

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Psychological Benefits and Costs of Participating in Men's Groups in the Czech Republic

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The main goal of this study was to examine the subjective benefits of participating in the men's groups in the Czech Republic. The research was completed between 2011 and 2012 with 200 members of these groups. A special questionnaire, "Men's group inventory—MGI", which has five open-ended questions, was used for the purpose of this research. The answers were processed qualitatively. The results show the main benefit of being a member of such a group is the chance to freely share inner feelings in a secure environment. Research also suggests the need for honest communication and positive relationships among men in terms of helping them to mature.

Keywords: men's groups; Christian men; men's relationships; men's needs

Men's Groups in the Czech Republic

Currently there are about 35 small groups in the Czech Republic where Christian men can meet to pray, share, and have discussions. The origins of these meetings are connected with the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) Whole Marriage Ministries. These meetings are week-long courses for married couples held by the YMCA. They introduced this service to the Czech Republic in 1989. Men who participated in these YMCA Whole Marriage Ministries needed their own men's activities, and as such, some of them have got together and looked for a base for such activities. They drew the main ideas for these meetings from the research of Rohr (2005), Bly (1990), and Moore and Gillette (1990). Upon beginning their project it became unofficially known as "The Men's Movement."¹ We would now like to briefly present the main ideas of these authors.

Richard Rohr is an American Catholic priest. He investigated the notion of men's identity and found its roots to be in the Bible and mythology. He has written over twenty books, the most famous being, "From wild man to wise man. Reflections of male spirituality" (2008). Despite being a priest, he is critical of vague spirituality and certain aspects of the Church's teaching that he considers too unearthly. Robert Bly is an American poet. He is also interested in exploring the topic of male identity. His book, "Iron John" (1990) describes the processes in men's psyche very sensitively. Robert Moore is an American psychoanalyst and professor of psychology and religion; Douglas Gillette is an American mythologist. In their most famous

book, "King, warrior, magician, lover: Rediscovering the archetypes of mature masculine" (1990), they describe four archetypes thought to be grounded in every man's psyche (king, warrior, magician, and lover), with their strength and weaknesses.

One of The Men's Movement's main activities are men's groups, which we chose as the subject for our research. The program of every group is similar – initially, men will play drums together for five to ten minutes. A common prayer follows. Men usually pray in their own words. This is followed by a sharing of what they have experienced since their last meeting. An analysis of a topic related to men's identity follows. Although the previously identified aspects of the program are common for most groups, this aspect is the most variable. In some groups men will come together to read a book dedicated to men's spirituality. Following this there is usually a discussion about the main ideas in the passage. In other groups the men will give a presentation on a chosen topic, which is then discussed in the same way as the book.

The members of the groups can meet once a week, every two weeks or once a month. There are usually anywhere between 4 to 15 members in any given group. The meetings can last up to two hours and usually take place in the evening. Some groups congregate in parish houses and others may meet in their own houses or flats. The membership is open to everybody who accepts the rules of the group (e.g., everybody has a right to express their opinion; everything spoken about within this group stays between its members etc.). Membership is also open for single and divorced people. There is no umbrella organization that would officially unite all these groups; nevertheless, members of various groups meet via internet conferences² or other events organized by The Men's Movement in the Czech Republic.

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Men's Groups Research

There is not any specific psychological research relating to men's Christian groups in the Czech Republic thus far. The Australian psychotherapist Biddulph (2010) describes the existence of men's groups in a variety of countries all over the world. He perceives the main benefit of men's groups to be supporting men to inspect their own inner world (Biddulph, 2010). An Australian meta-analysis by McCalman et al. (2010) summarizes the results of six Australian studies from 2002 to 2008 about indigenous men's groups in Australia. The authors researched native Australians' men's groups and their supportive tools. Their research was conducted using the method of Participatory Action Research that is based on the presumption that chosen members of the group will carry out the research (in this case: two). This study demonstrated the utility of men's groups, which teach their members respect, responsibility and increased well-being for themselves and their families (McCalman et al., 2010).

