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# Using a Narrative Approach to Understanding the Frontline Practices and Experiences of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Child Protection Workers

Sherri Pooyak and Yvonne Gomez

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### Article abstract

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Sherri Pooyak and Yvonne Gomez

## Introduction

The idea for this paper resulted from various conversations between Sherri Pooyak and Yvonne Gomez, the principle authors of this paper. Sherri is of Cree heritage and works in the field of health research and is a practitioner dealing with high risk/high needs youth while Yvonne is a second generation Canadian of Spanish ancestry and ethnically identifies as White. She works in the field of Child Welfare. Sherri's current research for her MSW focuses on the familial relationships of First Nation women involved in the sex trade and resiliency using a Cree First Nation methodology and storytelling methods. Yvonne's MSW research focused on how to better understand frontline child protection social workers conceptualize power through their daily practice narratives. During one particular conversation, Sherri and Yvonne came to see the overlaps in their theoretical perspectives, practice styles, and mutual interests in how stories are told and how social workers listen to these stories.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how narratives of frontline child protection social workers can be understood through Cree/First Nation worldviews and Western perspectives. Out of our collective experiences with the Child Welfare system and interest in the child welfare system, we thought varied analysis, using Yvonne's thesis as a basis would present an interesting discussion and article. The analysis that follows focuses on the role of culture in each research participant's narrative; examination of the connections to the community and the participants' description of their connection/disconnection to their respective child welfare agencies.

Questions or correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to:

[pooyaksd@gmail.com](mailto:pooyaksd@gmail.com) or  
[yvonne.gomez@casott.on.ca](mailto:yvonne.gomez@casott.on.ca)

## Abstract

This article reflects on the use of narrative analysis in understanding the experiences of two women, one Aboriginal and the other non-Aboriginal, each practicing in child welfare environments opposite of their cultural identities and worldviews.

## Self-Location

### *Sherri Pooyak, BSW, MSW Candidate*

I am a Cree woman from Sweetgrass, Saskatchewan. My father was the second generation to attend residential school and the impact and effects that this form of colonization had upon me greatly affected the ways in which I view the world. I do not speak Cree, yet I was raised with a strong belief and pride in my Cree culture and heritage. My family and community were always a strong part of my life and still are. Prior to entering graduate school at the University of Victoria in the Masters of Social Work program, I worked as a social worker in a residential facility for high risk/high needs youth. My work there also greatly influenced my thesis research entitled: "My life is my ceremony: First Nation women of the sex trade share stories of their families and their resiliency." This research focused on the familial relationships of First Nation women involved in the sex trade and how their families have contributed to their resiliency. I met Yvonne, in a graduate social work theory class. We bonded over our mutual interest in theory and because of the geographical distance from our families, a friendship evolved. Yvonne and I have sought to challenge and encourage social workers including ourselves, to reflect on how we/they practice within our/their communities and within the Child Welfare system. Thus it is through this challenge and reflection that this paper was conceived.

*Yvonne Gomez, BA, BSW, MSW*

I have worked in the field of child protection in several capacities over the past five years; as a frontline child protection social worker, international caseworker, family counsellor, adoption and guardianship social worker and now as a kinship worker. I completed my MSW at the University of Victoria and wrote my thesis on the daily practice experiences and narratives of frontline child protection social workers. What my research answered for me is that there is a place to impact change in the larger system of Child Welfare. This change can begin through those delivering frontline services and is underway at the frontlines – although we as practitioners and researchers do not fully realize/acknowledge this group's potential for transformative change. Secondly, my research and my practice has shown me that there is not enough thoughtful sharing between professionals or academics on the topic of Child Welfare practice. Thoughtful sharing is understood as an honest critique of one's own practice where critical analysis can occur in a non-judgemental setting – the desired outcome is to have a better understanding of practice, both personally and systemically.

I have been fortunate to participate in this type of thoughtful sharing with my peer, colleague and friend Sherri. We have been engaged in numerous discussions where Sherri has challenged my mainstream experiences with her First Nations knowledge and has both encouraged and cultivated new ways of seeing existing strengths of child protection practice, and the Child Welfare system.

