

Contradicting perceptions of nursing teachers on the neoliberal context of labor

Percepções contraditórias de docentes de enfermagem sobre o contexto neoliberal do trabalho
Percepciones contradictorias de docentes de enfermería acerca del contexto neoliberal de trabajo

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To identify and analyze the perceptions of nursing teachers on the new configurations of the job world and the repercussions for their labor activities. **Methods:** Qualitative, descriptive, exploratory research, carried out at two federal nursing colleges in Rio de Janeiro. Data collection occurred with 27 nursing teachers, between May and June 2016, through semi-structured interviews. The data were treated using the thematic content analysis technique. **Results:** The results showed contradictions in the teachers' perceptions about the job world, which has been guided by neoliberal precepts. Such contradictions are characterized by manifestations in favor of incorporating these precepts, highlighting their negative effects on nursing teaching work. **Final considerations:** There are incongruities in the way of perceiving the current configuration of the job world, proposing more and profound reflections on such a work scenario.

Descriptors: Teachers; Worker's health; Nursing; Job Market; Policies.

RESUMO

Objetivos: Identificar e analisar as percepções de docentes de Enfermagem acerca das novas configurações do mundo do trabalho e as repercussões para suas atividades laborais. **Métodos:** Pesquisa qualitativa, descritiva, exploratória, realizada em duas faculdades de enfermagem federais, no Rio de Janeiro. A coleta de dados ocorreu com 27 docentes de enfermagem, entre maio e junho de 2016, por meio de entrevista semiestruturada. Os dados foram tratados pela técnica de análise temática de conteúdo. **Resultados:** Os resultados apontaram contradições nas percepções dos docentes sobre o mundo do trabalho, o qual tem se pautado por preceitos neoliberais. Tais contradições se caracterizam por manifestações a favor da incorporação desses preceitos, evidenciando seus efeitos negativos sobre o trabalho docente de Enfermagem. **Considerações finais:** Há dissonâncias na maneira de perceber a atual configuração do mundo do trabalho, propondo-se mais e profundas reflexões sobre tal cenário laboral.

Descritores: Docentes; Saúde do Trabalhador; Enfermagem; Mercado de Trabalho; Política.

RESUMEN

Objetivos: Identificar y analizar las percepciones de docentes de Enfermería acerca de las nuevas configuraciones del mundo laboral y las repercusiones para sus actividades laborales. **Métodos:** Investigación cualitativa, descriptiva, exploratoria, realizada en dos facultades de Enfermería federales, en Rio de Janeiro. La recogida de datos ocurrió con 27 docentes de Enfermería, entre mayo y junio de 2016, por medio de entrevista semiestructurada. Los datos tratados por técnica de análisis temático de contenido. **Resultados:** Apuntaron contradicciones en las percepciones de los docentes acerca del mundo laboral, lo cual ha se pautado por preceptos neoliberales. Tales contradicciones se caracterizan por manifestaciones a favor de incorporación de esos preceptos, evidenciando sus efectos negativos acerca del trabajo docente de Enfermería. **Consideraciones finales:** Hay disonancias en la manera de percibir la actual configuración del mundo laboral, proponiéndose más y profundas reflexiones acerca de tal escenario laboral.

Descriptor: Docentes; Salud Laboral; Enfermería; Mercado Laboral; Política.

INTRODUCTION

The current job world is marked by strong influences from the neoliberal model, which is characterized by being more than a set of economic doctrines. It goes further: it influences and builds ways of being, values, ethics, shaping, and capturing subjectivities and, in this way, transforming society living and working relationships in a radical way⁽¹⁾.

This model values individualism over collectivism and defends the idea that the State must be "minimal", with an extreme reduction of its power to interfere in public policies, unfolding itself on the belief that the individual is responsible for his own social welfare⁽²⁾.

The neoliberal model appeared on the world stage in the late 1960s, being strongly related to the pressure for the expansion of the free market, through the increase in the deregulation of work and the privatization of state-owned companies. In Brazil, it emerged in the late 1980s, still under the government of José Sarney, and spanned the governments of Fernando Collor and Itamar Franco, deepening and consolidating with President Fernando Henrique Cardoso⁽¹⁾.

