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FINDING A LARGE AND THRIVING LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL COMMUNITY: THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF CARING

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Abstract

There has been little research on the complex phenomenon of 'lesbian communities' and even less on how bisexual women construct communities in the perceived absence of bisexual organisations or events in most U.S. cities. Sixty women (31 lesbians, 17 bisexual women, 2 women who identified as gender queer, and 10 heterosexual sisters) were interviewed about their communities. They were asked how they perceived their communities to be there for them during times of stress, and also on the converse of that — how much support they are expected to provide when others in their communities experience stress. Over half of lesbians and bisexual women were highly integrated into a number of communities and felt significant support when times were bad. Others relied on partners and family of origin when their communities were not supportive. Some women used the internet for support, whilst others felt quite isolated from any community. High involvement with communities came at a cost, however, since women had to decide how much time and effort to put into providing support for others in their communities. In contrast, the heterosexual sisters were generally less integrated into communities outside their own families.

Introduction

The cover image of Alison Bechdel's comic-strip book *Strip-Level Dykes to Watch Out For* (1998) shows a multi-generational and multi-ethnic group of friends helping to unload a U-Haul moving van. It is moving day for Clarice and Toni, an inter-racial couple with a son who are relocating to the white suburbs. Meanwhile the communal lesbian household occupied by Lois, Sparrow, and Ginger is up for sale, and those characters too are moving on. Later on in the comic strip Ginger becomes involved with a man and Lois becomes a gender-blending FTM.

For many of my friends, nothing could be further from their experience of community than this scenario. They feel isolated and lonely. They view their local lesbian community as cliquish, elitist, racist, or ageist. They say it is unfriendly to children, especially boys. When they have moved, or hurt their back, or needed a ride, no one was there for them. Bisexual women are even more disappointed. Many feel there is no bisexual community, and they must choose between being in the closet or passing as lesbian.

Research on Community and Lesbian/Bisexual Community

There is a voluminous body of literature on community, and the role of community and mental health in the general U.S. population (c.f., Brugha, 1995; Hobfall, 1986; Vaux, 1988). Yet there has been relatively little research on the complex phenomenon of 'lesbian communities' and even less on how bisexual women construct communities in the perceived absence of bisexual organisations or events in most U.S. cities.

My prior research on U.S. lesbian, gay male, bisexual (LGBs) and heterosexual siblings has indicated that heterosexuals live closer to their parents, have more contact with their parents, and perceive more social support from their

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families of origin (Rothblum, Balsam & Mickey, 2004). Lesbians and bisexual women are less religious, more likely to live alone, and more geographically mobile. Women who do not identify as heterosexual may become alienated from standard sources of community (such as extended family and religious organisations). For these reasons, it would seem that connection with and participation in lesbian and bisexual women's communities would be important for social support and as a buffer for stress and distress.

There has been recent interest in and research about LGB communities. Bailey, Gurevich and Mathieson (2000) reviewed the role of the lesbian and bisexual women's communities in providing support and buffering stress. Meyer (2003) has described the concept of 'minority stress' for LGB populations—the concept that anti-gay prejudice and discrimination create a stressful environment for LGBs in mainstream society. And Edwards and Riggs (2008) recently edited an entire issue of the journal *Health Sociology Review* on the ways LGB people create community and family.

Research on Social Support and the 'Cost of Caring'

There has been a vast amount of research on the role of social support in reducing stress. As early as 1976, Cobb defined social support as the interchange of information leading a person to believe that she or he is valued, loved and cared for, or part of a network having reciprocal obligations. For the purposes of examining the role of communities as sources of social support for lesbian and bisexual women, I will focus on four issues from the literature, with reference to how they pertain to the present study.

First, social support is complex and hard to define. As such, many researchers have focused on the quantity of social support (e.g., numbers of friends, membership in organisations) rather than the quality (e.g., perceived satisfaction from friendships or degree of help from organisations). Edwards and Cheers (2007) have reviewed the concept of 'social capital', the connections people have within social networks. Close and dense ties provide emotional support, but very close bonds may have the cost of demanding conformity from network members and excluding people who don't conform to these norms. There are many ways that communities can provide support during times of stress, and I was interested to see how lesbians and bisexual women had benefited (or not) from their communities.

