Children’s Participation in Ethnographic Research: Issues of Power and Representation

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The recognition of children’s social agency and active participation in research has significantly changed children’s position within the human and social sciences and led to a weakening of taken-for-granted assumptions found in more conventional approaches to child research. In order to hear the voices of children in the representation of their own lives it is important to employ research practices such as reflexivity and dialogue. These enable researchers to enter into children’s ‘cultures of communication’. Drawing on detailed examples from an ethnographic study on child health and self-care, the article examines issues of power, voice and representation central to the discussion of children’s participation. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

More than ten years ago I carried out my first ethnographic work with children on health and self-care in Copenhagen, Denmark. In this paper I will revisit this study and highlight some of the methodological questions central to it. However, because I do this through the lens of the present, my discussion will be filtered through the years of research experience with children that have followed. In this way I hope not only to connect the ‘then’ and ‘now’, but also to link questions about children’s agency and participation in research with issues relevant to their general social participation.

Over the years I have strongly advocated the importance of researchers seeing children primarily as fellow human beings. In my view this entails not treating children as in principle different from adults. This approach does not assume that particular methods are needed for research with children just because they are children, that a different set of ethical standards is required or that the problems faced during the research process are unique to working with children (cf. van der Geest, 1996).

Issues of power, voice and representation have been central to discussions of children’s participation in social and political life (see, for example, Davie and others, 1996; Landsdown,
These issues are also reflected in the growing methodological literature on research with children (see, for example, Christensen and James, 2000; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Morrow and Richards, 1996). This literature extends across the range of research styles, including, for example, issues in experimental and survey research as well as those arising in ethnographic and qualitative work. The discussion in this paper draws on my own ethnographic work. Ethnography is a distinct type of research where the knowledge that is produced depends on the researcher taking part in close social interaction with informants over extensive periods of time. It is because of its intensive and long-term character that ethnographic work provides important insights into the nature of the researcher’s relationship with their informants, which may also arise in less obvious ways in other types of research (Christensen and Prout, 2002).

In this paper I will discuss three themes about conducting research in which children participate. First, key aspects of the research process are understood as part of a dialogue. Ethnographic field illustrations are used to suggest ways in which a dialogical research process can be accomplished through entering into what elsewhere I have called children’s ‘cultures of communication’ (P. Christensen, 1999a: 76–77; Christensen and James, 2000). Understanding the ways that children engage with and respond to research include considering two key questions: are the practices employed in the research process in line with and reflective of children’s experiences, interests, values and everyday routines; and what are the ways in which children routinely express and represent these in their everyday life?

The second thread woven through my discussion is an examination of the distinctive role of the fieldworker and the research relationships that are developed during fieldwork. In particular I suggest that researchers need to pay critical attention to the question ‘what is an adult?’ when carrying out their work. Several writers have discussed the ways in which a fieldworker acts in research with children, for example by adopting ‘the least adult role’ or the role of ‘other adult’ (see for example, Mandell, 1991; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Pollard and Filer, 1996; Mayall, 2000). However, the definition and meaning of ‘adult’ as a social and cultural category remains relatively unexplored and unproblematised. It is often used as an umbrella term, without specifying the specific institutional practice concerned, for example, ‘teacher’, ‘parent’ or ‘pedagogue’. However, in contrast, children often greet researchers, who enter their lives as a strangers, with the frank question ‘Who are you?’. By making this enquiry children encapsulate one of the key processes of research: the working through of the wider notions of who we are to each other. This is an important precedent to how we relate to each other, a process that both researchers and children engage in (see also Corsaro and Molinari, 2000). In my view the researcher’s engagement with the detail of social interaction and the implications of social representations forms part of the process of children’s genuine participation. As I will go on to demonstrate, researchers’ responses to the question ‘Who are you?’ encapsulate the centrality of engaging with the lives of children and with the questions that are important to them.

The third thread is about power. Viewing power as inherent to research emphasises that research is a practice that is part of social life rather than an external contemplation of it. This requires that the researcher pay attention to broader issues of social and cultural life that are, or can be, sensitive to the issue of power. In this paper I argue for a move away
from seeing power as residing in people and social positions towards viewing power as embedded in the process, that is in this case the ‘doing’ of research. This, as I will go on to show, also involves concerning oneself with how people in everyday life understand the relationships between cultural categorisations, social position, status and power. Power is not, as such, nested in categorical positions, such as ‘adult’ or ‘child’, but rather in the social representations of these that we make, negotiate, work out and work with in social life (see also Christensen, 1998). Through this perspective my discussion links the issue of children’s representation to children’s participation.

