

# ***Dios y el Norte: The Perceptions of Wives of Documented and Undocumented Mexican Immigrants to the United States***

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*The purpose of this study was to assess attitudes toward the United States and Americans, toward Mexico and Mexicans, and knowledge about Proposition 187 in Mexican women married to documented and undocumented immigrant workers in California. The data presented here correspond to the baseline of a longitudinal study currently in process. Participants were a sample of 24 women living permanently in this community and married to documented (n = 11) and undocumented (n = 13) temporary immigrants, who at the time of data collection were all working in the United States. Results indicate more favorable attitudes toward Mexico and Mexicans than toward the United States and Americans. Respondents acknowledged the opportunities that the United States provides for their husbands, but they also placed high value on the traditions, customs, and morals of the Mexican culture.*

Mexican migration for work in the United States is a phenomenon that dates back to the late nineteenth century (Durand, 1994). This topic continues to be a timely, interesting, and controversial issue that, in spite of its long tradition, in the last few years has been the center of attention of politicians and citizens from both countries.

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**Dios y el Norte: The Perceptions of Wives of Documented and Undocumented Mexican Immigrants to the United States**

Mexican migration to the United States has become a way of life for many Mexicans as well as Americans, a social and economic fact that has had important repercussions in both countries. Whereas some Mexicans migrate with the purpose of seeking a better standard of living for themselves, such as furthering their education or obtaining a better job and opportunities for self-actualization, the majority, especially those from rural areas, migrate in order for their families in Mexico to survive, to provide them with food and shelter, and to maintain their village way of life (Arroyo, De Leon & Valenzuela, 1991).

It has been largely documented that most of the Mexican immigrants to the United States come from the rural and semi-urban areas of the Western region of the Mexican Republic. The states of Jalisco, Michoacan, and Zacatecas have been identified by their strong participation in volume and continuity in the migratory process (Arroyo et al., 1991; Lopez-Castro & Pardo-Galvan, 1988). When compared to the rest of the country, many of these "sending communities" and their inhabitants suffer from generalized impoverishment and marginality (Arizpe, 1985). Such conditions have forced many, especially married men, to participate in the migratory process to the north leaving their families behind. Migrants from these communities prefer to leave their wives and children behind, both to maximize their earning power and to protect them from what they consider a dangerous society for their families (Salgado de Snyder, 1995).

Migrants carry with them the responsibility of improving the living conditions of those left behind; they are the only hope and are expected to become effective generating agents of income for the survival of the family (Arizpe, 1985). Although migration to the United States in most cases does bring benefits and improve the quality of life of the Mexican family members left behind, it also brings some changes that cause ambivalence and others that are unwanted by all, such as family disintegration, increase in family violence, fear of being abandoned, and, among the wives, fear of being infected with the AIDS virus. (Salgado de Snyder, 1994; Salgado de Snyder, Díaz-Pérez, & Maldonado, 1996).

Often, rural inhabitants from the villages where migration to the United States is an institutionalized phenomenon have little choice other than migration; without this option the survival of their families would probably be precarious, because more people would have to compete for the already scarce resources. For instance, in the village where the data for the present study were collected, it is common for small children to contribute to the family income through their work in what is locally known as the "fertilizer factories," which are nearby cattle ranches where a child receives one peso

(about 15 U.S. cents) for filling a sack with cow droppings. Children can earn up to 20 pesos working a 10-hour day. Because of the poverty they experience, migration to the United States is recognized as a crucial alternative for the survival of the families in some of these communities. The effect in their personal lives of migration to the United States is reflected in a common expression often used by the villagers, "*Dios y el Norte*" (God and the North).

The issue of constant influx of immigrants to the United States has been a pressing one for politicians in recent years, particularly because a large proportion of migratory workers enter and work without the documentation required by the U.S. government (Bustamante & Martinez, 1979; Gastelum, 1991). This has generated a number of negative reactions from the American society. For instance, the attitude of Californians has been one of rejection toward immigrants from Mexico, especially those who are undocumented. This negative attitude was reflected in Proposition 187, which proposed to deny basic services such as health and education to undocumented immigrants and their children. Several scholars from both countries have suggested that, even if unconstitutional, Proposition 187 has already considerably damaged the relationship between Mexico and the United States with probable long-lasting consequences (Armendares, 1994).

