Free time is defined broadly, to include leisure activities such as sport and culture, social contacts, time spent consuming media, volunteering and attending gatherings.
Dutch citizens aged 12 years and older devote roughly the same amount of time to 'obligatory' activities as to leisure activities: almost 46 hours and 44 hours respectively per week, equivalent to some 6.5 hours per day. However, the most time is spent on personal activities: over 77 hours per week (11 hours per day). The main reason for this is that these activities include a lot of time spent sleeping: the Dutch spend an average of 59 hours per week in bed (more than 8.5 hours per day). They also spend just over 11 hours per week eating and drinking and spend 7 hours per week showering, getting dressed, etc.
Those who performed paid work during the diary week spend an average of 31 hours per week on this activity. Respondents who reported spending time on education at any point during the week spend an average of 14.5 hours per week on this activity. This may not appear to be a lot of time at first sight, but in addition to general and vocational education, 'educational' activities can include pursuing courses connected with hobbies. Those who perform household work (which is almost everyone) spend just under 20 hours per week on this activity.
Those carrying out care tasks spend around 6 hours per week on average doing so. This might entail looking after children living at home, for example, though in reality the total time spent with their children by parents with children living at home is much higher than this, averaging around 30 hours per week for fathers and 40 hours per week for mothers.

If we look at leisure time use, we find that most time is spent consuming media (almost 20 hours per week) and on social contacts (just over 8 hours per week). There is also a large category 'other leisure time', which includes activities such as sport, culture and hobbies; these activities account for around 14 hours per week. Roughly one in three Dutch citizens report that they spend part of the week volunteering and/or attending gatherings (such as church services). Those who participate in these activities spend an average of 4.5 hours per week doing so.

This report not only describes how long the Dutch engage in various activities, but also when they do so. The times when people work and relax still fall into the 'traditional' time slots. Work is carried out mainly on weekdays and during office hours, while people devote a lot of time in the evenings and at weekends to leisure activities. There thus appears to be no sign as yet that the Netherlands has become a '24/7 society'. If we compare these patterns with earlier years (see Cloïn 2013), we find strikingly little change in the timing of activities. The 'rigidity' of these patterns is ascribed by Cloïn en Van den Broek (2013) to a combination of biological and cultural factors. For example, we become tired in the evening and still prefer to do our shopping on a Saturday afternoon rather than on a Wednesday evening, for example.

The participants in the survey were also asked about their quality of life, for example to what extent they feel under time pressure. 36% of respondents aged 12 and over reported that they felt harried on at least one of the 'diary days' during the survey week; additionally, 54% feel that their lives are too busy and 39% feel they sometimes come up short at home or at work. Despite these feelings of being under time pressure, the Dutch are generally satisfied with their quality of life, awarding an average score of 7.8 out of 10.

S.3.2 How much variation is there in the time use of men and women, people in different phases of life and people with different educational levels?

Men work more, women provide more care

Comparing the time use patterns of men and women, we see that men still work more while women still spend more time providing care. This report shows that men spend an average of around 25.5 hours per week on paid work and 17.5 hours looking after the household and others. The proportion for women is more or less the reverse of this (16 hours paid work and 26.5 hours on care).

The gender differences in other domains are much smaller. Men report around 3 hours per week more leisure time, while women spend around 3 hours per week more on personal care (sleeping, washing, eating and drinking). Earlier research (e.g. Ridgeway 2011) shows that societal expectations and differences in upbringing provide an important explanation for gender differences in time use. Contrary to what is often assumed, the fact that the amount of leisure time and the time spent on personal care are roughly equal suggests that women do not spend more time on the total of paid work and care tasks than men. In fact, during the phase of life with children (living at home), fathers actually spend slightly more

time on this than mothers. On the other hand, women (and mothers) experience more time pressure than men (and fathers).

Phase of life plays an important role

Comparing the time use of people in different phases of life reveals clear differences. Children, adolescents and single adults spend a relatively large amount of time on education, leisure activity and personal care. In many cases they are pupils and students with few care tasks. Some of them – especially the single adults – also work, but their working hours are relatively low compared with cohabiting adults.
People living with a partner and with children living at home devote a relatively large amount of time (compared with the other groups) to work and care tasks. They are often in the middle of their careers, are looking after children at home and (slightly more often than younger people) have loved ones in need of care (Bianchi & Milkie 2010; De Klerk et al. 2017). This is also the phase when the gender differences in time spent on work and care are greatest. After retirement age, there is an increase particularly in the amount of available leisure time.
The above results show that time use patterns are to some extent linked to people's age and phase of life. People's roles, responsibilities and opportunities often change with their phase of life, and this has an impact on how they spend their time (Bianchi & Milkie 2010). It is however not the case that only young people are learning, that people not of working age do not work and that care tasks are limited to the phase of life with a family: people learn, work and provide care in all phases of life. Section S.3.4 looks in more detail at the time use of children and adolescents, parents and older people, and how this relates to their quality of life.

