

Reflection Article/Essay

Challenges for an occupational-therapeutic practice that promotes autonomy and emancipation¹

Desafios para uma prática terapêutica-ocupacional que promova autonomia e emancipação

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Abstract

This text discusses autonomy and emancipation as goals of occupational therapy, drawing inspiration from Vladimir Safatle's reflections to relate them to concepts such as freedom and democracy. It highlights the limited view of contemporary society, which often reduces autonomy to a strictly individual process. In dialogue with Luiz Silva and Paulo Freire, the text seeks to explore dimensions of emancipation processes, which include raising awareness of experienced oppressions and exercising autonomy in a free manner. It is argued that social occupational therapy, by adopting Freirean principles of critical and liberating education, can be understood as a tool to address the challenges posed. The text specifically discusses the practice of social occupational therapy developed with young people in public schools, which, by aiming to promote autonomy and emancipation, can contribute to strengthening youth leadership and, more broadly, to radical inclusion and democracy.

Keywords: Autonomy, Empowerment, Democracy, Education, Occupational Therapy.

Resumo

Este texto discute a autonomia e a emancipação como objetivos da terapia ocupacional, inspirando-se nas reflexões de Vladimir Safatle para relacioná-las com conceitos como liberdade e democracia. Destaca-se a visão limitada da sociedade

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contemporânea, que frequentemente reduz a autonomia a um processo exclusivamente individual. Em diálogo com Luiz Silva e Paulo Freire, busca-se explorar dimensões dos processos de emancipação que incluem a conscientização das opressões vivenciadas e o exercício da autonomia de maneira livre. Argumenta-se que, a terapia ocupacional social, ao adotar os princípios freirianos de educação crítica e libertadora, pode ser entendida como uma ferramenta para enfrentar os desafios postos. Discute-se, em particular, a prática de terapia ocupacional social desenvolvida com jovens na escola pública, que, ao buscar a promoção da autonomia e emancipação, pode contribuir para fortalecer o protagonismo juvenil e, de forma mais ampla, para uma inclusão e democracia radicais.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia, Emancipação Social, Democracia, Educação, Terapia Ocupacional.

Introduction

This essay stems from reflections generated from a master's research that aimed to analyze the concept of protagonism that guides the Integral Teaching Program (PEI) of the state of São Paulo.

Created in 2012 as one of the outcomes of the “Education Commitment of São Paulo” Program, PEI seeks to offer a comprehensive education with extended time at school, aiming to develop young people to be autonomous, supportive, and competent. To achieve this, it offers an integrated and diversified curriculum that provides the necessary conditions for students to design and build the so-called “life projects”. Additionally, it aims to contribute to the democratization and improvement of public schools. According to the foundations of PEI, all learning facilitated by the school should be considered fundamental elements for students to construct their life projects, with protagonism as the main means of achieving these objectives (São Paulo, 2013).

Considering the significant expansion of PEI in the state of São Paulo between 2021 and 2023, a study was conducted to deepen the understanding of what is referred to as protagonism in this program, both in terms of discourse and practice, from the perspective of its professionals. The results of this research, which involved analyzing the primary guiding document of PEI—the Guidelines of the Integral Teaching Program—and interviews with professionals from a school participating in this program, indicate contradictions between these two dimensions. In the realm of discourse, there is an idealization of the young protagonist as someone already prepared for this role, which does not align, in practice, with the reality of Brazilian youth, as well as with the public school itself and its physical, material, and human resources (Cavicchioni, 2024).

These results raise questions about how much this concept of protagonism, as it is being developed in PEI, aligns with democratic principles. The ensuing discussions highlight the need for educational processes that promote autonomy and emancipation as key elements for the development of genuine protagonism—beyond what is idealized by this program and its professionals—that can effectively contribute to the construction of a democratic and democratizing public school (Cavicchioni, 2024).

These elements intersect with objectives established for occupational-therapeutic practice: the promotion of autonomy and emancipation and, especially in actions directed toward the educational sector and the proposals advocated by social occupational therapy, the contribution to processes of radical inclusion and democracy (Lopes & Borba, 2022).

