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## Conclusions

*what have we learned about rural quality of life and how do we proceed?*

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*Published in:*  
Rural quality of life

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.7765/9781526161642.00038](https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526161642.00038)

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*Publication date:*  
2023

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Johansen, P. H., Tietjen, A., Iversen, E. B., Lolle, H., & Fisker, J. K. (2023). Conclusions: what have we learned about rural quality of life and how do we proceed? In P. H. Johansen, A. Tietjen, E. B. Iversen, H. L. Lolle, & J. K. Fisker (Eds.), *Rural quality of life* (pp. 459-470). Manchester University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526161642.00038>

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## Conclusions: what have we learned about rural quality of life and how do we proceed?

*Pia Heike Johansen, Anne Tietjen, Evald Bundgård Iversen,  
Henrik Lolle and Jens Kaae Fisker*

### Introduction

In this concluding chapter we (1) summarise the findings from every chapter in the book; (2) draw conclusions and wider implications on each of the four main themes; and (3) point out possible directions for future research on rural quality of life. To provide an initial overview, Figure 24.1 summarises the themes covered in each part of the book (within the circles), and the cross-cutting themes that emerge among them (between the circles). Before going through the four parts, we want to open by offering a few reflections on these cross-cutting themes: spatial justice, meeting places and rural sociality.

Spatial justice emerged as common concern for authors in parts I and II in particular, but it is worth keeping the theme in mind when considering findings from parts III and IV as well. The most immediate manifestation of spatial injustice was connected to the phenomenon of rural gentrification, but the theme also cropped up in other ways. In the broadest sense, it has to do with difficult questions emerging about whose quality of life we are talking about, especially in situations where critical scrutiny reveals one group may derive their happiness from actively or passively, wittingly or unwittingly, excluding other groups. But spatial justice is also in play when we discover how urbanisation is not always just about urban sprawl and densification of the built environment, but may also entail a subtle colonisation of rurality by urban ideas and lifestyles. The collective message from authors dealing with these difficult issues is that at the very least we cannot afford to ignore and overlook these complexities if we are to properly understand rural quality of life. In this regard, more work is needed to connect quality of life studies with scholarship on social and spatial justice (see, for instance, Fraser, 2009; Soja, 2010; Fisker et al., 2022).

Meeting places emerged in particular between the perspectives on built environment in Part II and the focus on civil society in Part III. Unsurprisingly, there is broad agreement that meeting places are important for rural quality

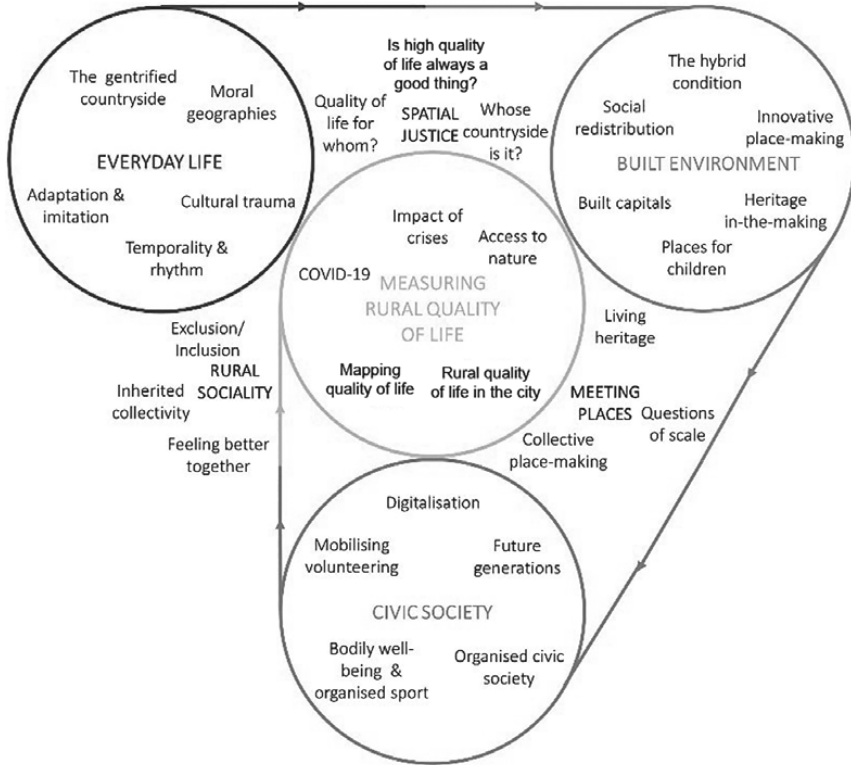


Figure 24.1 Summary of themes and findings within and between parts.

