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Full Report of Research Activities and Results.

Gendered Bodies, Personnel Policies and the Culture of the British Army.

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Full report of research activities and results to Economic and Social Research Council, January 2003

1. Background

The context for this research is the gradual increase in the proportion of women in the British Army. By September 2001, women comprised 7.2% of the regular Army (9.5% officers, 6.8% other ranks; DASA 2001). The extent of women's military participation is a complex issue. There are practical and managerial issues involved, but more challenging for the Army are the ways in which military culture has had to adapt to women's growing presence and to deal with gender and difference. The underlying question this research asked was whether cultural barriers were limiting the full participation of women in the Army. Obviously, investigating military culture and gender is a potentially enormous task. This research looked very specifically at one small part of that culture, namely that surrounding the personnel or employment policies aimed at facilitating women's participation in the Army. We were interested in how cultural attitudes evident in discourse about gender influenced the development and implementation of specific initiatives. The policy areas of interest were:

- the expansion of posts open to women in 1998 and the subsequent announcement in 2002 on combat effectiveness and gender which maintained the exclusion of women from certain direct combat posts;
- the introduction and implementation of Physical Selection Standards (Recruits) (PSS(R)) in 1998;
- the development of strategies for equality of opportunity and the management of diversity; and
- the more general codification of employment issues set out in the Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy (AFOPS), implemented in 2000.

For each of these, we investigated whether they contained an identifiable understanding or interpretation of what gender (as an organisational category) meant, and how that particular discourse of gender operated. This research did not constitute an evaluation of these policies, and nor was it motivated by any particular view on women's suitability for close combat. Rather, we were interested in the cultural ideas about gender which informed these policies and wider practices in the Army.

This research was based on an understanding of gender as a social category, rather than as biologically determined. This understanding of gender argues that gender identities – what it means to be a man or a woman – is socially determined, is temporally specific, is spatially contingent, and is embodied and physically expressed. This understanding suggests that the gender relations experienced in different organisations are driven by the discourses of gender circulating within it. The Armed Forces are not

unique in constructing a specific understanding of gender, but they do so in ways unique to them producing a culture of gender specific to that organisation. The conceptualisation of culture informing this research was of culture as a 'whole way of life' involving practices, representations, languages, customs and the construction of knowledge in discursive frameworks as 'common sense'. (A longer review on theories of gender and their relevance to the military was included in the original application.)

2. Objectives

The original research objectives are set out below, with a commentary on how they were addressed and whether they have been met.¹

Objective 1: To theorise the construction of gender within military cultures by looking at the development and implementation of personnel policies with reference to conceptual debates on the formation of gendered subjectivities, corporeality and performativity.

We have theorised the construction of gender within military cultures as revolving around three concepts. The first is gendered subjectivities, which refers to how people see themselves as men or women, how they view the categories of male and female, and how these views coalesce within discourses (systems of concepts) constructed and reproduced within an institution or a culture. The second concept is corporeality, which refers to the embodied experience of gender (hence the title of the project), and which sees gendered identities as physically located. The third concept is performativity, which refers to the idea that gender is expressed (performed) in the everyday rituals and activities within an institution or culture.

The policies of interest were examined with a view to teasing out any (discursive) content which talked into these three concepts. We conclude that a number of discourses about the woman soldier circulate within policy debates within the Army, and inform the practice of policy implementation. These discourses construct the woman soldier as (variously) capable but limited, keen but sensible, sexualised, potentially disruptive, and potentially one of the male group but ultimately limited in her contribution because of her sex and physicality. Naturally, these are not the only discursive constructions of the woman soldier in circulation within the Army, but they are the ones which appeared most evident in this particular analysis of policy documentation.² We also conclude that these military cultural constructions make the figure of the woman soldier safe, contained and unthreatening. This could be interpreted as a defensive act, a cultural mechanism for protecting the Army as a masculine institution. These observations take forward existing theoretically-informed studies of gender in the Armed Forces; there is a significant academic literature on military masculinities (see Woodward, 1998, 2000, 2003) but little on the discursive construction of female gender identities in the Armed Forces.

¹The commentary is brief because of the word limit of this report. The academic publications which constitute the major part of the output of this research will elaborate on these ideas more satisfactorily than we are able to do here.