Reflecting on autonomy and emancipation as elements that lead to democracy presents complex challenges for professional practice, certainly not only for occupational therapists. We intend to deepen this discussion in this essay, drawing on the reflections of Safatle (2019) and Silva (2013), adding elements for the theoretical-practical reflection of occupational therapy. In particular, we consider the demands of public schools, but not exclusively, reaffirming the potentiality of social occupational therapy grounded in Paulo Freire's conception of education as a practice of freedom, as a direction for confronting these challenges.

Autonomy, Emancipation, and Paths to Democracy

Traditionally, autonomy is associated with the idea of individuals' self-governance in an independent manner, and therefore linked to self-reflection and self-construction. However, Safatle (2019) proposes a critical reflection on the concept of autonomy, interrelating it with the notions of freedom, emancipation, and democracy. This author argues that, in our current society, autonomy is grounded in a liberal notion of freedom that, by emphasizing independence and self-determination, ends up ignoring the interdependencies and social relations that constitute human subjectivity and freedom itself. From this perspective, absolute autonomy would not exist, as freedom is necessarily mediated by relationships with others and by social structures.

For Safatle (2019, p. 24), true freedom is not the ability to act in isolation and independently, but the ability to act and develop within non-oppressive social relations. He argues that freedom must be understood as "heteronomy without servitude" in which social interactions and dependencies are acknowledged and valued.

The idea of freedom must be understood as heteronomy without servitude, that is, recognizing that freedom occurs mediated by social interdependence, inherent to the human condition. Genuine freedom, however, is only possible when social relations are constructed in an egalitarian manner, free from oppression and domination. This perspective implies considering emancipation as an essential element for the necessary transformation of structures of domination, enabling all individuals to fully exercise their autonomy with freedom in a collective context.

The strategies for reflection necessary for emancipation, however, according to Safatle (2019), are corrupted by a colonizing mode of thought. This means that the ideas and practices that could lead to emancipation are often distorted or dominated by perspectives and interests that perpetuate oppression and inequality. Democracy, as a possibility for active and equal participation, thus becomes a necessary condition for emancipation (Safatle, 2019).

Seeking alternatives to these challenges related to emancipation and the construction of democracy, Safatle (2019) reflects that autonomy, as a process of freedom, requires the subject to be aware of their own belonging. From this perspective, democracy would

imply, along with freedom, the recognition of the inherent autonomy of each individual, which no power can alienate from them (Safatle, 2019).

However, this self-awareness, related to self-possession, could harm the very consciousness, functioning as a kind of distortion in which the subject could perceive themselves as the sole deserving party of what they possess or as solely responsible for their failure or success. Additionally, they could assume identities that, while bringing collective recognition, would ultimately distance them from their possibilities of building their own history (Safatle, 2019). Drawing on the sociology of absences² and emergencies³, Safatle (2019) proposes an approach to the process of emancipation in which the subject connects with future potentialities, balancing potentiality and reality. Autonomy, within the democratic context, should be grounded in the renunciation of the idea of self-ownership, expanding the understanding of what is imposed as property. In this process of self-detachment, which would only be possible through other forms of political thought, the subject would progressively emancipate themselves (Safatle, 2019).

For Safatle (2019), the simple claim of identity and autonomy by formerly dominated groups does not necessarily represent true emancipation. He argues that autonomy is frequently conceived as a common-sense idea, a notion that individuals can assert their rights after realizing their condition of subjugation.

However, this perception requires a deeper process of citizenship maturation that can only be achieved through structural transformations in society. This author emphasizes that, without these transformations, individuals risk remaining on the margins, unable to attain true autonomy and emancipation. He relates this concept to colonized thinking, highlighting how the lack of awareness of one's own rights keeps people trapped in a mindset of submission (Safatle, 2019).

Connecting this with the earlier ideas, Safatle (2019) encourages us to act from what dispossesses us, that is, in areas where we lack power or rights as subjects, seeking to identify and confront deprivations and dominant political structures, as well as shared solidarities. The reorientation of our actions, therefore, depends on placing ourselves in a state of estrangement, where new practices and forms of thought can emerge:

Effective democracy is not the affirmation of self-ownership. It is the emergence of political subjects devoid of property relations, even of self-ownership. But this dispossession of properties is the condition for them to embody processes that continually remove individuals from their supposed identities, creating a field of generic implication. There is a social plasticity within effective democracy that we have not yet known. For this would require political affects different from those that currently guide us (Safatle, 2019, p. 35).

