

Reflection Article/Essay

# Complex sociocultural activities and older adults' protagonism from an occupational therapy perspective: a methodological proposal

*Atividades socioculturais complexas e o protagonismo das pessoas idosas na perspectiva da terapia ocupacional: uma proposta metodológica*

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## Abstract

This essay presents “complex sociocultural activities” as an intervention methodology in the field of occupational therapy in culture, oriented toward strengthening older adults' protagonism. The proposal is organized as a systematized process composed of interdependent stages: (a) participatory planning; (b) recording and documenting creative pathways; and (c) culminating in community-open events. This methodology differs from traditional workshops by prioritizing events engagement, relationship building, circulation across territories, and recognition of older adults as cultural producers. By understanding culture as a right and an opportunity for social participation, this approach shifts occupational therapy from a logic centered on the health–disease binary to a sociocultural and community-based logic in which cultural devices become legitimate spaces for care, creation, and citizenship. The experiences analyzed, developed within a university outreach project, included fashion shows, theater, photonovels, and intergenerational cultural events, with older adults actively participating in all stages. The results indicate that the effectiveness of the methodology, understood as the capacity to promote cultural agency, expand belonging, strengthen self-esteem, and reframe life trajectories, depends on the integrality of the process. This integrity is characterized by ethical, aesthetic, political, and pedagogical coherence across all stages, as well as by shared responsibility and the active participation of those involved. The essay concludes that complex sociocultural activities constitute a reproducible methodology across different contexts, contributing to innovative and transformative practices in the field of occupational therapy in culture and aging.

**Keywords:** Occupational Therapy, Art, Human Activities, Aging, Social Participation.

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### **Resumo**

Este ensaio apresenta as “atividades socioculturais complexas” como metodologia de intervenção no campo da terapia ocupacional na cultura, orientada ao fortalecimento do protagonismo das pessoas idosas. A proposta organiza-se em um processo sistematizado, composto por etapas interdependentes: a) planejamento participativo; b) registro e documentação dos percursos criativos e c) culminância em eventos abertos à comunidade. A metodologia difere das oficinas tradicionais por priorizar engajamento continuado, construção de vínculos, circulação nos territórios e reconhecimento das pessoas idosas como produtoras de cultura. Ao compreender a cultura como direito e oportunidade de participação social, essa abordagem desloca a terapia ocupacional de uma lógica centrada no binômio saúde-doença para uma lógica sociocultural e comunitária, na qual equipamentos culturais se tornam espaços legítimos de cuidado, criação e cidadania. As experiências analisadas, desenvolvidas em um projeto de extensão universitária, incluíram desfiles de moda, teatro, fotonovela e eventos culturais intergeracionais, com participação ativa das pessoas idosas em todas as etapas. Os resultados indicam que a efetividade da metodologia, entendida como capacidade de promover agência cultural, ampliar pertencimento, fortalecer autoestima e ressignificar trajetórias de vida, depende da integralidade do processo, caracterizada pela coerência ética, estética, política e pedagógica entre todas as etapas, bem como pela corresponsabilidade e participação ativa das pessoas envolvidas. Conclui-se que as atividades socioculturais complexas configuram uma metodologia reprodutível em diferentes contextos, contribuindo para práticas inovadoras e transformadoras no campo da terapia ocupacional na cultura e do envelhecimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Terapia Ocupacional, Arte, Atividades Humanas, Envelhecimento, Participação Social.

### **Introduction**

This essay aims to present and discuss a new methodology, based on artistic and cultural activities in occupational therapy, that seeks to develop an emancipatory political-pedagogical praxis directed toward promoting autonomy. The proposal is grounded in the idea that developing critical awareness and participatory citizenship constitutes an important basis for addressing all forms of discrimination and violence against older people. It is assumed that engagement in artistic and cultural activities can promote transformations in the lives of older people and can also serve as a means of developing citizenship and community involvement.

