



FlashReport

Victims versus perpetrators: Affective and empathic forecasting regarding transgressions in romantic relationships

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Affective forecasting about transgressions showed an overestimation level bias.
- ▶ However, individuals correctly forecast that perpetrators would feel worse than victims.
- ▶ Empathic forecasts also revealed an overestimation bias.
- ▶ Moreover, a role bias (victim versus perpetrator) was evident for empathic forecasts.

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ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that people frequently mispredict their own and other people's emotional responses. In a longitudinal study, both members of 104 couples predicted the degree to which they (affective forecast) and their partner (empathic forecast) would experience sadness in response to 20 relationship transgressions, in both victim and perpetrator roles. Then, every two weeks for 10 weeks, participants reported whether they or their partner had enacted each transgression and indicated how sad they felt about each transgression. Such procedures allowed for comparisons of both affective and empathic forecasts with actual experiences for both victim and perpetrator roles. Participants forecast greater sadness for themselves and their partner in both the victim and perpetrator roles than they actually experienced. Participants correctly forecast that they would be sadder in the perpetrator than the victim role, but incorrectly forecast that their partner would be sadder in the victim than the perpetrator role.

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Introduction

Our actions do not occur in a social or emotional vacuum. Therefore, it is surprising that researchers have not investigated the accuracy with which individuals predict how their actions affect *others* emotionally. Although a flurry of research has investigated how accurately individuals predict their own emotional responses to events that occur to them (affective forecasting), only one report has investigated predictions of how others will respond to those same events (empathic forecasts; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Specifically, Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) investigated affective and empathic forecasts regarding feedback on a cognitive test. Individuals overestimated the intensity of another person's affect, just as they overestimated the intensity of their own affect (impact bias; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998), and the magnitude of overestimation

was comparable for affective forecasts and empathic forecasts. Although Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) took the first step toward examining empathic forecasting, neither they nor any other scholars have investigated forecasts of others' emotional responses to one's own actions—a particularly important type of empathic forecast.

Dyadic relationships are a fertile context for exploring this type of empathic forecast and comparing empathic forecasts to affective forecasts. In intimate relationships, two roles frequently exist for such events. For example, interpersonal transgressions—a virtually inevitable byproduct of interdependence—involve a victim role and a perpetrator role. An individual could be keeping an important secret from her partner (perpetrator role), and her partner could be keeping an important secret from her (victim role). This role variable allows for a novel investigation of forecasting accuracy. Not only can we test for a *level bias* for both affective forecasts and empathic forecasts (i.e., overestimation or underestimation of one's own and one's partner's affect), as previous research has addressed, but we also can investigate the possibility of a *role bias* (i.e., differing forecasts

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for multiple roles regarding the same event), which previous research has not addressed. We examine affective forecasts and empathic forecasts of both perpetration and victimization in romantic relationships, which allows us to address several previously unanswered questions not only about affective and empathic forecasting, but also about how people respond to being the victim or the perpetrator of transgressions in intimate relationships. For example, do people overestimate their own emotional response to relationship transgressions? Do they forecast that they will feel worse as the victim or as the perpetrator? What are their corresponding empathic forecasts of their partner's feelings? Do these forecasts match reality? Below, we present our hypotheses for forecasting biases regarding both the *level* (general overestimation of emotional responses) and the *role* (the victim's and the perpetrator's emotional responses) of affective and empathic forecasts regarding transgressions in romantic relationships.

The affective forecasting literature reveals that people tend to overestimate both their positive affect following positive events, such as their favored team or candidate winning a football game or election, and their negative affect following negative events, such as failing to earn tenure or the breakup of a romantic relationship (e.g., Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Gilbert et al., 1998). People overestimate their emotional responses because they focus overly on the event as a source of affect (i.e., focalism; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000), and they overestimate the impact of similar past events (i.e., retrospective impact bias; Wilson, Meyers, & Gilbert, 2003). Consistent with this research, we hypothesized that individuals would overestimate their own sadness as both a victim and a perpetrator of transgressions.

Hypothesis 1. Level bias in affective forecasts.

The accuracy of affective forecasts regarding one's role in transgressions depends on both the actual experiences of victims and perpetrators and individuals' forecasts of these experiences. Although both parties are likely to feel bad after transgressions, perpetrators may feel worse for several reasons, including being responsible for having harmed a loved one and experiencing shame and guilt (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). For example, research on unrequited love found that rejectors felt certain negative emotions (e.g., self-blame, regret) more than their would-be lovers (Baumeister, Votman, & Stillwell, 1993). Will people be attuned to the greater sadness that they are likely to experience as the perpetrator than as the victim? Although affective forecasts tend to be inaccurate in that they generally overestimate emotional responses, forecasts can be accurate in other respects. In one study, individuals overestimated the distress that they would feel following a romantic breakup, but were accurate regarding the steady decay of their distress over 10 weeks (Eastwick et al., 2008). Similarly, a recent meta-analysis of affective forecasting studies employing within-participant designs found that individuals overestimated their absolute level of affect, but were accurate regarding their relative level of affect: Those who predicted that they would feel the most distressed did indeed feel the most distressed (Mathieu & Gosling, 2012). Consequently, we hypothesized that individuals would be aware of the victim-perpetrator disparity in sadness and would correctly forecast that they will feel sadder as a perpetrator than as a victim.