Highly educated people 'busier' than the lower educated

In line with earlier research, this report shows that more highly educated people spend more time on paid work and experience more time pressure compared to lower educated people. Those who are higher educated also participate in more activities on an average day and multitask relatively often. Explanations for these differences were not investigated directly, but earlier research suggests that people with a higher education level more often have a (larger) job and loftier career ambitions and that being busy also carries a certain status for these groups (e.g., Sullivan en Gershuny 2017).

S.3.3 How much has time use in the Netherlands changed over time?

Times are changing, but the changes are small

Time does not stand still, and time use patterns have changed over the last 40 years. Between 1975 and 2005, the amount of time spent by Dutch citizens aged 12 years and older on paid work, care and education ('obligatory' time) increased by 3.5 hours per week This increase appears to have taken place at the expense of leisure time, which fell by 3 hours per week over the same period. Personal time remained unchanged. The changes

have been less marked over the last ten years. On average, time spent on personal care has increased by just under 2 hours per week. In parallel with this, time spent on obligatory activities has increased by 1 hour per week, as has time spent on leisure activities.
The changes over time are thus relatively small and happen more slowly than is often assumed – though the overall trends and general averages sometimes also mask larger changes. For example, the average number of hours worked by women increased relatively sharply between 1975 and 2005 (from just under 7 hours to just over 14 hours per week), and this upward trend has continued over the last ten years (from just over 14 hours per week in 2006 to almost 16 hours in 2016).
This study looked in more detail at changes in time use in the labour force. The emphasis was on potential indicators of time pressure, such as combining roles and tasks. Compared with ten years ago, it is slightly more common for people to be performing several activities at the same time, sometimes called multitasking. In 2006, men spent around 15% of their time multitasking and women around 17%; in 2016 these figures had risen to 19% and 23%, respectively. The number of activities people perform on an average day has not increased, suggesting that time use has not become more fragmented in recent years. There has also not been a substantial increase in the total time spent on paid work, care and education.
The study also looked at changes in perceived time pressure. The share of people of working age who sometimes feel harried during the diary week was 8 percentage points higher in 2016 than in 2006 (compared with 6 percentage points for the population as a whole). However, this share was slightly higher in 2011 than in 2016. There is thus no clear discernible trend.

S.3.4 What are the characteristics of the time use of young people, parents and older people, and how does their time use relate to their quality of life?

Young people: leisure time and new media

The time use patterns of children and adolescents (aged between 10 and 18 years) are characterised by ample time for leisure activities, especially compared with adults. This leisure time is mainly filled with sport, play and media activities. The data from our study offer little support for the notion that the leisure time of young people is under pressure.
Yet some young people's lives can become very busy; one in four young people in our study sometimes feel harried, and almost half of them report that they are sometimes 'too busy'. The time pressure that young people experience at school may play a role here. This pressure appears to have increased over recent years: earlier representative research shows that more than a third of secondary school pupils experience significant pressure due to their school work (Stevens et al. 2018).
The pressure experienced by young people may also be related to their frequent use of new media. We found indications in our study that use of new communication resources can have both positive and negative effects on quality of life. For example, young people themselves find that it can be both relaxing and stressful to spend (lots of) time online; and

the more online contact young people have, the more likely they are to feel harried and have the sense of being 'too busy'.

The phase with children: the 'rush hour' of life

The phase of life when children are living at home is often described as the 'rush hour of life'. The chapter of this report which describes the time use of parents with children at home shows that there are good reasons for this. The total time spent on paid work, looking after children and running the household is higher during this phase than in any other phase of life. There is also relatively little time for leisure activity and personal care in this phase of life.

Parents are not only objectively busy, but in many cases they also *feel* busy. During the diary week, more than four out of ten reported that at a certain point they felt harried, and almost seven out of ten reported that they are sometimes 'too busy'. These percentages are higher than in any of the other groups studied. At the same time, parents report that they were roughly just as happy with their lives as people without children. The fact that the family phase is experienced as busy need therefore not mean that it always has a negative impact on quality of life.