This essay argues that the so-called “complex sociocultural activities” constitute a new methodology for conducting activities in the field of occupational therapy in culture. Occupational therapy in culture is understood as a distinct field of practice, different from the other professional fields. From this perspective, “complex sociocultural activities” were conceived as collective, community-based interventions aimed at creating spaces for expression, encounter, and social transformation, situated outside the health–disease binary that has historically guided much of professional practice. This new methodology was designed to occur in art centers, social centers, cultural centers, or community spaces, privileging older people’s protagonism in groups and collectives. Importantly, this proposal is not intended for clinical settings but aims to construct shared cultural territories where the symbolic and political dimension of participation is central.

Complex sociocultural activities are collective and community-based interventions planned in a process-oriented and participatory manner, involving the following stages: (a) participatory planning, (b) recording and documenting creative pathways, and (c) culminating in community-open events. These activities have as their central axis the protagonism of older people, the construction of bonds, and the strengthening of a sense of community, aiming to expand social participation, produce meanings, and transform life trajectories. They differ from traditional workshops because they require time, continuity, and shared responsibility among participants at all stages of the process.

Silvestrini et al. (2019) point out that culture is understood as a fundamental element in the construction of occupational-therapeutic practices, because it enables the understanding of human activities in their historical and social contexts. The integration of cultural activities into the occupational-therapeutic process promotes the empowerment of persons in their communities.

Artistic and cultural activities in occupational therapy do not end in their aesthetic dimensions. They expand as political, ethical, and social practices that challenge and recreate ways of occupying the world and constitute a fertile field for symbolic expression, favoring processes of creation (Lima, 2006). Such activities represent a revolutionary gesture, because they allow for the creation of different ways of communicating and expressing, and stimulate critical and sensitive reflections on everyday situations. In this way, the artistic and the therapeutic fields come to converge. Art expands singularity and values what is intangible, fostering connections between people (Rizzi Costa et al., 2025).

Lavacca & Silva (2023) reflect on occupational therapy in the field of culture from three dimensions: the cultural aspects of human activities within occupational therapy; the influence of culture on the historical and constitutive processes of the profession, with an emphasis on the protagonism of the arts; and culture as a field of practice for occupational therapists, considering cultural policies and the understanding of culture as a right. From this perspective, culture assumes diverse forms in occupational therapy, being present from the profession's historical construction, contributing to the understanding of human activities and to the creation of a distinct field of practice.

Within the proposal presented here, in which "complex sociocultural activities" are a new methodology of intervention in the field of occupational therapy in culture, thinking about art, culture, and occupational therapy in ageing implies moving away from the traditional conception of workshops and activity groups that have a beginning, middle, and end on the same day. This format often proves insufficient to generate real engagement and, not rarely, results in initiatives that produce few transformations and meanings in the lives of older people, with limited impact on social participation. This occurs because, in most cases, proposals are repeated, structured around the logic of the mere offer of activities that are not always built in a shared manner and, rather than promoting autonomy and participation, which are central objectives of this type of intervention, may not produce the expected results. In the proposal of "complex sociocultural activities", older people participate in all stages. According to Ferreira (2016) and Dutra & Carvalho (2021), the ageing process, when traversed by factors that devalue the person's potentialities, can lead to a significant reduction in quality of life and in the social participation of older people, resulting in isolation.

In contrast, when recognized and respected, older people, as guardians and constructors of memory, play a significant role in the cultural life of their communities. They are, for example, the sages and masters of traditional knowledge and arts, who pass on their crafts to children, young people, and adults, and are fundamental to the future of their surrounding communities and of society as a whole. Transmitting this knowledge and these experiences to new generations, with the aim of preserving memory and cultural identities, is a right guaranteed by the Statute of the Older Person (Brasil, 2003). In addition, participation in cultural life is a strategy for strengthening community involvement and social inclusion.

This essay argues that activities that demand continuity and are not exhausted in a single meeting tend to enhance participants' involvement, because they favor the construction of bonds, the consolidation of learning, and openness to new dialogues. As they develop over time, these proposals allow collective maturation around a shared doing, stimulating progressive engagement and creating more fertile spaces for the exchange of experiences and knowledge. The singularities of older people and the heterogeneity of ageing, including different rhythms, contexts, life histories, functional conditions, among other aspects, are considered in the construction and implementation of the proposal. This ongoing process contributes to deepening reflections, expanding repertoires, and strengthening a sense of belonging to the group, which are essential aspects of practices aimed at constructing collaborative and transformative processes. These activities are termed "complex sociocultural activities".