² These discursive figures resonate with the much cruder tabloid media constructions of women soldiers described below, suggesting a closer link between military and popular cultures than we had anticipated. The Army is not a closed institution in this respect.

Objective 2: To generate research data using qualitative methods to address the following research questions about the discursive repertoires informing the development and implementation of policies for women's participation in the Army:

- a) How does Army culture shape the development of personnel policies for women's increased participation in the Army?**
- b) What is the role of Army culture in the implementation of policies for women's increased participation in the Army?**
- c) What are the lessons for the Army of this examination of the cultural contexts which shape the development and implementation of policies for women's inclusion?**

The techniques for generating qualitative data are outlined in Section 3 below.

Objectives a) and b) above have been addressed and met as follows. Army culture³ is hierarchical, predicated on an organisational system which is tightly ranked and stratified and which operates through a fairly strict chain of command. This system shapes the development and implementation of policy by providing a pre-existing structure through which policy directives can be passed. For example, an initiative originating centrally within the MoD or at a tri-service level can be put into practice quickly and efficiently. This system also allows policy to be tightly codified (i.e. written up extensively as rules and regulations) and broken down into its constituent parts to be delegated at the appropriate level. It became apparent during the research that the development and implementation of policy operate in combination and are better analysed together. Feedback mechanisms enable assessments of the efficacy of policy to feed up the policy hierarchy.

Army culture is built around a tightly bounded code of conduct which provides a moral reference point. Disobedience to orders incurs penalties which are often viewed as severe by civilian standards. Overt resistance is often difficult, if not impossible. In terms of the policies under discussion, checks on their implementation ensure overt compliance. A (possibly unintended) consequence is that resistance becomes hidden, which makes it harder to identify and police. In some areas, such as the enforcement of anti-harassment measures, this can be problematic. This problem was recognised by interviewees, and is also recognised in the academic literature on the subject.

Army culture draws on a range of core military values, some of which may be inimicable to equal opportunities for women's full participation. Army culture is traditionally a masculine one, drawing on specific views of women which may be out of step with contemporary social attitudes (see Section 4 below).

Research question c) has been addressed by suggesting to the Army the need for greater awareness of the subtleties of military discourses about gender. There is general recognition about the need for cultural change to accompany the implementation of policies for the wider participation of women. Many

³ 'Army culture' is a blunt term to use for a 'way of life' of a large and diverse organisation. The ideas set out below are those suggested by research which looked for key discourses, rather than an approach aimed primarily at spotting variety within an organisation. We recognised during the research that cultural differences in terms of constructions of gender are apparent between capbadges, depending on the proportion and rank of the women deployed and the professional activities they undertake.

have argued that such changes take time, occurring over a generation or more. There is room, however, for the Army to be proactive in promoting cultural change within the institution, not least by being alert to the implicit messages communicated through discourses on gender (outlined above). The dynamics of the relationship between popular and military cultures need recognition, given the influence of the former in shaping attitudes towards women soldiers (see Section 4 below).

Objective 3: To assess the utility of concepts such as sexed subjectivity, corporeality and performativity in understanding the production of military subjects, by asking what theoretical lessons could be drawn from this investigation.

The commentary on Objective 1 explains these concepts. The utility of these concepts has not been doubted during this research, because they have enabled us to develop a distinct analysis of gender within the British Army which goes beyond existing descriptions of the position of military women. Future publications will expand on these ideas.

Objective 4: To feed back to policymakers within the Ministry of Defence and the Army the research findings on the role of culture as a gendered social practice in the development and implementation of Army personnel policies.

See Sections 5 and 6 below.

Objective 5: To use this research project to lay the groundwork for a more extensive future project on gender, culture and military bodies in the British Armed Forces.

Future research opportunities are currently under discussion; Section 8 below outlines likely future topics.

There was no substantive change to these five aims and objectives during the course of the research, beyond those described above. However, in addition to the above, and as a direct result of the research process, an additional objective emerged. This was to explore the relationships between representations of the woman soldier in popular culture (particularly popular news media) and the discourses informing the development of personnel policies within the Army. There is evidently an exchange between the two; this research did not explore the dynamics of that relationship, and this is identified as an area for future research.