In this discussion, emancipation stands out as precisely the result of liberating the subject from themselves. Concisely, Safatle (2019) tells us that true autonomy occurs when

² The sociology of absences is understood as a way of giving visibility to what exists but is discredited, that is, an autonomous and alternative action in relation to what is considered invisible (Santos, 2002).

³ The sociology of emergencies refers to the expansion of the visibility of non-existent futures through concrete possibilities (Santos, 2002).

the individual places themselves in a state of estrangement, recognizing that their actions and thoughts are shaped by political and social dynamics. By doing so, they emancipate themselves and gain more autonomy to forge their own path, step by step. This implies acting in dispossession of oneself.

Emancipation involves conceiving the human being as both the means and the end of an ongoing historical process, whose goal is the awareness of their ways of life, recognizing the importance of those around them, as well as their own value through the other, their relevance in collective life, and in the process of self-construction. Emancipation needs to recognize differences and not prioritize dominant interests, which would require political strategies to value the human being as an end in itself and not for the fruits of their labor (Safatle, 2019). Nevertheless, it is recognized that the ideal of intrinsically valuing the human being is difficult to achieve within current political contexts, and the means for individuals to liberate themselves from themselves are scarce. Seeking alternatives for individuals to act against what deprives them of their fundamental rights as human beings, Silva (2013) addresses emancipation from a sociological perspective, exploring its meaning and significance by proposing it as the capacity of the human being to reflect on their own condition within the social context, interacting creatively and identifying contradictions, allowing for their constant expression and reaffirmation. However, this interpretative approach requires continuous development to discern the different dialogues and contexts, to “appropriate the diversity of views and variety of perspectives on social, cultural, and political reality” (Silva, 2013, p. 753-754). An emancipated view would be one that expands the possible horizons for individuals, allowing them to experience new realities with critical thinking through knowledge.

Silva’s (2013) thought emphasizes the importance of providing experiences that explore individuals’ future possibilities. In these conditions, an emancipated society would be one in which, even with distinct values, there would be no polarization that harms the different paths of individuals. Thus, there would be no concentration of dominant interests to the detriment of others, allowing subjects’ actions to be free (Silva, 2013).

Human emancipation, according to Silva (2013), consists precisely in the awareness and mastery over the process of the subject’s self-construction in relation to their set of historical processes. For this author, the basis of human emancipation lies in the collective control of self-construction processes and history, consciously (Silva, 2013).

For the construction of this emancipated society, it would be necessary for subjects and human life to be detached from the labor market as the only way to attribute value to the subject in their vital process. This would imply conceiving human existence no longer as an exclusive result of work, but as something that gives meaning to life in contact with its own nature. Certainly, this change would require a political transformation of labor relations, as it is through work that human beings maintain their survival and, consequently, their existence and history. Therefore, rethinking the current economic model is a concrete way of reflecting on emancipation (Silva, 2013).

This aligns with the emancipation proposed by Safatle (2019), as it involves acting on the possibilities present in the historical and local context. Emancipation is not conceived as a higher state to be reached – a view that could generate frustration or demotivation; on the contrary, it is understood as the capacity of individuals to promote

changes in their own contexts, recognizing themselves as part of the transformation process.

According to Safatle (2019), this requires openness to small confrontations, committing to what is achievable, and seeking tangible victories. By avoiding the anticipation of predictable results and challenging established expectations, individuals can expand their autonomy and freedom.

This implies being vulnerable within our own structures, allowing us to confront our “self” and those around us. It is in this process that true autonomy, with emancipation, is found, empowering us to explore what unites and constructs us, re-signifying attitudes, thoughts, and deconstructing outdated habits, breaking with “possessive individualism”⁴.

In this sense, in the words of Silva (2013): “Emancipation, then, is the process of liberation expanding into social life, in which subjects are constituting forms of being and existing in the world, free from the desires of others” (Silva, 2013, p. 763).

