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Joanna Chwaszcz
Iwona Niewiadomska

Meaning of resources in social inclusion



**Joanna Chwaszcz
Iwona Niewiadomska**

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in social inclusion**

Editors:

Joanna Chwaszcz
Iwona Niewiadomska
e-mail: sekretariat@ipip.info.pl
www.ipip.info.pl

Reviewer:

DANUTA RODE, Associate Professor SWPS

Statistical Editor:

Rafał Bartczuk, PhD

English Language Editor:

Mirosław Drozd

Text Editor:

Monika Piech

Picture Editor:

Zbigniew Kowalczyk

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sekretariat@natanaelum.pl

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	7
Chapter 1	
Inclusion. Social Theoretical Considerations on Rawls' Theory of Justice	9
<i>Jochen Ostheimer</i>	
Chapter 2	
The sense of positive responsibility as a factor that protects against threats	22
<i>Irena Mudrecka</i>	
Chapter 3	
Sustainable development policy as a strategy for combating social exclusion, based on the example of unemployment.....	33
<i>Łukasz Marczak, Stanisław Fel</i>	
Chapter 4	
The distribution of resources and the subjective quality of life in patients covered by a replacement therapy programme.....	40
<i>Aleksandra Sadowska, Iwona Niewiadomska, Agnieszka Palacz-Chrisidis</i>	
Chapter 5	
Distribution of resources and subjective quality of life among drug addicts in the early stages of recovery	50
<i>Maria Klimek, Iwona Niewiadomska, Agnieszka Palacz-Chrisidis</i>	
Chapter 6	
Resources as a factor that protects psychoactive drug addicts from relapse	61
<i>Adam Lenart, Iwona Niewiadomska, Agnieszka Palacz-Chrisidis</i>	
Chapter 7	
Sense of support and stress coping strategies in nicotine-dependent persons.....	70
<i>Natalia Jachowicz, Iwona Niewiadomska, Rafał Piotr Bartczuk</i>	
Chapter 8	
The severity of crisis in valuation and the use of coping strategies in prison inmates.....	80
<i>Renata Tyrka, Iwona Niewiadomska, Rafał Piotr Bartczuk</i>	
Chapter 9	
Personality and stress coping strategies in gambling-addicted persons	91
<i>Izabela Łącka, Iwona Niewiadomska, Agnieszka Palacz-Chrisidis</i>	
Chapter 10	
Personal adjustment and preferences for coping strategies in people with behavioural addictions.....	103
<i>Paulina Pietras, Iwona Niewiadomska, Agnieszka Palacz-Chrisidis</i>	
Chapter 11	
Innovation as a tool for social policy and welfare.....	114
<i>Magdalena Zdun, Stanisław Fel</i>	
About authors	122

Chapter 8

The severity of crisis in valuation and the use of coping strategies in prison inmates

Renata Tyrka, Iwona Niewiadomska, Rafał Piotr Bartczuk

ABSTRACT

The issue of valuation is important and ever-present subject of psychological research. Past studies showed that a stable system of internal standards narrows the circle of applicable strategies of coping to those that are consistent with the values preferred by the person. However, the coping is one of the most important aspects of life in prison. The present study concerns of the relationship between the severity of the crisis in valuation and the preference of coping strategies among imprisoned persons. The study group consisted of 124 Polish male prisoners. The results showed a complex relationships between the crisis in valuation, measured using Oles's Value Crisis Questionnaire, and strategies of coping studied using COPE, developed by Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, and Strategic Approach to Coping Scale by Hobfoll.

Keywords: value crisis, coping strategies, prisoners

Introduction

Even though values are an important issue that continues to be present in psychological studies, the problems associated with crisis in valuation are relatively infrequently explored by scholars.

The area of values is deeply rooted in human personality (Rokeach, 1973). Values are what you assess as good, what you have a positive attitude towards, what you want to pursue and what you ultimately choose (Oleś, 1989a). Values are important for human functioning because they are responsible for establishing one's goals in life, planning and completing tasks, which, in turn, leads to self-actualisation, sense of fulfilment and success. Values are

the driving force behind our actions. Well-established hierarchy of values ensures the consistency of actions taken by the individual with his/her axiological system. This protects the individual against negative emotions that arise when the individual fails to act in line with his/her system of values (Rokeach, 1973; Niewiadomska & Chwaszcz, 2010).