3. Research Methodology: Data Sources and Research Techniques

Analysis was undertaken of relevant unclassified policy documentation from the Army, the MoD and from the House of Commons Defence Committee, Army publicity and recruitment documentation, research reports from academic and military organisations, and briefing papers from the Equal Opportunities Commission. Documentary analysis drew on established methods for textual and discourse analysis, which entailed looking for content and discursive themes.

Research interviews were conducted with relevant personnel from the MoD and Army responsible for the development, implementation and public face of policy on gender and employment in the Army.

Interviews were taped, transcribed, analysed through textual analysis methods involving the coding up of discursive content.

Media sources were used in order to put the study of military culture and gender within a wider cultural context. Sources included print media (tabloid and broadsheet) retrieved through electronic searches; television documentaries; non-fictional accounts of military life; and television and print advertising. These sources were examined for their discursive content and coded accordingly.

'Soft' sources, primarily off-the-record conversations with serving personnel, did not provide a direct source of data, but were invaluable in providing explanatory intelligence to assist the analysis of policy documentation.

4. Research Results

Equal Opportunities and the Management of Diversity

The Army's achievements in developing a coherent policy framework for the implementation of equal opportunities policies should be commended as an example of good practice. Initiatives include the introduction of Physical Selection Standards (Recruits) (PSS(R)) which matches the physical abilities of all recruits to the different employment groups on offer in the Army; the expansion of posts open to women; top-down directives from the Chief of General Staff on equal opportunities; the implementation of IDT(A)10 on equal opportunities; the establishment of the Tri-Services Equal Opportunities Training Centre at Shrivenham and the provision of equal opportunities training at a senior level (training for unit advisors, plus day courses for those of the rank of Brigadier and above); the establishment of mechanisms to support personnel and eliminate harassment and bullying; and high-profile publicity drives to demonstrate the Army's commitment in this area.

Equal opportunities is defined by the Army as a combat effectiveness issue: 'The Army is to promote an environment which is free from discrimination, harassment and intimidation, in which every individual has an equal opportunity to contribute to operational effectiveness' (CGS 2000, p.1). The Army has partial exemption from equal opportunities legislation; for this reason, the exclusion of women from some direct combat position is entirely legal. There is some irony in this. A recruitment office window poster⁴ proclaiming 'If you've got what it takes, take it further' notes at the bottom 'Ages 15-26, male only. The Army is committed to Equal Opportunities.'

Although a credible framework exists to facilitate equality of opportunity for all, some problems remain with policy implementation in practice, and these problems lie entirely with the need for cultural change within the Army. Examples include resistance towards the idea of accommodating difference within the Army amongst some 'opinion-makers' within senior ranks; the notion held by some that the accommodation of difference implies some sort of externally imposed political correctness; and anecdotal

⁴ Observed on The Strand, London, June 2001.

evidence for the movement of discrimination and harassment underground, where challenging it becomes more problematic.⁵

Inducing cultural change in an organisation is difficult, and takes time. Generational changes will ultimately have the most impact, and there was evidence from interviewees that younger officers were less resistant to change than those reaching the end of their careers. Change can be slow and cumbersome to induce: one interviewee commented that changing attitudes within the Army was like 'turning a supertanker'. Attitudes towards gender appear to vary with rank and capbadge.

There is an identifiable linguistic and conceptual shift taking place in the Army, a move from talking about equal opportunities to talking of managing diversity. The adoption of the discourse of diversity (which originated in the private sector as a means of addressing social difference whilst using it for competitive advantage: Prasad, 2001) is both interesting and problematic. It is interesting because it is seen as an evolutionary step, a means of moving forward once the legislative and policy frameworks have been set in place. It is interesting because the 'management of diversity' is seen as more palatable and less political than the idea of equal opportunities, to which many within the Armed Forces have become hostile.⁶ It is also interesting because, as one interviewee argued, the notion of diversity accords with some core Army values which emphasise fairness and the value of an individual's contribution to a larger team.

