



## MAKING ONE'S WAY – THE CHALLENGES OF EDUCATIONAL CHOICE FOR UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL LEAVERS

*How did students already studying in higher education remember the educational choices they made at the end of upper secondary school? Students in higher education often reflect on these past educational choices as compelling, frightening and lonely. Reasons for this can be found in the structure of the education system, the individualisation of choices and the social position of upper secondary school leavers. On the other hand, education was also perceived as a path to fulfilling one's dreams and goals, and the challenge of choice can be met in many different ways, all of which can work in some situation. When reflecting on one's past, the importance of particular past choices often diminishes in the context of lived life.*

### Write about your educational choices

The data for this article consists of autobiographical writings collected during spring 2011 from students in higher education. Student organisation mailing lists were sent an invitation in Finnish and Swedish to take part in a competition to write about the topic "my educational choices". In addition to the writing competition, the competition included an illustration series; the analysis in this article is based only on the written texts. Travel vouchers worth 400 and 200 Euros were awarded as prizes in both series.

The following instructions were given in the invitation: "The theme in both series is your educational choices. You can reflect on your own thoughts and feelings regarding your educational choices as well as on how those choices connect to other issues in your life. Describe events, situations, feelings and hopes." Additionally, some suggestions were given on possible topics to cover. It was emphasised that the texts should be rich in description, wide-ranging in their topics and based on personal experience.

69 autobiographical texts on educational choices were received during the competition. The oldest writer was born in 1965, the youngest in 1992. Five writers did not reveal their date of birth. The median age of writers who gave their date of birth was 24. Fifty of the writers were women. After primary school, 55 writers had attended upper secondary school, 6 had attended vocational training, and from 8 texts secondary school attendance could not be determined. The high number of upper secondary school attendants is explained by upper secondary school education being the most common form of base education for higher education.

At the time of writing, 12 writers were studying at a polytechnic and 57 at a university. The writers are grouped according to latest field of study in table 1.

Table 1. *The writers' latest field of study.*

Field of study	Texts
Architecture and planning	2
Veterinary medicine	1
Business	9
Education	6
Languages	11
Music	2
Law	2
Nutrition	2
Humanities and cultural studies	13
Technical studies	2
Theology	1
Social sciences	11
Journalism and communication	6
Unknown	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>

Only two texts were received from students in technical fields of study. Additionally, in the so-called professional fields (e.g. medicine, law) participation was scarce, with the exception of the field of pedagogy. The purpose of this competition, however, was not to gain a representative sample of a group of people under examination, as autobiographical writing is not a very common practice, and writers motivated to write these kinds of texts are already in some sense exceptional (Roos 1987, 30–31). The goal was to collect personal experiences on educational choice, with the assumption that the experiences of a motivated group of writers reflect typical problematic issues regarding educational choice.

### Life, story and interpretation

The content of the received texts yielded a rich and versatile set of data, the utilisation of which in research set some special challenges. Each of the 69 texts received was unique in its way. However, there were also similarities in the writers' experiences and situations. In order for it to be possible to analyse the data, one needed to step back from time to time and reflect on what autobiographical writing is ultimately about. This task was made easier by consulting the tradition of biographical research.

When telling about their own life<sup>1</sup>, the narrator or writer chooses those parts of their experience that they find significant, and this kind of authenticity is one of the key characteristics of life stories as research material (Roos 1987, 29). This also creates a tension regarding the utilisation of biographical material in research. On the one hand, the narrator of a life story is an expert on their own life, but on the other hand, their memory is selective, and they decide for themselves what they want to share. With regard to the analysis of biographical texts this raises the question of whether emphasis should be placed on the authenticity of the text and its reference to actual events (e.g. Roos 1996) or on the interaction between the narrator and the imagined reader, which can affect the story being told depending on the situation (e.g. Vilkkö 1988)?

I consider that the primary purpose of life story is not primarily to serve as a detailed description of one person's experiences. A life story is not an unbiased report but an act of communication, an attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> I will be referring to the texts in the competition as life stories. On the use of the concept of life story, see Vilkkö 1988, 18–22.

make one's own life understandable to someone else. However, this communicative act takes place according to some expectations particular to the autobiographical genre. According to Philippe Lejeune (1996 [1975], 14–15), the very definition of autobiography contains an assumption of identity between its writer and narrator as well as that between the narrator and protagonist. Thus, an autobiography is about the authentic narration of personal experience. According to Lejeune, these expectations on autobiography create an *autobiographical pact* between the writer and reader of the autobiography.