## Literature Review

### *Child Protection Social Workers*

Yvonne's research sought to understand frontline child protection social workers' daily practice. What was discovered is that in Canada little is known about who the social workers who practice within Child Welfare system are. A statistical profile on the number of child protection social workers currently practicing in Canada reveals that many within this population are new graduates of social work and begin their careers in child protection but "few are committing to long-term careers in this field" (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.41). In a study of child protection workers, Kufeldt & McKenzie (2003) found that 80% of the participants were women whose primary language was English (p.44), 53% obtained a BSW from an accredited university (p. 46), 35% had less than two years' experience (p. 47), 32% had two to six years of experience and the overwhelming majority of workers, 70%, were between the ages of 26-44 (p. 47). This study is by no means comprehensive; however it remains the only demographic study of child welfare workers in Canada.

For the interest of this paper, the most relevant demographic information is in regards to the ethnicity of the workers, "94% identified themselves as White and at only 2%, the second largest group identified as themselves as Aboriginal" (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.47). Although the profile of social workers may have seen changes since that study was undertaken (which was Yvonne's own experience, being hired in a large urban center where there were linguistic and culturally specific recruitments in hiring practice), overall the face of a social worker in child protection is that of a young, White female BSW graduate who had less than two years of direct practical experience in the field (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003). These statistics tell us that the people receiving child protection services are not being served by people from their own communities, culture, or ethnicity.

If there is a general acceptance of the importance of the role frontline child protection social workers have within social work, then why are their stories and voices lacking within the scholarly literature? It is true to say that the voices of child protection workers are entirely absent? And when the stories of frontline child protection social workers are found, they are often small and fragmented. Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this article to provide a full literature review of Child Welfare practice in Canada however the following provides a small glimpse into the issues addressed for this paper.

### *Community Control of Child Welfare*

For many First Nation people, the mention of child protective services elicits a negative reaction and can be observed in the following statement "...There are approximately three times as many First Nations children in the child-welfare system today as there were at the height of residential school operations in the 1940s" (Blackstock, 2005, p. 1). For frontline child protection social workers, First Nation and non-First Nation, this means every social worker practicing in this area will encounter working with a First Nation family at some point during their practice. In fact, according to the Assembly of First Nations "1 out of 10 First Nations children are placed in care compared to 1 out of every 200 non-First Nation children in Canada" (Assembly of First Nations, 2007, question 2).

It is understandable that First Nation people seek to gain control over social services, to be a part of the decision making process regarding the welfare of their children and to be a part of the decision making process in regards to where their children will be living. As part of First Nation culture, community members view children as a part of the community. It is customary within First Nation cultures to view the child as "theirs." It is a part of our epistemology. Children are seen as the future and their

care is of vital importance in ensuring the survival of First Nation people (RCAP, 1996).

An article emphasizing community control of Child Welfare was chosen as a key area of focus for our literature review. This article highlights how social workers are only one element of the child protection continuum within First Nation communities. While there is minimal literature available regarding First Nation community control of Child Welfare, the exception is "Community Control of Child Welfare: Two Case Studies of Child Welfare in First Nation Communities" by Brown, Haddock & Kovach, (2002). Using a case study methodology, the authors provide an overview of two First Nation communities who gained control over their Child Welfare services and how the agencies within these two communities bridged together two opposing views in the way they provide services. The two approaches presented were the deficit model and the community's participation model (Brown, Haddock & Kovach, 2002). A deficit model enforces a neo-colonialistic ideology which further perpetuates this model over First Nation people by sustaining and encouraging further dependency upon this type of system (Brown, Haddock & Kovach, 2002). Community control of Child Welfare aims to engage the community and its members to be actively involved in the decisions affecting its most vulnerable members (Brown, Haddock & Kovach, 2002). This article concisely articulates how community control of Child Welfare benefits not only the child, but also the members of the community. Community members are often the ones who are delivering the program that deal with issues of accountability, participation, paternalism, and service delivery making this particular agency successful and unique (Brown, Haddock & Kovach, 2002). Ultimately, community control of Child Welfare for First Nation people is decided and controlled by and is provided for its own members. It is based on the cultural values and beliefs of its members rather than on those who seek to colonize and assimilate.