of life. When reading across the chapters, however, it quickly becomes clear that meeting places may be a lot of different things and that they are not confined to only being concrete physical sites. It also becomes clear that the meetings, or encounters, taking place at meeting places can be very different and that the question is more about who meets where, why and for what. It may therefore be useful to begin distinguishing between places where humans meet nature, places where people of different backgrounds meet across various axes of difference (class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.), places where locals meet visitors or newcomers and so forth.

This points towards the even broader common theme of rural sociality. The fact that most attempts to measure quality of life are conducted at the individual level sometimes distracts from the reality that rural quality of life is all about the social relations that define and condition the everyday life context for every individual. Some emotional states are inextricable from the social and cannot really be understood at the level of individuals, even if this is indeed the point at which we have the best opportunity to measure.

## Everyday life

Michael Carolan opened the part on everyday life by asking whether finding that rural quality of life is high in a specific community should always be regarded as a good thing. Based on fieldwork in rural Colorado he made the case that quality of life for one group is sometimes premised on the misery or exclusion of another. He attributed this to moral geographies and racial politics by pointing out the need for having discursive, practical and intellectual tools for talking about difference, and being able to practice rural policy which will not harm others' quality of life. Carolan concludes that a higher level of quality of life is not always to be favoured. Rather, a high level of quality of life may in some contexts and in some communities be a warning about social exclusion and suppressing of others' quality of life.

Pia Heike Johansen and Jens Kaae Fisker explored quality of life in rural Denmark through the lens of Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis with a view to complementing Hartmut Rosa's sociology of the good life. They direct attention to the risk that the construction of rural quality of life is just another coping strategy for being able to deal with all the human, social and environmental problems created by a society based on social acceleration. Everyday rural life is deeply integrated in social acceleration; living in the countryside, then, is not an effective means of escape. However, where resonance was identified, it was associated with rhythmic aspects of life in the countryside and not with rural life, concluding that those rhythms cannot be linked to specific activities, gender, class, age, or predefined lifestyles.

Martin Phillips, Darren Smith, Hannah Brooking and Mara Duer continued the thread opened in the previous chapter about going beyond the rural idyll. Their chapter focused on the gentrified countryside and the lack of overview on how quality of life goes into that. Their review outlined six approaches to well-being and pointed out the impact on findings when it came to constructions of rurality, temporal changes in well-being and the atmospheres of particular locations.

Simona Zollet and Meng Qu adopted a specific focus on lifestyle migrants moving from the city to the remote countryside, in their case small Japanese islands. They found that lifestyle migrants may adapt to 'inconvenient' ways of life, but they also raise doubt whether the lifestyle migrants in the long run will be able to deal with the lower level of services and infrastructure. Zollet and Qu found that a desired rural lifestyle, including a better work-life balance constructed in an urban setting, may lead to more work through a creation of a suitable mix of activities that bring in-migrants as close as possible to their desired lifestyles. They point out that for lifestyle migrants driven by a desire for autonomy, self-sufficiency and simpler, downsized lifestyles, rural communities can become spaces of experimentation for new modes and ways of living. Zollet and Qu conclude that desired lifestyles

and expectations of quality of life highly depend on the extent to which in-migrants can construct lifestyles that go radically against expected local conventions, without putting aside the social interaction, relations and networks with the locals.

Finally, Maria Christina Crouch and Jordan P. Lewis explored what rural quality of life means among Alaska Native groups. Their study found that through the process of colonisation there has been a disruption in the natural order of life and a persistent push to modernise and move from traditional rural life. They conclude that Alaska Native people's strong connection to their land gives them an identity spirit and quality of life that makes them resilient to the rapid sociocultural changes in rural Alaska. Like the other authors in this section, Crouch and Lewis argue for the need of holistic frameworks for understanding the meaning and embeddedness of quality of life for different groups of people.