Second, there are different domains of social support. Our social relationships can provide us with tangible support (e.g., money, use of a car, childcare), they can provide love and affection, or they can give advice or feedback, among other benefits (see Solomon & Rothblum, 1986, for a review). Some people may obtain all kinds of support from one person (such as a spouse or partner) whereas others may look to different people for different things. Furthermore, the friend who provides affection will not be necessarily be useful if one's car breaks down; for that one needs a friend with a car, affectionate or not. I was interested to see which types of support women had or wanted to receive from their communities during times of hardship.

Third, the Buffering Hypothesis (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985) theorises that people most need social support if they experience high stress, whereas people who do not undergo stress do not benefit psychologically from social support. The proverb "a friend in need is a friend indeed" best sums up this hypothesis, which implies that social supports "buffer" people from mental health problems during times of stress. In the present study, I was interested to see whether community support mattered to women who hadn't actually experienced much stress.

Finally, the early literature on stress and social support assumed that the more friends and supports one had, the better. Research indicated that for women, more friends meant more work when these friends became ill or

needed a sympathetic ear (Belle, 1982). Thus women's social supports may themselves become sources of stress. Deborah Belle (1982) termed this 'the cost of caring'. Edwards and Cheers (2007) assessed social capital among same-sex attracted women living in rural communities in South Australia. They found women's networks to provide support, but also to place excessive demands on them. Women with lower social capital felt excluded. In order to examine the phenomenon of the cost of caring, I asked participants about ways that being part of their communities created stress for them in terms of having to take care of others.

The Lesbian, Bisexual and Heterosexual Community Project

I received a grant from the Lesbian Health Fund of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association to conduct interviews with lesbians, bisexual women and their heterosexual sisters about their communities. The announcement about the project stated:

> We hear a lot about the role that `communities' play in health and well-being, but in fact little is known about social networks and needs of adults. I am looking to interview women about the role of community in their lives. I will focus on women in specific age groups (20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and over 50), in rural and urban settings, and from diverse ethnic and racial groups. My research in the past has compared lesbians and bisexual women with their heterosexual sisters. This is because sisters are often similar in race, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. The goal of this project is to understand what lesbians, bisexual and heterosexual women mean by `community,' their satisfaction with their communities, and implications for stress and mental health. You do not need to have a sister to participate in this project. However, if you do have a heterosexual sister who would like to be interviewed as well, it is important that your sister knows that you are lesbian or bisexual (in other words, you cannot be closeted if you want your sister to be interviewed as well).

I was able to pay participants, and when the announcement appeared on internet listservs I received more than twice as many requests for participation than funds allowed. Of the 60 interviews I conducted, nearly all were over the telephone, and I made the decision to limit interviews to women living in the U.S. One-third (20 participants) were women of color (African American, Asian American, Latina, Middle Eastern, Native American, and biracial) and ages ranged from 18 to 75. Not all lesbian and bisexual participants had sisters, and others were not close to their sisters; in two cases I interviewed sisters who were themselves lesbian. Of the 60 women in the total sample, 31 participants identified as lesbian or gay, 17 as bisexual, 2 as gender queer, and 10 as heterosexual.

The participants represented an extremely diverse set of communities, including the pagan, college student, retirement, dance, polyamorous, elite athletic, butch/femme, dog lovers, music, and S/M communities. A few women had serious health or mental health problems, which impeded their ability to work. Some women were living or had lived in feminist, hippie, or Buddhist communal houses. Some worked for LGBT centers or organisations; others were extremely closeted or just beginning to come out. A few were immigrants from other countries or had lived abroad. Some had been raised in fundamentalist religious families; others were currently part of religious communities. Some women had no community; some were living in extremely rural settings far from other people. Some had few contacts outside of their partner, children and/or family of origin; others relied on the internet for their social supports. Some bisexual women were currently involved with men and others with women.

All interviews were taped and transcribed, and all names cited below are pseudonyms. Tapes were sent back to participants for them to keep, and transcribed interviews were emailed to participants for their comments.

The present article will focus only on how par-

ticipants perceived their communities to be there for them during times of stress and hardship, and also on the converse of that—how much support they are expected to provide when people in their communities experience hard times.