During the past century, many inconsistent and often discriminatory immigration laws have opened the door to some newcomers and closed it to others. However, because of Mexico's long immigration tradition, the current economic problems and political crisis at home, and the magnet of a U.S. economy that pays considerably higher wages, it seems unlikely that any law can dramatically reduce documented and/or undocumented migration to the North.

With the apparent anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican climate that currently seems to prevail, especially in California, we believe that attitudes toward the United States and Americans would be an important issue to investigate among the family members whose survival in Mexico depends on the remittances from both documented and undocumented workers in the United States. The purpose of this study was to assess, in a sample of women left behind and married to documented and undocumented immigrant workers in California, the knowledge they had about Proposition 187 as well as their attitudes toward the United States and Americans and toward Mexico and Mexicans.

### Method

Data were collected during the summer of 1995 in a rural community of the state of Jalisco, Mexico. This town, located about 80 miles northeast of the city of Guadalajara, has a population of about 3,000 (Instituto Nacional

de Estadística, Geografía, e Informática, 1990) and has been identified as a sending community of mostly male migrants to the United States (Arroyo et al., 1991). The data presented here correspond to the baseline of a longitudinal study currently in process aimed at assessing changes in attitudes and lifestyles of wives and children left behind and of the immigrants themselves who go to live and work in the United States with or without legal papers.

### *Subjects*

Participants were a convenience sample of 24 women living permanently in this Mexican rural community and married to documented ( $n = 11$ ) and undocumented ( $n = 13$ ) temporary immigrants, who at the time of data collection were all working in the United States. The mean age of the wives of undocumented workers was 36 ( $SD = 9.9$ ), and their level of schooling was 4 years ( $SD = 2.7$ ). They had been married an average of 16 years ( $SD = 11.2$ ) and had an average of 5 children ( $SD = 3$ ). One half ( $n = 6$ ) of the women indicated that they supplemented their husbands' remittances through informal and irregular sources of income such as making and selling handicrafts, food, and candies.

As for the wives of documented migrants, their mean age was 40 years ( $SD = 8.5$ ), they had an average of 4 years of schooling ( $SD = 2.4$ ), had been married an average of 20 years ( $SD = 9$ ) and had between one and eight children ( $M = 4$ ;  $SD = 2$ ). None of the women in this group worked to generate additional income.

### *Procedure*

Key informants who have worked with us in the past, such as the village priest and a nurse, identified the participants. Subjects were approached in their homes by trained female interviewers and were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. The purpose of the study was explained to them, as well as a brief description of the questions and the confidential nature of their responses. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes.

### *Instrument*

The data collection instrument was specifically designed for this study and had three general sections in addition to the sociodemographic information. The first section requested information about the respondents' marital and family life, which will not be used in this report. The second section included a series of items to evaluate attitudes toward Mexico and Mexicans and toward the United States and Americans. The attitude scale had a total of 64 items

that were responded to using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*disagree completely*) to 5 (*agree completely*). Questions in the scale were aimed at assessing attitudes toward three specific areas of life in each country: values/culture, economic opportunities, and family issues. Last, we conducted in-depth audiotaped interviews that were guided by 10 semistructured questions, which had the purpose of generating detailed information about our subjects' perception of life in both countries, their husbands' experiences as migrants, and their knowledge of recent immigration policies in the United States. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed and content analyzed.

## Results

We first explored whether attitude differences existed between the wives of documented and undocumented workers, but found that statistical analyses revealed differences in only 2 out of the 64 items of the questionnaire. Therefore, the results will be presented describing the responses of our subjects as a single group. Also, to illustrate the participants' reasoning for their responses, we have incorporated short excerpts taken from the in-depth interviews.

