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Pedagogical Counseling and Theory of Helping Relationship to Face the Vulnerability of Our Present Times: Perspectives and Practices

Abstract

Educational counseling, with its focus on relational and educational dimensions, is one of the most significant practices for promoting the well-being of individuals and communities. The paradigm upon which educational counseling draws is the theory of helping relationship as a dynamic process of personal accompaniment and regeneration of vulnerable people. The article develops a theoretical and practical reflection on educational counseling as a response to the actual existential vulnerability and widespread distress, as well as opportunities for educational development. Particular attention is paid to the role of educational counselor as a human professional and to the relational and pedagogical posture activated in dynamics of help.

Keywords: vulnerability, helping relationship, education, pedagogical counseling, pedagogist.

Poradnictwo pedagogiczne i teoria relacji pomocowej wobec kruchości współczesnej epoki: perspektywy i praktyki

Abstrakt

Poradnictwo edukacyjne, koncentrujące się na wymiarze relacyjnym i edukacyjnym, stanowi jedną z najważniejszych praktyk wspierających dobrostan jednostek i wspólnot. Paradygmat, na którym opiera się poradnictwo edukacyjne, to teoria relacji pomocowej rozumianej jako dynamiczny proces towarzyszenia osobie i regeneracji ludzi znajdujących się w sytuacji kruchości. Artykuł rozwija refleksję teoretyczną i praktyczną nad poradnictwem edukacyjnym jako odpowiedzią na współczesną egzystencjalną

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kruchosc i powszechne poczucie cierpienia, a takze jako przestrzen dla rozwoju edukacyjnego. Szczegolna uwage poswiecono roli doradcy edukacyjnego jako profesjonalisty-humanisty oraz jego postawie relacyjnej i pedagogicznej, ujawniajacej sie w dynamice procesu pomocy.

Słowa kluczowe: kruchosc, relacja pomocowa, edukacja, poradnictwo pedagogiczne, pedagog.

Vulnerability at the heart of the contemporary era

The bronze sculpture *Freedom*, created in Philadelphia by Zenos Frudakis, an American artist of Greek origin, depicts the vulnerable condition of contemporary man. The artist expresses this by depicting the naked human being in four different poses: in the first, he is entirely incorporated into a wall; in the second, he begins to wriggle and stand out; in the third, he wriggles further, leaning forward; in the final pose, the man distances himself from the wall, walking forward with his arms outstretched in a liberating gesture, finally exposing himself in all his vulnerability. The image of this artwork offers a metaphor for the human condition of exposure to vulnerability (Dadà 2022; Brown 2016) understood as the recognition of a condition of living that encounters limits, blocks, shortcomings, experiences that can compromise our life balance, sustenance, beliefs, emotional and mental states, sense of self-esteem, and even our position within the system of the "lifeworld" (Habermas 2022).

At the same time, vulnerability involves processes of transition in order to free oneself, to rework difficulties and limitations into possibilities for deeper self-knowledge, into new capacities to reorganize the structures of one's personality to respond to the needs of changing life situations (Cyrulnik 2000: 10). Vulnerability, as an awareness of one's imperfection, is recognized as offering a series of potentials for achieving personal autonomy. The concept of "vulnerability" is today a recurring theme in social and educational policies, with a strong impact on professions that work with individuals considered "vulnerable" (Brown 2015). Social workers, teachers, and those who provide daily care, increasingly encounter the need to master an anthropology of vulnerability through which to understand the multiple conditions of crisis, existential struggle, and personal and family transition, which require recognition, protection, and valorization of individuals' residual resources.

Particular attention must be paid to the relationship between individuals and the context in which technology and forms of "neo-bureaucracy" (Han 2018) induce to surrender to the influence of a digital society that creates a system of forced transparency, where everything is dominated by algorithms and Generative Artificial Intelligence. It runs the risk of reducing identity to constant external incursions, depriving individuals of the ability to perform intentional actions and foster relationships. Consequently, the growth in data and information collection corresponds to a reduction of self-experience and relationships with others. Furthermore, in efforts to recalibrate welfare and social justice processes, attention to people's experienc-

es of vulnerability has become a key benchmark for both public decision-makers and helping professionals, who are called to reflect on the increase in vulnerability among the most disadvantaged citizens and to foster the skills needed to address poverty and hardship (European Economic and Social Committee 2024).