Analysis

Community support during times of stress and hardship

A number of participants gave examples of ways in which their communities had been there for them when times were bad. Of the total sample of 60 participants, 33 women (55%) experienced their communities as supportive during stressful times. This included 19 of the 31 lesbian participants (61%), 11 of the 17 bisexual women (65%), none of the 2 genderqueer women, and 3 out of 10 heterosexual women (30%). The examples below all refer to lesbian and bisexual women; I will describe experiences of heterosexual women in a separate section.

Perhaps the best examples of considerable support came from women who lived in intentional communities. Ciska is in her sixties and lives in a lesbian communal household. Her housemates support each other during times of stress. She stated: "My housemates are very supportive of each other with health problems or relationship problems; we treat each other like family. We visit each other in the hospitals, we coordinate people, you know, to visit, make visits to the hospital. When I was laid up for all those months, for five months I had lunch and dinner brought to me. There were not only lesbians bringing the food but also non-lesbians coming to the house". Similarly, Veronica had moved to a new city and was down to her last dollar when a Buddhist communal household asked her to move in and paid her to do various tasks around the house.

We do not typically think of colleges as intentional communities, yet colleges spend a lot of money and resources to make sure that students experience community, including mini-communities for international students, students of color, LGBT students, and so forth. Jordan is an African American lesbian in graduate school at a predominantly white university. She told me:

> I would say I've been through a lot of stress and hardship here. Where I've had family members pass away or just trying to get my master's thesis together. And I think that's when at times a community definitely rallies around you to help support you in any way that they can. Whether that's getting your mind off it and taking you out to dinner; or just coming to your house to chill out; or reading over your papers or whatever, I think that the community I have I am very, very thankful for. They send you cards and flowers and things to let you know that they're thinking of you no matter what.
>
> We definitely have a lot of parties for people. We celebrate a lot. We celebrate the last day of class. We celebrate the first week of class. We celebrate anything we can just to have that fun and laughter and joy in what we're doing. No matter how much at times we have a lot of horrible things that happen to us here, a lot of racist behavior, homophobic behavior. I've actually had a bias-related incident happen to me that had to be reported and during that time I definitely had people sending me flowers. I had directors talking to me, and all sorts of things.

Not everyone actually *lives* in community. Mary is 75 and her community consists of various organisations. She said:

> I had to go into the hospital in November for a shoulder replacement, and I found that all of the women from my group were there for me. They came to visit me in the hospital, and they sent me emails asking if there was anything they could do for me. I do find support for anything that I put out. And my friend that I had breakfast with this morning, she's been very supportive in helping me around the house to do things, and yesterday she came and put a shade up for me because I can't do it with my physical limitations right now. I don't think I seek a lot of

> emotional support from people. But I think if I did I would absolutely receive it because I certainly have gotten a lot of caring and wishes around my physical being from others.

There were multiple ways that participants described efforts by their communities to help them through hard times. When Elise's long-term relationship ended her friends were supportive and invited her to come live in their house. Laine identifies as polyamorous, with male and female partners. When her friend died, a number of people from her community were there for her. Jamie is HIV-positive and a single mother. She felt surrounded by support from the HIV community. Leah received support from her S/M group that meets every couple of months. The group has been very supportive about members' problems, sex, and money. She said she feels "very padded".

For other lesbian and bisexual women, it really comes down to family and partner when times are bad

A number of women emphasised the fact that communities were not there during bad times. Instead, they relied on their family—their partner, parents, or extended family. For example, Anna was struggling to finish college and didn't consider her lesbian community that supportive at the time. Instead, she relied on her family. Oline admitted to being an introvert, so she relied on her partner and sister for support. When Bella's community imploded, she was unwilling to share that experience with anyone other than her partner and parents. Camilla mostly talked with her mother and her heterosexual friends when her relationship ended and her parents got divorced. Cheryl is part of the polyamorous community. However, she has a chronic illness and her husband and his parents have been her main support.

Lesbian and bisexual women with children do not always find communities all that supportive. Conversely, women with children don't have much time to participate in community events. Cassie and her partner are rearing their children with another household of adults and their children. This set-up provided excellent support for childcare, but it means that none of the adults spent much time with friends or community organisations.