### *The People: Mexicans and Americans*

Results regarding attitudes toward Mexicans and Americans will be presented first. As can be seen in Table 1, the women interviewed perceived Mexicans more likely to be hardworking than Americans (4.1 vs. 2.4;  $t = 6.8$ ;  $p < .001$ ); amicable (3.9 vs. 3.3;  $t = 2.8$ ;  $p < .01$ ); hospitable (4.0 vs. 2.7;  $t = 6.2$ ;  $p < .001$ ); affectionate (3.8 vs. 3.2;  $t = 3.5$ ;  $p < .01$ ); but poor (4.1 vs. 2.4;  $t = 7.0$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

Only Mexicans can stand journeys that last from sunrise to sunset. Americans can't.

Mexicans work for them [Americans] much harder. . . . My husband works in a fruit stand from 5 in the morning until 6 at night.

We are as poor now as when he used to be here. If he had a job here he wouldn't go north . . . but here there is nothing, not even hope. . . . In this small town the most he could earn is two hundred pesos a month, which is what we pay for the rent of the house, and then we need money to pay for water, gas, electricity, food, and clothing.

Our respondents perceived no differences between both national groups, Mexicans and Americans, in terms of intelligence, liking school, having bad habits, and lacking moral values, although Americans were perceived as taking advantage of Mexicans more than the other way around.

Four additional items were included to evaluate the respondents' perceptions of Americans only. Americans were perceived as racist ( $\bar{X} = 3.5$ ;  $SD = .93$ ), wanting

**Table 1. Attitudes Toward Mexicans and Americans (N = 24)**

	Attitudes Toward <sup>a</sup>		t	p
	Americans	Mexicans		
They are				
hardworking people	2.4	4.1	6.8	.000
amicable	3.3	3.9	2.8	.010
hospitable with Mexicans/Americans	2.7	4.0	6.2	.000
affectionate	3.2	3.8	3.5	.002
poor	2.4	4.1	7.0	.000
intelligent	3.5	3.3	0.9	.390
They				
lack moral values	3.0	2.5	1.5	.156
like to go to school	3.6	4.0	1.1	.286
have bad manners/habits	3.2	3.0	0.7	.517
take advantage of Mexicans/Americans	3.8	2.2	6.2	.000

a. Mean ratings of agreement. Attitudes were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *in complete disagreement*, 2 = *in partial disagreement*, 3 = *do not agree or disagree*, 4 = *in partial agreement*, 5 = *in complete agreement*).

everything for themselves ( $\bar{X} = 3.5$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ), having a superior attitude ( $\bar{X} = 3.8$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ), and not liking Mexicans ( $\bar{X} = 3.5$ ;  $SD = .88$ ). It is interesting to note that all these items reached a mean value of at least 3.5 on the 5-point scale.

He cannot go out because he is afraid they [Americans] will beat him . . . it has not happened to him yet, but it has to many others he knows.

[In the United States] . . . they discriminate against Mexicans, they humiliate them, and there is much suffering.

### *The Countries: Mexico and the United States*

When Mexico was compared with the United States, as seen in Table 2, it was perceived as a good country in which to raise children (4.1 vs. 2.4;  $t = 7.7$ ;  $p < .001$ ), a country where family is the most important thing in life (4.3 vs. 3.3;  $t = 4.5$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and a country where values and traditions are also important (4.2 vs. 3.3;  $t = 3.5$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

In Mexico there are many hardships, but it is a better place to live . . . here any person will help you out if you are sick and have no money . . . you just tell the doctor . . . but not in the United States . . . also, if you do not have anything to eat here, people help you.

In Mexico, he says he feels free and stronger . . . this is his own country.

**Table 2. Attitudes Toward Mexico and the United States (N = 24)**

	Attitudes Toward <sup>a</sup>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Americans	Mexicans		
It's a good country to raise one's children	2.4	4.1	7.7	.000
The family is the most important thing in life	3.3	4.3	4.5	.000
Traditions and values are important	3.3	4.2	3.5	.003
There are many hardships	3.7	4.1	2.1	.047
It's almost impossible to find a job	3.4	3.9	2.4	.025
Laws are easy to break	2.2	3.3	3.8	.001
Offers many opportunities to improve one's life	3.9	3.2	2.6	.016
It's a country with much violence	3.9	3.4	2.4	.025
It's a country without traditions	2.9	2.0	3.3	.003
It's hard to control children	3.8	2.7	3.9	.001
Children grow up without moral values	3.7	2.6	4.6	.000
Children learn bad habits	3.9	3.0	3.9	.001
Everyone can improve quality of life if they fight for it	4.0	3.7	1.3	.207
Children have more opportunities for improvement	4.0	3.8	1.3	.208
Children could have a good life	3.5	3.7	1.0	.308
Schools offer good education for the children	3.6	3.6	0.6	.576
Clothing, food, and appliances are of good quality	3.9	3.2	2.4	.028

a. Mean ratings of agreement. Attitudes were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *in complete disagreement*, 2 = *in partial disagreement*, 3 = *do not agree or disagree*, 4 = *in partial agreement*, 5 = *in complete agreement*).