### Methodology

How does one describe the existence of something ineffable? First Nation epistemology is embedded in the belief in things that are unexplainable. How can I explain my belief in a universal intelligence which I have no proof exists, only a faith that I am guided and protected by the Creator. Our belief system, that is of the Cree people, encompasses all things living and non-living, a belief that all things; people, trees, water, rock and the land are considered an integral part of this oneness (Ermine, 1995). At the base of this system are the cultural teachings and spiritual traditions, which are passed down through oral tradition. Protocols provide guidance as to

how things should be done; offerings are made asking guidance, maintaining the language ensures that the epistemologies, stories and traditions are passed on from generation to generation. For First Nation people, now more than ever, we require a clear understanding of who we are as a people and the connection that exists between what we believe in relation to the land: to the mother earth and those that live on it (Wilson, 2008).

Our worldview, as First Nations, helps us locate our place and rank in the universe; it influences the sense and understanding of culture at a very deep and profound level since it affects the beliefs, values and attitudes, the interpretation of time and other aspects of culture (Ermine, 1995). Our worldview affects our belief systems, value orientations, decision-making processes, assumptions and modes of problem solving (France, McCormick & del Carmen Rodriguez, 2004, p. 267). A Western worldview is based on scientific knowledge which struggles with knowledge that is passed down through oral traditions such as storytelling, as it is interested in the empirical and positivist forms where numbers and evidence are preferred and valued (Wilson, 2008; Ermine, 1995). From a Western perspective emphasis is not on the use of oral tradition, rather it is on the written word (Wilson, 2008; Ermine, 1995). From this perspective documenting cultural beliefs and traditions of its people (non-First Nation people) can then later be referred to for future reference, this is often called evidenced based practice (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). The writing down of the Cree traditions and cultures (including other First Nations cultures) is becoming a trend for First Nation people, particularly as more First Nation people are entering academia and defining First Nation theory and epistemology (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). For First Nation people, culture is an integral part of how you identify with the outside world and how you understand yourself in relation to that world (Graveline, 1998; McCormick, 1997; Wilson, 2008).

For many First Nation people stories have three main purposes, they include: The way in which stories are told; traditionally stories were told as a means of teaching the members of the community socially appropriate ways of communicating and behaving (Loppie, 2007; Wilson, 2008). Stories were a way to "share knowledge, philosophy, and instruction without direct censorship" (Loppie, 2007, p. 276). The reason for telling stories as telling is as important as hearing the stories and; the importance of telling stories; as the storyteller, the story is being told "not to play on your sympathies, but to suggest how stories can control our lives" (King, 2003, p. 9) and to remember "to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories you are told" (King, 2003, p. 10). Stories serve many purposes, for the purpose of this article, the stories reflected in this article recount



the experiences of two women's reflections as frontline child protection social workers as adapted from Yvonne's Masters of Social Work thesis (2008).

**Data: The Voices of Frontline Child Protection Social Workers**

Here we present two stories of Vickie and Jean, who are frontline child protection social workers. Vickie works in a non-First Nation agency, whereas Jean works in a First Nation controlled child welfare agency. This data was collected through Yvonne's thesis research (Gomez, 2008). All ethical guidelines were followed including having participants sign informed letters of consent releasing the data to be used in further publications. Names and locations have been changed to protect the identities of the participants and the clients they served. Narrative analysis was used to collect and investigate power from the perspective of the frontline child protection social worker. It was a means of expanding what is currently understood about practice, as well as documenting knowledge of those in the field. Riessman (2002) states that "narrative analysis allows for systemic study of personal experiences and meanings; how events have been constructed by active subjects" (p. 263). Finally, in the field of social work "narrative research that is done from a critical social work perspective looks at author(ing) the stories that 'ordinary' people tell" (Fraser, 2004, p.181).

Vickie is a former child protection social worker. During her interview she identifies herself as a First Nations woman. Vickie, at the time of writing this article, was employed as a child protection social worker with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) in British Columbia (BC) and many of her clients were First Nations children, youth and families who lived primarily on reserve; her office however, was located off reserve.

