

Full Length Research Paper

Road wanderers in Brazil: A study on modern psychosocial human mobility

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Human mobility patterns are quite diverse nowadays and a very singular, extreme pattern is seen in the Brazilian scene: road wandering. Road wanderers are individuals who leave their home, family, work and other territories of a settled life and throw themselves into a life of solitary wandering along Brazilian highways. This study aimed to describe the lifestyle of road wanderers, investigate the reasons that led them choose this way of living and understand it against a background of modern human mobility patterns. A total of 63 interviews were conducted with individuals wandering on road shoulders. We found road wandering is associated with the following determinants: poverty; unemployment; marital conflicts; emotional suffering following the loss of loved ones; desires for adventure and freedom; and cultural symbols related to journey, migration, exodus and other modes of displacement. Despite its particularities, road wandering can be understood as a way of human mobility in the modern world.

Key words: Wandering, road wanderer, mobility, migration.

INTRODUCTION

Human mobility patterns interweave in various spaces and times of social life and culture in Brazil but a very singular mobility pattern stands out: road wandering along shoulders of Brazilian highways. Road wanderers are individuals who cut the ties with a settled life, leave their home and family and choose a way of living by wandering alone road shoulders. They populate the landscape of highways in Brazil but no demographic study has yet assessed the number of people living under these circumstances. These wanderers move aimlessly along Brazilian roads, carrying their meager belongings on their backs. Moving along a highway is a survival strategy. They usually wander alone, avoiding the cities, have no income, and make use of no government assistance and protection program (Justo, 1998, 2011; Nascimento, 2008).

While road wanderers are quite visible to any traveler,

they are completely ignored in academic and government and nongovernment organizations and religious institutions and charities. Unlike beggars, homeless people and many other wanderers wandering a city who are an object of scientific interest and targeted by social welfare projects and policies (Justo, 1998, 2011; Nasser, 2000; Vieira et al., 2004; Rosa, 2005; Nascimento, 2008; Cefai, 2010), road wanderers are ostracized. There are neither research studies nor public policies targeting this population.

We have studied road wanderers for nearly 15 years. We first acknowledged the presence of wanderers on road shoulders and casually made preliminary, exploratory contacts, approaching them during car trips. These preliminary contacts were significant and we found an accessible empirical field that could be explored through interviews conducted on road shoulders.

Over the years we traveled many roads within the state of São Paulo, southeastern Brazil, especially those with higher density of road wanderers. Our research sought to explore from their life history to specific issues such as

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the reasons for breaking up with a settled life; sociability issues; feelings and emotions; thoughts, fantasies and delusions; memories of their past life; future prospects; alcohol use and other specific aspects of their way of living (Justo, 1998, 2011; Nascimento and Justo, 2000; Justo and Nascimento, 2005; Peres and Justo, 2005; Nascimento, 2008).

São Paulo is the most industrialized and densely populated state in Brazil attracting most internal migrants and immigrants from neighboring countries and other continents. Human mobility is quite marked along roads and across cities within the state, and road wanderers are mostly seen on those highways connecting large cities and neighboring states. There are no statistics on road wanderers.

The Brazilian institute that conducts census population counts and collects data for state government management do not have any data available on this population. Thus, the exact number of road wanderers on Brazilian highways is not known.

Not even local welfare centers that occasionally give them assistance or shelter when they are moving along stretches of roads that border the city limits have detailed records of the services provided. These individuals are categorized as "itinerant population" which includes all those passing through the city and those who are seeking temporary work but are not road wanderers.

In view of lack of statistics and the difficulty of conducting an accurate count of this population, we made an estimate based on our own records kept during our travels during fieldwork. We observed in higher traffic roads connecting large cities within the state São Paulo at least three wanderers every 100 km. According to the Department of Road Transport and Highways (2012) São Paulo paved road network has nearly 33,000 km and it is thus estimated there are about 990 wanderers moving along these roads.

This pioneer research study aimed to describe the lifestyle of road wanderers, investigate the reasons that led them choose this way of living and understand it against a background of modern human mobility patterns.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Qualitative approach

A qualitative approach was used to explore the unknown way of living of wanderers. It should be noted this design is not intended for and does not provide adequate instruments for statistical data collection and analysis.