Challenges for Occupational-therapeutic Practice

Given the debate outlined, we will draw some parallels regarding the work of professionals who face the challenge of promoting autonomy and emancipation as elements leading to democracy, focusing on occupational therapy and its correlation with education and public schools.

The understanding that occupational therapy is

a field of knowledge and intervention in health, education, and the social sphere, bringing together technologies aimed at the emancipation and autonomy of people who, for reasons related to specific issues—physical, sensory, mental, psychological, and/or social—experience temporary or permanent difficulty in integrating and participating in social life (Conselho Regional de Fisioterapia e Terapia Ocupacional Região 3, 2022),

assumes that professionals in the field deal with the complexity involved in intervention processes aimed at promoting autonomy and emancipation. In this regard, it is necessary not only to master technical skills but also to deeply understand the social dynamics that shape the ways of life of the people they work with (Melo et al., 2020).

Part of occupational therapy has been influenced by the reflections of Paulo Freire, as Farias & Lopes (2022, pp. 10-11) identify when they recognize the “possible and powerful connections between occupational therapy and Freirean perspectives on education.” These connections can provide support for professional work with populations excluded and oppressed by various factors, requiring a broader professional practice focused on “the realities of the subjects, toward social emancipation.” In this context, dialogue is essential for subjects to actively participate, building bonds and having their experiences valued.

⁴ The notion that to be free and autonomous is to be the owner of oneself. Safatle (2019) proposes reflections that lead us to reframe autonomy and freedom based on the principle that there is no ideal to be achieved. By nature, each subject is the owner of themselves, but also shaped by the influences of others.

Additionally, Farias & Lopes (2022) discuss the possibilities of an occupational therapy aimed at individual and social emancipation, utilizing Freirean references. This would involve, among other things, considering an individual “empowerment” in which the subject of the intervention develops a critical and questioning perception of society, recognizing themselves as a “social agent” (Farias & Lopes, 2022, p. 15).

In the realm of social occupational therapy, which seeks to address the contradictions arising from the social question, problematizing the situations of oppression experienced by individuals, these principles are more fully incorporated, particularly in the assumption of education as a practice of freedom and the promotion of awareness processes through dialogue (Farias & Lopes, 2020). Thus, personal and social emancipation processes have been placed as central objectives of professional action (Barros et al., 2002; Farias & Lopes, 2022), integrating the pursuit of each subject’s exercise of autonomy, conscious of their role in social dynamics, and promoting active participation in society, both socially and politically (Melo et al., 2020).

Social emancipation can be conceived through awareness that recognizes that the world is unfinished and, therefore, filled with possibilities for educational interventions:

On these bases, therefore, man [and woman] begins to understand himself as a dialectical and historical phenomenon, acquiring the ability to discern reality and a critical-liberating perspective, and learns to exercise praxis to guide him in the process of transforming reality (Silva, 2013, p. 763).

It is possible to conceive that, by recognizing themselves as part of a historical process and a participant in the continuity of society’s history, the subject begins to become aware of themselves and their role in this process. From there, they can develop their autonomy by appropriating their reality, interpreting the world, and thus acting upon it consciously.

Thus, autonomy and emancipation can be considered part of broader educational processes that permeate everyday life and, therefore, can manifest in various institutional spaces, being an intentional dimension of professional practice (Silva & Pan, 2023). However, this reflection calls us, above all, to consider the centrality of public schools, because of their role as a space for learning human knowledge and for the (re)recognition of oneself in both individual and collective dimensions (Marshall, 1967).

In this context, Silva (2013) presents important considerations about the school process, so that it can be truly emancipatory. Human emancipation, when it enters the educational process, directly implies dismantling education as a service to the economy. Education becomes a coparticipant in the process of intervening in the world through an emancipatory perspective, implying changes in the educational system through a political transformation that disassociates the economy from school processes, recognizing the student as an end in themselves, that is, their self-realization (Silva, 2013).

From this perspective, when referring to the conditions of emancipation based on the knowledge of social reality, emancipation should assume an autonomous and free character (Safatle, 2019), grounded in the knowledge of oneself and others.