Jean is a frontline child protection social worker who continues to practice in the field of First Nations Child Welfare. During her interview she identified herself as not being of First Nations descent. Jean is employed within the province of BC, and works for an Aboriginal agency that is seeking full Ministry delegation (delegation being MCFD's terminology for self governance in manners pertaining to Child Welfare). Jean provides child protection services to First Nations community members both on and off reserve; her office is located on reserve.

**Nobody Wants Me – Vickie's Story**

Vickie's story is unresolved. This is important because in the practice of frontline child protection, social workers often do not know what happens to their clients and families after they do the piece of the work that the

legislation assigns to them. In Vickie's case, she is unable to finish her story and it is as if it is too difficult for her to relive her experience. Vickie's story is one of practicing alone, even though she has peers. She separates herself from her colleagues, supervisors, and even from the structure of child protection, her family, and herself. By the end of her narrative, the reader is left with a sense that Vickie cannot see value in her way of practicing, thus her narrative bears the name "Nobody wants me," and was selected from the text of the story. The line stands out, as it was Vickie sharing in the sentiment of her young clients and yet it summarizes in her own isolation and frustration of practice.

*So many wicked things happened. One time I don't know if this can be shared, but it is just too weird not to share to illustrate my practice. When I started on the reserve, I had 11 boys, and there were some serious issues – serious stuff going on... They were in a gang. We had to try and figure out, you know, what we were going to do. They were causing havoc on the reserve. So I went to the youth drop-in and lots of the boys were coming. I had one youth [on my caseload] that was in a treatment center, and he loved to come into the drop-in and hang out there.*

*Well, one night when I was working and these kids came in and said Vickie your car just got shot. He had shot my car. Granted it was a BB gun or some kind of gun, but it left bullet holes in my driver's side, and I was horrified. And he was quite horrified with what he had done. I went out back, and I was kind of teary-eyed and thought what am I going to do? Plus, I had been trying to get him a foster home really hard and the therapist assessed him as being quite dangerous, and I was saying he isn't dangerous. Well now, of course, everything that I had been advocating for and planned for and hoped for – for him, I realized now, it was not going to happen.*

*It was not looking good, and maybe I was wrong. Maybe he really was dangerous – so I was shedding a few tears, and he came out back. He started to cry, and said, 'What can I do? I am so sorry, some kids dared me to.' I said 'Why did you do that? We have such a good relationship. I don't understand why you would damage my car' and he said, 'I am frustrated you couldn't find me a foster home, and I'm frustrated that nobody wants me', and then... it was just...oh boy.*

*We went to the police station together. He was crying. I was crying, so was the police officer. The officer said 'I'm sure that I can advocate for the band to pay for the damage.' So I went back and of course all my co-workers thought it was funny, but I didn't and the managers said 'We aren't going to pay. Why would we pay?' I was working full time [as a frontline child protection social worker]*

*and trying to do my practicum and trying to do my school work. I think that is an issue that isn't brought up, the impact on your personal life... (Gomez, 2008, p. 62).*

### **You're Upright and Still Laughing – Jean's Story**

Jean shares a unique narrative about her daily practice experiences. The story she chose to share was not crisis oriented or risk based, which in child protection practice is often the case. The structure of the referral Child Welfare system is ultimately based on risk and protection, not on support services. In this story Jean articulates her practice with a particular client, a mother and recent widow. Jean's reflections on her practice revolved around the client, not the client around the system. Jean does not name her methodology or theory for practicing but places a strong emphasis on what she believes is important – the true love of children and the valuing of parenting. Much like Vickie's story, culture and relationship building are at the forefront. The naming of the story again comes from within the participant's own text.

*Stories... I think the most humble places have been, witnessing people still moving forward, still having hope, still having excitement and witnessing their love and connection with their children even though they're in some of the most challenging experiences that – that I could ever think of, and getting up every day and [they] keep moving forward and doing what needs to be done...*

*I think of one woman who her first husband was killed in a car accident... She had seven children and addiction issues... [the woman] had gotten sober... and we were sitting together in my office and we were just laughing. Ok, where do we start? I asked the mother. You know. What do you want to [do] and where do we go from here? I knew that I – that there's nothing that I could – you know I have no idea what you need. You've been through all this and you're still upright and laughing!*