The notion of diversity is problematic, however. It emphasises that we are all different, but equates all differences whatever their basis. As a consequence, this removes consideration of the power relations which lie behind the social construction of that difference (Sinclair, 2000). Sources of disadvantage – such as sexism and racism – can be trivialised (Prasad, 2001). The notion of diversity also universalises difference, implying that all differences can be managed according to equivalent processes. Diversity becomes a technical or managerial issue, and the assumptions of managerial ideologies can remain unquestioned. Structural problems – the causes of difference – remain unaffected. The discourse of rights in the public and private sectors, of which the move to diversity is part, is increasingly resistant to the idea that the workplace is a site for producing social change. This appears to be the case in the Army.

The notion of diversity is also problematic in that it works against other core military values such as conformity to authority and uniformity in the group. We would concur with Dandeker and Mason's observation that ultimately embracing difference in the Army requires a reconceptualisation of the very character of military organisations (2001, p.229). Diversity, for women soldiers, allows their incorporation into the Army, but only insofar as they can be like men and conform to the group. Military discourses about gender construct women as different in specific ways; some of these differences are presented as incompatible within military life, and problematic to women's full inclusion in the Army. A good example of this is seen in the debate on women in combat roles, discussed below. Where women can be made like or represented as being like men, difference can be accommodated. Where difference is understood as significant, it is constructed as problematic.

⁵ 43% of soldiers believe the army has a problem with harassment, discrimination and bullying, and 4.7% complained of sexual discrimination or harassment (Guardian, 12.11.02.).

⁶ The idea that equal opportunities constitutes 'political correctness' (or even 'political correctness gone mad') is a common theme in commentaries on the inclusion of women from senior personnel.

Combat effectiveness and gender

On 27th October 1997 the Secretary of State for Defence announced that from 1st April 1998 all jobs in the Army would be open to women, with the exception of direct combat posts in the Infantry, Household Cavalry and Royal Armoured Corps, Royal Marines and the RAF regiment. This increased the proportion of posts open to women from 47% to 70%, opening up posts on Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers and Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. 'If we are to properly modernise our Armed Forces, we must also bring our personnel policies up to date. The Armed Forces must represent the society they defend if they are not to become isolated from it' (MoD 1997). There was pride in this move: 'New figures released today by the Ministry of Defence reveal that every day is International Women's Day in the Armed Forces with Servicewomen deployed around the world defending the nation's interests' (MoD 1999).

This expansion of posts open to women and speculation as to whether the exclusion of women from close combat positions would be lifted, generated much comment from interviewees. A very diverse range of personal opinions – positive and negative – were offered on the topic. The research (because of the timing of the Secretary of State's announcement in May 2002) was not able to examine responses to the decision, but the publication of the study into Combat Effectiveness and Gender is considered here.

The decision to keep some infantry and armoured corps positions closed to women should be seen as essentially a political one. Following a review of relevant literature and field trials, the decision rested ultimately on 'military judgement', rather than on scientific evidence. 'Under the conditions of a high intensity, close-quarter battle, group cohesion becomes of much greater significance to team performance and, in such an environment, failure can have far-reaching and grave consequences. To admit women therefore, would involve a risk without any offsetting gains in terms of combat effectiveness.' (MoD 2002a). The military judgement concluded that mission success and the survival of units engaged in close quarter battle depends on unit cohesion. Given the lack of direct evidence from either field exercises or comparative material from other countries,

'The military viewpoint was that under the conditions of a high intensity close-quarter battle, group cohesion becomes of much greater significance to team performance and, in such an environment, consequences of failure can have far-reaching and grave consequences. To admit women would, therefore, involve a risk with no gains in terms of combat effectiveness to offset it' (MoD, 2002b, paragraph 18).

However, the Report seems to offer no explanation as to how the admission of women would pose a risk, and no explanation of what it is about women that constitutes the risk to combat effectiveness. The Report notes that the literature review and field trials were either equivocal, or indicated that factors other than gender would also undermine unit cohesion. The implication of this Report is that the very presence of women in a combat unit would automatically incur a risk, purely because of their gender. The reasons why this is so are absent from the report. The implication of this lack of explanation is that the decision to keep women out of combat roles rests on an understanding of women as essentially disruptive, not because of anything specific that they may do, but through their very presence. An essentialist assumption has been made about women, and a precautionary principle applied.