The anthropological condition of vulnerability is also closely related to its implications on education, teaching, and learning, as it highlights not only the problematic dimension but also generative potential of vulnerability as a resource for developing a deeper understanding of students and young people, but also for encouraging educators to question themselves and learn to build empathy and collaboration within the educational community (Loveless et al. 2016), to transform conditions of material vulnerability and poverty into conditions for generative recovery of life (Fondazione Emanuela Zancan 2015), to think and reflect on vulnerability in order to be able to draw from it the conditions for building educational relationships and value between generations (McMullin 2018; Crotti 2013). One of the most significant theoretical axes in contemporary pedagogical counseling is therefore represented by reading and interpreting vulnerability. Far from being conceived as a deficit or lack, it emerges as a key concept for understanding humanity and as a transformative possibility. According to Ricardo Peter, “imperfection contains a healing power” (Peter 1996: 7–18) because it restores humanity to its ontological reality, which is intrinsically composed of limitations, errors, blind spots, and struggles. Consideration of this fallible humanity leads to a rethinking of the modern myth of efficiency and perfection, which has obscured authentic awareness, making it difficult to embrace fragility and pain. Educational counseling, on the contrary, is based on the acceptance of limitations and the ability to inhabit the wound – not by denying it, but by transforming it into a generative space.

Educational counseling as a response to vulnerabilities

Given the different categories of people exposed to discomfort, disabilities, and fragilities, educational counseling emerges as a set of responses to problems and conditions that cause a sense of estrangement both on a personal and community level (Han 2015: 2). Educational counseling also intervenes whenever conditions of widespread social emergency arise (Giordano 2020), as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was followed by a sharp deterioration in living conditions caused by social distancing (Musaio 2021): consider the importance of monitoring and intervening to help with depression in adolescents (Vicari 2022), emotional difficulties encountered in children with respect to school commitments (Riva 2022; Farmer et al. 2020; Dejaeghere, Murphy-Graham 2022), or intervening for more complex problems such as drug abuse (Deuchar, McLean, Holligan 2022; Giacolini, Leonardi 2016), eating disorders, and self-harm (Mendolicchio 2018).

Regardless of the emergencies arising from the pandemic, educational counseling is a professional field geared toward helping not only adolescents and young

people, but people of all ages, adults and the elderly (Mariani, Musaiio 2019; Williams 2017), when they experience psychological and mental distress, whether it is visible or unspoken suffering, as often happens with young people who try to push away suffering by shifting the deep pain they cannot decipher into an exasperated focus on their bodies. In all cases, educational counseling intervenes to address the condition of exposure (Martinez 2002) that affects everyone, but even more so for those who are facing physical and psychological limitations, trauma, wounds, discrimination, disability, and other hardships, as occurs with the sick, disabled, elderly, and those who are not self-sufficient.

When people are exposed due to their fragility and marginalization, they need to be supported by interventions that bridge the experienced or existential distance (Musaiio 2020). Although distance is a fundamental dimension of every relationship, when it creates barriers, it can cause difficulties: for example, when the teacher or educator fails to gain the student's attention, when they fail to engage in communication, when they maintain a physical and psychological posture of distance that prevents them from entering into the empathetic closeness necessary for the developing person to express their free and authentic personality (Guardini 1987).

Special attention is required for conditions of psychological and psychiatric distance, such as those resulting from psychosis and schizophrenia, in which the original distance between the self and the rest of the world disappears. The individual loses the distinction between inside and outside, with evident transformations that lead to depersonalization, delirium, and obsessive behaviors. But beyond the pathological manifestations that may be encountered, educational counseling does not rely on categories that discriminate against a person's condition. A significant step forward has been achieved in Italian educational scholarship by an attempt to overcome discrimination against the use of words such as "disabled," "mad," "crazy," etc., which are no longer considered worthy of respecting the dignity (Cormos 2019: 474–486; Bianchini 2009) of each person affected by specific syndromes. Focusing on overcoming stigmatizing words means trying to interpret from within the fragility we all experience without distinction, a fragility that unites all human beings, and which we must become familiar with to develop the skills that help us become "antifragile" (Taleb 2012: 182). This means practicing looking within ourselves at the problem or fragility that displaces us internally, such as pain, detachment, or distance.