*Well she [the mother] was really neat. She would show up whenever she needed something, and it wouldn't be that she was downtrodden or you know, at the end of her rope. It's just that she thought maybe I could help her find something. She'd turn up and we'd have coffee and, and she'd tell me what's going on. And that's how I'd start: 'So what's happening?' And she'd tell me what was happening, and we'd deal with that, whatever it was that she needed help with at that time. She didn't have a phone. She didn't have a car... All these appointment times when I was with the Ministry.*

*You're booked back to back and then with the Aboriginal agency, because a lot of people didn't have a phone or transportation, you're pretty open and you'd go out and try to connect with them and*

*know where they were depending on, you know, the season or knowing what's happening generally for the community and having a finger on that without making that be an understanding rather than a problem.*

*People like to problematize things, and it's just it's the way it is, and this is what we're going to work with, and we'll do whatever we need to do to support that rather than the other way around. So if it was the day that the food bank had vegetables, I would make those good days to visit because then I had a car and I could help [families] bring groceries home. So it's not oh I can't – they are busy. You know, we can meet and we can do it together. So trying to work around whatever way's going to support the outcome of our meeting, that I can be there rather than this clinical person who's going to tell you, 'Well you can go here for drug and alcohol counselling,' or 'You can go there to the food bank,' but not think about the barriers, you know to get to the food bank, to get your food home.*

*So it's really frustrating to see what people [go through], the little struggles that people say well, why don't they get help themselves? Well, the systems just don't allow it. They're [clients] constructed in a way that are really non-supportive or don't recognize some of the barriers that people are trying to work under. So I still see [the mother] now. She's got a couple of grandchildren, and I'll see her; she waves. And we bump into each other at the mall and chat, and she's still glowing. She loves being a parent, loves being a mother, loves being a grandmother. It's a very connected family and that's the thing that I've seen as a cultural issue. Like the connection to the child as more than an individual, as a part of a family, as a part of the community and a large network of families. (Gomez, 2008, p. 68).*

### **Discussion**

These select stories are rich in culture, wisdom and practice and highlights the realities of being a frontline child protection social worker both within a First Nation and non-First Nation organization. Although there are many complex issues raised, this article cannot take up all these elements, however it does reflect on the daily practice of two social workers whose worldviews come from different places, one from a Western world and the other from a First Nations perspective. We decided that one way of doing this is through the very stories of those doing the frontline practice.

The women's stories of social workers working in child protection show us how they understand themselves and how they each respectively understand their relationships with the clients they are working with. There are two themes that stand out from these narratives:

first, the role culture plays in the way these two women practice on an individual and community level, and second, how the cultural interaction exists within the structure of Child Welfare.

From a western worldview Vickie's story shows a strong connection to the story her client is telling. Vickie speaks candidly to the youth, and empathizes in the youth's desire for a placement. Vickie's location and the relationship she has with the youth highlights an element of community that can be observed because she works on a First Nations reserve. There is a cultural disconnect between the practice and beliefs within Vickie's story, as she attempts to advocate for the wishes of the youth and the lack of support from her agency. The lack of community and collaboration from peers can be observed as they perceive the situation as funny, and Vickie's supervisor is quick to shut down her request for support stating that the agency will not pay for the damage to her vehicle. Although the social worker in this narrative identifies herself as First Nations, and explains that her clients are from, and live on reserve, there is a focus on individualism that does not allow Vickie to practice in relationship with the youth and ultimately leaves her isolated as well as leaves the youth without connections.

Vickie's story reflects how genuine empathy and a cultural connection can allow for a trusting and forgiving relationships. On one level she understands the young man's frustrations and struggles as a First Nation youth who has experienced racism, oppression and colonization. On another level, she must contend with her own frustration and struggle, working in an agency where she feels unsupported and ostracized. If Vickie had been working in a community controlled Child Welfare agency, would she have had the same response from her supervisor and co-workers or would there have been a more supportive environment that would have supported her practice in meeting this client's needs?