The aim of this study is to present what the author terms "complex sociocultural activities" as an effective process for generating engagement and participation among older people, especially within working classes, in the cultural life of their cities, neighborhoods, or localities. The study seeks to establish a theoretical reflection around the experience of a university outreach project in which this new methodology was applied as a new method grounded in the field of occupational therapy in culture.

### **Paths toward understanding "complex sociocultural activities" as a methodology for action in occupational therapy**

The experience with university outreach activities is used to characterize the attributes that confer greater potential for interest, meaning, and engagement for older people on what are called here "complex sociocultural activities". The proposal is closely related to the research and outreach project titled Sociocultural Participation of the Older Population, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Clementino Fraga Filho University Hospital, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, under opinion no. 3.121.146, dated 24 January 2019.

The outreach project is conducted in partnership with the Municipal Department of Culture and is held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Art Center, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Its main objectives are to foster older people's participation in cultural activities and to promote intergenerational connection through the bond established between the outreach students and the Art Center's visitors of all ages. The project is conducted with a collective of 27 older people, almost all women, aged 70 to 92 years, almost all with preserved functional capacity. Three of them have cognitive or mobility impairments.

The so-called “complex sociocultural activities” were presented here as a new methodology and were analyzed and discussed in relation to each of their constituent elements, that is, their attributes, namely: sequential planning, documentation of stages, and culmination in an event open to the community. Each of these attributes was discussed in this study based on the experience with the outreach project.

For the occupational therapist to work effectively with tools from the cultural field (1. using artistic languages as a strategy to promote social participation; 2. producing spaces for encounter and creation; 3. articulating with cultural policies to ensure access and protagonism for the subjects), it is necessary to invest in and shift the field of practice toward cultural facilities. Only within cultural facilities, or in social centers, is it possible to experience all stages involved in “complex sociocultural activities”. Using this approach in other practice settings may not yield equivalent results given the influence of the cultural, territorial, and institutional specificities involved. It is necessary to assume a new field of practice, a practice setting specific to the cultural field, strongly grounded in community experiences.

The insertion of occupational therapy in the cultural sphere proposes new ways of understanding its interventions and is equally linked to an ethical-political commitment that includes defending and advancing human rights and citizenship, respecting diversity, and promoting social participation (Silvestrini, 2019).

Community experiences in occupational therapy directly involve communities and their social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. These initiatives are aimed at strengthening social bonds based on the real needs of populations. They are generally organized in specific territories (neighborhoods, urban peripheries, and rural, quilombola and Indigenous communities, etc.) and have a collective, participatory, and interdisciplinary character. In these experiences, popular knowledge, active listening, shared responsibility, and the protagonism of the persons involved are valued, working with meaningful occupations in everyday life and in the population's ways of living. These articulations require, however, a consistent ethical-political commitment, as well as participatory methods and situated practices that recognize popular knowledge and territorial specificities (Farias & Lopes, 2020).

Some notions are fundamental for understanding community experiences in occupational therapy. The first concept is territory, understood here, as in the perspective of social occupational therapy, not only as physical space but as lived space, marked by social relations, local histories, power disputes, and forms of collective organization. Territory is where bonds, resistance, and senses of belonging are built (Bianchi & Malfitano, 2020).

*The concept of territory suggests the combination of space, process, and relation, going beyond the definition of physical geographic space. Community brings the notion of collectivity, networks, belonging, and identity. The use of both presupposes reflection on ways of living and of appropriating material, social, and cultural resources that are established in a place. (p. 625)*

Another fundamental element is the bond. More than a technical or assistance relationship, the bond is built through attentive listening, recognition of local knowledge, and the ethical and sensitive presence of occupational therapists, who must be open to encountering the other, establishing relationships of trust and responsibility (Angeli, 2021).

In this context, it is within these ideas that what are called here “complex sociocultural activities” develop, which necessarily need to bring together certain attributes to be considered as such. They need to involve participatory planning, recording and documenting creative pathways, and culminating in community-open events. All these stages are planned and implemented jointly. In the case of this essay, the activities center older people’s protagonism and potentially involve a certain degree of sense of community and group cohesion, which are necessary for transformation.