According to Silva (2013), emancipatory education “requires a set of dispositions to understand social conditions, how they are represented and interpreted” (Silva, 2013, p. 756). Thus, it would provide support for understanding the production of cultural

practices and social reality, “thereby, by learning to understand the logic of everyday practices in the light of theoretical references, the subject will be in a position for emancipation” (Silva, 2013, p. 756).

From this perspective, education aimed at emancipation faces the challenge of promoting dignity, ethics, respect for others, political and ecological awareness – in short, engaging with social praxis in all aspects that qualify human life. In other words, emancipatory education is committed to seeking the formal and esthetic specificity of life, creating conditions for the formation of subjectivities capable of recognizing the other as someone important and seeing oneself in them (Silva, 2013, p. 755).

Education, when emancipatory, should seek the recognition of the subject in the other. Additionally, Silva (2013) emphasizes that education with emancipatory goals aims to involve the learning of conflict resolution among social actors, based on diversity, an essential characteristic of humanity.

Facing the challenge of operationalizing this emancipatory education, Paulo Freire, between the 1950s and 1990s, developed important reflections and propositions regarding the concrete social and educational reality of Brazil, which, in his analysis, was constructed through the exploitation of oppressed peoples and in ways that did not favor democracy (Freire, 2022a, 2022b).

According to Freire (2022c), it is necessary for subjects to recognize themselves as bearers of their own freedom and capacity for reflection. Education as a practice of freedom assumes that the oppressed, those considered socially inferior, question where they are and who they are, recognizing dehumanization as a historical reality resulting from domination. The true role of the educator—or, in the parallel we propose here, also of other professionals—is to present the real and concrete situation and, together with the subjects, problematize this reality through awareness, creating actions that promote freedom.

Humanization, according to Freire (2022a), is a vocation denied to human beings: “Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness” (Freire, 2022a, p. 40). Acting from what dispossesses us means recognizing our condition as unfinished and dehumanized beings, dominated by political forces, but capable of humanization processes as we become aware of the oppressions we experience.

The denied vocation would be humanization which, although possible, is never fully achieved and thus remains incomplete. The vocation is “thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity.” (Freire, 2022a, p. 40). Everyone has the potential to be humanized, but the humanity of some is subtracted and subverted to the interests of others, more powerful and dominant in their citizenship, status, and class. Thus, dehumanization can also be understood from the perspective of the oppressor, who robs others of their humanity and not only the one whose humanity is stolen.

No human being is doomed to failure because of their historical conditions. The struggle for de-alienation, for being-for-itself, “is possible because dehumanization [...] is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust ‘order’ that engenders violence in the oppressors, and this, the *being less*” (Freire, 2022a, p. 41).

Consciousness is not a representation of reality, but its very presentation, its presence. “It is a way in which humans behave in relation to their surrounding environment, transforming it into a human world” (Freire, 2022a, p. 18). In this way, human consciousness always goes beyond the things it can grasp and, for this reason, is able to objectify and confront them (Freire, 2022a).

This consciousness is intertwined with the student’s critical thinking, as curiosity should incite them to the incompleteness of the world. For Freire (2022a), consciousness is simultaneous with the transformation and elaboration of the world, allowing for reflection and judgment of oneself and things. When the subject, through consciousness, distances themselves from their lived world and decodes it, presenting it as a problem from a critical perspective, they rediscover themselves as a subject of their experiences and of the world. Consciousness of oneself and the world grows and develops together, allowing for the identification of others, what differentiates them from oneself, and what unites them. It is at this initial moment of the process of self-awareness, “when the authentic struggle to create the situation that will emerge from overcoming the old begins, that one is already struggling for the *being more*” (Freire, 2022a, p. 47).

However, the mere recognition of the situation of oppression does not signify liberation; only engagement in liberating action represents its overcoming. It is necessary to commit oneself to liberating praxis, which implies genuine solidarity. This involves recognizing the oppressive and domesticating reality, which acts as an “almost mechanism of absorption for those within it, functioning as a force of immersion of consciousnesses” (Freire, 2022a, p. 52). Critical reflection, combined with authentic practice, can demystify this reality (Freire, 2022a).

With these considerations by Freire, it is possible to understand what it means to act from what dispossesses us, as proposed by Safatle (2019). At the same time, these reflections lead us to create practices that transcend the consciousness of domination.