This conclusion has been based on our reading of the report and decision on *Women in the Armed Forces*. Supplementary briefing documentation supported this view by expressing doubt that mixed gender teams would develop bonds of unconditional trust, loyalty and mutual support required in a fighting unit. The implication, again, is that women are disruptive to the unit by their very presence. In addition, anecdotes about women soldiers told in interviews were revealing because of the ways in which they were used to point to this idea of disruption. The representation of women as disruptive undermines, in our view, the Army's moves to portray itself as a progressive employer open to all sections of society.

This resistance to women's full participation is indicative of some deeply-held and often very traditional beliefs about gender roles, sometimes radically out of step with contemporary social values. Some interviewees argued (and we would concur with this) that the symbolic importance of the figure of the (infantry) soldier as an exclusively male one should not be underestimated. According to this argument, the removal of the idea of combat as an all-male preserve is threatening and destabilising to the Army's collective sense of self as a masculine institution. The opening of combat positions to women is therefore not just another incremental step towards equality of opportunity, but the breach of a boundary which marks out the Army as a masculine preserve.⁷

The significance of popular culture

Although this research didn't set out to look directly at popular culture and its dialogue with the Army, as the research progressed this relationship seemed more and more important. Policy debates spark media responses. Media events provoke reaction in policy. Furthermore, and in line with the growth of promotional culture in many facets of social life, the Army has developed an increasingly sophisticated approach to its portrayal of itself to the wider public; see for example, its most recent television advertising campaigns targeted at women.

There has been very little serious consideration of this relationship. The academic literature on civil-military relations has not looked in depth at cultural issues, and the cultural studies literature has not investigated the Armed Forces to any significant extent.

Popular (tabloid) media provides a constant stream of images and representations of women soldiers. Whilst it is easy to dismiss tabloid treatment of military issues as 'just entertainment', we think the style and tone of such coverage is significant because of the power of the images and arguments it contains. A proportion of the readership of tabloid newspapers constitutes labour pool from which the Army draws the vast majority of its recruits to the ranks. These images are thus influential, and need to be taken seriously by the Army and MoD.

Our analysis suggests that media representations of women soldiers tend to cluster around two distinct images or figures. One figure is of the woman soldier as a sexual object, and who is disruptive precisely because of that sexuality. This figure was given physical form when a Sun 'Saucy Services Special' announced that 'Today sexy Lance Corporal Roberta Winterton becomes first serving soldier to pose on

⁷ The Army, we insist, is a masculinist organisation; it is probably the only contemporary institution where 'manning' is promoted as a gender-neutral term.

Page 3 TOPLESS. [...] Eyes front, everyone – and get a load of this curvy corporal'.⁸ Pregnancies amongst women sailors, mention of a drugs scandal on board one Royal Navy craft and the death of a crew member from falling into a dock, all in the same Saucy Services Special elided the presence of women with sexual activity and disruption. The going AWOL of a woman soldier whose photograph had previously been used in a publicity poster was reported with glee ('Our Love on the run')⁹, and a 'Sun Exclusive' on 'The Spy Who Shagged Me' reported a relationship between a Signals Captain and a Lieutenant Corporal in a Russian military intelligence unit in Kosovo.¹⁰ This figure of the sexualised disruptive makes the figure of the woman soldier safe, contained and non-threatening by reducing her as an object of parody and ridicule. It emphasises her sexuality and thus her potential for disruption within the (male) unit.

The second figure is of the woman soldier as a tomboy or incomplete man. She is a competent soldier insofar as she can be like men. However, she can never be exactly like a man, and is contained or made safe in this way. For example, media coverage of the first women to undertake the Royal Marine Commando Training Course at Lympstone was extensive. Three women (denoted as 'girls' in media coverage) and 66 men undertook that particular course. The women were singled out for coverage. None completed the course. The women's failure was explained in terms of their physical inadequacy; 'Gutsy Claire knew she'd had enough' and 'realised she did not have enough strength'.¹¹ Broadsheet coverage of the Army's deployment during the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001 offered up a more positive representation of women soldiers involved during the crisis, but still played on this tomboy figure. The tomboy figure is interesting, because it shows the woman soldier moving into male territory, but only to a limited extent.

These two images serve as poles around which representations of women soldiers cluster in tabloid coverage of military issues, particularly issues of gender. These figures appear in their crudest form in tabloid coverage, but they also resonate through policy debates on women in the military. For example, the notion of the woman soldier as disruptive on the grounds of her sex and sexuality could be traced in the debate about combat effectiveness and gender. The development of strategies for the management of diversity accommodate women to the extent that they are like men, and become problematic because of the extent to which women are different from men.