Among the consequences of neoliberal precepts in public organizations is the absence of public tenders, which increases the flexible hiring of work and encourages multiple employment relationships. This multiplicity of association occurs due to the lack of job stability and the scraping of wages⁽³⁾.

This context has been increasing competitiveness among workers, reducing formal jobs, and increasing informal work, with little or no labor rights. It is also designed by the application of cutting-edge technology, which results in an increase in the pace of work instead of allowing more free time for the leisure of workers⁽⁴⁾.

In addition, highly qualified, versatile, and multifunctional professionals are required; ready to tackle the biggest organizational challenges and goals. Thus, scholars on the subject emphasize that the organization of labor guided by neoliberal precepts have a high potential for making workers ill, as they are demanded maximum productivity, while being offered minimum conditions⁽³⁻⁴⁾.

In this perspective, the absence of adequate organizational conditions and extreme level of demands, associated with work overload, form the set of teacher expectations, which interfere not only in the quality of teaching and research, but mainly in the health of this worker, potentially leading him to illness⁽⁵⁾.

Thus, the occurrence of psychosomatic diseases such as duodenal ulcers, irritable colon, vertigo, and migraines is verified. Depression, pathological anxiety, occupational stress, *burnout* syndrome, and suicide attempts are also identified, among other negative repercussions resulting from such work configuration⁽⁶⁾.

Finally, there are several organizational demands that pressure the worker to produce more and more efficiently, without a work environment itself capable of offering him material, social, and emotional conditions to achieve these goals⁽⁷⁾.

However, there are contrasts to this view that the neoliberal model would come to deteriorate relations and working conditions. They assert that this model allows flexibility of the workday, allowing greater freedom for the worker to carry out his work activities at the moments that are most convenient to him.

Another example pertains to the use of technologies that favor working remotely, via the internet, virtual social networks, and devices such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and SMS (*Short Message Service*)⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾. Such technologies allow workers to carry out their work activities in places of greater comfort and convenience.

Another reason understood as positive in relation to the precepts of neoliberalism is about the possibility of professionals being the "owners" of their own careers, not being tied down to lifelong jobs that make workers comfortable in their position and discourage them from seeking new and better opportunities in the job market⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

Regarding such aspects listed as positive points arising from the implementation of the neoliberal model in organizations, authors emphasize that this is a process of capturing the subjectivity of workers in favor of a capitalist logic that clouds the workers' analysis capacity and immobilizes them from taking actions against this perverse model aimed at the working class⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

Consequently, this neoliberal policy has repercussions on public institutions as a whole, so it encompasses higher education institutions. It generates a decrease in public tenders for the position of permanent teachers, makes wages precarious, increases the pace of work and labor requirements, charging workers with versatility and multifunctionality in order to cope with the various activities that are required in the context of education, extension, and research⁽⁷⁾.

It is understood that the present study is relevant, as it seeks to study a work context based on an economic model that is relatively new for Nursing and which, in turn, has had repercussions for the work and health of teachers. In addition, it allows analyzing the intricacies of nursing teaching, which is still little discussed among this professional group⁽⁸⁾.

Thus, this study contributes to a reflexive criticism and a greater and deeper clarification about the interference of the neoliberal model in the organization of nursing professors' work. In addition, it is relevant to the current national economic and political moment, where we observe constant attacks on social security and labor rights, cuts, and arrears in salaries of civil servants in several states in Brazil, including professors from major universities in this country, with the justification that it is necessary to reduce the size of government and generate profits for the State.

OBJECTIVES

To identify and analyze the perceptions of nursing teachers on the new configurations of the job world and the repercussions for their labor activities.

METHODS

Ethical aspects

The study was registered in the Sistema Nacional de Informação sobre Ética em Pesquisa envolvendo Seres Humanos (SISNEP) [National Information System on Research Ethics involving Human Beings], subsequently submitted for REC evaluation and approved, according to Resolution No. 466, of 2012⁽⁹⁾, from the National Health Council (NHC).

Study type

This research had a descriptive, exploratory character, with a qualitative approach. The structure of the article explains the methodological steps based on the *Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research* (COREQ).