### The built environment

Mark Scott set out to scrutinise the prioritisation of human well-being and quality of life in rural planning. Findings from a range of European cases led him to request a broader place-sensitive perspective that takes into account a holistic range of rural 'capitals'. He argued for a more empowering process to explore how rural communities themselves can mobilise place-based capitals to shape future conditions for well-being. Scott concluded by suggesting a framework for future planning so that it can play an *enabling* role in the process of clarifying the interrelationships, the potential for 'conversion' of one form of capital to other capitals, for intergenerational sustainability and well-being.

Anne Tietjen and Gertrud Jørgensen systematically investigated place-based participatory projects in Denmark which had been conducted with a view to enhancing quality of life in rural areas affected by population loss. They found that Danish rural communities are competent and energetic, reaching out to wider society in relational built structures when building places for better quality of life and especially community well-being. The locals know about the qualities they want to nurture in their built environments when it comes to cultural heritage, landscape and nature. Importantly, Tietjen and Jørgensen make clear that locals work to find place-based solutions to problems caused by general urban-rural development and centralisation policies. While national Danish rural policy shows little efficiency, these community-driven projects are an important local development tool.

Juane Cilliers and Menini Gibbens addressed a very different setting in rural South Africa, where a general lack of basic infrastructure meant that the creation of spaces conducive to children's well-being were often

being neglected. Their investigation of child-friendly spaces showed that such spaces should be valued for the social, environmental and economic benefits that they provide to communities. Especially in the African context, this value is important. They also reached the conclusion that there is a need for rural policies to support community-led creation of child-friendly places. On the academic side, Cilliers and Gibbens found a need for a deeper understanding in the planning literature of the meaning of child-friendly places in an African context. Finally, they argued that safety and free access to activities are fundamental for child-friendly places, for the rural community as well as for the children.

Meiqin Wang explored what may happen when art is used as the medium for interventions in the built environment of rural places in China. Based on her case study of Longtan village, she concluded that the intervention had, on one hand, improved the visibility of local heritage in the village, and on the other hand, mobilised cultural heritage as a vehicle for community and personal development characterised by a focus on the past in the present. This, she argued, may allow villagers to take an active role in making better futures through creative engagement in arts and placemaking. But Wang also warns that long-term sustainability of the interventions should not be taken for granted.

Nick Gallent took up the topic of rural gentrification from a different perspective by focusing on the relations between affordable housing and quality of life in the English countryside. His study showed very clearly that having the opportunity to buy or rent an affordable house is central for well-being – both for individuals and for rural communities. The vitality of rural communities depends on this and where available it ensures that they do not become exclusive enclaves, thereby losing much of their capacity to respond to the challenges that rural areas will face in the future. Gallent also found that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed housing inequalities across Europe and North America. In these parts of the world, wealthier urban households escaped to the countryside. Relatedly, he warned that some rural areas may be swallowed by a counter-urbanisation pressure undermining the rights of existing residents and that planning systems and land policies need to flex to cope with these new challenges. The future of rural communities depends on the capacities and innovation that are rooted in social diversity. New exclusions risk undermining social diversity, which in turn creates not only new socio-spatial injustices but also dangers for the broader well-being and resilience of rural communities. Therefore, Gallent concluded that planning and market rationing need to prioritise access to affordable housing, since this is a prerequisite for social diversity.

Nils Björling departed from the focus on present and future to address the historical development of the Swedish welfare state and its implications for rural quality of life. His analysis showed how this long historical process led

to a geographical polarisation between urban and rural. This polarisation, he concluded, has led to the production of a 'rurban void' which has come to define everyday life in vast stretches of the country. Against this tendency, Björling made the case for new planning sensibilities and alternative planning practices emerging in the rurban void which embrace the notion of a right to spatial production, especially for actors who are usually missing or not able to participate on equal terms in the planning process. In the Swedish case, the current articulation of inequality and polarisation in public debate may constitute a window of opportunity for moving in this direction. For Björling, this involves nothing less than the creation of a new social contract involving recognition of difference as a value to be safeguarded.