It is interesting to note that in the in-depth interviews, our respondents consistently indicated that if it wasn't for the poor economy and lack of job opportunities in Mexico, their husbands would not have migrated to the United States. In other words, migration seemed to be conditioned by the lack of economic resources to support the family in Mexico. Further, migration to the United States is viewed as an unwanted temporary situation, a sacrifice for the entire family.

You cannot buy a family nor the love of your family with the dollars you earn in the United States . . . going to the North is a sacrifice, but as I said, it is a matter of survival. For now destiny wants it this way, so . . . *ni modo*.

He tells me, "I would like to stay here with you and the children, but I cannot make enough money to support you" . . . so, I think he feels very badly about this.

Regarding the perception of opportunities offered by each country to improve the respondents' quality of family life, when compared to the United States, Mexico was seen as a country with many hardships (4.1 vs. 3.7;  $t = 2.1$ ;  $p < .05$ ), where it is almost impossible to find a job (3.9 vs. 3.4;  $t = 2.4$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and where the laws can be easily broken (3.3 vs. 2.2;  $t = 3.8$ ;  $p < .001$ ), overall, a country that offers fewer opportunities for the improvement of one's quality of life (3.2 vs. 3.9;  $t = 2.6$ ;  $p < .05$ ). In fact, all the women interviewed consistently indicated that the only reason their husbands were in the United States was the possibility of earning more money to get ahead in life.

In Mexico there are no opportunities, we do not trust our government . . . one never knows what is going to happen from day to day.

I don't think he will ever come back to Mexico. . . . What for? . . . There are no jobs here, he doesn't make enough money to eat . . . there is nothing here . . . there is no life . . . it is like a desert . . . if he had not gone north we would probably be starving to death. First God and then our men in the North.

The only way he would stay in Mexico is if he had a good job, things are difficult . . . with the money he makes we hardly eat . . . we still do not have enough money to do anything, just to survive.

When compared to Mexico, the United States was viewed as a violent country (3.9 vs. 3.4;  $t = 2.4$ ;  $p < .05$ ), a country without traditions (2.9 vs. 2.0;  $t = 3.3$ ;  $p < .01$ ), where children are hard to control (3.8 vs. 2.7;  $t = 3.9$ ;  $p < .001$ ), are raised without moral values (3.7 vs. 2.6;  $t = 4.6$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and learn bad habits (3.9 vs. 3.0;  $t = 3.9$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

It is more dangerous to live there [in the United States], there are gangs and drug addicts . . . more vices.

In the United States it is easier for children to be influenced by bad friends and take on vices. For instance, my 18-year-old daughter, if we lived there [in the United States], she could rebel and leave the house, but here, I go and get her because I can still control her.

In the United States a parent cannot rein in their children, that's why they [children] go into drugs, gangs, or prostitution . . . they are free to do what they want to do there.

However, on the positive side, the United States was perceived as a country that offers opportunities to improve one's life and where clothing, food, and appliances are of good quality. No differences were found between the two countries in terms of the opportunities available for themselves and



their children, either in terms of good education or the possibility of a good life. Additionally, respondents indicated that in the United States, children of Mexicans are discriminated against ( $M = 3.9$ ;  $SD = .99$ ), and that children of immigrants should be raised in Mexico ( $M = 3.7$ ) rather than in the United States ( $M = 2.7$ ;  $t = 5.6$ ;  $p < .000$ ).