Golding, Foley, Brown, and Harvey (2007) investigated senior men's groups in Australia. These groups are open to older and isolated men, especially those who are considered to have difficulties in engaging in work, education or training initiatives. Golding et al. (2007) describe these groups as a new and important Australian phenomenon. Results of this study illustrated the relevance of men's groups in Australia for the wellbeing of their members – especially in regards to their health, their social enjoyment, their capacity for learning and their ability to contribute to their community (Golding et al., 2007).

Whereas Australian studies were based on qualitative approaches, most studies investigating American origin have used a quantitative methodology (Whorley & Addis, 2006). Mahalik and Lagan (2001) explore the relationship between religion, wellbeing, and the ability to manage stress by group members. Results showed significant relationships between the measures assessing gender role conflict and stress, and those assessing religiosity and spiritual wellbeing.

The influence of group membership on one's psychological wellbeing was investigated in our pilot studies (Moravec & Dosedlová, 2014). The answers to the stated questions were processed by analysing the content of these questions. In this study we used clustering, counting, and relation searching (Neuendorf, 2002). We tried to assign respondent's answers to categories of wellbeing as defined by Ryff's (1989). In her model of wellbeing, Ryff distinguishes the following six dimensions: (a) Self-acceptance, (b) Positive relations with others, (c) Autonomy, (d) Environmental mastery, (e) Purpose in life, and (f) Personal growth. The dimension of Self-acceptance (a) not only relates to the idea of a positive self-image, but also an acceptance of one's positive and negative qualities. Positive relations (b) involve the ability to empathise, love deeply and create friendships (i.e., an ability to love). Autonomy (c) characterizes qualities such as self-determination, independence, or other behaviour related examples. A mature person finds his inner value inside himself and does not take others' esteem into account to a great extent. Environmental mastery (d) is grounded in one's ability to change the environment according to one's psychological needs and as such change the world through his activities. Looking for a Purpose

in life (e) helps people face their troubles and suffering. Personal growth (f) is tied to self-realization. This element of positive functioning is dynamic and includes a continuous process of developing one's own abilities (Ryff, 1989).

Our results illustrate that the evaluation of group benefits in the context of wellbeing were related to Positive relations (b) above the other dimensions (66% of respondents). Respondents' statements indicate that the meaning of the group for them is the development of mutual relations, and support for each other. The second most referred to dimension was the finding of Purpose in life (e) (36%). Common prayer was appreciated in the group and members mentioned that membership helps them in their faith and to widen their spiritual horizons. The Self-acceptance (a) dimension (18%) finished in third place: the fact that other members go through similar problems supported the members in their own personal development and in overcoming uncertainties. Following this, we find the dimension of Autonomy (c) (4% of men). Membership in the group helps men to be themselves. The group is a place where they can rest and where they are able to gather strength for life. The dimension of Personal Growth (f) received the same response (4% of respondents). Respondents described that the group helps them to be mature. Four percent of respondents also related to the Environmental mastery (d) category. In their opinion, groups offer them a place to rest.

The Aim of the Present Study

In the present study we aimed to get a deeper and more comprehensive insight into the theme surrounding the men's groups in the Czech Republic. We examined the psychological benefits for men who participate in these groups. We also analyzed the aforementioned negatives of the groups. We compared our results with other relevant studies. Our research question is: "What are the psychological benefits and costs of men participating in men's groups in the Czech Republic?"

Method

Participants

Research on men's groups has not yet been conducted in the Czech Republic. Our study was conducted between October 2011 and May 2012. The research sample consists of the Christian Men's Group members who were cooperative and those of whom we were able to contact. The leaders of the Czech groups were contacted via a notice in an internet conference. We tried to meet as many groups as possible, and were successful in 10 cases. One hundred and twenty two respondents (61% of the respondents) were questioned in that way. Groups that were not able to meet with us personally (usually because of a long distance or a small amount of regular participants) were addressed via e-mail. We sent research questions to every leader with a request for them to be answered at home or at the group meeting.

We collected answers from 200 respondents. The average age was 42 ($SD = 9.07$, ranging from 23 to 69 years). Regarding marital status, 80 % of participants were married, 15% single, and 4% divorced or married more than once. Regarding the time duration of the attendance at the group, the shortest time of attendance was 1 year and the longest

11 years. The average time duration of the attendance at the group was 3.90 years ($SD = 2.72$). 8% of the groups meet once a week, 52% of the groups once every two weeks, 38% once a month, and 2% less than once a month.