### Civil society

Evald Bundgård Iversen, Michael Fehsenfeld and Bjarne Ibsen consider how inhabitants in three Danish rural areas assess whether, how and why participation influences their quality of life. Using a qualitative methodology, they find three overarching themes which highlight how participation in civil society in different ways positively influences individuals' quality of life. The first theme indicates that it is rewarding for individuals to contribute to creating activities for others so that it is also possible to have a diverse leisure life in a rural setting. The second theme highlights how it is rewarding to contribute to civil society. The third and final theme highlights how it is experienced as rewarding to be a part of the 'struggle' which makes it possible to continue to operate a civil society in rural areas despite 'the rural exodus'. These three themes sum up different aspects of participating and contributing to civil society which arguably contributes to higher levels of quality of life in rural areas.

Next, Anders Melås, Maja Farstad and Sein Frisvoll shed light on rural youth – their quality of life, civil participation and outlook for a possible future for youth in rural areas. Using mixed methods, they show how two different aspects are important to understand what characterises rural youth's participation in different rural contexts. First, they show how sociality is different among rural youth in comparison to their counterparts in larger cities, with rural youth participating in civil society activities to a higher extent, and how this indicates that rural communities stimulate rural youth's participation in both organised and unorganised civil society. Second, they show how rural youth have a significant duality and ambivalence in their presentation of the rural as being both peaceful and safe, while also boring and limiting for their aspirations. Finally, the authors suggest a socio-spatial approach to understanding how to improve quality of life

in rural areas. According to this approach, future policy should focus less on keeping up a given population and instead focus more on how a socio-spatial approach could have a wider impact on which social and spatial circumstances might matter for the quality of life in rural areas.

The third contribution in this section is written by David Beel and Claire Wallace, who investigate how cultural heritage might mobilise local civil society and add to the quality of life in rural areas in the Orkney Islands. They argue that cultural and social capital can be a focus of civil society and the civil organisations in relation to this can circulate different forms of capital. Using a qualitative methodology, they show how local historical associations have helped generate local capital within their localities and across the islands. Digitalisation of the material collected by the local historical associations produced both advantages and threats. The advantages include creating world-wide interest and attracting more visitors which benefits the local economy, the threat being a loss of control by local associations and creating a demand that the local associations had difficulties in meeting. By creating social and cultural capital locally, local control of the cultural transmission through technology links the past with the future and thereby helps to empower civil society and thus benefit rural quality of life.

Fourth, Kjersti Tandberg and Jill Loga explore how the organisation of ‘volunteering neighbourhood mothers’ operating in a rural area might contribute to voluntarism, inclusion and quality of life in Norway. Using a qualitative methodology, they show how marginalised women with low language skills are included in a civil society organisation and how this participation might influence their well-being. Tandberg and Loga find that inclusion in a voluntary organisation has a huge impact on ethnic women’s experienced well-being and quality of life in rural areas. In rural areas there are fewer and more often membership-based organisations, which makes it harder to find a relevant organisation, particularly for immigrant women, as there are fewer organisations with an immediate profile relevant for them. Further, voluntary organisations are important arenas for individuals’ well-being, but also for their possibilities to get a job as it is often through the networks in such associations that the possibility to get a job is achieved. Being a member creates a social belonging which is a primary motive for becoming a member. In sum, Tandberg and Loga find that the voluntary organisations seem to be a more important arena for inclusion in rural areas than in cities.

Rochelle Eime, Jack Harvey, Melanie Charity and Hans Westerbeek ended this section with a comparison of health-related quality of life in rural/regional areas and metropolitan areas of Australia. Their quantitative study based on survey data showed that the only consistent difference between rural/regional areas and metropolitan areas was that those in metropolitan



areas reported better physical health than those in rural and regional areas. Highest levels of mental health and well-being were found among metropolitan males and rural and regional females and lowest among metropolitan females. The highest level of life satisfaction was reported by rural and regional adults and lowest by rural and regional adolescents.