This autobiographical pact forms the basis for the interaction between the writer and the reader. The relationship of the writer and the reader is also affected by situational aspects particular to the collection of the autobiographies. These include the instructions given to the writer and the prizes promised if data collection is organised in the form of a competition. One defining feature in the collection of this data was the instruction to write specifically about educational choices.

The value of life stories as research material is based on both the requirement of authenticity created by the autobiographical pact and the interaction between writer and reader. The narrator must choose what to tell and how to tell it in such a way as to make herself understood to a stranger. The choices writers make in this effort also relate something about the society surrounding the writer and the reader.

### **“What do I want to do?” Upper secondary school leavers’ roadmap to anxiety**

In such a compact article it would only be possible to scratch the surface if one were to attempt to include in the analysis all the themes developed by the writers in the research data. This would neglect the greatest asset of the data, its experiential nature. For this reason, I have limited the topic of this article to only cover only the writers that attended upper secondary school (n=55) and their experiences of educational choice at the end of upper secondary school. As all the writers are already attending higher education, this sets a particular framework for the analysis of the data. The past is interpreted in light of the present, but on the other hand events in the past have also provided the material for the interpretation of the present.

#### **The necessity of choice**

*“In primary school I was interested in media studies and interior design. However, my parents’ opinion was important to me, and when I told them about my career dreams, they condemned them without hesitation. My mother said that the world is full of media graduates and there was not enough work for them. My father didn’t think that a polytechnic was the place for me and he continued repeating his own suggestion. “Our girl is going to the school of economics or some other university, end of discussion.”*

*I realised that there was some sense in what my father was saying. Why throw away good grades? Why shouldn’t I see how far the genes of success I had inherited from my father could take me? So I followed in my father’s footsteps and applied for the same upper secondary school where he had studied 30 years earlier.*

[...]

*The final year of upper secondary school was a golden age of brainwashing. Students from around the country came to our school to talk about their places of study and their own wild and boozy student lives. I waited for their presentations like a child waits for Christmas. I hoped that one of them would be able to tell me that “you belong in this field, this city and this school”. The application time for further education was only a month away, and panic began to show on the faces of many students, including myself. – writer 15*

The situation that upper secondary school leavers face upon graduation is framed by a disjunction in the education system. Until then, their lives have revolved around the social and educational context of the school. In many of the stories, the choice to attend upper secondary school was not really reflected upon or in some cases was even attributed to direct pressure from parents.

*“Justifications and for applying to further education during the final year [of upper secondary school] could be found at home, at school and among friends. Not to forget all the advertisements, magazines and leaflets arriving in the mail. Or the cheerfully aggressive online education portals whose banners blink in email messages and newspaper websites. Not to mention the older siblings of friends who are having the time of their lives in euphoric parties – at their university.” – writer 40*

Awareness of the break ahead of them enters the experience of upper secondary school students from many directions. Through parents, teachers and friends, this awareness becomes a part of the students' experience of their final year at upper secondary school. Family members and relatives mostly expect upper secondary school leavers to apply to higher education. Ensuring a place in further education becomes a dominant theme of the final year. For many, studying and student life seem a self-evident and desirable next stage in life. The educational system, friends, parents and the media together communicate a message that idleness after upper secondary school is to be avoided. The choice to apply to higher education becomes self-evident. In practice it is also a necessity, as ongoing educational inflation has devalued upper secondary school degrees in the labour market (Aro 2003).

Naturally, upper secondary school graduates also have the possibility to choose otherwise. Some decide not to apply for further education. A year off for travelling, work, relaxing or finding oneself seems like a tempting alternative to many students finishing their long stretch of education. In making such a choice, students are aware that they are in many ways going against the expectations of the surrounding world. Paying lip service to these expectations, students may apply for some sort of education, either seriously or half-heartedly, and whether they actually intend to take up a place of study or not.