Measures

The "Men's group inventory – MGI" was used (Moravec, 2013). After assessing basic demographical information, five questions open-ended questions were asked:

1. "Try to describe in several sentences, what the group gives you (what is the benefit of meeting in the group for your life/relationships/work/practical life of husband, man. . .)."
2. "Try to mention briefly, what difference you feel between the time when you didn't attend any men's group and the present time."
3. "Try to describe in several sentences, what you miss in the group."
4. "Try to describe in several sentences, what bothers you in the group."
5. "Is there something you have to give up because of the membership of the group?"

Question 1 is the fundamental question in terms of describing the benefits of attendance at the group. We wanted to know how membership of the group helps each respondent in his relationships, especially in his role as a husband and father. The second question encourages reflecting on the benefits of participating in the group by comparing the difference between the present point and the point at which the respondent was not participating in the group. Questions three to five are about the cost of participation in the group – what the respondent misses,

what bothers him and what he has to give up because of participating in the group. The completion of the MGI took respondents about half an hour.

We tried to incorporate these ethical considerations into our research (Wiling, 2008): respondents were fully informed about the research; they agreed with participation in the research; and they were free to withdraw from participation in the research at any point. The answers were processed anonymously, and afterwards the respondents were provided with their results.

Method of Analysis

An exploration approach was used in this study. We used the method of grounded theory (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Answers to the given questions were analyzed, common themes were integrated, common categories were created, and they were then selected by a common name. In cases where one answer contained two or more elements that could be classified into more than one category, we divided that answer, and each part was put into the appropriate category. The frequencies of categories of respondents' answers were counted. Because some of the answers were divided, the summary of the percentages for the categories is not one hundred percent. The coding was created by two authors.

Results

The Perceived Benefits of Participating in Groups for its Members

The first question was: 'Try to describe in several sentences, what the group gives you (what is the benefit of meeting in the group for your life/relationships/work/practical life of husband, man . . .)'. Nine common categories were created. **Table 1** shows an overview of category frequency and examples.

Category created from the answers	Percentage of answers	Examples of answers
(a) Safe area for sharing inner experiences	44	"When I discovered, that we are on the same boat, asking similar questions, struggling similar fights, I started to see my problems in a different way. Men are a real support for me." "The possibility to share my spiritual life with others. My losses, my falls, but also my pleasures."
(b) Support from others	37	"I am looking here for support and patterns how to be a good man, husband and father." "Support from men who are on the right track in their families, parishes, and in the society."
(c) Help in the faith	21	"I am strengthened by the praying with other men. We give over our anxieties and weaknesses to God and He really changes them." "Common men's prayer has its own depth, which I admire the most."
(d) Broadening of horizons	11	"A new perspective on myself and in my life." "The group drives me to think deeply about things which I didn't pay attention to them before."
(e) Maturation of men's role	7	"The group helps me to understand, what it means to be a man in the context of Christianity. I find myself obliged to play the role of the father and the husband in the same time." "I better understand my role, my mission – what it means to be a man, a husband, a father."
(f) Relaxation	5	"Rest. I draw on strength and lightness of life." "It gives me a rest from everyday problems and work and it helps me to give more strength and hope in my life."
(g) Capacity to be self-contained	4	"I became more self-contained – I feel I am more grounded." "I am more self-confident in my work and also in my life."
(h) No special benefit	1	"I cannot see any important benefit." "Because of participating in the group for more than ten years I sometimes do not see the fulfilment of attendance of the group."

Table 1: Categories and examples from answers to question one.

Note: The percentages sum up to more than 100% because some answers could be assigned to more than one category.

Perceived Benefits by Comparing between the Present Point and the Point at which the Respondent did not attend any Group

The second question asked: 'Try to mention briefly, what difference you feel between the time when you didn't attend any men's group and the present time.' Eleven common categories were created based on the answers given. **Table 2** gives an overview of category frequency and examples.

What the Members Miss in the Group

The third question was: "Try to describe in several sentences, what you miss in the group." Twenty common categories were created. **Table 3** shows an overview of category frequency and examples.

What Bothers the Members in the Group

The fourth question was: "Try to describe in several sentences, what bothers you in the group". On the basis of the answers given, eight common categories were created. An overview of category frequency and examples of some answers are given in **Table 4**.