Qualitative research focuses on the description of human experience for understanding how subjects live their life and its meanings. It explores the individuals in the world, the meanings they produce and social complexity that surrounds them aiming at understanding their potential perceptions and subjectivity (Richardson, 1985).

Instrument

A semi-structured questionnaire was used for interviewing wanderers on road shoulders. At each stage of the study, we defined an area and roads to be traveled in the state of São Paulo. We carried a tape recorder and video camera and traveled by car along the stretches selected. When a wanderer was sighted we would pull over the car at a distance. We would then approach them, introduce ourselves as researchers and university professors, explain the objectives of our study and invite them to participate in the interview.

Subjects

63 road wanderers freely agreed to be interviewed. These interviews lasted on average one to two hours. There were no remarkable events during the interviews and they were all conducted following the ethical principles of scientific research involving human subjects and Brazilian regulations.

Procedures

Data was collected and analyzed using systematic content analysis of Bardin (1977). This technique consists of full transcript of the interviews recorded; fluctuating reading for corpus building (pre-analysis); repeat readings of interviews for data systematization and coding; and thematic analysis that involved identification of themes as units of meaning and categorization and subcategorization for the analysis of results.

RESULTS

We will first describe how road wanderers live and then we will present the reasons that make them adopt this way of living, and finally we will discuss the relations between this mode of wandering and other modes of modern human mobility.

Characterization of road wanderers and determinants of wandering

From the beginning of our research, we found there were particularities and major differences among wanderers, a finding that was key to our study. At first we thought these individuals were quite similar: they all wore ragged clothes, carried a bag on their backs, and wandered aimlessly as sufferers from poverty and extreme poverty and absolute exclusion.

Contrary to what may seem at first glance, we encountered a multitude of living situations among road wanderers. Some of them live in search of work, especially in rural areas, and subsist on odds jobs in rural properties where they get board and lodging plus a small cash payment. Others, however, make use of makeshift, shoddy carts to carry their utensils, groceries, and basic clothing as well as materials discarded on the roadside

including vehicle parts and recyclable packaging that can be sold.

There are also those who live by begging, getting food, clothing, footwear and some other essential products from roadside businesses and small family farms. Most sleep under bridges, at roofed bus stops, in abandoned houses and other farm buildings such as pens. They can also sleep at gas stations or even in the woods using plastic sheeting to sleep on or cover themselves on rainy nights.

Occasionally, they seek help in a city such as medical care, overnight in shelters, meals and clothing from charity organizations. However, most avoid walking into a city because they are often abused. Road wanderers are markedly different from the so-called *homeless people* and *beggars and tramps* living in cities. Although they are also people without homes, they tend to be more sedentary, wandering through a city or staying in a city for long periods of time before moving to another location. They are *city dwellers* par excellence and hardly wander on road shoulders as they have developed strategies for subsisting in cities and cannot live otherwise.

Unlike city dwellers road wanderers are less gregarious; they live an isolated, lonely life and develop strategies to survive as wanderers. They learn how to protect themselves against rain, hot sun, cold weather, weeds, small animals and natural and road dangers and how to improvise a shelter, light a fire in the cold, and prepare some food. They get help from truckers, people living close to roadsides and manage to establishing contact and identity recognition. They are neither stranger in this non-place nor perceive themselves as aliens because the road is their home and wandering aimlessly is their way of life.

A distinctive feature of city wanderers as compared to road wanderers is that wandering aimlessly and being fully nomadic is a much more extreme situation with more pronounced isolation for the latter.

City wanderers live with a group of people that gather in public squares or alleys for alcohol use. They are more gregarious as they live in an urban space. In contrast, road wanderers are lonely people and avoid contact even with other wanderers that by chance cross their path. It is a law of the road: people do not know each other, they do not trust anyone and fear each other. They live by the law of extreme individualism where each one has to survive alone and there is even no place for a dual partnership.

A highway setting is a scenario where joint efforts are not effective because road wanderers do not move together and live collectively. City wanderers usually gather under marquees in the evening and at night or even in the ranks of charity centers.

On the road everyone goes a different direction and there are no encounters. When they pair up they are not welcome and hardly get any help from people living in

small farms or other properties nearby highways or gas station employees because they cause more apprehension and fear and place a greater burden for those who are willing to help.