Whenever vulnerability strikes us, we experience a distance, as in the case of those affected by psychological or social distress, addictions, exclusion, poverty, or the experience of error and failure. In all these cases, we need to open our eyes, to see differently, to remove veils, to look into the depths of our own fears, to discover that we all share fragile lives.

Educational counseling helps people to find the skills within themselves to achieve fulfillment, to build and be part of a community more attentive to common frailties. It implements interventions and promotes educational professionals who can support people, listen to them, observe them, and be there for them. The work of the educational counselor addresses the dramatic wounds of the fragile and precari-

ous human condition, riddled with the risk of being lost, of ending up in poverty – not only material, but also existential and educational.

The reflection of an educational counselor or pedagogue sometimes seems to stall, surrendering to signs of weakness; at other times, it manages to rise above them and reaffirm the high value of personal development and education. But learning to hear and see involves recognizing that educational work involves listening (Mancini 1995), adapting to each other, finding joy despite everything, learning to pause and recognize that there is beauty to be found even in one's wounds. Suffering and beauty are the terms of a difficult but inseparable pairing that helps us to seek the intimate connection between a person's wound and what holds the potential to heal it. There is a correspondence between the forms of physical, psychological, and existential discomfort and the need to rediscover the lost part of ourselves, as well as aspiration, despite everything, to something beautiful for ourselves. Wound and beauty are the terms of a search that leads us to invest in both self-care and relationships with others, looking not in extraordinary solutions or realities, but in the smallest things: in details, between the lines, where we often can no longer see what is right before our eyes.

Pedagogy and the theory of a helping relationship

Moving beyond rhetoric about human fragility, stigma, and exclusion of individuals experiencing hardship, the educational sciences explore the merits of a vulnerability paradigm to formulate a theory of the helping relationship (Schein 2009; Brammer, MacDonald 1999).

The purpose of the theory is to educate people about the practice of care, assistance, and the promotion of each person's potential (Flaherty 2022), regardless of their vulnerability. In the Italian context, from nursery schools to high schools, from support communities for minors, to centers and services for people with disabilities, to youth centers, and even shelters for those experiencing hardship, educational work has always suffered from the lack of legislation recognizing and protecting educational and pedagogical professions (Orefici, Corbi 2017). However, following the approval of Law 55 of April 15, 2024, after a long process of awareness-raising and commitment in the political and legislative spheres, the specificity of the different professional profiles in the field of educational counseling was finally recognized (Iori 2018). The regulation of the pedagogical and educational professions, which also establishes professional registers for both roles and the relevant professional association, has allowed greater visibility of the role of the pedagogue or educational consultant (Bleza 2021; Bleza 2020; Mariani, Musai 2019), understood as a specialist in the educational processes, who operates with scientific autonomy and ethical responsibility, and coordinates, consults, and pedagogically supervises functions in various social and educational fields. As a specialist, the educational counseling establishes a supportive relationship with individuals' various frailties and current emergency conditions. He or she works to promote inclusive and sustain-

able education (Lecce, Aiello 2021: 289–302) in response to the many conditions of vulnerability. This can become an opportunity for personal and social development, activating the needs-response dynamic when necessary, with a view to broaden our perspective on the daily lives of people experiencing some kind of difficulty; on the right of people with disabilities to be recognized, included, and fulfilled; and on the possibility for those experiencing exclusion, such as prisoners or those in poverty, to overcome the indifference and loneliness of life (Benasayag, Del Rey 2008).

Without claiming omnipotence, much less a definitive solution, the educational consultant focuses on vulnerabilities, recognizing each person's quest for well-being and happiness, to help them navigate paths of autonomy and self-awareness.

Future consultants are trained through the Master's Degree in Educational Consultancy for Disability and Marginality, to acquire knowledge, skills, and practices with the aim of developing the expertise needed to understand people's stories, overcome prejudices and discriminatory categories, and help them function in everyday life. The educational consultant's interventions are structured in relation to both the individual and the family, the educational environment of the school, the network of counseling services for students and teachers, and the entire local area.