### Measuring rural quality of life

Henrik Lolle investigates the case of Denmark, a geographically small, universal welfare state. He expects only minor differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas, and if any significant difference exists, he expects that Denmark will follow the recent trend in the global North more generally, with rural areas in the lead. Lolle uses person-level, register panel data merged with survey data from thirty-eight municipalities to analyse differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas by way of multilevel regression analyses. The survey data includes several different domain satisfaction measures as well as different subjective well-being dimensions. The main results are that there are only minor differences in the level of subjective well-being between municipalities in Denmark. However, on average, rural municipalities have higher subjective well-being than do urban municipalities. Overall, compositional effects from age, marital status, income etc. cannot explain this difference. However, a large part of the difference is mediated through a lower level of feeling of stress in rural municipalities and a higher level of feeling meaning in life. In general, these findings apply not only to life satisfaction, but also to other dimensions of subjective well-being and to a series of domain satisfaction measures, for instance everyday life and family life. Lolle also explores rural–urban migration and subjective well-being, and the general pattern here is very small and insignificant effects on well-being from migration.

Federica Viganò, Enzo Grossi and Giorgio Tavano Blessi investigated how the relationship between an urban–rural continuum and subjective well-being has changed in Italy from 2008 to 2018. Their point of departure was a survey from 2008 where the results supported the more general findings from later research, namely that the level of subjective well-being is significantly higher in rural areas. The purpose of the chapter was primarily to investigate whether this trend towards higher levels of subjective well-being in rural areas has continued in Italy. The secondary purpose was to explore which factors have an impact on subjective well-being, whether different factors are relevant in rural vis-à-vis urban areas, and if this has changed over the decade from 2008 to 2018. The impact factors under consideration were a series of background factors, four constructed scales for

cultural activities, health, social activities and participation, and finally participation in physical exercise activities. Somewhat surprisingly, the trend has seemingly turned around in Italy, with levels of subjective well-being now being higher in the larger cities than in rural areas. Additionally, the authors found that a few impact factors have changed character markedly in the interim period.

Continuing on the same topic of changes in subjective well-being over time, Marta Pasqualini's analyses from France also focused on in-depth investigations of subjective well-being along a rural–urban continuum. But whereas Viganò et al. looked at changes over a decade, Pasqualini explored changes from immediately before and through the COVID-19 pandemic, using nine measuring points spread across the period. She concluded that being locked down was more stressful in the largest cities and that in the first phase of lockdown subjective well-being was higher in rural areas and smaller towns. But she also found that this general finding covered up a more diverse pattern with internal variations in both urban and rural areas.

Rolf Lyneborg Lund opened his chapter by stating that since the early Chicago School, scholars have done neighbourhood studies, and these have been on the rise in recent years. A prime hypothesis in neighbourhood studies is that this local setting, the neighbourhood, influences the people living there, for instance people's happiness. However, as Lund continues, it is strange then that nearly nobody seems to be interested in defining the neighbourhood. The borders are blurry, and it is hard to get measures that in some consistent way can describe such neighbourhoods. In quantitative studies, you can define borders of official local administrative units like a region, a municipality, or a city, and you can often find lots of figures describing these units: by mean income, rate of unemployment, percentage of people living in single-family houses, Gini-coefficient etc. However, often it is the fuzzy neighbourhoods, and not the official geographical units, that affect people's lives. Lund has developed a new method, based on geographical grid-data to map neighbourhoods. With this method, it is possible to 'catch' homogeneous neighbourhoods much more in sync with reality so to speak, much more than is the case with administrative units or just some squares on a map. In the chapter, Lund shows how he, with Denmark as a case, can use his method for analysing individual-level register data as well as such register data in combination with survey data. With his flexible mapping method, Lund shows how the estimated neighbourhoods can better differentiate average scores on, for instance, deprivation. He shows, among other things, how a rural municipality consists of very different neighbourhoods. The survey data is scarce in comparison with the register data, and it is not possible to get valid measures of single neighbourhoods. However, by pooling together neighbourhoods that are alike in terms of certain individual-level,

register-based measures, he can still use this mapping method to analyse the survey data. He shows examples of this on measures of subjective well-being.