Ossowski (1967) argues that values can exist at the actual and declarative levels. This distinction is important for their respective roles in behaviour control. This function is fulfilled only by internalised values, i.e. those perceived and considered as attractive (Bielicki, 1991). This regularity is clearly reflected in the assessment of the axiological attitudes of persons receiving their imprisonment. This group holds values that are similar to those recognised by the majority of the society. Among inmates, the overriding values include family life, fitness and physical strength, followed by education, stability in life, social support, pursuit of wealth, financial independence, and, finally, the satisfaction of one's hedonist needs (Świętochowska, 1995, Ziomek-Michalak, 2005). The essential difference between prison inmates and the general public is that the former attach significantly less importance to values associated with searching for meaning in life in relation to transcendence and the quality of interpersonal relations. Also in terms of values connected with working towards one's goals, socially maladjusted individuals are significantly more likely to choose factors based on self-sufficiency, like courage or independence, rather than those associated with interpersonal cooperation, like honesty, responsibility, integrity, truthfulness or cheerful disposition (Kościuch, 1984). The cited findings, which show insignificant differences in the hierarchy of values between socially maladjusted, or imprisoned, persons and the general public, suggest that the discrepancies between these groups should be found not so much in their failure to hierarchise their values as in the process of valuation itself. Previous studies on inmates, while focused on their hierarchy of values and valuation methods (Kozaczuk, 2005), have disregarded an important issue, that is the crisis in their axiological sphere.

Each human experience is connected with the sphere of values, hence the difficulties arising during the valuation process can play a significant role in the life of an individual. Oleś (1989a) argues that disorders in the axiological sphere can manifest themselves in: (a) difficulties in hierarchising one's system of values, when the individual is unable to identify his/her dominant value, which results in conflicts between values, and, consequently, causes axiological disorientation; (b) considerable re-evaluations, when the individual discovers new values, or abandons the values he/she used to hold on to; (c) failure to integrate cognitive, affective and motivational processes that take part in valuation, when the individual declares certain values, while at the same time having negative emotional attitude towards them or being poorly motivated to preserve them; (d) difficulties in assessment and making choices on the basis of one's system of values, that can result from the failure to adequately hierarchise one's inner standards or one's inclination towards impulsive behaviour; and (e) feeling that one has failed to hold on to one's values in life, i.e. realising the discrepancy between one's inner standards and behaviour. A valuation crisis can be caused by strong internal (social and/or cultural) or external (frustrated needs) pressures (Oleś, 1989a).

Imprisonment is a difficult time and the process of coping with stress is one of the vital aspects of functioning in a correctional facility. As argued by Lazarus and Folkman in their pioneering work (1989), coping is defined as the person's "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are

appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources" (p. 141). Individual coping methods for specific difficulties are defined as strategies (Heszen-Niejodek, 1997).

Studies conducted by Groth (2003) on a group of prison inmates and persons without a criminal record showed that juvenile delinquents, as compared to non-offenders, are characterised by a stronger tendency to use emotion-focused strategies, avoidance and self-distraction. However, there were no differences between these groups in terms of avoidance strategies focused on seeking interactions with other people. As demonstrated by other studies (Niewiadomska, Chwaszcz & Augustynowicz, 2010), inmates who develop their coping skills in problem situations are more capable of social readjustment. This is facilitated by their frequent use of strategies based on seeking social support and increased caution in their actions. Lower prevalence of strategies based on the use of psychoactive drugs, anti-social, instinctive, or avoidance activities, indirect behaviour and negative religious coping contributes to improved adjustment in penitentiary confinement. The use of alcohol or other psychoactive drugs as avoidance coping strategies is characteristic of the individuals who are released from prison and constitutes an important factor that leads to their return to criminal activity (Szczeplaniak, 2003; Yu, 2000). Studies on criminals covered by addiction therapies have shown that such therapies encourage the use of an increased number of constructive strategies in difficult situations in life (Hepburn, 2005).