The life of a road wanderer seems unbearable and nonviable for those living a settled life with a home, job, relationships and long-term stable emotional ties. But, at a closer look, we found road wanderers are highly resilient individuals. They are able to effectively respond to situations of uncertainty, insecurity, isolation, temporariness, transience and to many other severe situations they are critically faced with. Under their living conditions, they do not make plans or provide for tomorrow. The inexorable day-by-day wandering is their only certainty.

Wanderers cannot make a stop or a halt for a time; they are compelled to keep walking, going back and forth on the same route or road section. Even when they seek care in a charity center, it is only for a few days as they are compelled to keep their journey as inveterate wanderers.

Predispositions of the wandering road wanderers

We performed a more detailed analysis of data collected from interviews about the reasons driving road wanderers to break up with a settled life and engage in wandering. These reasons were divided into three main sub-categories of factors: (a) socioeconomic (unemployment and temporary work); (b) psychological (family conflicts, heartbreak, mental disorders, seeking freedom and adventure); (c) social and cultural (production of human mobility, internal migration, temporary work, culture of individualism, and ephemeral nature of emotional and social ties).

(a) Socioeconomic factors: Unemployment and an ensuing need to move from one place to another in search of temporary job offers, e.g., seasonal harvest jobs, appear to create human mobility conditions favoring a radical progression to a wandering life. Many workers, who travel from distant regions to work sugar canes cutters, harvesting coffee or weeding pastures, spend long periods of time away from home and family, which loosen up their territorial ties and lead to wandering in many cases. It is noteworthy that most road wanderers used to work in agriculture or unskilled jobs in a city.

These socioeconomic issues eventually force individuals to make an extremely hard choice such as venturing to go away from their social niche in search of work or to simply get away from tribulations of everyday living. We present an illustrative account of one of the respondents about the reasons that led him to abandon his family and home as follows:

"To tell you the truth, it was lack of money and work. I

have no professional qualifications and it paid a high toll (...) I lead a wandering life, but I donnot get much from it (...) I wander along highways searching for a job in a farm and try to get back to who I was in the past (...) a man with dignity” (DS, 47).

Another road wanderer, a man of about 55 years old, explained quite clearly the process of rural unemployment caused by increased mechanization in agriculture and agribusiness development in Brazil in the 1950s.

“It was easier to work in the past. There were plenty of jobs. For some years now the country has grown and then with that machinery has also grown, I mean, at that time there were less people and we did it all by hand but now they use machinery for the country to succeed and it cannot be done by hand so there is no job. I mean you have to be smart to tell a story, and that is right, you need machinery because the country has grown, doubled, because since the 50s Brazil has grown 15 to 20 times its size, 15 to 20 times more” (GP, 55).

The advance of capitalism and technology in rural areas is also clearly evident in the following discourse of another road wanderer:

“Walking is really my life. I will walk this long road because there is no crop. Before there was corn harvest, now there is not, the machine does it. They are putting a poison in the sugar cane, no work is needed, just cutting. Sugar cane is killing us, it kills in two ways: no work and the cachaça [sugar cane spirit] we take” (PG, 44).

In the discourse in the foregoing, the road wanderer complains about unemployment caused by mechanization in agriculture and use of pesticides that have replaced manual labor and shows he is aware of damage caused by alcohol use by calling *cachaça* —the most popular alcoholic beverage in Brazil; a deadly drink. Drug use and especially alcohol use are major public health problems in Brazil that have a direct impact on the workforce leading to high rates of absenteeism, work-related injuries and early retirement.

Road wanderers often mentioned alcohol use as a secondary driver for leaving their settled life and an inseparable companion that help them face the difficulties and sufferings of a wandering life. When they find work, road wanderers complain of low pay:

“People see us wandering on the road and think we can work for free or that they can pay pennies. Where I have been, they pay not more than three reais per working day but you have to work because you do not know how to steal. And if you steal you go to jail. When you find a job you get no food and lodging. But you have to thank God

you found it” (BS, 42).

These discourses show work is a major issue and a challenge for this group of wanderers. They said that living on their own work was hard when they lived a settled life but it was practically impossible as a wanderer. They express stronger frustration and disappointment regarding work and most need to subsist as beggars.