What the Respondents have to give up because of Membership of the Group

The fifth question was: 'Is there something you have to give up because of the membership of the group?' Nine common categories were created based on the answers given. An overview of category frequency and examples of some answers are given in **Table 5**.

Discussion

In the present study, we wanted to assess the psychological benefits and costs of participating in men's groups in the Czech Republic. By using qualitative methodology, we have tried to compensate for the lack of qualitative studies in the field of males and masculinity, especially in regards to social relationships, as Whorley and Addis (2006) suggest.

The analysis of answers to the first question (Benefits of the group) shows that nearly half of the respondents consider a "safe area for sharing their experiences" (a) as very important benefit of the group. Sharing allows group members inspection of their own inner world, as states Biddulph (2010). "Support from others" (b) was important

Category created	Percentage of answers	Examples of answers
(a) Broadening of horizons	17	"The difference is in my ability to perceive the events and people around me. Before I accepted all the events unconsciously, as something obvious, but nowadays I feel more humble." "I am interested in everything related to life and this widens my horizons."
(b) Support from others	15	"The difference is big. I feel fulfilled, I get to know other men's lives, we are now in together, we try support each other. I did not experience that before." "I perceive the difference in everything, mostly I feel, I am not longer alone against my problems. My wife is a support for me, but she cannot help me in everything. Now I can come to the group and ask for a pray, a help or an advise."
(c) Personal growth	13	"I feel a bigger inner peace in myself." "The community is important for my personal growth."
(d) Safe area for sharing inner experiences	13	"When I didn't attend the group, I went through a period when I missed being part of a community where I could share myself. I was not able to express, what I felt. The group allows me to do this. I can share myself with people who understand me." "The difference is that I know now that all men have similar problems, worries, joys, hopes. I am not alone. Their example, encouragement, advice is a great benefit to me."
(e) Help in the faith	10	"Increase in the faith and the trust of the real God's presence in our lives." "Now I can experience God through the community more than I ever did."
(f) Capacity to be self-contained	10	"I try hard to be more myself, any pretense is not necessary. I fight with failures and lack of success, I am more humble." "I used to succumb to anxiety, fear, which was related to my life tasks or church. I gained courage, decisiveness to contribute to positive things."
(g) Maturation of men's role	6	"A man has been born in me – in the past I missed the masculine patterns." "I am subjectively more the man – perhaps I understand myself and other men better now."
(h) Change to the better	6	"Personal growth." "I feel I have found something I was missing, something I have found in my core."
(i) Difficult comparing	3	"In my case the conversion to Christianity was made at the same time as I started to visit the men's group. So it is difficult to compare." "I do not know how to describe the difference. There is the difference, but there are also other circumstances. So I do not know how to describe it precisely."
(j) No perceived difference	3	"I cannot see any difference on my own." "The group does not influence me so much."
(k) "I do not know."	3	"I do not know yet." "I cannot specify it."

Table 2: Categories and examples from answers to question two.

Category created	Percentage of answers	Examples of answers
(a) Missing better themes for the discussion	17	"Sometimes there is 'a fake theme' followed by 'a fake discussion,' what makes me really bored." "I miss more actual themes: education of the children, problems with work. . ."
(b) Missing the genuine sharing	11	"I miss higher tolerance in the discussion." "I miss more genuine sharing – that everyone tells how he understands the topics we discuss."
(c) Missing the maintenance of the discipline	9	"I miss the discipline during speaking (length)." "I probably miss stricter rules which would finish the discussion before it changed into chatting."
(d) Missing other activities out of the group	8	"I miss some joint activity - work, voluntary work. . ." "I would appreciate other forms of our meetings, as weekend spent together, trip etc."
(e) Missing more men in the group	4	"I miss some of my friends here." "I miss some men here – but I have probably no chance to change it."
(f) Missing more relaxation	4	"I miss some time just for talking." "I miss more relaxation."
(g) Missing better relationships	4	"We do not help each other much." "I miss more mutual relationships and friendships."
(h) Missing the participation of more men in planning and organization	3	"I would appreciate if more people were willing to involve in preparation of the program." "I wish members would feel more responsibility for the program of the meeting so they would take a part in its preparation."
(i) Missing the presence of the priest in the group	2	"A visit of a good priest." "A presence of the priest."
(j) Missing music	2	"Meditation songs (taize)." "Perhaps more songs. Songs allow us to praise the Lord in a special way – I admire it."
(k) Missing beating drums	2	"Beating drums." "I miss beating drums– most of the members do not like it."
(l) Missing more enthusiasm	1	"The group needs more enthusiasm and joy – we used to meet in the evening and we are too tired now." "For the last 2–3 years I feel some tiredness and exhaustion. In the first years of group's existence it was something great."
(m) Missing women	1	"Although we are a men's group, sometimes I miss a feminine element (i. m. sometimes the presence of women)."
(n) Judging is difficult	6	"I cannot express an overall judgement of my time in the group. At every meeting the atmosphere is different and I feel differently." "I cannot express it."
(o) Nothing important	11	"Actually I do not find anything. I do not think we miss something." "I do not know. I think the groups fulfil my expectations."