Studies have proven that, when faced with a difficulty, the most effective and adaptive coping style is the problem-focused strategy. Coping focused on changing emotions and on avoidance does not provide these benefits (Pervin, John, 2002; Strelau, Zawadzki & Oniszczenko, 2004). These findings have been corroborated by studies conducted on different groups of inmates. A survey by Niewiadomska (2007) showed that the low intensity of the task-oriented coping style corresponds to poor adjustment capacity in convicts, and infrequent use of emotion-focused and avoidance strategies is associated with increased adjustment, i.e. low severity of the value crisis. Both one-time and habitual offenders with considerable adjustment capacity use psychoactive substances, such as sedatives, alcohol or drugs, only to a small degree. Trying not to focus on negative emotions when faced with a difficult situation results in moral improvement among recidivists. A reverse trend is found in habitual offenders with a limited capacity to change. They generally tend to concentrate on reducing their emotional tension, wishful thinking, daydreaming and focusing solely on themselves.

The relation between coping strategies and crisis in valuation is well established in the literature on the subject. Individuals characterised by a major crisis of values are distrustful, hostile and excessively critical towards others. They are unable to develop close emotional relationships. In addition, they have a tendency to compete and take vengeance on other people, while at the same time seeking acceptance and sense of interdependence. Individuals with the low severity of crisis in valuation desperately seek peaceful management of interpersonal relations. Such persons tend to be kind, friendly and caring (Oleś, 1989b). It has been argued that coping with problems by means of using emotions is associated with an inefficient management of internal standards, which increases tension (Strelau et al., 2004). A stable system of internal standards restricts the range of available coping strategies to those that are consistent with the values held by the individual.

A study by Ostrowska (1982) demonstrated that juvenile delinquents predominantly use strategies based on attack and ruthlessness. Their high scores on those scales indicate that these individuals tend to achieve their goals by any means. Frequently, they break

the law to reach their objectives. Recidivists, in turn, prefer strategies based on ruthlessness and resignation. Such individuals do not have any goals that would give purpose to their life. They also deny the importance of objectives they used to consider important. Studies have also shown that offenders who are imprisoned for the first time are less likely to use strategies based on resignation and ruthlessness (Ostrowska, 1982). Socially maladjusted individuals, including inmates, tend to come into conflict with their environment and are characterised by wrong attitudes towards society. They experience tensions and adopt wrong attitudes, which is manifested by their using antagonistic and destructive behaviour (Kozaczuk, 2006).

Crisis in valuation is also connected with destructive problem solving. Such coping methods are employed by individuals with poor coping skills, who adopt avoidance attitudes, often resort to self-destruction, abuse psychoactive drugs and experience fear of human interaction (Badura-Madej, 1999; Kubacka-Jasiecka, 2006). At the same time, the increased severity of crisis in valuation leads to the escalation of destructive attitudes in life, passivity, avoidance behaviour such as alcohol, drug or medicine abuse, and distancing oneself emotionally from society (Niewiadomska & Chwaszcz, 2010).

A hierarchised system of values rejects anti-social coping strategies in favour of pro-social ones (Niewiadomska, 2007). Axiological stability is further associated with only slight preference for assertive, instinctive or indirect strategies, or negative religious coping (Niewiadomska & Chwaszcz, 2010). Valuation integration is facilitated by the use of constructive coping strategies. These lead to the discovery of higher values, encourage the pursuit of mature goals, develop pro-social attitudes, and, as a result, drive inmates towards personal growth. One of such strategies is to act with caution in difficult situations (Cekiera, 1993; Niewiadomska, 2011). A study by Niewiadomska (2007) demonstrated that the low intensity of the task-oriented coping style is associated with increased crisis in valuation, while less frequent use of emotion-focused and avoidance strategies is connected with a low severity of crisis in the domain of values.