For Costa & Silva (2015), a sense of community is understood as a core element in rebuilding life. These authors describe this sense as a shared perception of belonging, collective identity, and connection among subjects who share similar experiences. This feeling does not refer only to physical coexistence in a common space but, above all, to the construction of affective bonds, mutual trust, and solidarity among members of the group.

A sense of community is expressed through interdependence among individuals, insofar as each person recognizes themselves as part of a collective, they can count on and in which they also plays an active role. There is, therefore, a relationship of exchange and mutual support that contributes to a sense of safety, welcome, and belonging. This sense of community is identified as a factor of subjective and collective strengthening, capable of generating hope, recovering memories, and creating new possibilities for life. It is associated with life projects and symbolic references (Costa & Silva, 2015).

A sense of community proves essential for encompassing diversity in aging, insofar as it enables the sharing of experiences and the construction of bonds that reduce the burden of individual limitations. Collective interventions facilitate exchange among participants, promoting mutual support, recognition, and strengthening of social identity, elements that become even more relevant in the presence of conditions such as cognitive difficulties, which some older people may experience. By participating in collective activities according to their possibilities, persons with cognitive impairment experience moments of belonging and groupness that contribute to their emotional well-being. In these spaces, their difficulties are recognized and welcomed, reinforcing the idea that community action can be an inclusive resource capable of promoting social participation.

Only on the basis of a sense of community, opportunities for conflict, consensus, and dissent, and time and engagement around a common artistic project does a complex sociocultural activity emerge. Within the outreach project, the following activities have already been conducted: a fashion show, a theater play, photo shoots, a photonovel, the production of a video on senior dance, and the organization and implementation of two artistic events at the Art Center . Despite their particularities and distinct characteristics, these initiatives have much in common, because they involve attributes that qualify them, in the same way, as “complex sociocultural activities”.

### **Stage 1: Participatory planning of “complex sociocultural activities”**

This stage constitutes the strategic foundation of the process and is grounded in principles of active participation, shared responsibility, and older people’s protagonism in the collective construction of the project. It initially includes mapping available socio-territorial resources, identifying public facilities, civil society organizations, collectives, autonomous groups of older people, health units that conduct collective activities, cultural centers, and social centers, in order to recognize potential partners

and strengthen existing local networks. Next, a joint program is proposed with sociocultural activities of a more elaborate nature that dialogue with the interests and demands expressed by the community, valuing local knowledge, experiences, and cultural practices.

As a result of this process, the participatory construction, with older people, of a sociocultural production to be developed and implemented collectively is envisaged, ensuring that each stage of the process, from conception to execution, is shaped by horizontal and dialogic methodologies, enhancing autonomy, engagement, and participants' appropriation of the project. Whatever the proposed cultural activity (a theater play, photonovel, fashion show, audiovisual productions, etc.), to constitute a "complex sociocultural activity", it must follow the same methodology, detailed in the following paragraphs.

Once the sociocultural activity to be conducted has been collectively decided, the project moves to the collective project's operational unfoldings, a stage that is equally shaped by participatory methodologies. At this point, responsibilities for each phase of the process are agreed upon together with the participants, such as defining the necessary materials, identifying partners and supporters, developing the activity schedule, planning the creation of sets, organizing the culminating event, and defining strategies for recording and documenting the stages, as well as mobilizing virtual social networks. Each of these decisions is, in itself, a powerful space for interrelation, the exercise of dialogue, conflict negotiation, and the strengthening of a sense of belonging and group cohesion. By involving subjects in the different dimensions of planning and execution, the process values diverse knowledge, challenges traditional modes of organization, and creates opportunities for developing truly collaborative, autonomous, and critical practices.

This participatory planning is an opportunity, throughout the process, to highlight the central role of the older person as the protagonist of the creative, decision-making, and implementation process. Far from occupying a place only as a beneficiary of actions, older people are recognized as subjects with knowledge, experiences, and desires, whose active and autonomous participation is a fundamental condition for the project's success. By engaging in the multiple stages of planning the cultural production, older people expand their possibilities for expression, reaffirm their identities, re-signify their trajectories, and strengthen their bonds with the territory and with the collective. This perspective breaks with reductionist narratives that associate aging with passivity, repositioning old age as a potent time for creation, political participation, and situated cultural production.