The Helping Relationship Theory (Musaio 2020; Mariani, Musaio 2019; Bobbio 2012; Canevaro, Chierigatti 2003) offers a broad testing ground for professionals working in the educational and social fields from the perspective of reflective, theoretical, and practical training. Helping relationship pedagogy is based on an epistemological and operational paradigm that intertwines theory and practice, recognizing the individual as a subject in relation, a bearer of needs, desires, vulnerabilities, and potential. From this perspective, pedagogical counseling is configured as an intentional and reflexive action (Schön 1993), aimed at supporting processes of self-development, re-signification of the self, and "personal flourishing" (Camfield 2025; Zucchini 2022). Indeed, the educational helping relationship is not limited to responding to emerging issues, but is part of broader processes of human, social, and ethical formation and regeneration. It is configured as a transformative device (Massa 1997) through which the educational consultant acts not only for the other, but "with the other", from a perspective of co-construction of meaning and active accompaniment.

The relationship's primary focus is on human experiences—critical issues, crises, traumas, and the difficulties faced—but also on regaining a balance between self-care and care for others, between solitude and sharing, between the ability to delve into ourselves and building relationships and bonds with others. One of the main challenges facing the theory of helping relationships is the spread of externalizing lifestyles and behaviors to which we tend to become accustomed, partly as a result of what philosopher Han calls "infocracy" (Han 2023), the control and intrusion of digital systems into people's lives which deprives them of access to their inner selves. Our time prioritizes everything but interiority. We can see this in lifestyles oriented toward externality, in the tendency to abolish all personal boundaries, to renounce internal space, in the tendency to prioritize success, performance, and results rather

than the pursuit of one's inner life, even abolishing that sense of modesty that underpins self-respect and our own uniqueness, as the driving forces behind an authentic exercise of freedom.

The findings regarding externalization lead us to rediscover the call to interiority: through attention to communication, the words used, and by listening to others (Nancy 2001).

For these reasons, practicing the art of listening is one of the essential requirements of educational counseling, called to practice listening "the most appropriate sense for embracing the complexity of what life is" (Mendoça 2019: 24), to train in the art of listening as a synthesis of at least three dimensions: the ability to decipher the other even when they are not speaking; listening to ourselves; listening through the practice of silence, to be able to see not only the things that are clear to us, but also those that shine through the darkness of existence: "The pain of our thirst is the pain of extreme vulnerability, when limits crush us" (Mendoça 2019: 32), therefore listening also implies knowing how to decipher the mystery of life, that which appears inexplicable, because "[t]he great human experiences are on the side of the ineffable, the untranslatable, the nameless, the silence" (Mendoça 2019: 9).

The areas of practice of the educational counselor as a professional

The professional role of the educational counselor is closely related to the role of the counselor, which originated in the 1930 in America and arrived in Europe via Great Britain, quickly establishing itself in Italy as well. This was influenced by Carl Rogers's perspective, which recognized that "clients" have the potentialities to solve their own problems after gaining full awareness of them (Rogers 1970; Bruzzone 2007). The attention, previously focused on the practitioner/expert, is now shifted to the client/person. Help is a tool for freedom. Technical and procedural skills are equally important, but only if they are possessed by an individual endowed with human qualities (sensitive, genuine, accepting and non-judgmental, flexible, creative, profound, patient, available, autonomous). Otherwise, technical skills can constitute a defensive entrenchment, which would aggravate the practitioner's internal shortcomings, resulting in the inadequacy of their intervention.

The purpose of counseling is to encourage people so they can help themselves by leveraging an intervention that is effective thanks to empathy (Stein 1986; Boella 2006), the ability to congruence, and positive and unconditional acceptance in communication. These requirements are considered not only necessary but also self-sufficient. The emphasis is on the helping relationship which can be directed at an individual or a group, and which is supported by the ability to create a human relationship in a conscious, controlled, and intentional way, rationally mastering skills that are integral to who one is (Borgna 2000).

The work of educational counseling, unlike that of a psychologist, focuses not on the pathology but on the health of the person. Their intervention is not aimed at re-adapting or restructuring the personality, but rather at resolving relational difficulties in the personal, familial, workplace, or other spheres, linked to life's ups and downs, such as bereavement, separation, but also changes in the professional life, home, city, etc. The goal is to activate the person's intrinsic resources, helping them to uncover and draw upon them.