Differences in perceived time pressure and satisfaction among parents were also investigated. The more time parents spend on paid work and looking after their children, the busier they feel their lives are, but at the same time they also feel greater satisfaction with their lives the more they work. The finding that, whilst it can be busy and complex, combining different roles and tasks can also be seen as a positive experience – for example because it can be enriching – echoes the findings of earlier research (Gareis et al. 2009; Rantanen et al. 2013).

Older people: more time for the household, media and social contacts

The time use patterns of people aged over 65 differ in some respects from those of people aged under 66 years. For example, older people spend less time caring for others (e.g. providing informal care), but they devote more time to volunteering. And while older people participate less in sport, they spend more time walking and cycling. Furthermore, older people spend more time looking after the household, consuming media and pursuing hobbies. That is hardly surprising, given that these activities often take place in and around the home and that older people – after retirement – often spend more time at home.

Our findings yield a mixed picture of the social life of older people. People in this phase of life do spend more time alone. In part, this can be seen as a result of the fact that older people are no longer working and their children have left home; some of them have also lost their partner. They do have much more time for social contacts, and older people spend more time visiting others, for example, than younger age groups.

All in all, the older persons in our study are just as satisfied with their lives as those aged under 66 years, but do more often feel lonely. The more time they spend with others, the less lonely they feel and the more satisfied they are with their lives.

S.3.5 How is the social participation of the Dutch and how much time do they spend caring for others? And how does participating in social activities and providing care affect their quality of life?

Social participation

In this report, social participation includes all forms of leisure activity in which people are in contact in any way with others and with the community around them. This includes social contacts and volunteering, but also media consumption such as reading, listening and watching and attending gatherings, cultural and sporting events (as participants or spectators).

If we look at the participation of Dutch citizens on an annualised basis, it is highest in media activities, volunteering, culture and sport. Some of these activities are carried out frequently (such as reading and playing sport), others less so. That applies for participation in culture, for example: eight out of ten Dutch people have attended a performance or cultural attraction in the past year, but that is not something that people do every week; during the diary week, only 15% of participants reported a cultural activity of this kind.

Analysis shows that there is only a limited relationship with quality of life. The type of activity in which people engage is found to make no difference to their happiness and satisfaction. It is plausible that people fill their leisure time with activities that contribute to their happiness and satisfaction, but precisely what those activities are varies from person to person.

There is by contrast a relationship between participation and loneliness: people who volunteer, attend sporting events or visit cultural events are less lonely than those who do not do this. Similarly, people who spend more of their leisure time with other people or outside the home are less lonely. It is however not possible to determine whether participation reduces loneliness or whether it is the other way round and that people who are lonely (for whatever reason) participate less in these activities.

Caring for others

Since our data are based on observations during a single diary week, we are able to identify which Dutch citizens provide care to children and/or adults on a weekly basis. Caring for children can include looking after and supervising one's own children, but also other children (e.g. grandchildren). Caring for adults was measured by looking at the time spent providing care and help to adults. This may include informal care, but also performing odd jobs for a family member or friend who is not ill.

One in ten Dutch people provide care to both children and adults; one in four provide care only to children; and one in seven provide care only to adults. In line with findings reported from other research (Dykstra et al. 2006; Opree & Kalmijn 2012), it is mainly women who combine caring for children and adults. Contrary to the dominant view, however, these are by no means always women in middle age; one in five 'task-combiners' are aged over 65, and a quarter are younger than 35.

Although people with care tasks generally spend less time on paid work and leisure activities than those without care tasks, this does not apply for all groups of carers. For example, people who are only caring for children spend just as much time working as non-carers, while those who care for adults spend the same amount of time on leisure activities as those who do not.
The quality of life of those who provide care is comparable in many respects to that of people without care tasks. This is in line with earlier research, which shows that caring for others entails both costs (such as stress) and benefits (such as a stronger bond) (Nelson et al. 2014; Boer et al. 2015; Musick et al. 2016). Caring for others does appear to be associated with more time pressure, though this time pressure is lower for carers who have more time for relaxation or who are providing less intensive care.

S.4 Conclusions

S.4.1 Justified concerns about (growing) time pressure?