Methodological procedures

Study participants

The study participants were 27 teachers, 14 of whom were from University A; and 13, from University B. Inclusion criteria were established for participant selection, namely: nursing professors who had a statutory employment relationship and who had been in full exercise of their functions for more than 15 years in the investigated institutions. This time frame was important, since professors with this tenure were able to speak with more experience on the changes that occurred in the job world before and after the incorporation of neoliberal precepts in such institutions.

Exclusion criteria were as follows: teachers who were licensed, on vacation, or assigned to other institutions during the data collection period; and teachers who were directly involved with the present research (they were part of the examining board of the dissertation that gave rise to this part of the research).

Study scenario

The research was carried out in two nursing colleges belonging to the federal public network, located in Rio de Janeiro. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the institutions in which the study was developed, it was decided to call them University A and University B.

University A has its activities at the undergraduate, postgraduate *lato sensu*, and *stricto sensu* (master's and doctorate) levels. The faculty is composed of 41 professionals, distributed among four departments, which are: Department of Fundamental Nursing; Department of Public Health Nursing; Department of Medical-Surgical Nursing; Department of Maternal and Child Nursing.

University B also develops activities at the undergraduate, postgraduate *lato sensu*, and *stricto sensu* (master's and doctorate) levels. Its faculty consists of 72 professionals, working in five teaching departments: Department of Fundamental Nursing; Department of Nursing and Surgical Medicine; Department of Maternal and Child Nursing; Department of Nursing Methodology; Department of Nursing and Public Health.

Data collection and organization

Data collection took place in May and June 2016, through a semi-structured interview, only after obtaining a favorable opinion from the Research Ethics Committee (REC).

The interview script consisted of two questions, in which the participant was asked to describe his work routine and discuss his work process after the insertion of the neoliberal model, a fact that occurred around the 1990s.

Teachers were invited to participate in the research by explaining the objectives and method of this study, also clarifying the benefits expected from the present investigation. Invitations were done through personal approach, telephone, and e-mail. Those who agreed to participate received a Free and Informed Consent Form (ICF), in two copies.

Doubts pertaining the ICF, an instrument for data collection, dissemination of data, and guarantee of anonymity were clarified. The interview was conducted in a quiet place, usually in the rooms of the departments in which the professors were allocated. It is worth mentioning that, from time to time, the interviews were interrupted due to work related demands, but they were small interruptions, which did not affect the quality of the captured content.

In order to safeguard interviewee identity, it was decided to identify participants via identification codes. Such codes were initiated by the letter T (teacher), accompanied by the letters A or B referring to the institutions to which they were linked, followed by a cardinal number, which indicated the chronological order of the interviews.

Data analysis

The type of content analysis used in this research was the thematic analysis, which consists of operations for breaking up the text into units, according to analogical groupings. These operations aim to discover the core components of a communication, being concerned with the frequency with which these cores appear, in the form of segmented and comparable data, and not with their dynamics and organization. Operationally, this technique is synthesized in three phases: pre-analysis; material exploration; treatment of results, inference, and interpretation⁽¹⁰⁾.

Thus, the interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes, were recorded on digital media, and transcribed in a Microsoft Word document, version 2010, in Times New Roman size 12, 1.5 cm line spacing, resulting in a 105-page file, thus characterizing the corpus of analysis. This consists of the set of documents considered to be submitted to the analytical procedures. For its constitution to occur, it is necessary to formulate rules such as completeness, representativeness, homogeneity, and pertinence⁽¹⁰⁾.

The application of this data processing technique has raised the following category: "Nursing professors' subjective apprehension on neoliberal logic".

RESULTS

Nursing professors' subjective apprehension on neoliberal logic

With the analysis of the interviews, it was sought to carry out critical assessments about the participants' perceptions of the neoliberal model and its consequences in nursing teaching work. In this sense, there was a process of capturing the subjectivity of many teachers for the defense of the neoliberal model as the most appropriate for the current job world.

The speech presented below exemplifies the defense of neoliberal precepts for teaching activities at the *stricto sensu* graduate level, specifically in relation to research.