In the context of educational counseling, the helping relationship is structured as an intersubjective encounter, which requires complex professional skills: hermeneutic ability, empathy, pedagogical reflexivity, and planning. The helping professional listens to the other person to address their questions, without imposing themselves but guiding them toward new possibilities for meaning (Bruzzzone 2007). The ultimate goal of a helping relationship is human flourishing, understood as the ability to live one's life authentically, freely, and consciously, despite, or even thanks to, the opportunities that can be found in one's vulnerabilities. Educational counseling thus takes on a maieutic meaning and role, as it is not an adjustment activity but rather one that accompanies the individual in the challenging art of becoming oneself (Musaio 2016).

The role of pedagogues today is increasingly central in educational, clinical, social, and organizational contexts. They are called upon to be "human professionals", capable of reading the signs of distress and responding with personalized, sensitive, contextualized, and culturally relevant interventions aimed at promoting the intangible heritage of relationships.

This is not a neutral or merely methodological role, but an ethical stance, capable of navigating the complexity of educational situations with sensitivity, compassion, and responsibility. In an age marked by multiple crises (health, social, existential, geopolitical), a pedagogical counselor preserves the meaning of education as care for others, as a generative presence, and as a testimony of trust in the evolutionary resources of each person. For these reasons, educational counseling today is developing in a variety of fields, addressing a variety of stakeholders, and responding to multiple needs.

Summarizing we can list some of the main macro-areas:

- educational and scholastic sphere, including counseling interventions for students, teachers, parents, and school educators, to support academic difficulties, orientation, dropout prevention, and support during critical moments in the growth and maturation of children, adolescents, and teenagers;
- personal and relational sphere, including family, couples, parenting, and emotional counseling, with the aim of supporting relational balance, conflict resolution, and the building of meaningful bonds;
- emergency sphere, providing support in crisis or trauma situations, with special attention to the emergency responders and workers involved, to promote timely and competent intervention in managing the psychological suffering and pain caused by trauma and unexpected events;

- socio-work and organizational sphere for career guidance and retraining, stress management, motivation, organizational well-being, and work-life balance: in this case, the pedagogue contributes to the creation of humanizing and inclusive work environments;
- health promotion sphere, such as social-health counseling, hospital counseling, support for issues related to addiction and substance abuse, or support for people with disabilities and various types of fragility (Lizzola 2005), in which the helping relationship is intertwined with care, hope, resilience, and the ethics of caring (Barcellona 2012);
- intercultural and social sphere for support in migration contexts, reception centers, situations of marginalization and educational poverty, because in this case, pedagogical counseling promotes processes of inclusion and active citizenship;
- existential and spiritual sphere for support in spiritual and religious crises, such as pastoral counseling; support for motivation and personal growth, and the search for meaning.

In all these cases, educational counseling emerges as a hub for the synthesis of principles and practices for the humanization of individuals in educational and social contexts (Mounier 2004). It requires specific skills, both methodological and personal, as well as appropriate psychological and ethical approaches to assistance, deep listening, and the ability to understand and interpret individuals and their reality. The ultimate goal of pedagogical counseling is not problem resolution, but personal flourishing—that is, helping others to be reborn (Carckhuff 1989), to reinterpret their experiences as opportunities to embark on a free and conscious journey, even through their own wounds. In this sense, the helping relationship emerges as a radical pedagogical act, intertwining care, responsibility, transformation, and hope.

Towards what perspectives?

If we pay attention to the assumption that the human dimension begins not with the pursuit of perfection, but with the encounter with one's own impotence and imperfection (Peter 1996: 40–46), we have to agree that experiences of limitation, lack, and fragility have become central to the practices of educational and social work. These considerations also allow for a revision of many assumptions surrounding anthropocentric visions that tend to emphasize human capabilities rather than the limits within which humankind exists in full freedom. Recovering the most authentic meaning of humanism in practice requires us to confront not our ideal of perfection, but our imperfection. Moreover, the most recent emergency scenarios of our time urge us to consider that education, care, and relationships should transcend uniformity and be developed in relation to a multiplicity of existential conditions. This set of conditions can become an opportunity to begin developing approaches to the major themes of education and sociality, no longer dominated solely by needs-response dynamics, however necessary, but seen as opportunities to broaden our perspective