The internet provides support during bad times

Some women could not find a specific community close to where they lived, so relied on the internet when stressed. For example, Ashton has no transgender community in her town so she relied on the internet for support. She explained that the internet "feels like a conversation" and she appreciated the responses of "Oh, yeah, me too". In contrast, when she talks to people in her town, "I spend a lot of time explaining words that I'm using, because they don't know what they are".

Carmencita is very isolated in her large city; she used Facebook to make friends and call them during times of stress:

> Just because of the distance and people moving on everywhere, one of the main forms I use is Facebook. It's very popular now, and my best way of keeping in touch with people and what they're doing. Sometimes my friends from (university), they're always in class, and so it's hard to find time to be together. So we usually send messages. It's a community, but it's very dispersed.

Phoenix is part of the polyamory and kink communities, and relied on LiveJournal contacts when she was stressed. She told me:

> I would say through LiveJournal, that's when my friends have been there for me. I tend to log about what's going on in my life. If there's something particularly stressful going on, my friends write to me and say, don't worry about it, I know how you feel, I had to go through this.

Community support needed to be a good fit with what women needed

As described above, research on social support indicates that there are multiple domains of support, and there needs to be a good fit between what women needed and what the community could provide. For example, Lisa is part of the midwife and mothering community. When she gave birth herself, it was the perfect community to give her support. Robin had health problems and through the community found some really great doctors — one who was a lesbian and one who was gay.

A number of women interpreted my question about support to mean financial support. For example, Alice was working three part-time jobs and struggling financially; her community helped out by paying for things or not letting her pay. When Lynne needed money to pay her telephone bill, she mentioned this on her internet list and two people sent her the money. Rosemary's friends have learned to worry when Rosemary "cocoons" and doesn't show up for events. When she broke her leg and didn't have health insurance, the community came together and provided the money. When Susie's wallet was stolen, someone got her ATM pin number and stole her entire savings. Her friends loaned her money and gave support.

Communities are for good times only

As a corollary to the concept that communities have to be a good fit with women needed, some women felt that that their communities were set up mainly for fun and social events. Thus they were not organised for support during stressful times. Camilla wasn't sure what the intentions are of people in her lesbian community — they might be talking with her in order to get sexually involved with her. Angelica is part of the musical and athletic lesbian communities in her city, but those social organisations are not set up to help people during times of stress. Carmencita saw the lesbian community as focused on sex and entertainment, which meant it wasn't there when times were bad.

There's no one to help

For a number of reasons, some women felt isolated or unable to share bad times with their communities. This left them without many resources. Ashton, who is gender queer, saw gender as dividing her community, so that no one got much support. She has become self-reliant during times of crisis. She found help from one friend here and another friend there but there was no organised support from community.

Jean is bisexual and married to a minister. The church community perceives her as straight, so she was careful what she told parishioners. This means she couldn't make herself vulnerable. Jean is essentially 'passing' as heterosexual to most people she knows and thus experiencing support from her church community as a heterosexual woman.

Emily has a partner with chronic health problems; they live in a rural community and are very isolated. During the rare times that Emily traveled she asked a neighbor to look in on her partner, but mostly she has few supports.

The community has not supported Lavinya; she has been very isolated. She said:

> Lesbians are still stigmatised as outcasts in society. As a Black woman the lesbian community is not very responsive to my needs, and that is something that I figured out a long time ago.

But some women haven't experienced much stress

The Buffering Hypothesis states that social supports do not provide much extra help when times are good. In fact, some women admitted that they hadn't experienced much stress. These tended to be younger women. For example, Georgina has two lesbian "aunties" whom she calls on when she is feeling

stressed. However, she admitted that she hadn't had much stress.

Wendy does not feel part of a community, but relies on her partner for support. When asked about stress, she tended to speak hypothetically. She said if things got stressful, "I could go to one of my friends….Or I could go to a therapist if we were having relationship problems". This had not happened yet, however.

The Cost of Caring

Anderson (2006) refers to the notion of 'imagined communities', indicating the socially constructed nature of communities. When lesbians and bisexual women imagine the ideal community, they often picture a tightly-knit set of friends, neighbors and acquaintances who are there for them during times of stress as well as happiness. What they rarely consider is that communities that are set up to help others must by definition rope members in to providing this help. In other words, community members who are not undergoing crises should be helping out those who are. How does this work in practice?