## **Stage 2: Recording and documenting creative pathways**

In the context of emancipatory practices in occupational therapy, recording "complex sociocultural activities" constitutes a fundamental dimension of this proposal. Beyond a merely documentary or technical function, recording operates as an ethical, aesthetic, and political device, strengthening lived experiences and ensuring that narratives, produced meanings, and the marks of the collective process are preserved, revisited, and, above all, re-signified. Through recording, memory is not only left behind, but space is created for older people's stories and trajectories to be recognized in their complexity and singularity.

These records, whether written, photographic, audiovisual, or in other creative formats, become tools that expand the visibility of actions and of the subjects involved, breaking with logics of silencing and erasure often imposed on older people. When produced in a shared and dialogic manner, the records generate a polyphonic narrative in which different voices intertwine. In doing so, they produce new meanings for what was lived. They also often challenge crystallized discourses about old age. These discourses frequently portray older people as dependent, unproductive, socially passive, and lacking creative potency. They likewise prescribe normative ways of living this stage of life. These different forms of recording, beyond showing older people as active protagonists, can generate new cultural products. For example, the record of staging the play served as the basis for producing a photonovel, and the photographic material produced over months generated a photo exhibition.

According to Dorneles (2011), artistic and cultural activities operate as ethical-aesthetic devices that open fissures in everyday life, creating spaces of insurgency, collective invention, and the expansion of modes of existence. This author reinforces this understanding by stating that cultural experiences are fundamental for constructing inventive identities and strengthening territorialities, broadening the understanding that these practices not only occupy physical spaces but produce senses of belonging, memory, and resistance. In this field, records accompany doing and actively participate in creating these spaces, allowing experiences not to end in the moment of action but to reverberate across other times, territories, and publics.

When situated within this critical-reflexive field, recording becomes a political practice capable of producing ruptures in normative ways of understanding cultural actions and ageing processes. This rupture occurs because the records render visible experiences that challenge hegemonic social expectations, such as the association between old age and incapacity, cultural disinterest, or withdrawal from public life. By documenting older people creating, performing, planning, and occupying the city's cultural spaces, recording offers concrete evidence that contradicts such narratives and expands the social imaginary of ageing. It is necessary to move beyond an instrumental understanding of cultural and artistic practices, avoiding viewing them only as means for achieving conventional therapeutic ends. In this context, recording becomes part of the practice of invention of "complex sociocultural activities" itself, contributing to expanding repertoires and circulating older people's narratives.

Furthermore, involving older people in decisions about what and how to record reinforces their role as protagonists and authors of their own histories and productions. By participating actively in these decisions, whether through curating images, writing accounts, developing captions, or leading interviews and videos, older people re-signify recording as a living, relational, and creative practice. This participation further expands the sense of belonging and the group's collective potency, strengthening support networks, territorial articulations, and the possibilities of continuity of practices beyond current projects.

Recognizing recording as a processual, ethical, and creative stage of the proposal also affirms that it must be cared for in its aesthetic, political, and affective dimensions. The goal is not to produce cold or bureaucratic documents, but to create sensitive traces that hold the potencies of what was lived, call forth new ways of seeing, engage the public, and, above all, inspire other practices in other times and spaces, contributing to strengthening collective, emancipatory, and community-based practices.

### **Stage 3: Culminating in community-open events: transformation**

Within the university outreach project, “complex sociocultural activities” were conducted in ways that highlighted older people’s protagonism as active, creative subjects. The actions developed included producing a documentary on the benefits of dance in ageing, hosting a fashion show, staging a play, conducting photo shoots, and organizing cultural events at the Art Center. Across these initiatives, older people played a central role, participating intensively in the entire creative process, including planning, implementation, and evaluation. In doing so, they moved away from the passive position of spectators and became protagonists of these cultural experiences.