The fieldwork site

In this article I address these themes through a focus on the methodological context of one particular ethnographic study. I will include a brief description of the study design and then go on to highlight some points relating to working with the children and my role as researcher in the field. When I initiated the research it was a rarity in anthropology to let children’s experiences and practices form the main core of an ethnographic study (Hardman, 1973; Van der Geest, 1996). It was carried out in a local district of Copenhagen in the early 1990s and involved in-depth ethnographic fieldwork with children, parents, a school and two after-school centres. The study focused on children’s everyday health and well-being and, in particular, children’s own active participation (or not) in self-care, therapy management and their contribution to the health care of other children (friends and siblings) and adults (especially parents) at home and at school. I carried out field studies by following the daily school-life of the children, observing classroom interactions and activities, and participating in their art or music lessons and in the projects conducted by the children. In the afternoons I spent time with children in two local after-school centres connected to the school. During the vacations I spent all day in the centres together with the children and participated in their summer camps. I also visited children in their own homes, meeting and interviewing their families. General anthropological fieldwork methods were used, including ethnographic interviews and participant observation, supplemented with participatory techniques (see also O’Kane, 2000) to encourage children’s active engagement with particular issues of the research. These included drawings, essays, dramatised plays and peer group discussions. As is now more widely recognised in research with children, my fieldwork was not confined to verbal accounts requiring conversational skills. Rather it encouraged children to use a diversity of means to express themselves in the communication between us.

Researching children

The first few months of the study gave me important insights into child-adult research relations. From the beginning I knew that it was important as a researcher to establish relationships with children that they felt they would want to continue throughout the research process. In the early stages of my work I wanted to explain and present the aims of the study to the children. I introduced myself by saying, for example, ‘I am interested in how children live their everyday life. Its important for me to get a better understanding of what it means for children themselves. What you think and do!’. I hoped in this way to convey to the children the emphasis I put on their own perspectives in the research process. Later my task was to perform and demonstrate such an interest in a way that was genuine
and convincing for the children. For instance, when conducting more formal interviews, I worked with an underlying notion of facilitating a continuing dialogue, which children felt they had control over and which would allow them independence in our conversations. Children could introduce their own themes and conclude an interview on their own terms. Therefore, when first I interviewed six to ten-year-old children at school, our conversations were relatively short and set around a specific topic. For example, the children, in groups of two to five, were asked to make a drawing of ‘the last time you were ill’ and then interviewed individually. Each child decided when their drawing was finished and the interview would stop when the child wanted it to, although sometimes I eventually suggested that we finish because I felt they were beginning to feel ‘fed up’ or tired.

However, it was only in later interactions with children, when they knew and trusted me, that I learned that our first encounters had been conditioned by children’s initial discomforts. Then I had been a ‘stranger’ and an ‘adult’, but also, as they now confided, they thought the subject of our conversations (everyday health) was sometimes ‘peculiar’, ‘rubbish’ or simply ‘boring’. The problem this presented me with was how to understand children’s puzzled, though not altogether disengaged, responses to my interest in their experiences of health and the everyday management of an illness. On reflection, it became obvious to me that the children’s openness and engagement had been restricted by their shyness and occasional mild disapproval of the subjects we talked about, both in the spontaneous group discussions sparked off among the children while making the drawings and in the conversations I had with them individually afterwards. Whilst I was able to carry out the interviews because of the children’s cooperative and accepting manner, I began to reflect seriously on what needed to be taken into account when researching children’s perspectives.

First, the inherent power relation between researcher and researched in child research may be reinforced by more general cultural notions of power and control in generational relations between children and adults (Alderson, 1995; Mayall, 2000; Alanen and Mayall, 2003). This means that one-off interviews with children, whether these be qualitative or quantitative, or with the use of task oriented tools or not, are at risk of not providing the context within which children can respond in accordance with their own views. This is so because children will have been left little scope for engaging in a critical manner with the research questions and the research practice, despite the fact that children may have given informed consent.