on crucial areas: attention to the daily lives of people in difficulty; the right of people with disabilities to fulfill themselves and to love; the opportunity for those living on the streets and in the outskirts of our cities and in conditions of extreme poverty to overcome general indifference and condition of life loneliness as the only possible destiny. In this direction, the presuppositions of pedagogy come into play as a reflection on humanity and the educability of the people (Musaio 2010), as a potentially educable being, endowed with a set of dispositions, aptitudes, and abilities, all of which are affected by limitations. This is because the individual and their existence unfold through the meanders of fragility. This occurs not only for those experiencing visible fragility, such as physical fragility, but also for those experiencing invisible wounds such as mental illness, depression, and existential distress (Galanti 2007).

To summarize this reflection on the significance of pedagogical counseling, we must emphasize that fragility, as a dimension structurally innate to human existence, plays a central role in recalling that every human being is characterized by limitations, by finiteness, simply by the fact of being and having a body that identifies and qualifies them as living beings exposed to wounds, physical and psychological ills, mental distress, and madness. Furthermore, we encounter the unexpected, the dimension of shadow, of madness, which raises questions about the encounter with a humanity steeped in diversity and imperfection. "Nothing is fixed once and for all: every present is new, full of the unexpected" (Gualtieri 2022: 10).

As we pursue a model of perfection that does not exist, we cling to prejudices that refuse to acknowledge and respect the suffering of others. The person is also exposed by being simultaneously exposed to the other – to dialogue, to encounter, to irruption of the other into our existence. As Lévinas argues, we encounter the face of the other, of a sensitive presence, of the desire invisible within us, which urges us to understand that the relationship is a profound immersion in the destiny of the other, in the involvement and acceptance of a responsibility that urges me to emerge from myself and recognize the other's otherness (Lévinas 2003). The other cannot be reduced to my expectations, because in the relationship, beyond listening and speaking, understanding and embracing the other's diversity, an ethical commandment is realized that bursts forth and arises from the face of the other, reaching me from the outside, imposing itself like a force of the law that must be respected because the experience of the relationship is one in which I find myself personally involved. The relationship is characterized by my direct, immediate, spontaneous, delicate involvement, which implies care, because without the right care we deprive ourselves of a fundamental experience that resides and is located at the root of our condition as human beings (Mortari 2019).

Relationships are also experiences of delicacy and sensitivity, which involve recognizing the "threshold" dimension, from the Latin *limen*, between an experience and the leap beyond it (Musaio 2025). In education, we approach experiences that are not controlled only by rational or cognitive components, but are nourished by a reason capable of feeling. What we encounter and investigate in education is so delicate, because these are experiences that exist on the threshold between

the real world and in environments we inhabit anyway, even if they are intangible and we struggle to recognize them, even as they leave wounds and scars. In many cases, these are not phenomena we can investigate experimentally or by following the criteria of verification or validation: how can we prove, for example, that the long-awaited “inner transformation” has occurred in a drug addict or a prisoner who has made a mistake? How can we demonstrate that the relationship we have established with a person with a disability can actually resonate empathically with the other beyond all limits? Consequently, fragility prompts us to be more resonant, to experience resonance both within ourselves and in others (Rosa 2024). This means considering that despite being in a relationship, we live an experience that involves our body, our sensitivity, the attempt to be within the words we speak and hear. A relationship is an intimacy of listening between “I and Thou” (Buber 2005) that implies a posture of immersion within existences, but in order to achieve this, we need to pay attention not only to our bodily posture, but also to our attitude toward existence, including fundamental questions.

Educational counseling converges and is nourished by a profound hermeneutics of an individual, which involves focusing on the set of processes and paths they can undertake to seek their identity and uniqueness on their own. As the poet Mariangela Gualtieri wrote, we experience “psychic and interior malnutrition” (Gualtieri 2022: XIII). This observation calls us, even more so as educators, professionals in helping relationships, and pedagogists, to approach in-depth research: because “only those who delve deeply can breathe well on the surface”. Problematic experiences: mental distress, wounds, pain, the shadows we must recognize within ourselves, while recalling life in its complexity, lead us to understand who we truly are, because who we are is within us, not in external masks, but within ourselves alone, as we recognize the underlying meanings of the person and listen to their emotions (Riva 2019).

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