The concept of youth protagonism adopted in PEI of the state of São Paulo, which seeks to develop autonomous, competent, and supportive young people, like other understandings of protagonism present in public policies aimed at youth (Souza, 2006), brings to light the problem of idealizing young people. From this perspective, the young person is seen as someone who already possesses the necessary conditions to exercise a certain protagonism, disconnected from the life realities of these young people, the public school itself, and its conditions regarding human and material resources (Cavicchioni, 2024). In the opposite way true protagonism would be one connected to the community and personal life of young people (Costa, 2007), enabling them to engage in processes of awareness and, thus, the construction of their autonomy, as they emancipate themselves from their position as “actors” to that as “authors” of their individual and collective lives. This possibility of acting on reality would enable the “this overcoming demands the critical insertion of the oppressed into the oppressive reality, with which, objectifying it, they simultaneously act upon it” (Freire, 2022a, p. 53). Critical insertion into reality is a great challenge, as it is in the interest of the

oppressor that the subjects, the oppressed masses, remain immersed in the reality imposed by the oppressors. The pedagogy of the oppressed confronts the culture of domination and consists of two phases: the first is the process in which the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and commit to the praxis of transformation; the second is the transformation of reality, at which point the pedagogy of the oppressed ceases to exist and becomes the “pedagogy of all people in a process of permanent liberation” (Freire, 2022a, p. 57).

Therefore, based on Freire (2022a), we can conceive true autonomy for the subject as that which frees them from their imprisoned consciousness, that is, which is realized through emancipation via awareness. For young people in public schools, this would represent the process by which they can act upon reality and context, being recognized as “youth protagonism.”

Considering these ideas, it is possible to recognize the potential contributions of social occupational therapy, especially that developed with young people in public schools, and which adopts Freirean principles as the guiding framework for its action (Pan & Lopes, 2022). This approach can foster what is understood as youth protagonism in public schools, by prioritizing the exercise of autonomy with freedom and the promotion of personal and social emancipation processes. This aligns with what part of the field advocates for the education sector regarding radical inclusion and democracy (Lopes & Borba, 2022), as well as with the demands presented by public schools themselves (Bittar & Bittar, 2012).

From this perspective, key elements for technical action can be identified: ethical-political commitment, criticality-problematization, democratization, and technical-scientific rigor. The ethical-political commitment assumed by occupational therapy in the education sector must be rooted in the social struggles that still engender processes of exclusion, without dissociating its technical action from its political dimension. Criticality-problematization involves unveiling reality from a critical perspective, revealing what is hidden by dominant thoughts. The professional’s action must be based on the knowledge of the subjects and their relationships with the world, seeking to develop and strengthen their critical view of the world and society (Farias & Lopes, 2020). Democratization refers to breaking away from authoritarian structures of power and knowledge hierarchies. In this sense, the action of the occupational therapist is guided by respect for the subjects’ ways of existing and their choices, challenging them to question their options and conditions, without imposing solutions. Technical-scientific rigor refers to the professional’s duty to practice with technical and scientific competence, using strategies and resources effectively (Farias & Lopes, 2020). All of these aspects influence professional practice to promote truly emancipatory education, which values individuals’ capacity for action, their protagonism, and, as the desired outcome, their autonomy on an individual level and, more broadly, the strengthening of democracy.

Thus, in line with Safatle (2019), who asserts that each small step of reflection and action taken toward transformation is already a form of emancipation, we reaffirm the importance of occupational therapy’s role in the education sector, especially social occupational therapy in public schools. From the set of reflections developed here, we view this technical role as a possibility to promote autonomy and emancipation by

directing action toward these objectives, which are fundamental elements in the construction of democracy. Aware of the challenge, we understand that

Theory can lead us to believe that we have the desire and capacity to do much more than we have done so far, theory can tell us that we have not yet gone very far with our denial, but it cannot anticipate what refuses all projection. Because theory opens itself to what only emancipated practice in its local contexts can produce (Safatle, 2019, p. 40).

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Author's Contributions

Sendy Carollina Cavicchioni: study design, organization and analysis of the data, and writing of the manuscript; Livia Celegati Pan: study supervision, writing and reviewing the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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