The early phase of the work revealed another set of related questions. A few weeks after I had begun the fieldwork among the ten-year-old children, the children responded to my questions by straightforward rejection. During that period I was concerned with understanding the social and geographical environment of the school, which seemed confusing and inaccessible. For me, this included some very simple and practical questions such as finding my way around the school or knowing where to go next when a lesson finished. It also concerned understanding the rhythms, schedules and routines of the children’s school day. Admittedly, I was first and foremost concerned with the process of my research because, although I also wanted to fit in at school and get to know the children, my approach was mainly self-directed.

These attempts at understanding often involved asking questions. By the end of the second week these questions received a very clear-cut response from the children. One
day, returning to the school after a school trip, a group of girls spontaneously dashed away from me when I attempted to walk with them through the school gates. This incident was quickly followed by some of the other children expressing their resentment about ‘all your silly questions’. These experiences prompted me to shift my approach in working with the children and to find a way that better corresponded with the children’s own practices and strategies. I did this by observing and copying them. For example, I did not make attempts to participate in any activity before I first had observed ‘what was going on’ or I was asked to join in. I took on what was, in some respects, a more restricted role, but not a less passive one, because of my constant attentiveness. I found this a successful way of working and conducted myself according to it throughout the study. I emphasised observation and would let the possibility of participation flow from that. This approach corresponded well with the children’s own practices as they joined in and moved out of games and playing. It also contrasted with how other adults like teachers engaged with children. Their style of activity showed a much more ‘interfering’ and active role, which generally meant that the adult (a teacher or member of staff in the after-school centre) joined in a game, and took it over through (re)organising it. In this respect a researcher who wants to spend time with and around the children will, unless they modify usual adult behaviour, very easily be seen by the children as intimidating and overpowering. This may call forth both children’s quiet acceptance and, as demonstrated in my case while my role was still unclear, strong reactions from them.

This practice, again, alerted me to what I have called the act of looking and its overall importance as a conventional social practice among children in forming and conducting their social relationships (Christensen, 1993; compare Corsaro, 1997). In the course of the fieldwork I developed my ability to listen attentively to children both during our conversations and their conversations with each other. That I choose to make this point may seem crude and somehow naive. However, it was crucial to the way my relationships with the children developed and were shaped throughout the study. Working with groups of children is an engaging experience. Its almost constant business leads one to at times feel in a fusillade of noise, tempo and activities. Through this I became aware of the importance of ‘looking and listening’ when the children asked me to. I developed a determination not to let myself be interrupted by something or somebody else until a child had completed what he or she wanted me to see or hear. I supposed that, from the children’s point of view, this confirmed that I was genuinely interested and wished to learn and understand about their lives. It is, however, a practice that often runs contrary to institutional assumptions that talk between adults takes precedence over talk with children.

Cultures of communication

My development of good research practice was prompted by the children’s initial refusal to engage in the research and closely connected to the ambiguity of my role. I seemed to be an adult conducting myself like other adults and was therefore an ‘outsider’ in terms of their social relationships with each other. At the same time I seemed to want to engage with their lives in a way different from most adults (Fine, 1987; Mandell, 1991). The children’s reactions can be seen as calls for me to take sides. Their mockery showed me very directly that I was not seen as part of their group. At the same time a ‘choice’ was made clear for me: I could decide to engage with the children from the position of an adult, calling on its status like the other adults they knew and thus, perhaps through the means...
of authority, engage the children; or, alternatively I could invent a form of communication and interaction which resonated with children’s own practices and that, therefore, could be seen as acceptable by the children.

The lessons to be drawn were manifold. Most importantly, it reminded me that research questions are very rarely posed at the request of the participants in our research. The questions were posed by me and were central to my interests and concern, not theirs. These first interactions sharpened my understanding, leading me to make ideas and questions conceptually understandable for children and to ensure that our interactions took on a reciprocal form. I also realised, with a humility and gratitude that still remains, the way in which the children engaged with me, taking great effort to include me in their everyday lives, explaining their activities and relationships and even, as some children did, developing a sense of what I wanted to know. During the final stage of my fieldwork, these children would be able to guess my questions and often began to answer them before they were spoken.