## The fear of falling

*“As an A student from an academic family I can tell you that nothing caused me as much anxiety as planning for the future. Due to my success in school, I have been hearing all my life that I have the potential to do anything, which also led to the birth of a hundred different dreams. Once I was graduating and forced to choose between these dreams, there were no words for the feeling of unease in my stomach.*

*Thoughts of the future mostly caused me anxiety after graduation. I couldn't get rid of the fear that I would make a wrong choice. How can you choose just one out of a hundred dreams, and what would guarantee that you have made the right choice? The great choice of possibilities also became a problem. If I can do anything I want, then what should I rule out?” – writer 28*

The disjunction in the education system forces students to make choices that are often accompanied by a vague feeling of fear. All types of higher education are open to upper secondary school graduates, but once one path is chosen, others seem to be closed off. The necessity of choice intermingles with the fear of making a wrong choice, but what would eventually show a choice to be wrong and what would be the consequences of a wrong choice?

*“Now my parents are worried that I'll be left without a place to study or out of work for the whole year. I have been shouting at them many times: “do you think I'm that stupid, as if I would just sit around and do nothing, is that how you think I'm like?” – writer 34*

The fear of making a wrong choice intermingles with the perceived consequences of such a choice for one's social position. Such fear is far from unfounded. It becomes apparent from the texts of young people that upper secondary school graduates that neglect to take part in the competition for a place in higher education or fail in their efforts often face socially and economically problematic life situations: working for labour market subsidy, living with one's parents against one's will, being stuck in one's hometown with friends moving away. Failure at this critical moment is feared to limit one's possibilities of choice in the future.

The position of a young person graduating from upper secondary school seems to be defined by an instability with regard to time. To maintain their position, upper secondary school graduates must make a choice in order to avoid a fall. The fall experienced by some seems to haunt the experiences of others. The possibility of dropout is what makes choice both a necessity as well as a possibility.

Uncertainty of one's own position seems to stem from a disjunction in the education system, but also from problems stemming from the writers' position in wider society. The writers' background in upper secondary school positions them as a part of the large and obscure Finnish middle class, which can be defined by its lack of a class identity: neither working class, farmers nor of the old elite (Sulkunen 2009, 80–81). Within this middle class, a person's status is determined by personal accomplishments instead of birth. While the possibility of advancing in one's career is ever-present (ibid. 81), the flipside of advancement is the possibility of falling. The trajectory of such a fall is not towards the working class, but into unemployment, "doing nothing", becoming a social outcast, classless. Public concern regarding "dropouts" seeps into young people's decision-making, transmitted by newspapers, magazines and well-meaning parents.

### **"Do what you want to do" – the loneliness of choice**

*"I think the biggest help have been my friends, because they encourage me to do what I want to do. Now, could they tell me what it is that I want? Most of my friends are as clueless as I am, so an analytic discussion with them is not possible because of this storm of emotions." – writer 34*

*"I didn't know what to do after upper secondary school and no one was there to help or guide me with that. I'm not sure I would have accepted any help even if it was offered, but I was quite alone with my feelings, even though there were many of us graduating. In a situation like that, friends cannot help you, as they have their own struggle to go through. Student counselling wasn't very helpful and I couldn't get any advice at home. I had to make my own way." – writer 27*

Educational choice holds a dual purpose, a positive one of advancement and a negative one of avoiding the semblance of dropout. The necessity of choice is self-evident but the choice itself is devoid of content. It seems that educational choice after upper secondary school is for many adolescents their first significant opportunity to affect the course of their own life. In the case of earlier choices between upper secondary school and vocational education, many of the writers assert that vocational education never seemed as a genuinely available choice. Several writers emphasise the importance of parental opinions when choosing between upper secondary school and vocational education. In educational choices made after upper secondary school, the role of parents seems to change. They mostly encourage the youth to apply for education but cannot help them in making a choice between the different educational opportunities on offer.

A challenging feature of educational choice is that it is not just about finding a means to an end. It is also about weighing the desirability of different ends. During primary school, the ends of education were set by others, whether the pupils were inclined to accept these ends or not. Adaptation and nonconformism were both dispositions adopted within the predefined environment of the educational institution. For the first time, the school leaver must take on responsibility for their own future, as the context of their

agency changes from that of a closed predefined setting to an open one of multiple possibilities. The question of the future takes the form: “What do I want to do?” This question is a challenging one for at least two reasons. Firstly, the process of giving an answer demands grappling with fundamental problems of self-identity; on the other hand, a practical solution needs to be arrived at as quickly as possible.