The mean values of the individual items were recoded (to follow the same direction), added, and divided between the total number of items in the equation to create four scales: attitudes toward the people of each country, that is, Americans and Mexicans, and toward the countries, the United States and Mexico. We found that our respondents held a slightly more favorable attitude toward Mexico than the United States ( $3.0$  vs.  $3.3$ ;  $t = 2.8$ ;  $p = .05$ ), and significantly more favorable attitudes toward Mexicans than Americans ( $3.5$  vs.  $2.7$ ;  $t = 7.8$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

Respondents were also asked to rate on a five-point scale their quality of life compared to their fellow villagers, Mexicans in the United States, and Americans in the United States (1 = *much worse*; 2 = *worse*; 3 = *the same*; 4 = *better*; and 5 = *much better*). Their responses' mean value was 3.3 ( $SD = .46$ ); 3.0 ( $SD = .95$ ); and 2.6 ( $SD = 1.0$ ), respectively.

Also, during the taped interview, we explored whether our respondents had any knowledge about Proposition 187. Interestingly, in spite of the fact that all but one of our subjects' husbands lived and worked in California, 6 out of the 13 wives of undocumented workers and 2 out of the 12 wives of documented workers did not have any information about Proposition 187. Of those women who did know about this initiative, 7 feared that this proposition would affect all people of Hispanic background, regardless of their legal status.

Oh yes . . . it is the law that is going to send all Mexicans back here.

With that law they [the American government] will not allow Hispanics in the schools, hospitals, and jobs.

All respondents, however, disapproved of this proposition. A woman said, This law is very ugly, it is racism, because if an American comes to Mexico, we wouldn't deny them school, medicines, or a job. . . . We Mexicans would offer a hand to anyone in need, who knows if they would be grateful, who knows . . . but we offer our hand not looking to whom.

It was interesting that even the wives of men who have been working for many years with the required papers in the United States expressed concern about their husbands' future in relationship to new immigration policies:

He has papers, but . . . the governor there [in California] doesn't like Mexicans . . . I am afraid they [the government] will take them away [her husband's working

papers], you know . . . because he does not speak English. . . . He will lose everything if they throw him back into Mexico . . . I hope someone helps him because he is a man, and he is working in a ranch . . . he is alone there.

I think this [Proposition 187] is going to affect undocumented as well as documented workers, I am afraid they will start killing . . . [Mexicans] on the streets.

Finally, we thought it would be interesting to end this article with the comments of women regarding their husbands' lifestyles. Most of the women interviewed (80%) expressed concern over their spouses' commitment to work and their lack of participation in social life and recreational activities in the United States. They emphasized their husbands' self-imposed obligation to work hard to give their children a better chance in life.

In the United States he feels as if he is in jail, he never goes out . . . he has no fun. [Life] is very monotonous.

They don't enjoy life there like we do. Here we go anywhere freely . . . there, it is not the same. They are always working, and after working they get home and do house work, fix their lunch for the next day . . . also they have to wash and iron their own clothes.

What my husband dislikes the most in the United States is the solitude and loneliness, he does not like to be alone . . . he gets sick.

My husband says, "I am not going to stay here and make my children suffer [because of lack of money]." The risk he takes is not worth it, but he has to do it for our children.

What he likes the best is to go work [in the United States] and bring things to the children . . . bringing even small things to the children makes him happy.

### Discussion

Human migration from Mexico into the United States has been an ongoing situation for many years, yet it is only recently that the growing visibility of immigrants, especially those without documents, has created public concern in this country. Mexican immigrants in the United States, especially in the state of California, have been the target of negative comments and immigration policies that try to stop the entry of undocumented workers. Such situations affect not only the immigrants themselves, but also those left behind, wives and children, whose survival depends on the income generated by these men. Mexican wives who remain in those communities play an important role in the migratory phenomenon. As it has been previously documented (Salgado de Snyder, 1994, 1995; Salgado de Snyder &

Maldonado, 1992), these women are left with the responsibility of maintaining the family unit until their spouses return. After a short visit that may last anywhere between a few days and a couple of months, men abandon the family again to go north and continue their participation in this transnational circuit between Mexico and the United States.