The theoretical implication underlines my earlier point about ethnography as a dialogical enterprise. One of the main features of my approach was to attend to what I have termed the ‘cultures of communication’ encountered in the field. This approach is an important step away from the idea of researchers developing and using particular methods for particular groups of people. Rather, my work emphasised the importance of seeing fieldwork as a practical engagement with local cultural practices of communication. Thus, by observing children’s language use, their conceptual meanings and their actions, I pieced together a picture of the social interactions and the connections between people. Through getting to know about different codes of conduct and communication, contexts and timing, I myself learned how to behave and interact with and among children. At the same time, I was able to engage with the differences among children and adults and their understanding of my otherness in relation to them. This included my appreciation of how different contexts, for example the school or the home, constitute a set of positions from which children and adults ‘speak’. This also enabled me to better understand how I became integrated into their everyday lives. I suggest that my readiness to join in with and respect the communicative forms of children established reciprocity between us and, thus created a route for them to enter into a dialogue with me about my particular questions, interests and ways of communicating. It thus established a dialogue through which it became possible to create a better understanding of the social interactions and relations that children are part of (Christensen and James, 2000). Much in the same vein, recent research has demonstrated how this can be successfully done with very young children by developing an imaginative array of methods for listening to them. Clarke and Moss (2001) stress that research with children needs to be carried out with sensitivity and respect, writing:

> It is not only a question of seeing the world from children’s perspectives but of acknowledging their rights to express their point of view or to remain silent. We are keen that a participatory approach to listening is respectful of children’s views and also of their silences. (Clarke and Moss, 2001)

**Working out research questions: talking about health**

It is worth reflecting on the kind of data that are likely to be produced through research that is more or less solely directed by the researcher’s interests rather than the priorities
and agendas of the respondents. This calls for a sincere consideration of whether the 
subject of the research makes sense to them and how it may be made to reflect their 
experiences and perceptions (Mauthner, 1997). As described earlier, the youngest 
children responded to my interest in their illnesses with puzzlement, as if illness 
belonged to the category of rather mundane and uninteresting events in everyday life. 
Among the older children I sometimes experienced straightforward resentment towards 
talking about illness. It seemed that they saw illness as an unsuitable subject for 
conversation.

To begin to understand the broader framework of children’s thinking, children’s accounts 
must be related to how they conceptualise, develop and apply understandings of the 
social and cultural world. For example, it was not only necessary to investigate the topic of 
health from a variety of different angles and over a period of time but it was also 
important to consider whether or not children knew about a particular experience, how 
they named it and whether it was significant for them. Through our conversations and my 
observations I familiarised myself with and would make use of children’s own vocabulary 
and formulations. This again led me into detailed questioning and reflection on children’s 
sometimes enigmatic replies (see, for example Christensen, 1993, 1999b). This persistence 
was rewarded, however, by a deeper understanding of children’s views and I would 
argue that it is through such practices that the researcher prevents him or herself from 
making unwarranted analytical jumps (see also, Geertz, 1973/1993: 6–10).

Privacy and power

That power derives not only from the position of adult over child was illustrated for me by 
the children throughout the study. Familiar with the formal power roles conventional to 
terviewing (through television images of journalists at work), children would sometimes 
attempt to shift them, inverting the roles of who is the interviewer and who is the 
interviewee. They did this by simply grabbing the tape recorder and asking me various 
questions, often before an interview had really started. However, in this way the children 
demonstrated their own active interest and engagement in shaping what was talked about 
and how. The very concrete action of gripping the tape recorder became a way in which 
some children took a lead, almost rehearsing the character of our relationship as partly 
defined through the fluidity and shifting relations of power between us. Power was not 
fixed to or residing in me nor in them. In that sharing I believe we established a sense of 
equality and commonality in our interactions.

During my first conversations with the children, I observed that they were concerned 
with, and actually cherished, the privacy of an interview. Before each interview I routinely 
reassured them that only I would listen to the tape of our conversation and I promised ‘not 
to tell anybody’ what we had talked about, neither other children nor any adults. I 
explained that I would write about what they said but would change their names or make 
general points without naming particular people. Reassurances such as these are 
important when carrying out research with children. Not only are children aware of the 
possible ‘exploitation’ of information but also confidentiality has a particular resonance 
among children whose relationships and friendships are often performed through the 
engagement with telling and keeping secrets, revealing secrets to other children or ‘telling’ 
adults. Together with children I would, therefore, ensure that other adults (and other
children) could not overhear our conversations unless the children themselves gave their permission.