Some of the texts describe the occasionally heavy-handed attempts of parents and student counsellors to affect educational decision-making. It is not a lack of available advice that most baffles school leavers contemplating educational choice. Rather it is the experience that no one can make the decision for them; they must themselves assess whether the advice given by others is relevant for their particular situation. The burden of choice is theirs alone to bear.

Decision-making in educational choices thus can be said to be characterised by a lack of legitimate authority. It is interesting to compare this situation to the autobiographies of previous Finnish generations, in many of which the writers seem content to adapt to harsh conditions with little capacity to influence the course of their lives (Roos 1987, 77–86). For the youth of today contemplating their educational choices, this situation is reversed. Educational choice is considered to have a determining effect on their future. In principle, one is free to choose anything. Thus each person comes to feel that they themselves must create the framework for their lives out of whole cloth. In this light, there seems to have been a change of culture accompanying the change in external economic conditions, the emergence of a new middle class and a new way of thinking about the relation of self and society, described by Sulkunen in his book *The Saturated Society* (2009, 80–81). For the individual, the task of making a life choice seems a lonely one, but research in social sciences has shown the enduring effect of persisting social structures. Individuals appear to be responsible for choices they make, yet the conditions of choosing are still shaped by sociocultural structures (Furlong & Cartmel 2007, 5). Thus, the individualisation of choice does not necessarily entail freedom of choice.

## Meeting the challenge of choice

In the previous section, I presented some of the challenges intrinsic to the situation of making educational choices after upper secondary school. However, school leavers are not helpless in the face of these challenges but act to influence their own situation. In this section, I will conceptualise educational choice as an activity where (1) customs and habits (2) dreams and goals and (3) deliberation and evaluation meet. This division is based on an analysis of the temporal dimension of agency by Emirbayer & Mische (1998). It must be emphasised that this division is analytical and not empirical in nature (ibid. 971–972). Even though these dimensions are here presented in their own sections, in the narratives, and in real life they are always intertwined to different degrees. Thus, the purpose is not to categorise young people into different types of decision-makers but rather to introduce the spectrum of different ways in which the challenge of choice is met in practice. All these dimensions are present in the decision-making situation, when actors are looking for different tactics to deal with the challenge of necessary choice.

### Past habits

*“Towards the end of upper secondary school I started thinking about university studies. I still didn’t have any particular dreams about a profession, so I needed to come up with one. Ok, I was good at mathematics, physics and chemistry. Based on these, the University of Technology sounded good, as I thought that general university studies would be too scientific for me.” – writer 7*

*“As you can probably guess, this kind of approach to life [anxiety in social situations] has caused me a lot of problems in making educational choices. It was virtually impossible for me to imagine*

*myself as any kind of student, as I knew I couldn't make it through the studies without giving presentations or speaking in class. It felt horrible to even think about how I would need to be embarrassed and shy away from others just because I happened to be born incredibly shy. Because of that, the year off I took after upper secondary school just stretched on endlessly, as I couldn't think of a place where I would've dared apply and where I would've felt I could cope like the others."* – writer 6

From a pragmatist point of view, the connection between the world and action can be conceptualised as a system of feedback between actions encountering the world of 'hard facts' (in C.S. Peirce's memorable phrase) (Peirce 1931–1958, 103). It is by this process of feedback that we form habits for how to act in particular situations. For the actor, it can be difficult to differentiate between what can be influenced and what cannot. Past experience influences the way in which we perceive our characteristics and abilities, and so forms a permanent framework guiding our actions. These experiences in turn rest on the roles we have taken and been placed in. For example, in school one might have learnt that they are bad at mathematics, another at crafts, a third in social situations. The habits we have formed guide us towards certain opportunities while limiting our perception of others forming together with the opportunities on offer our horizon of action (Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997, 34–35).

Habitual action is based in our past but it is also active operation, being a union of both our past experiences as well as our interpretation of the past at the moment of action and of which events in our past correspond with the situation in the present (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 975–983). When a break in the educational system forces the youth to make a choice, relying on past habits is one possible way of coping with the situation.