The road wanderers also mentioned technology advances and consequent requirement for professional qualification as a major reason for their difficulty in finding work or maintaining a stable job with satisfactory pay. In addition to impoverishment, unemployment and meager remuneration, they also reported low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority and guilt, experiencing humiliation, alcohol abuse and domestic and family conflicts.

(b) Psychological factors: Unemployment and other socioeconomic factors play a role together with other factors among wanderers in Brazil. Conflicts and psychological problems also play an important role. Heartbreak experiences including wife or steady partner infidelity emerged in many interviews. These accounts are strongly related to the macho culture, and infidelity is described as intolerable and humiliating. Heartbreak is the final blow to marriage and the most critical moment in a life marked by socioeconomic difficulties and failures. The following discourse is remarkable among several interviews:

“I caught my wife in bed with another woman. I was working in a circus, taking care of animals (...) when I got home they were having sex. I did nothing but felt like killing them (...) To prevent the worst I chose to leave her. I am living this wandering life for quite a long time” (LB, 43).

In addition to infidelity, there were reports of constant disagreement and quarrels that made living together unbearable.

“Not long ago I used to work, I had a job, I worked in a construction firm. To tell you the truth, a woman did it. She made me to lose in life. Every day she would get home and fight. She would tell me she was in a bar drinking but she was not there many times. Then I said to her: “This way, there is no mending (...) You know what, I am going out into the world. I hit the road” (FS, 48).

The discourses pointed to other family conflicts as reasons driving to a wandering life. Wanderers recalled clashes and disagreements with their father and brothers since childhood as reasons for abandoning the family and a settled life and diving deep into lonely wandering life.

“My parents could not talk to me. They abused me. They

used to beat me as a child, tie me on a tree and assault me, beat me with a hose (...) when I grew up I left them forever” (JP, 51).

Some road wanderers also mentioned the death of their parents as the main reason for leaving to the road. Their life stories are very similar: they were never married and used to live with their parents, but after their death, they felt depressed and disillusioned with life, and eventually left everything and went out into the world aimlessly in search of some meaning to life. Psychological disorders, especially paranoid delusions, were also identified in the discourses analyzed, although there is no way of knowing whether these delusions were present before or developed after living on the road.

Many of the respondents claimed to be heirs of Christ with a mission to save humanity and that they were assailed by the enemies of faith. One of them made a long and emphatic description of his enigmatic theory about the world. He believed there was a war between benign and malignant entities in which evil beings were using “radars” to spy on everyone to dominate the world. These evil beings were owners of satellite communication antennas that were widespread. He justified his wanderings as an attempt to escape, to escape the ubiquitous gaze of those evil beings as can be seen in the following discourse:

“My mother is a brunette, she has long smooth black hair reaching the mid-back (...) but she must have left because she was at that radar up there where planes fly at the airport, she was there at the radar. I believe she could not stand the burden of war (...) Antenna owners are bad people” (A., 50).

Another male wanderer, appearing older than 60 and speaking with a strong Spanish accent, told us he had come to Brazil from Argentina and was traveling on foot along Brazilian roads to accomplish his mission of disarming and pacification of the world because he believed it was on the verge of another great war. These individuals and many other respondents suffered from similar paranoid megalomaniac delusions. Most conformed their delusions to the life on the road with resignation or even joy. However, in addition to conflicts, frustration, disappointment, and psychological suffering, road wanderers left driven by a dream of freedom and adventure:

“I left home because I wanted to be happy and could not stand the pressure of my boss at work, the demands of my family (...) when you cannot take it, it is best to wander the roads where you do not have to deal with anything of that and are free to do whatever you want” (GS, 37).

It is remarkable that even those who did not mention a

quest for freedom as a main reason for their choice and believed that leading a wandering life was difficult and painful, they pointed out they were free on the road and were no longer subjected to the same earlier forms of exploitation, pressure, and submission.

(c) Social and cultural factors: Wanderers often gave accounts of a family history marked by constantly moving to other Brazilian regions or other cities within the same state:

I came as a small child to São Paulo from the interior of Piauí [northeastern Brazil] with my parents and brothers and sisters. We came to work in a coffee farm. Later my parents moved to another farm, further away in Mato Grosso [central-west Brazil], they went there to work in cattle breeding. When I was older we moved to the capital of São Paulo and when I married I moved again to the interior [of São Paulo].