This was for example illustrated in a conversation I had with two ten-year-olds, Anna and Linda, in the after-school centre. The two girls suggested that during the interview we occupy a room, called ‘Hyggeren’ (in English ‘The Cosy or Social Room’), where children usually could spend time without adult supervision. During the interview Mette, Linda’s six-year-old sister was present, but was commanded by the two older girls to remain quiet. The following extract is from the first few minutes of the interview. Linda and Anna asked to borrow the tape recorder. They held it between them and spoke into the microphone, as if they were imitating a television interview. When they expected my response they pointed the microphone towards me. The transcript is as follows:

Anna and Linda: Yes, and we welcome Pia Haudrup, she would like to make an interview with Anna and Linda—and Mette sits quiet, quiet, quiet as a mouse (in Danish their formulation is: ‘musse, musse, musse stille’ which would be equivalent to ‘mousy, mousy, mousy quiet’). And now we’ll just make an interview with Pia, before she begins the interview with Linda and Anna. OK! What would you like to ask us in the interview?

Pia: Well, first I would like to say that what we talk about today on tape, I will be the only one who will listen to it. I will transcribe it when I go home, but no one else will hear it. When I use it I’ll change your names.

Anna and Linda: OK, but we would like to ask if they also can hear it, Anna and Linda?

Pia: Hear the tape? Yes, they can hear it, too. If they also make sure to listen to it in a place where no one else can hear it.

Anna and Linda: . . . and now Pia has found something . . . and now she would just like to say something.

Pia: What I would like to talk with you about has to do with medicines—and how you may use them?

And about how you help each other as children? How do you help each other, when something happens?

As in this situation, children would occasionally let another child hang around quietly during our conversations. After the first individual interviews with children, described earlier, I would encourage children to bring a friend around for our conversations. I noticed that it generally made the children relax and would help if they felt shy or insecure. In most situations the children would preciously guard our conversations either individually or as a group. The children generally seemed (as I did) to enjoy our conversations, a point indicated, for example, by the fact that the children themselves would ask me to interview them.

One especially important implication of being an adult anthropologist studying children concerns being ‘let in’ on secrets, particular games or ‘dubious’ practices by children from which other adults are usually excluded. These incidents are of crucial value for developing understanding and giving rise to new insights about what is significant to the research, especially in contrast to times when conducting research with children seems to have become ‘routine work’ or when confronted with events that seem to confirm conventional thinking.

It is important to explore ideas about the exchanges between the participants in the research and also the set of ethical values, such as confidentiality and trust, that underscores the work we do. Working together with children in research requires attention to the trust and loyalty that accompanies it. In my attempt to unravel particular parts of my fieldwork, my engagement with the children would provoke new lines of thinking and demonstrate in a quite practical way how data production and analysis are inextricably
linked together. In this way the understandings of children participating in the study came to contribute very importantly to the shaping of key analytical themes of the research.

The researcher in the field: ‘what is an adult?’

Above I have described how I fundamentally changed my approach to the children after their refusal to engage with the research process. At its outset the study raised particular issues of methodology when studying children’s everyday life from the child’s perspective. This included the need to be accepted by both children and adults.

This is a question that has received some attention in the literature on ethnography with children and one to which several sorts of solution have been attempted. Most focus has been on the relationship between an adult ethnographer and children. Fine (1987: 222) notes that differences between adults and children such as size and place in the hierarchy of organisations make it almost impossible for an adult ethnographer to ‘pass’ as a child, thus making it difficult to become, as for example Geertz (1983) maintains, a ‘native insider’ to their social and cultural lives. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) suggest that the ethnographer of childhood has to find a way of straddling the divide between adult’s and children’s worlds and they suggest adopting roles such as that of adult ‘friend’ to the children. This maintains adult identity but softens it so as to allow a partial access to the children’s experiences and perspectives.