When action regarding educational choice is taken in a primarily habitual mode, earlier experience of educational institutions takes centre stage in decision making, and it is primarily in light of this experience that current options are assessed. For many, perceptions of one's own abilities and tendencies seem to form a framework that is difficult or impossible to change. Success in certain subjects and difficulties in others guides toward choosing the path of lesser resistance. Experiences of school as an environment and institution also affect whether the person is inclined to make an educational choice in the first place or whether taking time off from education seems more desirable.

## **Future dreams and goals**

*"I struggled with my own thoughts and dreams. When thinking about my plans for the future, I had only one picture in my head; I saw myself taking photographs in an Amazonian jungle or in Africa during sunset and writing down notes in a notebook. I don't know what this vision was telling me, but it was always the first one that came to mind when someone asked me about my plans for the future. I still think about that picture and I know it means something great. I haven't wanted to reveal this to anyone, so I've kept quiet and said that I'm still thinking about what I want to do. I've been afraid of other people's reactions and dismissal. Now I'm not afraid any more, as I believe in myself and that fate will lead me in the right direction."* – writer 12

*"The title was clear: I was going to be a lawyer! I could be an expert, an authority, study law. My strong sense of justice probably had something to do with it as well as the high regard of the profession in society. I would be getting a general degree to social professions, and the wages of a lawyer would probably not be too bad, either. It would be possible to specialise in anything from international law to criminal law and communication law."* – writer 11

Besides habits, choices are also about dreams and images of the future. Decisions and actions can be primarily oriented to imagined future possibilities that can be realised through action. In action based on habits, the emphasis is on personal traits, whereas in dreams and aspirations the emphasis is on the

possibilities that these imagined futures hold within them. Future-oriented projective action holds the possibility of freeing oneself from habitual modes of practice (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 983–984).

What is significant about this kind of projective action is the orientation towards the future and the exercise of imagination (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 984). Such projective action can be oriented towards well-formulated career goals, but equally well it can be oriented to vague dreams and fantasies. In the context of young peoples' educational choices, it would be easy to value goal-orientedness above dreaming. In a culture which values cognitive and rational decision-making, dreams can seem an unsound, even embarrassing, premise on which to base one's career and educational choices, as writer 12 describes. A young person might need to defend their dreams when an adult professing superior worldliness questions them. However, a recurring theme in the texts was how experience can alter even the best-laid plans and how a dream or aspiration can be a source of strength on which to draw in order to fight for one's goals. Dreams can also lead astray, but only after experience has shown that the dream was not worth striving for in the end.

A noteworthy characteristic of the images of the future of the young people in the data was their vividness and sensuality. Expectations of good wages and secure job were present in some images of the future, but detailed descriptions also appear of a particular way of life that writers hope to establish: countries to travel to, things to do, clothes to wear, people to spend time with. Media from television shows to music and video games fuel these dreams and aspirations of the future. A theory of career and educational choices emphasising technical rationality often forms a framework for dealing with educational choice. The texts pose the question of whether we are ready to accept that the success of career and educational choices might not be dependent on the method of decision-making.

### Choices in the here and now

*“After upper secondary school I was facing the hardest choice: what then? I took eight subjects in the matriculation exams and got really good grades from all of them. All doors were open to wherever I wanted to go, or at least that’s how I felt. The choice was not easy, but I was guided by my own personality and personal values. I had the most respect for education that would give me everything I needed for my future career. For me, educational choice was the same as career choice. I was interested in many things; I thought about international politics, general history and communications, but law was the winner in the end.” – writer 11*

Above I have discussed the ways in which the customs and habits of the past as well as the images of the future are present in choices. In addition to the presence of the past and the future, educational choices are naturally also about making choices in a particular moment. Making a choice requires practicality, tactics and execution – what Emirbayer & Mische (1998, 994) call situationally based judgement. In relation to the situation of choice, they identify the following stages of making and executing a choice: (1) problematisation of the situation, (2) characterisation of the situation, (3) deliberation, (4) making a decision, and (5) executing the decision (ibid. 998-1000). This division between the stages of decision-making is ultimately analytical, and it cannot be directly applied to certain types of decision-making. Nevertheless, in everyday choice-making, our customs and habits as well as possible future projects must be seen in relation to the situation at hand (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 997).