[...]so, nowadays, the vision that I have comes close to this neoliberal model. I think that, within the university, with the exception of graduation, research, above all, is not really for everyone. I think that the government does not even have to allocate resources for research to be developed within the university and that these resources must come from private currencies. (TA10)

It is worth mentioning the little or no critical appraisal of some teachers regarding changes undertaken in the work process arising from neoliberalism, as they attribute such changes to individual efforts, specifically to individualized academic training.

I do not know if I can say that I live in the neoliberal model, because I would not have a means to measure when I am influenced or if I stop being influenced by that model. Because, as I mentioned before, I don't see these changes. I joined the university as a professor in 1996 and, since then, I can tell you that nothing has changed. I keep doing the same things, I increased my work hours, because I find myself doing some activities that until then, at the beginning of my career, I didn't do. These activities are developed because I qualified. (TA3)

I think it has a lot to do with the demands. When I started in the university, I was finishing my master's degree, so you have other kinds of demands. As you qualify, specifically when you become a doctor, your life changes. Because then the demands are very high. I don't know if this has to do with a neoliberal context. (TB8)

There was also evidence of speeches that bring in their core a certain competitiveness and unworthiness of some teachers due to the research they develop. In this perspective, the consequences of neoliberalism are highlighted, one of which is competitiveness and tension in relationships, dismantling the professional collective, so that a few teachers have a prominent place in the organization and are guaranteed in more prestigious spaces, as in *stricto sensu* graduate studies.

The resource is there, there are several notices that exist today. I'm talking specifically about research. It is up to each researcher to submit their projects to these notices and that they be approved and contemplated based on the evaluation by their peers, considering the merit. Much of the research done within the university does not have the merit that we hoped. It is not meant for just any teacher, it is meant for the best. (TA10)

Today you do not have collective work, group work, you have to move fast and produce, because the CNPq [Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico] [National Council for Scientific and Technological Development] requires this production to maintain the postgraduate score. Hence you wear yourself out, spend your own money for publishing, strengthening your lattes [Brazilian digital platform for science tracking of individual and institution research] to stay in the fight, to improve the condition of competitiveness. (TB4)

Despite all the issues mentioned above, some participants, from both universities, expressed concern about the political landscape, referring to the presidents' administrations: I) Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who was mentioned as having little investment in education and health, resulting in negative repercussions for the work process of these professionals, in addition to being a

period of constant uncertainties for civil servants; and II) Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in which there were important social achievements and an end to the issue of the privatization of universities. The statements presented below can exemplify this analysis.

Another perception about this moment relates to the government of Fernando Henrique, who had the idea of reducing the size of government. Even though there was resistance, there was a great fear of everything. Something deliberately created by the government to create that fear; so, in addition to working with a reduced number of people and increasing the demand for work, you had a fear that plagued us every day, knocking on our doors in relation to layoffs, the change in the profile of entering public service, the question of stability that could be effectively changed. (TB9)

I think this is a serious problem that started in the 1990s, when we had the Fernando Henrique government, which was when the neoliberal model presented itself in a much more objective, much clearer way. That period showed us that health and education are things that do not work though state investment. I think that the Lula government put a stop to this process of universities privatization, because it resumed investments in the university. [...] now we see the return of a stronger neoliberal discourse [...]. (TA12)

It was evident in the speeches that teachers have been observing a compromise in the quality of the training of students who ingress the university, often a result of the difficulties faced by students throughout high school. There is also a need to guarantee public education that enables critical reflection and the transformation of the current reality. The following are speeches that highlight this analysis.

Our work does not generate a more tangible profitability; on the contrary: we form a critical mass that should criticize this policy. I also think that we have had a lot of losses in relation to the quality of education in secondary and elementary education since the implementation of this model. (TB11)

One difference that I notice is the quality of the teaching received by the student who is entering the university. This quality is much lower than that of students who entered before the neoliberal model. The impression I have is of a general scrapping. (TB12)

One of the participants made an interesting comment that comes close to the issue of alienating more intellectualized classes:

We have a fragility that we did not have in the 1990s. We had leadership, regardless of the type, but we had leadership in several aspects, which today we do not have. And there is no reason why people today think mainly of themselves, and this has its pros and cons. But, for neoliberalism, this behavior of ours is very fruitful. To live in the era of Fernando Henrique, when we lived in a pinch and struggling to teach the minimum to students without any working conditions, I think that now it will be the process of privatization. So, those who have money to pay for education survive, those who do not will be enslaved in the labor market. (TA12)

DISCUSSION

Regarding the defense of neoliberal precepts for teaching activities at the *stricto sensu* graduate level, specifically in relation

to research, there was some content favoring resources from the private sector for conducting research in public universities.