Researchers (including myself) have positioned themselves in relation to a taken-for-granted, general notion of what an adult is, assuming that this notion is somehow commonly shared across social and cultural settings. Some researchers have contrasted the researcher’s relationship to the children with that of other key adults such as teachers (Baraldi, 2002). The attempt to modify their adult identity and status is taken much further by writers such as Mandell (1991) and, from a feminist perspective, Thorne (1993). Mandell advocates taking the ‘least adult role’, which in her work she attempted by rejecting opportunities to exercise adult authority over children and engaging as a participant in children’s activities, most notably spending hours with the children in their sandpit games. This strategy must be commended for its wholehearted effort to enter into and participate in children’s social relations but is open to the criticism that it seems simply to wish away the complexity of the differences and similarities between children and adults as they are currently constituted. From this perspective the issue of power is one of social position with a preconception of children as the least powerful in the institutional settings of their everyday life.

I suggest, however, that researchers need a more careful working out of the different ‘versions’ or representations of ‘what an adult is’ in the everyday interactions in the particular settings of the research. The apparent complexity of my role in the field was illustrated to me by a mother of one of the ten-year-old boys. We met on the football pitch outside the school on one of the last days of the fieldwork. While watching the game she said goodbye to me and then she added:

The children will miss you!! But I’ll tell you something—they didn’t always know what to make of you. I mean you haven’t been an adult in the usual sense. They knew you weren’t a teacher and that you weren’t a mother, but I think sometimes they forgot that you weren’t ten like themselves.
My aim had not been to assume the status of a ‘child’, which, from the point of view of children (or other adults), might have been perceived as patronising and insincere. Thus the study was conducted as an on-going balancing act between being recognised as an ‘adult’ and at the same time avoiding the preconceived ideas, practices and connotations associated with ‘adulthood’ or specific adult roles such as a teacher, member of staff or a parent. This status as an ‘other’ was inevitably negotiated and renegotiated with both children and adults during the entire process of the study. At one level of interactions with children, I followed the ‘rules’ set for adults at school and the after-school centre—for example regarding my own active (or not) participation in children’s play or games. At another level, my participation, in general play or in a particular game, relied on following the children’s ‘rules’ and practices, for example when joining in or leaving a game. I refused to adopt traditional adult roles in the institutional settings such as setting the rules of a game, telling children off, solving conflicts among the children or protecting and looking after them.

In this sense I developed an approach, later given support by Mayall (2000) that adults doing childhood research should present and perform themselves as an unusual type of adult, one who is seriously interested in understanding how the social world looks from children’s perspective but without making a dubious attempt to be a child. Through this the researcher emerges first and foremost as a social person and secondly as a professional with a distinctive and genuine purpose.

**Conclusion**

I have suggested that the participation of children in research emphasises the dialogical qualities and the potential of, in this case, ethnography to reveal the working out of research relations over time. The dialogical approach is fruitful and necessary if children are to be actively involved in research. It requires that the ethnographer ‘retrains’ their attention so that they do not dominate conversation, as adults often do. It requires a shift towards engaging with children’s own cultures of communication, including the context and timing of communication, which are often key to this process.

The researcher may be tempted to try and pass as a child but my experience is that children are well aware that this is a ploy. Children are very sensitive to adult-child differences precisely because they encounter them throughout their everyday lives. It is, however, possible to be a different sort of adult, one who, whilst not pretending to be a child, seeks throughout to respect their views and wishes. Such a role inevitably involves a delicate balance between acting as a ‘responsible adult’ and maintaining the special position built up over a period of time. In everyday routines this is not too difficult to accomplish but it can be testing in some circumstances. Research with children that builds on children’s active participation and wishes to engage with the complexity of children’s relationships will need to investigate key cultural ideas about what it means to be ‘an adult’, including the categories used to describe generational categories and life-course stages.

Finally, the complexity of children’s practices and the dilemmas that this creates demonstrate that the issue of power is complex and cannot be addressed through only viewing power as a matter of social position—such as ‘adult power’ over children or vice
versa. In the process of research, power moves between different actors and different social positions, it is produced and negotiated in the social interactions of child to adult, child to child and adult to adult in the local settings of the research. The vulnerability of any piece of research is that basically it needs people who want to take part. In my experience this is revealed through different notions of trust posed by the children aimed at testing the reliability and genuine engagement of the ‘adult’ researcher in the research process.

References


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