In the chapter by Kathryn Colley, Margaret Currie and Katherine Irvine, the authors performed primary and secondary analyses to critically examine the value of outdoor recreation for the well-being of rural residents. Initially, the authors found statistically significant effects from outdoor recreation on subjective well-being. However, use of outdoor recreation can only explain a minor part of the higher average level of well-being in rural areas. The primary focus for the authors was on exploring the inequalities in the use of outdoor recreation in rural areas. Among other things, the empirical results showed a polarisation in outdoor recreation participation in remote areas which is not seen in more accessible rural areas. The authors also discussed future outdoor recreation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and asked if the pandemic might act as a moment of change and reshaping habits. This discussion should be read with Pasqualini's findings in mind.

Ruut Veenhoven, Nivré Claire Wagner and Jan Ott introduce the reader to the biophilia theory and to the furthering of urban green. As such, the chapter turns the primary focus of the book away from the rural to the incorporation of rural elements in urban environments. The main research question is whether urban green has a positive effect on happiness. The authors also present a new method for doing synthesis analysis, collecting results from existing research on the correlation between happiness and urban green from the World Database of Happiness. They use results from seventeen empirical studies between 2004 and 2018 from eleven different countries around the world. Their synthesis analysis shows only small positive correlations between greenery in urban areas and the happiness of people who live there. However, as the authors write in conclusion, the findings 'leave us largely in the blind about causality, mediators and moderators'.

### **What did we learn and what is next for the study of rural quality of life?**

On the topic of **everyday life** we learned that what rural quality of life is and what it can be is contingent not just on who experiences it but also the situations that they find themselves in while doing so. Importantly, we also learned that while quality of life is certainly not a zero-sum game, there are dynamics at play in which the happiness of one community or group may sometimes come about at the cost of misery for another. This is exceedingly important for policymakers to recognise and to address in policy-making, especially as well-being becomes an increasingly central policy objective.

Regarding the **built environment**, we are now better placed to embark upon those necessary collective journeys towards places that are truly conducive to human (and non-human) flourishing. Keeping the lessons from above in mind, now is the time to begin specifying how rural planning may make good on the promise to prioritise quality of life before and above other policy targets. The arguments for doing so are there and possible ways forward are taking shape. What should be drawn from this book is the lesson that if rural planning is to succeed in this endeavour, it needs to find ways of recognising, respecting, safeguarding and nurturing *difference*.

That **civil society** is important for rural quality of life was never really in question, but the simplistic notion that a strong civil society leads to higher levels of well-being does not really say all that much. The explorations in this book have opened this black box. As is often the case when opening black boxes, the result is not clarity but neither is it complete confusion. Rather, what we are left with is an enlightening enrichment and a wealth of challenging questions for future work, especially across the blurry boundaries between organised and unorganised civil society. What future research should ask is not so much which of the two is most responsible for creating rural quality of life, but rather how they create it together. What, in other words, is the ‘right amount’ of organisation in rural communities if what we aim for is to enhance quality of life.

**Measuring quality of life** is as difficult as ever and the jury is still out on the rural–urban happiness paradox. Our mission, however, was not to decide on a winner but rather to provide a way forward where insights from both sides of the debate are allowed to inform our views. Our empirical investigations have provided important new evidence but also suggest new methods, not just for measuring but also for mapping quality of life. The latter is of particular importance if future research is to break new ground regarding the intricate patterns emerging along the rural–urban continuum.

There are, however, also important topics that the book has not covered. In rounding off, we feel obliged to mention two of these and to direct attention towards the important work being done on them beyond our own circle of contributors. Our most serious omission is the intersection between rural quality of life, gender and sexuality. The work and discussions included on spatial justice, post-coloniality and moral geographies could have been further enriched by more overt encounters with similar challenges facing sexual minorities and justice issues related to gender (see for instance Liliequist, 2020; Lundgren & Johansson, 2017). The other omission was premised by our entry point: the rural–urban happiness paradox. In previous work, this phenomenon has been observed precisely in countries usually considered part of the global North. Our decision was therefore to focus mostly on these countries. But the topic of rural quality of life is of course equally

important elsewhere, and it would be highly relevant to follow up our work by collecting contributions from authors working with a much more diverse set of empirical cases.

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