The present study addresses the following research question – What is the relationship between the severity of crisis in valuation and coping preferences among inmates? The authors expected that the high severity of crisis in valuation would co-occur with the use of strategies focused on avoidance behaviour (Hypothesis 1), based on seeking support and focused on emotions (Hypothesis 2), of active anti-social nature (Hypothesis 3), or of asocial character (Hypothesis 4), while the low severity of such crisis would be associated with active coping strategies (Hypothesis 5) or with active pro-social attitudes (Hypothesis 6).

Method

Study group and procedures

The study group comprised 124 men serving their time in the External Detention Facility of the semi-open Penitentiary in Zamość. The survey was conducted in groups of several people each. Before completing a set of questionnaires, the inmates had been informed

that the study was anonymous and its findings would be used solely for research purposes. Following the rejection of certain questionnaires due to incomplete data, 117 inmates were subject to an analysis.

The study covered prisoners aged 18–63, 51% of whom had resided in cities/towns, and 49% in villages before imprisonment. The majority of subjects had completed primary (37%) or vocational (33%) education; this was followed by secondary (24%) education, with only 7 inmates having university degrees.

On the basis of personal questionnaire forms, the study group was profiled against the variables connected with their stay in the penitentiary, the types of crimes committed, the time to be served, the time already served and the time remaining until being released from prison and the number of sentences served. The relevant study group description is presented in Table 18.

Table 18 *The profile of the study group in terms of the variables associated with imprisonment*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Type of crime		
against life or health	10	9
against safety in transport	25	23
against family or custody	19	17
against property	46	42
against business transactions	1	1
against the Act on prevention of drug abuse	10	9
against public order	1	1
unsuspended fine	5	5
against freedom	2	2
against document credibility	1	1
Time to be served		
Less than 6 months	9	8
Less than a year	10	9
Less than 2 years	27	24
Less than 3 years	24	21
More than 3 years	43	38
Time served		
Less than 6 months	33	30
Less than a year	20	18
Less than 2 years	27	24
Less than 3 years	15	14
More than 3 years	16	14
Time remaining until being released from prison		
Less than 6 months	30	27

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Less than a year	16	14
Less than 2 years	40	36
Less than 3 years	18	16
More than 3 years	7	6
Sentence served		
First	81	75
Second	17	16
Third	4	4
Fourth	4	4
Fifth	1	1
Tenth	1	1

Methods

Valuation Crisis Assessment Form (VCAF) The VCAF by Oleś (1989a) comprises 25 items, of which 24 are of evaluative nature. The assessment provides the overview of the overall crisis in valuation and 4 sub-scales that measure the major outcomes of this crisis: Difficulties in hierarchising one's system of values, Sense of being lost in terms of values, Valuation disintegration, Sense of failure to live in line with one's values. The overall score is obtained on the basis of answers to 24 evaluative questions. This study uses only the overall score provided by the VCAF.

The subjects were asked to assess each statement by ticking one of the following three answers: P – truth, ? – I'm not sure, it's hard for me to decide, F – false. The reliability of the overall score assessed using Cronbach's alpha is 0.89 (Oleś, 1989a).

Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced (COPE). In its Polish version, as developed by Juczyński and Ogińska-Bulik (2009), the COPE inventory by Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, refers to the transactional approach to coping adopted by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and is designed to assess individual attitudes to stress. This tool assesses avoidance, active, behavioural, cognitive, emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies.

COPE consists of 60 statements that make up 15 sub-scales, which have been categorised into three styles on the basis of factor analysis: (1) Active coping (positive reframing and growth, planning, restraint coping, active coping, suppression of competing activities), (2) Avoidance (behavioural disengagement, self-distraction, acceptance, denial, humour, substance use), and (3) Seeking support and focusing on emotions (seeking instrumental social support, seeking emotional social support, turning to religion, focusing on and venting of emotions) (Juczyński & Ogińska-Bulik, 2009). The reliability of the individual scales, measured using Cronbach's alpha, ranges from 0.48 to 0.94. The highest score was achieved for Turning to religion (0.94), and the lowest for Self-distraction (0.48) and Active coping (0.49) (Juczyński & Ogińska-Bulik, 2009).

Strategic Approach to Coping Scale, a situational version (SACS-S) The SACS-S by Hobfoll is used to assess coping strategies used by individuals when faced with stress.