It is noteworthy that public-private partnership resources also come from taxes paid by the population, making it a public resource still. In addition, when the research is aimed at private capital interests, there is a risk of not focusing on the solution of health problems that may help the population in dire need, since the only interest of private capital is that which generates profit⁽⁷⁾.

This analysis is corroborated by the Association of Servers of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul when it affirms that a strong relationship between university researchers and companies allows the entrance of resources in universities, however, at the same time, it modifies the traditional objectives of public universities, causing socially perverse effects⁽¹¹⁾.

It should be noted that there was little or no understanding by some teachers in relation to the changes undertaken in the work process arising from neoliberalism, as they attribute such changes to individual efforts, specifically to individualized academic training.

Neoliberalism, a crueler strand of capitalism, articulates in such a way that workers immersed in their daily work end up not realizing the effects of this policy on their lives⁽¹²⁾.

Thus, in the speeches mentioned above, it can be inferred that these professionals, despite having undergone major changes in their daily work, do not correlate them with the insertion of neoliberal precepts in the work organization of universities. In fact, it is interesting to analyze that these participants associate these transformations with the current capitalist context, as they take blame for their increase in work, as a result of a better professional qualification.

It is worth saying that the most coherent narrative would be to criticize the increase in work despite the lack of real growth in wages, to stand against this productive logic in teaching and research and to fight for a public and quality education, as well as better working conditions.

In the speeches, it was found that the issue of competitiveness and unworthiness of some teachers emerged due to the research they develop. Thus, the way in which the teaching work routine is configured - characterized, in particular, by the exacerbated demand for productivity - weakens the interpersonal relationship by encouraging meritocracy and competitiveness between peers instead of collaboration and teamwork⁽¹³⁾.

Such a situation leads to a subjective precariousness for teachers, and this precariousness has the potential to cause psychological distress and illness. In a study carried out on this topic, it was found that, although some teachers are aware of the process they experience, they often seek to adopt individual daily tactics of "survival", while collective strategies aimed at transformation are seldom used⁽¹³⁾.

It worth mentioning that data collection occurred during the impeachment process of President Dilma Rousseff. After assuming the presidency of the republic, Michel Temer, following the example of Fernando Henrique's government⁽¹⁴⁻¹⁵⁾, has been taking measures to reduce the expenses of the public sector, such as: Constitutional Amendment Proposal No. 55 (PEC 55), the reform of secondary education, and the reform of social security (Constitutional Amendment Proposal No. 287).

In this perspective, PEC 55 aims to freeze federal government expenditures, maintaining a budget ceiling, with inflation-adjusted figures, for up to 20 years, in a deceptive and manipulative attempt to emerge from the current economic crisis⁽¹⁴⁻¹⁶⁾.

This constitutional amendment will affect nursing teachers two-fold, as they are professionals who work both in health (in hospitals and other scenarios that are internship fields) and in education (in the training of nurses for the job world). If, without this aforementioned spending ceiling, the professors' working environments are already adverse due to deficits in human, material, and structural resources, then the perspective of the future for these professionals is even more devastating⁽¹⁶⁾.

In addition to these difficulties, professors at public universities are currently facing a scenario of greater inequality, as there is an increase in the population in a state of poverty and precarious access by the population to key sectors such as health and education. Such difficulties will require from these professionals a strong adaptive capacity so that they do not fall ill as a result of this hostile and perverse scenario⁽¹⁷⁾.

Regarding the speeches of the professors with regard to the compromised quality of the qualification of students who enter the university, it appears that the current movement is of an intentional low critical-reflexive technical formation. It is configured because there is a hegemonic interest in keeping the mass alienated from the consequences that this neoliberal model represents for the population, that is, non-investment by the government in basic services such as education, health, security, and quality transport; this, in turn, ensures that the dominant class continues to exercise its power of manipulation over the dominated⁽¹⁸⁾. Still, it is known that measures proposed by the neoliberal model, which accentuate inequalities, put the country's democracy in check, because, with high levels of inequality, the population in a state of poverty does not participate in democracy, since, for it to exist, a certain level of social equality is necessary⁽¹⁹⁾.