Table 3: Categories and examples from answers to question three.

Category created	Percentage of answers	Examples of answers
(a) Lack of the genuine sharing	16	"Phrases or speaking about 'nothing' bothers me." "We often miss the sharing. We discuss common themes like the Church or politics. . . , but we do not speak about our real lives."
(b) Monologues of some members	9	"I am bothered when somebody does not respect his given time for sharing." "I am bothered by talkative people and by their self-centeredness."
(c) Indiscipline	8	"I am bothered by bad time keeping by some members." "I am bothered by the irregular attendance of some members."
(d) Tiredness because of the late beginning	6	"I am bothered by my tiredness, late return home and sometimes uselessly stretched out theme for discussion." "The meetings are scheduled too late."
(e) Passivity	4	"I am bothered of the passivity of some members." "I expect more activity from others."
(f) Discussed themes	4	"Sometimes it is only about theory." "I miss clearer specification of the theme of the meeting."
(g) Bad relationships	3	"There is a too little time scheduled for personal discussion." "Sometimes I am bothered by the behavior of somebody in the group."
(h) Own weaknesses	2	"Our weaknesses." "Sometimes I create difficulties for myself."
(i) Embrace	1	"I am an introvert and sometimes physical contact (embrace) bothers me." "Nevertheless I feel honest relationships I do not need to embrace anybody."
(j) Logistical problems	1	"Sometimes the group takes place on the other side of the town and it takes too long to get there." "I cannot host the group at my flat – the neighbors would be angry because of beating drums and without beating there is something missing."
(k) Absence of the group	1	"I do not like when the group does not meet."
(l) Difficult to express	1	"I cannot judge it yet." "I cannot express it."
(i) Nothing bothers	11	"I find nothing annoying." "I do not have any objections. I think we complete each other very well."

Table 4: Categories and examples from answers to question four.

Category created from the answers	Percentage of answers	Examples of answers
(a) Giving up free time and relaxes	30	"Sleeping and the comfort of home." "Probably only sleep. . . ."
(b) Giving up time with family	17	"Family time." "There is one more evening for my wife when she has to look after our children just on her own."
(c) Positive benefit of membership despite giving up free time or time with family	12	"I give up some home time, but it is worth it. My wife understands it and it is very important for me that she tolerates, or perhaps even likes it." "I am not with my family, but my wife and my son understands, and they are looking forward to my return. I find it beneficial for all of us."
(d) Giving up time with family, which makes difficulties	9	"I give up my time with my wife and my children. If there is not a good atmosphere at home, I miss the group." "It is always difficult decision – to leave my wife and children or to miss the meeting. . . I know I am needed at home and it would be a difficult evening for my wife. Because of this I do not attend regularly."
(e) Giving up other activities	8	"I cannot pursue my hobby." "I miss time which could be spent with other friends, but it is only a matter of time management."
(f) Missing own attitudes	2	"I miss my pride and my narcissism." "I miss my childish fear."
(g) Difficult to express	1	"It is difficult to express."
(h) Nothing important	11	"There is nothing important that I miss." "Nothing important."