As commented at the start of this summary, concerns have been expressed recently about growing time pressure in the Netherlands. Based on our findings on (changes in) the time use of the Dutch and the relationship with quality of life, we are able to say something more about the empirical basis for those assumptions and concerns.

Many Dutch people sometimes feel under time pressure

First, a substantial proportion of the Dutch population sometimes experience time pressure. More than a third of the respondents in our study feel harried on at least one day in the week. In addition, more than half sometimes feel that their life is 'too busy'. The share of the population who experience time pressure fluctuates, with no clear discernible trend: the share of people who feel harried was slightly higher in 2016 than in 2006, but slightly lower than in 2011.

Little change in time use patterns

If we look at time use patterns themselves, we find no unambiguous evidence that life in the Netherlands is busier. For example, over the last ten years our data show no substantial increase in the time spent by the Dutch on obligatory activities: the time spent on paid work, unpaid work and care has hardly changed. This contrasts with previous decades – and especially the 1980s and 90s – when we did see an increase, especially in the time spent on paid work, and especially among women.
Time use has also not become more fragmented in recent years: the number of activities in which a person engages on an average day has remained broadly unchanged. Our study does however show that, compared with a few years ago, people report slightly more often that they are performing several activities at the same time. This could be an indication of multitasking, and that is something which we know from earlier research can exacerbate feelings of time pressure (Offer & Schneider 2011).

Some phases of life are busy

The fact that no major changes have taken place in recent years in the way people spend their time does not alter the fact that a substantial proportion of Dutch people do sometimes feel harried. Our study shows that, for some groups of people, life can sometimes be too busy, especially in certain phases of life. Parents with children living at home, for example, not only feel under time pressure, but also devote the most time in total to obligatory activities (paid work, care and education). They also relatively frequently multitask and their time is relatively fragmented (which means they report a higher number of activities per day).

S.4.2 Time use and quality of life in general

Busy and content

Our study found some support for the idea that people with more active and busy time use are more satisfied with their lives than people who are less busy. People of working age were for example found to be more satisfied when they devoted more time (in total) to work, care and education. And the more hours parents with children living at home spend working, the more satisfied they are with their lives. Similarly, older people who spend less time alone are more satisfied and less lonely.

Having a busy and active life may be a source of positive energy and experiences, enabling people to view their lives with more satisfaction and appreciation. It is also plausible that busy and active people receive more appreciation from those around them for their activities, which in turn can have a positive effect on how they see themselves and their lives. Earlier research has for example also shown that an active lifestyle can lead to new, broad experiences and in some cases to a certain status (Gershuny 2005; Greenhaus & Powell 2006; Treas et al. 2011). It is also possible that cause and effect operate in the other direction, and that people who are the most satisfied and happiest and the least lonely have the energy to do more.

Other explanations

Broadly speaking, however, we found the relationship between time use patterns and general quality of life to be weaker than expected. This could be because people structure their time in such a way that it matches their personal preferences, ambitions and interests. Personal preferences in relation to time use can also vary, with some preferring a busy lifestyle whilst others prefer a quieter life (see e.g. Hills & Argyle 2001). Another possible reason is that many people are generally satisfied with their lives and the variations in this respect are limited. This is also echoed in other studies (Veenhoven 2002; Veenhoven 2018; Wennekers et al. 2018). Even major life course events such as the birth of a child or losing one's job often have only a temporary impact on well-being, because people adjust their expectations and frames of reference to the new situation (Veenhoven 1991; Mandemakers 2011).

S.4.3 Time use and perceived time pressure

Busy and harried

Our findings support the idea that active and full time use patterns can give people a sense of being harried. People more often say they experience time pressure when they devote more time to the combination of paid work, care and education, and also when their time use is characterised by a higher degree of fragmentation and multitasking. There may be different underlying mechanisms at work here. A commonly proffered explanation in research is that time, energy and attention are finite resources and that people who participate in more activities consequently run up against the buffer of these resources and may experience conflicts and coordination problems (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985; Bianchi & Milkie 2010).

Other mechanisms

That does not appear to be the whole story, however. How harried or how busy someone feels depends not only on the objective amount of time they spend on a particular activity: psychological research, for example, suggests that there may be variation in people's aptitude to process and respond to stimuli from their environment (Aron 1997; Benham 2006). Given the same number of activities, a person who is sensitive to stimuli or who finds it difficult to process them will more readily develop a feeling of being overstimulated or harried than someone who does not have this sensitivity.