Hypothesis 2. Role accuracy in affective forecasts.

Past research offers less guidance regarding empathic forecasts of a partner's emotional responses to transgressions. Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) found a level bias in empathic forecasts regarding feedback on a cognitive test: Individuals overestimated the intensity of affect another person would experience. Individuals also egocentrically project their own affect on others when making social judgments (an "empathy gap"; e.g., Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). Thus, we hypothesized that individuals would exhibit the same *level*

bias for empathic forecasts as for affective forecasts, overestimating their partner's sadness as both victim and perpetrator.

Hypothesis 3. Level bias in empathic forecasts.

Past research has not addressed whether individuals exhibit a role bias in empathic forecasts. It is possible that individuals would predict that their partner will respond in the same fashion as themselves when they switch roles. If this is the case—if there is *role projection*—then they would forecast that their partner will feel the same way that they do in each role, sadder as the perpetrator than as the victim. However, we suggest a more likely possibility is that individuals instead will focus on the transgression itself and predict that their partner's affect will covary with their own. If this is the case—if there is *event projection*—then they would forecast that their partner will be sadder when they themselves are sadder (i.e., when they are the perpetrator and their partner is the victim) and less sad when they themselves are less sad (i.e., when they are the victim and their partner is the perpetrator). Individuals may overestimate the extent to which they are the center of their partner's emotional world, assuming that their partner's affect hinges on their actions and is likely to mirror their own. Previous research on the empathy gap and coregulation of affect in dyadic relationships appears to support event projection (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Schoebi, 2008; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). That is, empathic forecasts may be anchored by the affect individuals anticipate feeling in response to an event, despite the fact that their partner is in a different role. Thus, we hypothesized that participants would anticipate that their partner will feel sadder as a victim than as a perpetrator.

Hypothesis 4. Role bias in empathic forecasts.

Method

Participants and recruitment

Both members of 104 heterosexual couples ($N = 208$) who were married or had been dating for at least six months were recruited through advertisements, emails, and Craigslis.com postings. Six participants reported that neither they nor their partner committed any transgressions during the course of the study. The final sample included 202 participants (103 women) who were 26.86 years of age on average ($SD = 7.48$); 83% were Caucasian, 9% African American, 4% Asian American, and 4% other. Thirty-four percent of participants were married ($M_{\text{MarriageDuration}} = 5.42$ years, $SD = 8.04$); 48% were dating and 17% were engaged ($M_{\text{RelationshipDuration}} = 2.27$ years, $SD = 1.81$). Participants were paid \$126 if they completed all parts of the study and a prorated amount if they did not. Eighty-four percent of participants completed at least 8 of the 10 online follow-up questionnaires.

Procedure and materials

The present study was part of a larger investigation of relationship processes that included a laboratory intake questionnaire and 10 biweekly online follow-up questionnaires, each lasting 10–15 min, over the following five months. On the intake questionnaire, participants imagined that their partner committed each of 20 transgressions, encompassing domains such as deceit, infidelity, and aggressiveness (see Table 1 for the complete list as well as descriptive data on occurrences and average reported sadness for affective forecasts, empathic forecasts, and actual experiences). For each potential *partner transgression*, participants made an affective forecast about how they would feel as the victim of the transgression ("About one week afterwards, how happy would you feel about your partner's potentially hurtful behavior?"; for all items 1 = *very sad*, 7 = *very happy*) and an empathic forecast about how their partner would feel as the perpetrator of the transgression ("About one week afterwards, how happy would your partner feel about his/her own

Table 1

Number of participants reporting at least one occurrence; total number of reported occurrences; and average affective forecasts, empathic forecasts, and actual affective experiences of each transgression, separately for the victim (left) and perpetrator (right) roles. Values in parentheses are standard deviations.