Table 5: Categories and examples from answers to question five.

for more than a third of respondents. The importance of social relations among the men's group members is mentioned in a study by McCalman et al. (2010). "Help in experiencing one's own faith in God" (c) was important for a fifth of respondents and (d) "Broadening of horizons" for 17% of them. Rohr (2011) discusses the importance of healthy spirituality for mature manhood. The importance of religiosity for men is also discussed by Mahalik, and Lagan (2001). "Maturation of men's role" was important for 7% of the respondents. A study by McCalman et al. (2010) also demonstrated the utility of men's groups that help their members to take responsibility for themselves and their families.

The analysis of the answers to the second question (Difference between participating over time) shows that the main common category (a) is "Broadening of horizons" (17%). The importance of spirituality appears as an important issue for maturation in life. Although answers to the second question were similar to those of the first question, there were five new categories which presented: (c) Personal growth (13%), (f) Capacity to be self-contained (10%), (h) Change for the better (5%), (i) Difficult comparing (3%), and (k) "I do not know" (3%). These categories seem to highlight the progress participants made rather than their current status.

The main negative aspect of the groups' appears to be a lack of genuine sharing among members. Respondents express the desire for genuine sharing, which is fundamental to the group and requires trust. They are concerned about the monologues of some group members or situations when the sharing changes into plain chatting without a personal dimension. The members also consider it important to keep to the schedule of the group meeting. Also, clear rules for the discussion are welcomed. This is appealing to a moderator of the group in terms of overseeing the process from the beginning to the end of the meeting, and also during discussions. In relation to the membership of the group, respondents miss their free time and the time they could be spending with their family. Some express the importance of the group despite their family, but others admit that it creates tension within their families.

If we integrate the answers in which the respondents express they do not miss anything important when in the groups with the respondents who did not answer, we note that 40% of respondents did not find any disadvantage to participating in the group. Similarly, we can note that 50% of respondents did not find any disadvantage to participating in the group and 40% of them did not find anything important missing as a result of their membership in the group.

The importance of sharing inner experiences is presented as the main common category (a) in the first question's answers (44%), and the fourth category (d) in the second question's answers (13%). These answers show us that the main benefit to participating in the group is a safe area for sharing inner experiences. They also show us that a desire for genuine sharing seems to be the most important requirement for attendees.

Study Limitations and an Orientation for Future Research

One limitation of our study could be the omission of answers to questions regarding negative experiences of participating, that is, what the responders miss in the group, what bothers them and what they have to give up because of their membership. We have assumed that they left the answers blank because they do not miss anything, there is nothing bothering them or there is nothing they had to give up. However, we must also note that respondents might have left the answer blank for some other reason. An improved formulation for the questions could be:

1. "Try to describe in several sentences, what you miss in the group. If you do not find anything you miss, please write: I do not miss anything."
2. "Try to describe in several sentences, what bothers you in the group. If you do not find anything what bothers you, please write: I am not bothered by anything."
3. "Is there something you had to give up because of membership in the group? If you do not find anything you had to give up because of the membership, please write: I didn't have to give up anything."

A further limitation of our study could be the qualitative processing of respondent's answers by two researchers. The interrater reliability was considered to be the agreement between raters, but Cohen's kappa cannot be calculated. Analysing the answers by three or more researchers in an independent way, "triangulation" (Denzin, 1989), could be considered as more effective. Our way of processing was used especially because of the number of respondents – data processing by three separate researchers would have been very expensive and time consuming.

In spite of the aforementioned limitations to our study, we believe that our results bring interesting revelations that enrich the less explored area of the impact of men's participation in men's groups on their quality of life. The results of our study will hopefully ignite an interest in further research in this field. Comparisons of our study with results with other (non-Christian) men's groups could also be interesting. Deep interviews with the leaders of groups which have been established for a longer length of time and an analysis of their previous problems could be useful for such groups only at the initial formation stages. It suggests that Christian men take benefit from meeting together with other men in order to share their inner experiences in their lives.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ Nowadays a lot of activities are organized by three associations: YMCA Familia (www.familia.cz), YMCA Setkání (www.setkani.org) and Centrum pro rodinu (www.centrumprorodinu.cz).

- ² A few internet conferences on the principle of google groups exist. The most active group is the closed group "Men – initiation", where men who went through the Men's Rite of Passage meet. It is also possible to participate in a conference called men-information, where people can announce and look for news about planned events.

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