Community control of Child Welfare for First Nation people supports the notion that in order to be effective in providing child and protective services, the social worker needs to begin where the client is at, as in the case of Jean's story and to show empathy and compassion, as in the case with Vickie. What is interesting about the two women's stories of practice is how each story reflects the difficulties they express with the respective Child Welfare systems they are working within. Vickie, a First Nation woman, advocates for a youth with whom she sees potential. She is invested in the community she is working in and its members. Vickie's investment is a reflection of the cultural belief regarding children, that is that children and youth are the future. For many First Nation social workers, this cultural belief is commonly held (Walmsley, 2005) and is not as common among

those holding a Western worldview. Vickie believes in the young man she was working with and may even see him as one of her own. Vickie struggled with the agency she was working with, where she was unsupported and isolated by her co-workers. For Vickie, as a First Nation woman, it is understandable that she feels a connection to the young people she is working with, as they are of the same cultural background as her, who would have similar held beliefs about the world. As with many First Nation social workers, working in your own community poses difficulties as work, family and community responsibilities can have a great impact. As Vickie states in her interview "I think that is an issue that isn't brought up, the impact on your personal life...".

Jean's story reflects the larger structural and cultural barriers of working in Child Welfare, although Jean is not First Nation, her practice occurs within a First Nation Child Welfare agency. The story Jean tells reflects on what community practice looks like in meeting your client where they are at, in a literal sense. Under deficit models, such as those run by government based Child Welfare agencies, do not allow for this flexibility. Jean's story reflects how working in a First Nation agency allows for flexibility and to work with the client on their terms. More importantly, her understanding of the issues and of the barriers affecting her clients prevent her from being able to effectively do her job. Somehow Jean has been able to overcome these issues, and it appears that working in a community based First Nation run agency allows her to do this with a high level of success.

Jean's story is a sharp contrast to the practice challenges faced by Vickie. In the narrative Jean presents her manner of practicing as relaxed and fluid and this moves beyond her individual clients to a relational context of interaction. Jean expresses her humility and does not carry the label of expert assigned to her by virtue of her role as a professional social worker. She presents her practice as starting with the clients and knowing that the answers lie in the joint journey. Jean identifies herself as White, and her worldview is still Western in many respects. Although she practices in a culturally relational way, Jean remains naïve about the power embedded in the Child Welfare system and in her role. Jean works as a social worker in a delegated agency but is lacking the greater context that as social worker your voice is heard differently then that of the clients when navigating government systems. Jean story shows that practice can occur in a more relational, cultural way with clients, but along with this as a social worker, particularly as a White professional working along side of oppressed peoples, should not make us lazy and comfortable in our critical analysis and therefore perpetuate those same oppressive systems intact even when they are seemingly community led.

This moved us to seriously think, where do we go from here? We want to see more collaborative practices and stories in the social work literature – with the input coming from those who practice. Further research should include a deeper look at these collaborative approaches specifically in the area of Child Welfare practice. What does collaboration look like from the perspective of frontline social workers at the level of the workers and within and across agencies? Often these collaborations occur between those who practice under different mandates, policies, and funding structures. How then do we reach shared goals and outcome inside these often opposing structures?

### Conclusion

Relationships are an integral part of child protection practice. Building and having relationships with community members and those receiving services is a positive outcome as seen in the literature and through the stories presented in the article. What needs to be emphasized is that relationships are a significant part of community based and culturally based practice. Both Vickie and Jean show us that they are struggling to find balance in their practice. Vickie is faced with a child protection model that leaves her practicing as an individual and cannot connect with peers, even when as a First Nations woman she has a deep understanding of the culture and connection to the community and the families that she works with. Jean is practicing within a child protection model that allows for relationship to be at the forefront of her work, and yet as a non-Aboriginal woman who is educated and understands colonization and oppression, is still removed from the community. Jean cannot see the greater context of systemic oppression and her participation within this system.

Both women share passionate stories of practice displaying their dedication to the clients as well as the importance of Child Welfare in communities. What can be seen through Vickie and Jean's stories is that frontline child protection practice in both stories is being practiced in relational ways, and moves beyond legislated services; where connections to individuals and communities are being made. A First Nations methodology allows for a richer understanding of the interconnections between social workers and families, and the systems that we all work within. This methodology challenges us all as practitioners to move beyond being a vessel that merely delivers service but engages and is invested in the community and in the lives we touch. We must see ourselves as part of the practice.

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