Based on the results of this and previous studies (i.e., Barrientos, Lucker, Hosch, & Alvarez, 1994; Bustamante, 1994; Morales, 1989; Salgado de Snyder, 1995) it is clear that the main reason and most frequently cited motivation for Mexicans to go and work in the United States is to be able to provide family members left behind with the basic elements for their survival. Thus migration to the United States has the purpose of improving economic well-being, either individually or as part of a family welfare strategy. A number of immigration scholars (Bustamante, 1994; Donato, 1994; Durand, 1994; Massey, Alarcón, & Durand, 1991) have suggested that the increasing Mexican migration to the United States is rooted in "pull" and "push" factors in both countries. In Mexico, such push factors include, among others, underdevelopment, unemployment, disparities in the income distribution, and discrimination of the rural sector in favor of the urban in the allocation of government funds. The most important pull factors in the United States are higher income and job opportunities. The changing conditions in Mexico and the economic crisis faced by that country since 1982 have created economic distress in the Mexican families, leaving no alternative but to go north in search of opportunities. Furthermore, the process of migration becomes institutionalized and self-sustaining once enough people from a particular community have migrated and find jobs in the United States. Through this process, social networks are developed between the two countries, thus facilitating the movement of new migrants and encouraging migration to the north as a viable solution for economic hardships in Mexico (Massey et al., 1991).

Our respondents acknowledged and were grateful to the United States for the job opportunities that their husbands had in that country; however, they perceived their husbands' migration as an unwanted but necessary situation, a sacrifice for both the men and the family. Also, it was clear from our respondents' comments that their men cross the border to meet the financial obligations with their families in Mexico and not to seek a new land to settle permanently. Further, the women interviewed did not wish to live in the United States themselves nor did they want this for their husbands and children. Most temporary immigrants to the United States retain ties with their home families and communities; they go to the United States with the purpose of seeking resources such as job opportunities and an income in dollars, but they consider Mexico their country and the place where they belong.

Results of this study indicate that, in spite of the fact that the survival of their families depends on the dollars sent by their working husbands in the United States, wives of undocumented and documented immigrant workers hold more favorable attitudes toward Mexico and Mexicans than toward the United States and the Americans. These results, far from being surprising, provide us with important information regarding how these women are aware of the critical economic situation of Mexico and the associated lack of jobs and opportunities, which have forced their husbands to go north, and yet maintain a positive perception of their own country. Our respondents attach great value to the morals and traditions of Mexican culture, especially those that directly affect children and the family unit. Similar findings have been documented in previous research (Barrientos et al., 1994).

The women interviewed perceived that they had a better quality of life than the inhabitants of their same community; however, they did not perceive themselves better off than the Mexicans and Americans that live in the United States. The perception of these women of having a better standard of living than the locals seems to reinforce the belief that God and migration to the United States are responsible for improving their economic situation. Furthermore, small villages, especially in rural areas, need alternatives to poverty. Until such options are available to people, rural Mexico will continue to send migrants to the United States for jobs and will continue to live by their motto "*Dios y el Norte.*"

Bustamante (1994) has suggested that undocumented immigrants experience two different standards. In the United States, they are considered delinquents, and in Mexico, successful breadwinners. It is interesting to note that the responses of the women interviewed reflect this issue. Undocumented immigrants are perceived by their wives, family members, and local villagers as someone to be proud of, someone to be admired for taking the risk of going north with no papers and working in a hostile environment to make enough money to meet their self-imposed obligation to get their families ahead. In the United States, however, these undocumented immigrants are considered "illegal aliens," people who invade from the exterior, damaging the resources of the United States and victimizing Americans (Bustamante, 1994). From a psychological perspective, this becomes an extremely important topic for future research.

Finally, a methodological comment. There is a considerable number of studies about Mexican immigration to the United States. Beyond the differences between disciplines and methodologies, the general approach for understanding this phenomenon is that the main targets of these studies are the men who go and the role they play in the migratory process. This role,

however, cannot be completely understood without an in-depth knowledge of the role played by their families left behind. We want to emphasize the usefulness of interviewing family members left behind to address substantive dynamics, survival strategies, and future plans for the children. Researchers in this area should consider investing more efforts in collecting data from sources that have not been explored and that are substantial in providing new light into the migration phenomenon. Researchers may find a renewed interest in conducting studies in this field.

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