In the context of higher education and university hospitals, the scenario is also adverse, where we can observe government actions towards the privatization of these institutions and the loosening of professionals' labor ties to institutions. In this perspective, it is mentioned that, on December 15, 2011, through Law 12.550, the Empresa Brasileira de Serviços Hospitalares (Ebserh) [Brazilian Hospital Services Company] was created, which is linked to the Ministry of Education and aims to restructure university hospitals, managing them and providing support to universities in the administration of these institutions and everything that concerns them⁽²⁰⁾.

It is claimed that the government has reduced the transferring of funds to federal institutions of higher education, which, consequently, have been increasingly scrapped. Together with the pressure from the media, which conveys the idea of bankruptcy and the incompetence of everything that is public, they reaffirm the opinion that the only way out of this context is a contract with Ebserh or with some other public company⁽²¹⁾. It is worth mentioning that, of 35 higher education institutions in Brazil, 31 have a contract with Ebserh, 1 university has a contract with a public company, and only 3 continue to fight against this privatization movement⁽²²⁾.

In the speeches of the participants, there was a dullness of the most intellectualized classes of nursing. The absence of attitudes

and positioning in the face of this situation can be observed through representativeness in current politics, in which a category with approximately 1,750,000 professionals has only one congressperson – a representative in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro⁽²³⁾. In addition, it can be seen that, regardless of whether the category has a high number of workers, it does not have a strong influence on the elaboration of public policies.

This lack of influence or even representativeness in politics is due to its historical trajectory of being attached to medicine and also to the uncritical formation adopted in some universities⁽²⁴⁾. There is a need for a transformation in the nursing training process, as only critical nurses, who have a professional identity, are able to break with this inadequate lack of political participation and claim better working conditions, guide public policies, and change adverse realities⁽²⁴⁾.

Study limitations

As a limitation of this research, we highlight the fact that it was developed in a single state in Brazil and in two universities with the same character of connection, both being federal.

Contributions to the field of Nursing, Health, or Public Policy

It is considered that the main contribution of this study is to present dialectical perceptions in relation to an economic model that greatly impacts the lives of nursing professors. These opposing views are influenced by values, worldview, and different understandings, and such distinctions are clear in the positioning of teachers. Therefore, the results and analyses serve to provoke a reflection and criticism about neoliberalism, both positive and negative, offering subsidies for a more mature and consistent understanding of the impacts of this model on the teaching work.

Another contribution is to enable a discussion on the influences and repercussions of the neoliberal ideas on productivity, on the work

process and on the interpersonal relationships of nursing teachers, as well as their impacts on research and teaching of the profession. Such discussion favors a critical understanding of complex, multifaceted, and serious situations that have been occurring in the job world.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the results, it was found that there is disagreement in the way of analyzing the current configuration of the job world, which has been basing itself insidiously on neoliberal precepts. Thus, despite obtaining results that expose the harmful effects of neoliberalism on the class and specifically on teaching, there were participants who defend the benefits of this model.

In this sense, we see, for example, the competitiveness for the best academic productions. Such a procedure deteriorates relationships and incorporates the motto of “looking out for yourself” in the professional collective, giving workers a feeling of abandonment and loneliness, which negatively affects their subjectivity, with the potential to cause psychological distress, mental illness, and behavioral changes.

There is also a need to emphasize the intensification of the work rhythm, which is achieved by capturing the subjectivity of the worker, making him meet the demands of the organization, but which are not always achieved, which also has the potential to generate psychophysical suffering and illness. Furthermore, such intensity encourages the professional collective to use non-work time, that is, time usually dedicated to leisure and socializing with family and friends, to achieve organizational goals, which are often unattainable.

However, despite this perverse situation imposed by the neoliberal precepts in labor organizations and pointed out by some participants, there are those workers who defend their incorporation in the nursing teaching work, with the argument that it allows a flexibility of their time, the freedom to capture their own financial resources for the development of research, and autonomy in professional decisions.

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