*“One day I was hurrying down the school corridor, when my Finnish teacher’s substitute stopped me: “The local newspaper is looking for a student writer. Would you be interested?” Because I’ve always been interested in everything and don’t usually say no, I said yes quickly and continued on my way. I quickly forgot about the whole matter. Much later I realised that fate had intervened at that moment.” – writer 36*



According to the theory of pragmatically rational decision-making, judgement in a decision-making situation is not necessarily so much about weighing the merits of different options; more often, it is about whether to seize a given opportunity or not (Hodkinson 2008, 6). The passage from writer 36 describes a situation where seizing a given opportunity had great importance for the writer's future. As is apparent from these passages, opportunities are not seized in a vacuum. The customs and habits of the actor and assessment of future consequences also play an important role in these choices.

*"My sister told me that the students in her field often did excursions abroad. I'm embarrassed to admit that this "information" I got from her might have had quite a big influence on my decision. I applied and got in." – writer 3*

A related factor in decision-making is the importance of information from a trusted source (Ball et al. 2002). Information from trusted sources helps in dealing with the flood of information available on educational choices. When the individualised educational choice is formed into the question of "what do I want to do?", this kind of tailored advice can be highly significant in the decision-making process. It offers a way out of the loneliness of decision-making. It might not be all that surprising that, in this data, the advice that affects decision-making the strongest often came not from student counselling, but from friends, siblings or even perfect strangers. The professional ethics of a student counsellor prevents them from offering a simple solution to a complex problem. However, what some school leavers seem to need is a clear signal, a nudge in some direction, in order to begin dismantling the problem of choosing.

## Choice as part of life

*"Now that I think about it afterwards, the only thing stopping me from switching to another field of study was my pride. The mentality of not giving up that I had learnt as a child kept me stuck in my path. As I progressed in my studies, the time counted to be left kept becoming shorter and it seemed more rational to keep going. Perhaps I wasn't even as scared of giving up as I was of starting over. Now it seems ridiculous – at 21 being so scared of wasting everything that I couldn't start over." – writer 3*

*"During upper secondary school I was still quite certain that I would end up in a university. As a hard-working student interested in reading I couldn't even imagine continuing my studies in practically oriented polytechnic studies. However, this has been a good choice for me even outside studies. I have become more social and more spontaneous in seizing situations." – writer 38*

Social sciences and politics share a common tendency in their need to make classifications. In the previous section, I introduced an interpretation of the boundary conditions of the educational choice situation of upper secondary school students as well as the dimensions of agency in making those choices. It was not possible to discuss the stories as a whole within the scope of this article. However, this kind of examination reveals that both situations and the capacity to confront them shift throughout life. Based on these texts by students attending higher education, a realistic view on counselling and educational choices should at least take into consideration the following:

1. Past, present and are all present in processes of choice
2. Outcomes of choice cannot be deduced from the method of choice-making
3. Decision-making styles are not permanent
4. People cannot but change through experience

Policy measures that solely understand choice as a single event with optimal and less optimal options are doomed to fail for the simple reason that people do not want to and cannot adapt as choosers in

this kind of a model. Young people use different tactics within the educational systems and institutions in which they find themselves and utilise these systems created by others for their own ends.

From this point of view, intelligent counselling and educational politics would not rest on the impossible attempt to prevent wrong choices, but on offering opportunities for people to make use of their life experience, formal and informal education as efficiently as possible wherever their next destination in life may be.

*“How can it really be demanded that everyone be able to continue straight on from upper secondary school? For many, knowledge of the future ends at next weekend’s party or when their friend’s father’s company car’s gas light turns on somewhere near Kerava. At that point in my life I myself was living a very closed life and I couldn’t see that society would have anything to do with it. I was still living in a world of childhood, probably also due to my illness. I got a summer job through my parents, and “society” mostly meant the educational institution, the dentist and the psychiatrist as well as the annual school holidays. At the time I was trying to come up with reasons to even live and questions about what I wanted to do when I grew up were mostly just adding insult to injury. I still don’t understand how it can be expected from especially the weaker students to know what it is what they want to do, especially when their parents are laughing that they themselves don’t really even know.” – writer 43*

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