These activities, which involved a final product presented to the public, constituted powerful processes of exchange and mutual learning. Videos, texts, and audio materials with a didactic and informative character were collectively produced. In addition to documenting the stages of the work, these materials reinforced the collective agreements established and strengthened commitment among all persons involved. In the specific case of the fashion show, the process was preceded by four preparatory sessions conducted over the weeks leading up to the event. These workshops addressed relaxation practices, self-care, and clothing, creating a welcoming and safe environment for participants to experiment with new forms of expression. The final workshop focused on decorating the fashion show space and the dressing room, supporting the group’s full engagement across all dimensions of the activity. At the culmination of the event, during the collective evaluation, participants reported feelings expressed through words such as “wonderful,” “strong,” “queen,” “empowered,” and “good,” indicating positive impacts on self-esteem and a sense of belonging.

In the theatrical experience and in the photo soap opera, the scenes were developed from the participants’ own narratives, as they shared real situations of prejudice and discrimination experienced across their life trajectories. These stories, which previously carried resentment because they portrayed experiences of racism or ageism, could be collectively re-signified, as they were worked through and modified as part of the script for both the play and the photo soap opera. With support from the outreach team, older people created the script, envisioned the sets, and produced costumes and props in a process that extended across several meetings, marked by intensive rehearsals and the collective construction of scenic elements. The internal presentation of the play already allowed the observation of important effects on strengthening self-esteem and the group’s sense of empowerment, as participants transformed their stories into art. The theatrical process also strengthened new forms of communication and expression, stimulating the exploration of the body, face, voice, and language. It also supported revisiting individual and collective memories. In this regard, although in a mental health context, Rizzi Costa et al. (2025, p. 2966) state that “artistic activities promote experimental spaces for reproducing life, making it possible to reproduce everyday situations, experiences, ideas, and dreams by using and combining different languages.”

Rizzi Costa et al. (2025) also note that, through art, it is possible to explore different techniques, materials, concepts, and meanings in life and that, when this practice is integrated with occupational therapy, the value of sharing the results of interventions through artistic and cultural activities becomes evident.

*Participants allow themselves to be visible to the public, externalizing their emotions and experiences in a creative and sensitive manner. In doing so, they can experience a moment of self-knowledge and, at the same time, move spectators. (p. 2965)*

The cultural events held in the project, even though they had specific and singular characteristics, retained common attributes that run through the methodological proposal as a whole: valuing a sense of community, recording and documenting lived processes, and organizing culminating moments that increase the visibility of actions. The events, held at the Art Center, involved a full-day program with workshops, conversation circles, and diverse artistic activities, such as macramé handicrafts and video and photo exhibitions, among others. In these activities, older people not only participated actively but also led the actions, reaffirming their role as authors and protagonists. Cultural collectives, university outreach projects, social groups, and health education initiatives were invited to participate in the events. In dialogue with undergraduate and graduate students, these groups created a plural, intergenerational sociocultural program. The experience with the events contributed to strengthening local networks, expanded articulation among collectives, and enabled effective practices for building partnerships sustained by recognizing and valuing older people's knowledge and experiences.

## **Final considerations**

The reflections developed throughout this essay reaffirm that “complex sociocultural activities” constitute a new and distinct methodology in the field of occupational therapy in culture. This methodology differs from traditional practices because it is process-oriented, participatory, and community-based, involving stages that include participatory planning, recording and documenting creative pathways, and culminating in community-open events. Older people's protagonism runs throughout the entire process, ensuring their active participation in decisions and in constructing cultural products (audiovisual documentary, play, photonovel, fashion show, and the two artistic events organized). These attributes, continuity, shared responsibility, shared recording, community bonds, and the political dimension of participation are fundamental for these practices to achieve emancipatory and transformative potential.

The experiences described show that complex sociocultural activities, when organized from a participatory, territorially grounded perspective committed to processes of collective creation, acquire an innovative character. The actions conducted, such as fashion shows, plays, workshops, conversation circles, and open cultural events, when led through older people's protagonism, become powerful devices for identity affirmation, strengthening self-esteem, re-signifying life trajectories insofar as experiences are transformed into art, and expanding modes of expression.

It is essential to understand that these experiences reach their full potency only when the integrity of the process is respected. This requires participatory planning, collective organization, follow-up, agreed-upon responsibilities, and moments of evaluation. The maturation of these experiences demands time, engagement, active listening, and an ethical stance that values popular knowledge. Therefore, the effectiveness of “complex sociocultural activities” resides precisely in their processual nature.

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## Data Availability

The data supporting the results of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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