The statements employed by this approach refer to individual and collective coping strategies. The scale consists of nine coping strategies, which have been subject to factor analysis to distinguish three styles: (1) Active pro-social coping (cautious action, social joining, seeking social support, assertive action); (2) Active anti-social coping (aggressive action, instinctive action, anti-social action); and (3) Asocial coping (avoidance and indirect action) (Hobfoll, 2006).

Findings

In order to test the hypotheses, the study calculated Pearson's r . For average standard deviations and correlations between the individual valuation crisis coping strategies, please see Table 19.

Table 19 *Descriptive data and Pearson's r for the variables evaluated in the study*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>r</i>
Valuation crisis	31.9	8.8	
COPE			
Avoidance (style)	2.1	0.4	0.43***
Denial	1.9	0.6	0.38***
Behavioural disengagement	1.9	0.6	0.36***
Humour	1.9	0.7	0.21*
Self-distraction	2.1	0.5	0.36***
Substance use	2	0.9	0.34***
Acceptance	2.7	0.7	0.11
Active coping (style)	2.7	0.4	-0.29**
Planning	2.8	0.6	-0.34***
Positive reframing and growth	2.7	0.5	-0.182*
Active coping	2.8	0.6	-0.27**
Suppression of competing activities	2.6	0.6	-0.23*
Restraint coping	2.5	0.5	-0.10
Seeking support and focusing on emotions (style)	2.4	0.5	0.03
Seeking emotional support	2.3	0.7	-0.04
Seeking instrumental support	2.6	0.7	-0.06
Focusing on and venting of emotions	2.5	0.6	0.15
Turning to religion	2.2	0.9	0.04
SACS-S			
Active anti-social coping (style)	47.2	9.5	0.12
Aggressive action	14.6	3.5	-0.0
Instinctive action	19.3	3.8	0.18
Anti-social action	13.2	4.3	0.08

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>r</i>
Active pro-social coping (style)	84.2	13	-0.32***
Cautious action	16.5	4.1	-0.29***
Social joining	15.6	3.6	-0.14
Seeking social support	22.5	5.5	-0.12
Assertive action	29.7	4.6	-0.46***
Asocial coping (style)	29.2	6	0.20
Avoidance	17.8	4.2	0.16
Indirect action	11.3	3	0.18

Note. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The conducted analyses demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between the severity of crisis in valuation and avoidance behaviour (COPE) and its corresponding strategies. No significant correlation was found only in the acceptance scale. The moderate, positive correlations between the variables, as observed in the study, show that the greater the severity of crisis in valuation, the more likely the individual is to use denial, behavioural disengagement, humour, self-distraction, or substance use. This confirms Hypothesis 1.

Based on the analyses carried out under this study, it can be assumed that, in line with Hypothesis 5, there is a negative correlation between the severity of crisis in valuation and the active coping style (COPE) and its corresponding strategies. No significant correlation was found only in restraint coping. The moderate and low, negative correlations between the variables, as observed in the study, show that the lower the severity of crisis in valuation, the more likely the individual is to use planning, positive reframing and growth, active coping and suppression of competing activities.

The presented study findings demonstrate that there is a negative correlation between the severity of crisis in valuation and active pro-social coping (SACS-S) and its corresponding strategies. No significant correlation was found for two scales, i.e. social joining and seeking social support. The moderate and low, negative correlations between the variables, as observed in the study, show that, in line with Hypothesis 6, the lower the severity of crisis in valuation, the more likely the individual is to use cautious action and assertive action.

The conducted analyses demonstrate that there are no significant correlations between the severity of crisis in valuation and seeking social support or focusing on emotions (COPE) and strategies corresponding to this style. There are also no significant correlations between the severity of crisis in valuation and active anti-social coping (SACS-S) and asocial coping (SACS-S) and the strategies corresponding to this style. In view of this, Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 were not supported.

Discussion of findings

The findings presented above indicate that there are significant correlations between the severity of crisis in valuation and coping preferences among the surveyed prisoners.