When participants were asked in what ways they have had to help out when people in their communities were stressed, Tee's comment sums up the concept of the cost of caring:

> It's draining. It's really draining. I had a hard time dealing with it at first because when I was shyer it was really easy because I only had a few friends and I could focus right on them. It was really hard for me to learn that being a friend isn't just being there all the time, it's being there when they need you. It was really hard for me to learn how to be okay with just talking with them for a while and that being all right because I need to go off and do other things.

Ciska, who lives in a communal lesbian household, is aware that the care and support in the house is reciprocal. Thus, she too has taken care of a housemate who had a stroke and visited her in the hospital every day.

Rosemary is ordained in her pagan community so people come to her to get married and for funerals. This is quite time-consuming for her, although also a part of her role in that community.

Phoenix told me: "One of my friends tells me that I am just the girl who just can't say no". Male friends come to her for favors, and those favors are often sexual. She doesn't see herself as being used because they in turn also help her with food and bills.

For women who interpreted 'support' to mean giving financial support, they regretted lacking the means to do so. For example, Alice, who was receiving money from others during a time of need, wished she could give money to others.

For other women, family needs have taken precedence over community. Anna used to help out in her lesbian community when she was younger, but now her mother and sister need her help.

Less cost of caring because less community

Women who are relatively isolated have an advantage when it comes to the cost of caring — they don't have to deal with demands on them by the community. For example, Angelica is new in town so people don't seek her out for support. Leah moved a bit further away from her community and now she is no longer on the "front lines" of people that her friends call on. Christine said she is lousy at caring for others, but she is close to her church and the church takes on the caretaking role. Wendy's partner is a health care provider, so she is the one who helps out with health problems among their friends.

Laine reflected on this scenario more hypothetically, thinking about it as a possible future event:

> Personally, I try and, I think it should be an equal, reciprocal relationship. I know that if

> my friends had called me I would've done the same for them. Friendships I guess have different levels, and what-not, but I feel like there's maybe five or six of us who I would say could do stuff like that, just be there for each other.

Need to set limits

But lots of women were aware that they had to learn how to set limits to protect their time and health. As a minister's wife, Jean is expected to take care of others and visit them when they are ill. She tries hard to make her role clear so people don't make excessive demands of her. Jordan intentionally chose the LGBT office for her practicum so that she could be "more than just a face on a brochure". Nevertheless, she added, "But I definitely have to be mindful of taking care of myself too. Because there's only so much I can give, to a point where I am really bringing myself down and I need to be in good health in order to help someone else too". Lavinya tries to be less of a rescuer. She said: "I'm such a caretaker. I'm trying to heal myself from that. I'm one of those people that people come to because I'm strong".

Mary can disconnect very easily from her community to decrease stress. However, that became more difficult when she was taking care of a friend who was dying. Suzanne too said that as her community ages, more friends get sick and are dying. This means she has to make a decision about her appropriate level of involvement.

Nabaneeta told me:

> I've definitely, in terms of resources, I've actually been approached previously in regards to `hey, I'm in a bit of a jam, can you help me out?' And unfortunately sometimes it's come down to me saying, `listen I'm still in school and I'm up to my eyeballs in debt right now. I really have absolutely nothing.' And then other times I've been able to say, well right now I can spare like maybe a hundred dollars this will get you by for a little while.' It just works out that way.

Sarah is very handy at fixing things and also has money, so lots of people came to her for help. She has actually moved out of state partly in order to alleviate the stress of helping out others.

What is community for heterosexual sisters?