These two figures, as used in the popular press, do women soldiers no credit. To the extent that they resonate in policy debates on women soldiers, they do the Army as an equal opportunities employer no credit. More progressive figures of the woman soldier are needed. This is a necessity not least for recruitment reasons; the Army needs to draw on a pool of labour with the requisite potential to become good soldiers, and that pool is increasingly female. Progressive figures are needed as part of wider cultural change which the Army needs to make in order to get the most from its workforce (the ultimate goal of 'diversity strategies'). Recent advertising campaigns (such as the TV advertisements 'Floorboards', 'Crossbar'), have been seen as ground-breaking for the way in which they target women. However, they still draw on ideas which sexualise the figure of the woman soldier. The young woman in 'Floorboards', the 'face of the modern Army' we were told, wears only her underwear.

⁸ The Sun, 9th February 2001.

⁹ News of the World, 11th February 2001.

¹⁰ The Sun, 6th April 2001.

¹¹ The Sun, 26th April 2001.

This research did not set out to analyse the relationship between popular culture and military culture in any depth, but the following observation stands out. This is that the Army needs to take these representations seriously. The media's political role and its assumption of 'power without responsibility' have long been recognised by the MoD in the management of information during military deployments. Day-to-day coverage deserves equivalent consideration.

5. Activities

Initial research findings were disseminated to the Army in December 2002 in a short report (see Outputs). A presentation of research findings will be made to the MoD's Defence Scientific Advisory Council Working Party on Women in New Military Roles in March 2003.

Media interest is anticipated once a press release is issued, the final research findings (of which this report is part) are deposited with the REGARD database and the report is available on the web.

Seminars to initiate comment on initial research findings were given to academic colleagues in the Department of Sociology, University of Newcastle, (31.05.02) and the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies, University of Sunderland (28.10.02.)

6. Outputs

- Gender and Culture in the Contemporary British Army: A Research Report to the Army and Ministry of Defence.
- Woodward, R. and Winter, P. 'Every day is International Women's Day': discourses of gender in the contemporary British Army. Currently with *Armed Forces & Society*. We are still awaiting the editor's decision on a revised version.
- Woodward, R. and Winter, P. The limits to diversity: gender, women and the British Army. *Gender, Work and Organisation*. Accepted for the 3rd International Gender, Work and Organisation conference, 25th-27th June 2003, University of Keele. To be submitted for refereeing and publication following the conference.
- Winter, P. and Woodward, R. Tomboys and topless Lance Corporals: British media representations of women soldiers. *Feminist Media Studies* To be submitted summer 2003.
- Winter, P. and Woodward, R. Tamzin's back: The British woman soldier in television drama. *Television and New Media* To be submitted autumn 2003.
- Information about the qualitative data collected will be deposited with the ESRC's Qualidata archive.

7. Impacts

Reporting on impacts is premature, although it should be noted that the research users within the Army and MoD have expressed an interest following distribution of the research findings report.

8. Future Research Priorities

We have identified three areas for further research.

- Gender identities and women personnel within the British Armed Forces. Part of the rationale of this project was to conduct preliminary pilot research on gender in the Army, in order to stimulate contacts and ideas for a larger research project. This would focus on the construction of gender identities and gendered subjectivities, and would draw on the same conceptual framework as the research reported here. To date there have been no systematic studies of the experiences of women personnel in the British Forces; a considerable US literature exists on this, and some journalistic accounts of the British experience remain in print, but this is an obvious gap in the military sociology literature.
- Family life and the retention of women Armed Forces personnel. Informal conversations with women personnel during this research highlighted this as a cause for concern for the armed forces, and as a significant issue for women personnel. Policy-orientated research in this area would have direct relevance to the Armed Forces, and would also talk into academic debates on the structuring of employment and gender / family relations.
- The relationships between popular and military cultures. We have already noted the significance of the relationships between popular representations of military life (including women Forces personnel) and the Armed Forces. Further research in this area should be directed at examining the dynamics of this relationship in terms of mutual influences and strategies.

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