Hypothesis 1 assumed that the high severity of the crisis does not foster the use of strategies focused on avoidance behaviour in inmates. As demonstrated by the presented analyses, the high severity of crisis in valuation increases the likelihood of using avoidance strategies, such as denial, behavioural disengagement, humour, self-distraction and substance use among prisoners. These findings are consistent with those recorded by Niewiadomska and Chwaszcz (2010) and Niewiadomska (2012). Avoidance strategies are conducive to maladjustment, as they fail to overcome obstacles, while also contributing to the proliferation of problems (Niewiadomska & Chwaszcz, 2010). This, in turn, suggests that the use of this type of coping strategies shows significant correlation with valuation disintegration.

Hypothesis 5 referred to the relation between the low severity of crisis in valuation and the preference for active coping strategies in prison inmates. The study showed that individuals with a great severity of the crisis are more likely to use task-oriented coping strategies. Heszen-Niejodek (2002) and Pervin & John (2002) claim that such strategies support adjustment. Task-oriented strategies facilitate personal development. Through such attitudes, inmates are more successful in overcoming life's adversities, which, in turn, leads to less problems in the axiological domain.

Hypothesis 6 associated the low severity of crisis in valuation with the use of active pro-social strategies. The study supported this claim. In particular, this applies to cautious action and assertive action. Previous studies have shown that the valuation process is consolidated through the use of strategies based on cautious action and on kind and friendly social attitudes (Niewiadomska, 2011; Oleś, 1989b). The relations found in this survey further suggest that active pro-social activities are beneficial for inmates. By careful planning and problem solving, and determined pursuit of goals, inmates consolidate their axiological attitudes.

Hypothesis 2 assumed that the high severity of crisis in valuation would correspond to the use of strategies based on seeking social support and focusing on emotions in prisoners. The conducted analyses did not show any significant relations between these variables. In theory, individuals who fail to manage their internal standards successfully, i.e. who experience a crisis in valuation, tend to employ emotion-focused strategies (Niewiadomska, 2007; Strelau et al., 2004). This lack of correlation can be, at least in part, due to the lack of females in the study group. The literature contains studies indicating that women are more likely than men to use emotion-focused strategies (Byra, 2011). Another explanation can be based on the fact that during their stay in the penitentiary, inmates have restricted social contact, which makes it very difficult to seek support or sympathy from other people.

Hypothesis 3 referred to the relation between crisis in valuation and the use of active anti-social strategies among convicts. This hypothesis was not supported under this study. It was based on study findings obtained by Niewiadomska & Chwaszcz (2010) and Oleś (1989b). These authors demonstrated that, in difficult situations, individuals who experience a crisis of values act instinctively, tend to compete with others and display negative attitudes towards them. The lack of this correspondence in the study group can be caused by its penitentiary confinement. Imprisoned individuals can show no active anti-social behaviour because there are no favourable conditions for this. They are continuously controlled by prison service and have limited contact with other people towards whom they could exhibit such behaviour.

Hypothesis 4 assumed that there is a significant relation between the high severity of crisis in valuation and preferences for asocial coping strategies among convicts. It was

based on research which showed that, in stressful situations, inmates with unstable axiological systems prefer indirect actions and tend to avoid the problem (Niewiadomska & Chwaszcz, 2010; Niewiadomska, 2012). This study did not support this hypothesis. This might be due to the specific nature of the study group, which included prison inmates participating in a programmed impact system. This system focuses on stimulating activity. This is why such inmates are less likely to exhibit such coping strategies as avoidance or indirect action (Stępnia, 2009).

To sum up, the strongest relation with the severity of difficulties in the axiological domain among prisoners is manifested by avoidance strategies, and the poorest – by task-oriented and active pro-social coping strategies. These findings confirm that corrective measures designed to assist prisoners in overcoming crisis in valuation can foster their adaptation of constructive coping strategies (and protect them from destructive ones). On the other hand, encouraging inmates to focus on tasks, especially of pro-social nature, and preventing avoidance behaviour, can help their value systems crystallise.

The correlations between crisis in valuation and the remaining coping strategies included in this study seem to be determined by various environmental factors operating in the penitentiary institution. The discrepancies found between this study and findings recorded in the literature ask for further research into this problem.

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