Before starting this project, I had predicted that heterosexual women would be primarily focused on immediate and extended family and religious institutions rather than friends and organisations. Although the sample of heterosexual sisters in this project was small (10 women) and somewhat non-traditional, this was generally the case. For example, Asmira lives with housemates, but spends a lot of time trying to get her relatives more connected with one another. She emails her extended family quite often, yet told me she wished she had more contact with her family. Chelsea has a young son, and so her community includes parents of her son's friends, as well as her husband, sister-in-law, co-workers and neighbors. She has relied on her own family during times of stress. She has recently found a church, but still feels quite new there. Zewa lives at home with her parents and brother, and has a boyfriend who lives out of state. She told me that she tends to get very stressed, so her boyfriend and sister are her main supports during those times. Church and extended family are central to Gloria. Even though she spends part of each year overseas, when back in the U.S. she spends a lot of time with her grown children, mother, and brother. Karen too mentioned her church and family as major supports. Joanne dropped out of school to have children, and her current community consists of her husbands, parents, and extended family. She felt quite isolated. Not surprisingly, when asked about ways in which they are expected to help out their communities, heterosexual women whose families were central mentioned family crises as times of greatest involvement.

Not every heterosexual sister was focused on

family. Madeleine is part of the pagan, political, and music communities, and also stays in touch with high school friends. She felt overcommitted but closed off from people, and found it hard to connect. "I just don't do well talking about myself", she told me. Yet when she was stressed out, her communities have been there for her in unexpected ways. Wiley left her Mormon family of origin and created a blog to keep in touch with people. When her truck broke down, strangers on the blog sent her cash and care packages. Liz lives across the street from her yoga center, as do many of the other yoga members. This means that her community is there for her every day for advice and help.

As mentioned earlier, only three out of ten heterosexual sisters found their communities highly supportive during times of stress. Interestingly, two of these three sisters (Wiley and Liz) are connected to communities outside their families. It seems that when family is the only community, support is not always seen as adequate during bad times.

Conclusion: Pros and Cons of Community

Green and Mitchell (2002) have described the social networks of lesbian and gay men as a series of concentric circles beginning with partner and moving outwards to include close friends and family members, more extended friends and family members, work acquaintances and occasional friends, and others. This last category includes organisations. They also examine factors in the social support system such as size of network, type and frequency of activities, types and quality of support, reciprocity of support, density of ties, and stability of support system over time. Green and Mitchell conclude that lesbians and gay men have LGB friends and heterosexual family networks that rarely meet, requiring lesbians and gay men to "…expend more deliberate effort to create an integrated social support system that has family-like qualities" (p. 561).

In many ways, the women I interviewed who were most integrated into communities and happiest with the support they received fit this model. They were close to a few intimate people (their partner, a sibling, a few friends) but they also viewed themselves as part of larger organisations. They identified strongly with specific communities — the dance community, the butch/femme community, etc. — and described the members, activities, and issues that constituted these communities. When stressful events happened, the community was there for them. This was particularly the case for women who lived close to — or in — intentional communities. Women who live in a communal household, for example, are expected to take care of each other when crises arise.

Dahlheimer and Feigal (1994) have described lesbian and gay communities as 'families of choice', given the failure of many families of origin to nurture lesbian and gay family members. Yet I was surprised to find that many participants mentioned their own families (partners and children) and families of origin (parents, siblings, other relatives) as major supports. It is possible that over time, lesbians and bisexual women have come out to families of origin, made peace with them, and learned how to integrate their own lives into those of their families. Or it may be that during times of stress, even women estranged from families will draw closer, especially if their other communities don't have the resources to provide support.

Certainly the internet is a relatively recent way for lesbian and bisexual women to get and stay connected. Even women in rural settings or those who felt their own town had no relevant community could stay in touch with similar others over the web. And some women even received financial support from complete strangers over the internet.

High involvement with communities could come at a cost, however. When other people needed social support and tangible assistance, women had to decide how much help to pro-

vide and how to set some limits. The 'cost of caring' is certainly part of lesbian and bisexual women's communities. There has been little focus on this concept in the mental health research, yet this is an important variable to consider when urging women to find communities for social support.

The heterosexual sisters, as a group, were not as well integrated into communities outside their families, with the exception of churches. Heterosexual sisters may have less need to form 'families of choice' given that they get help less problematically from families of origin. In contrast, lesbians and bisexual women are not automatically integrated into families of origin in the same way.

Fischer (1982, p. 12) stated: "Few ideas saturate Western thought as does the conviction that modern life has destroyed `community.'" Yet in many ways, women's communities are thriving, and managing to provide support for their members despite limited resources. Women who manage to find communities of like-minded members at the very least find these communities there for social activities. And, during the worst of times, there is a good chance that the communities will be there to see them through.

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