Time pressure can moreover arise not just because of the activities that people *do*, but also because of the things they do *not* do but would have liked to or feel they should have done. This latter aspect is of course very difficult to study, but it is plausible that time pressure can arise where people have *too little* time to do what they would like to do, what they or others around them think they should do or what people have arranged to do, alone or with others. For the same amount of activities, someone who feels that they should have done more is more likely to feel harried than someone who does not feel this. In short, the demands which people impose on themselves or the demands or norms which are imposed on them by those around them will play a role here.

A final alternative source of time pressure can be use of social and other media; there are several reasons for this. First, media consumption often takes place during or between other activities, which means people are confronted with a range of different stimuli within a short space of time. In addition, messages which people receive during the day (or night) via social media often demand something from them, namely a response, either immediately or within a short space of time. People are thus tempted or pressured to adjust their plans, and this can cause them to feel harried. In our study of children and adolescents we found some indications that frequent use of modern communication resources could elicit or exacerbate feelings of being harried. However, precisely because a lot of media use takes place alongside other forms of time use and is of fairly short duration, this is less easy to capture in the diaries used in the Time Use Survey.

S.4.4 Implications for policy and research

Questions for future research

Answering research questions often spawns new research questions, and that is no different here. An example of a follow-up question is what causes objective time pressure to translate into perceived time pressure. Are there specific resources such as income, social support and 'do-ability' (Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) 2017), which make it easier to master the art of juggling time? Under what circumstances and for which people does objective time pressure lead to harmful forms of time pressure (harmful to health, for example)? And what about the more positive forms of time pressure which are associated with more favourable outcomes such as a sense of satisfaction? To answer questions such as these, it is necessary to identify which characteristics of individuals, families, organisations and societies can help and hinder people. This can be done both by exploring the role of psychological factors (such as someone's personality) and the more social and institutional factors (such as the social support someone receives and the influence of policy). It would also be interesting to examine the role of expectations: what do people expect of themselves and of each other? Why is it that some people set higher demands than others, and what does this mean for their time use and their quality of life? Follow-up questions such as these can shed more light on the complex interaction between behaviour, opinions and well-being.

A few considerations for policy

At first glance, there appears to be no policy in the Netherlands aimed directly at influencing time use; how people fill their time is after all an individual choice which is situated largely in the personal sphere. If we look more closely, however, Dutch government policy does appear to seek to influence some aspects of time use (Cloïn 2013). Labour market policy and emancipation policy, for example, focus in part on facilitating the combination of work and can tasks (Portegijs & Van den Brakel 2016; TK 2016/2017; Roeters & Bucx 2018); care policy seeks to stimulate informal care (Feijten et al. 2017; Klerk et al. 2017); and culture and sports policy uses various methods to encourage participation in these activities (Roeters et al. 2017). The government's aim in all these areas is to *increase* participation. Policymakers could however also view the time use of citizens in other ways.

The Dutch government has formulated the ambition of focusing on welfare in a broad sense (Rijksoverheid 2017). This suggests that the government not only regards the economic prosperity of citizens as important, but is also committed to increasing general well-being and ensuring good quality of life. As part of this ambition, consideration could be given to ways of reducing people's perceived time pressure. This report has shown that a substantial proportion of Dutch citizens experience time pressure, with the results suggesting that this time pressure 'peaks' in the family phase when there are children, and is also relatively high among the highly educated and women. Policy could explore ways of reducing the time pressure for these groups. Possible ways of achieving this could be to increase the opportunities for leave and childcare and giving more thought to comprehensive day-

time arrangements for children. These policy measures and their potential benefits for parents and especially mothers have been spoken about for some time, but this report underlines the urgency of developing policy that does not demand more time *from* people, but rather gives time *to* them.

Many of the behavioural changes considered desirable by policymakers demand new or greater time investments (Strazdins et al. 2011), while little account is generally taken of the possible time constraints experienced by citizens. The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) recently highlighted the importance of policy being based on realistic assumptions about people's behaviour and capacity (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid 2017), and called for careful consideration to be given when developing every new policy measure to ways of ensuring that citizens not only understand the measure but are also able to apply it. It would be helpful if account was also taken of people's time use and time constraints. For example, it seems unrealistic to expect people to work more hours, provide more care, learn more and volunteer more (Putters 2015). It would therefore be better when developing new policy to think about what demands on people's time a particular policy entails and how realistic it is to expect citizens to be able to meet those demands.

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