Like this case, many wanderers have since childhood migrated around Brazil, a country of continental dimensions marked by accelerated population growth and occupation of unexplored areas, and traveling and adventures are quite strong in their lives. These images of mobility become even more exciting in the light of modern movements and trends of occupying open and transit spaces. Dreams and drivers to leave in search of adventure or escape the hardships of daily life have often been referred in the mobility experiences of Brazilians.

Surrounded by stimuli and allusions to wandering it is understandable that many individuals, given the hardships of daily life perceived as oppressive and frustrating or stimulated by desires and dreams of freedom and adventure, will eventually throw themselves into a life of aimless wandering.

DISCUSSION

Modern human mobility has been widely discussed and analyzed by authors from various fields of knowledge and schools. Harvey (1990) emphasized the experience of time-space compression in modern times, arguing that a basic difference between modern and postmodern culture is that the former was perplexed by images of a world taken over by ephemerality and transience while the latter takes them as the existing order, accepting them and drawing upon them to explore the possibilities of life.

Virilio (1977) referred to the world that has emerged in modern times as a dromologic one, that is, taken by rush, speed and movement in all spheres of life. According to him, the modern world is grounded on the production of kineses, excitement, speeding up time and multiplying space connections, creating a state of trajectory. The human being has thus become a being of the trajectory, a transhumant species subject to regular displacement or constant migration.

What seemed transient in the effervescence of modernity; the ephemeral and fleeting, has eventually become permanent through repetition and ongoing movement throughout social space (Harvey, 1990).

In this context, modernity strongly summons up the image of a constantly changing volatile, ephemeral world where certainties and all other experiences of stability and soundness dissolve into air (Berman, 1982). Repeat mobility as can be seen in the kinetic corridors created by tourism, neutralizes the potentially subjectivizing and transforming nature of movement, creating a settling nomadism in which displacements are fully monitored and controlled. Modern travelers have actually become passengers that circulate through non-places with a fully programmed script (Augé, 1995).

Modern wandering can also be understood through concepts of the culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1979), the cult of performance (Ehrenberg, 1991) and the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1992). These authors have a common point of analysis: individualism is the trademark of the self for human beings today. The logic of individualism assigns to the individuals themselves responsibility for their successes and failures and they are thus supposed to create their own personal conditions to stand out, to be appraised by others and excel in the social scenario as a magnificent, excellent winner.

Modern individualism, on the other hand, has increased social vulnerability and led to a growing number of extremely impoverished people who are professionally unskilled and have no long-term unemployment, and are left on their own fate in completely negative individualism (Castel, 1995; Paugam, 1991).

According to Castel (1995), the negative individualism can be understood as total inexistence of links between an individual and sociability networks including stable employment and structured family relations. This complex modern phenomenon is aggravated by extreme poverty, loneliness, abandonment and complete lack of connection of an individual geographically, socially and psychologically (Grisby et al., 1990; Paugam, 1991; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Castel, 1995; Justo, 1998, 2011; Nascimento, 2008).

Our research study showed that Brazilian road wanderers can be understood within this set of different injunctions that make modern life more volatile and subject to mobility. Their constant wandering, loneliness, isolation, rarefaction of human relations and social ties, precarious livelihood, uprooting and volatility of life make road wanderers a dramatic and direct representation of today's kineses that drive movement at all levels: geographic, social, cultural and psychological. They are subject of time-space compression that accelerates and stretches life.

Unemployment, heartbreak, loss of parental figures, family violence and desire for freedom and adventure in a

culture saturated with images of mobility in an era marked by time-space compression are all determinants that lead wanderers to leave their social niches and throw themselves into a radical wandering life (Harvey, 1990). Frustration, oppression and rejection experienced primarily at work, in family and marital relationships and other relationships in everyday life make the images of escape, desertion, adventure, sudden and hasty parting and a drifting life quite attractive.

The road wanderers reported many experiences that triggered their impulse to escape, move and lead a wandering life with no attachments. Unemployment, poverty, debts, highly exploited labor, family conflicts, emotional frustration, parental loss, marital infidelity, feelings of powerlessness, inferiority, imprisonment, and many other hardships are clearly catalyzed into a desire of escaping, gaining freedom and venturing into the world (Justo, 1998, 2011; Nascimento, 2008).

Leaving to the road can be a brief experience as some, after a few days and nights of loneliness and no shelter, return home despite feeling humiliated. But those who stay on the road for a few years cannot come back to the kind of life they led before, settled with stable ties, despite the difficulties of an extremely volatile and precarious life because they are attracted to the feeling of lightness, disengagement, and no attachment that life on the road provides them. As the years go by, their social detachment deepens and a settled life with a steady job becomes increasingly more distant and difficult to return to (Paugam, 1991, Snow and Anderson, 1993; Castel, 1995).

Their chances and opportunities become limited or even inexistent and wanderers feel they can only have a wandering, dromomaniac life and their mobility becomes a life strategy (Virilio, 1977). Snow and Anderson (1993) also found that outsiders develop over time effective survival strategies that meet their physical and psychological needs and adjust and are familiar to their lifestyles. A drifting life deprived of stability and basic guarantees, as we understand the life of wanderers and outsiders, involves arduous daily efforts. They have to provide for their basic needs every day and for that, drawing on their long experience, they must develop more effective actions.

Road wanderers have no basic protection, rights, citizenship or any other form of social security. They say that in their universe there is no law and prevails an absolute individualism so well expressed by an old saying: "Every man for himself." Every day, every man for himself have to provide for their own food, night shelter, protection against the sun and weather conditions, protection against harmful actions of others and so forth.

There is some exchange of knowledge and experience between them that helps in devising survival strategies, but each one by himself will have to put them into practice and improve them daily. Despite the great

burden and difficulties of their helpless and vulnerable condition, they actually manage to withstand adversity, overcome everyday hardships and build a life that, for many, is possible and even better than the life they have before.

Conclusions

Although the life of road wanderers in Brazil remains an enigma to be completely deciphered, the feelings and injunctions of this kind of life were fully exposed. There were some important findings in this study. A general finding is concerning the association of wanderers' wandering journey on road shoulders, aimless and purposeless, with modern life trends of moving without much preestablished direction and course of action in a world marked by mobility and social networks that connect and go beyond different territories.

The wandering life of road wanderers cannot be taken alone as a result of a process of social exclusion but rather it should be seen as a manifestation of current trends of production of multiple, flexible, volatile and mobile lives in a scenario with increasing opportunities and accelerated time. There are different modalities of living in transit that include habitual travelers and tourists, businessmen and other professionals who travel the world, and many other walkers; and road wandering is one of these modalities.

It should also be noted that road wanderers, compared with other paradigmatic cases of subjective elements of modern human mobility, show there are different ways of living the time-space compression today. While some may move using sophisticated products and technologies such as airplanes, tourism packages and credit cards, others such as road wanderers use their own legs and carry all their belongings in a bag. They are allowed, at most, to move along road shoulders pressed by daily misery and hardship.

Another finding of our research study is that economic and social factors, such as unemployment, poverty, debt and conflicts are not the only ones driving them into the road because they are also driven by psychological factors that are as important and strong. They also reported profound conflicts and psychological distress such as: severe depression due to an unbearable

loss; deep heartbreak, strong feelings of rejection and humiliation experienced due to marital infidelity; painful feelings of powerlessness and inferiority due to unemployment and poverty that seem critical for taking a drastic action of abandoning a settled life; albeit precarious and seeking something better in the experience of wandering.

Among psychological factors are also dreams of adventure and freedom associated with wandering. The most many wanderers can aspire when they are taken by

the urge to search for life beyond that territory of an everyday life perceived as sedentary, monotonous and restrictive is to leave everything behind and wander on road shoulders, especially when freedom and expansion of life is culturally associated with wandering.

However, the different combinations of economic, social, cultural and psychological factors cannot fully explain why many leave a settled life and head for endless wanderings on road shoulders. There is an element of the imponderable, the unpredictable and the unique that acts upon only a few among many living in the same conditions, making them break up with a settled life and leave to the road. Although there remain obscure elements in the course of life of road wanderers, wandering is clearly a possible way of living, among many others, given the current situation of geographical, social, cultural and psychological mobility.

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