Transgression	Victim role					Perpetrator role				
	Ps.	Occ.	Affective forecasts	Empathic forecasts	Actual experiences	Ps.	Occ.	Affective forecasts	Empathic forecasts	Actual experiences
My partner was sexually unfaithful	1	1	7.00 (–)	7.00 (–)	2.00 (–)	9	15	6.13 (1.55)	5.73 (1.22)	4.73 (1.49)
My partner was emotionally unfaithful	11	16	5.06 (1.24)	5.56 (1.26)	4.75 (1.69)	17	41	5.10 (1.43)	4.49 (1.33)	4.20 (1.21)
My partner flirted with someone else	18	33	3.15 (2.11)	4.58 (2.23)	3.00 (1.73)	34	74	3.72 (1.38)	4.01 (1.64)	3.38 (1.50)
My partner forgot something that is important to me	21	28	4.11 (1.52)	4.58 (1.29)	3.82 (1.63)	16	20	4.35 (1.04)	4.40 (1.35)	3.80 (1.64)
My partner was physically aggressive towards me (hit or pushed or slapped me, etc.)	21	40	5.18 (1.47)	5.62 (1.28)	3.25 (1.64)	25	48	4.21 (2.68)	5.54 (1.34)	3.49 (1.86)
My partner acted excessively clingy with me	29	40	3.75 (1.39)	3.80 (1.70)	3.28 (1.41)	14	22	3.59 (1.65)	3.52 (1.29)	2.68 (1.89)
My partner kept a secret from me	31	42	4.58 (1.28)	4.76 (1.68)	3.88 (1.66)	33	67	4.81 (1.36)	4.34 (1.23)	4.39 (1.54)
My partner lied to me	33	54	5.11 (1.38)	5.66 (1.36)	3.64 (1.46)	32	62	5.05 (1.52)	5.11 (1.42)	4.15 (1.58)
My partner did something that he/she knew I did not want him/her to do	37	58	4.19 (1.49)	4.94 (1.51)	3.36 (1.70)	38	53	5.04 (1.22)	4.34 (1.27)	4.10 (1.36)
My partner was controlling of me	41	75	4.68 (1.03)	4.23 (1.53)	3.84 (1.37)	24	60	3.62 (1.40)	4.43 (1.44)	3.58 (1.82)
My partner was messy in a way that had a negative effect on me	41	81	3.58 (1.25)	4.23 (1.27)	3.70 (1.28)	34	64	4.22 (1.45)	3.95 (1.61)	4.03 (1.25)
My partner engaged in behavior I don't respect	42	62	4.69 (1.19)	4.74 (1.25)	4.02 (1.49)	30	43	4.84 (1.17)	4.17 (1.77)	4.56 (1.30)
My partner handled money poorly	45	83	4.53 (1.42)	4.68 (1.29)	3.51 (1.41)	42	77	5.06 (1.24)	4.90 (1.33)	4.39 (1.47)
My partner was rude to (or about) one of my family members or friends	47	63	4.16 (1.47)	4.86 (1.62)	3.33 (1.37)	36	58	4.36 (1.44)	4.10 (1.29)	3.28 (1.50)
My partner was emotionally distant from me (for example, acted coldly)	53	100	4.83 (1.43)	4.87 (1.31)	4.30 (1.41)	63	107	4.52 (1.43)	4.62 (1.29)	4.32 (1.36)
My partner did not support me when I needed it	55	85	4.95 (1.43)	5.56 (1.15)	4.22 (1.60)	27	34	5.09 (1.69)	4.79 (1.34)	3.82 (1.51)
My partner downplayed the importance of something I think is important	82	186	4.11 (1.09)	4.88 (1.18)	3.74 (1.38)	43	66	4.41 (1.38)	4.17 (1.39)	3.65 (1.48)
My partner was disrespectful to me	90	172	4.54 (1.51)	4.97 (1.32)	4.02 (1.52)	53	90	4.94 (1.40)	4.40 (1.23)	4.26 (1.63)
My partner made fun of me	108	232	3.12 (1.37)	3.92 (1.40)	2.45 (1.31)	80	166	3.66 (1.47)	3.30 (1.37)	2.65 (1.38)
My partner communicated with me in a negative way (for example, spoke meanly or didn't listen to me)	115	264	3.93 (1.29)	4.56 (1.48)	3.64 (1.51)	92	206	4.46 (1.41)	4.12 (1.36)	3.89 (1.51)

Note. "Ps." = number of participants reporting at least one occurrence of the transgression; "Occ." = total number of reported occurrences of the transgression. Necessary changes to the wording of transgressions were made for potential own transgressions.

potentially hurtful behavior?"). We chose the happy/sad continuum measure of affect in order to (a) be consistent with the bulk of past affective forecasting research, and (b) be relevant for both roles (victim and perpetrator). Then, participants imagined that they committed each of the 20 transgressions against their partner. For each potential *own transgression*, participants made an affective forecast about how they would feel as the perpetrator and an empathic forecast about how their partner would feel as the victim. Thus, participants made four forecasts of each transgression following a 2 (type: affective versus empathic) × 2 (target of forecast's role: victim versus perpetrator) design.

On each follow-up online questionnaire, participants reported whether or not they or their partner committed each of the 20 transgressions; over 3000 transgressions were reported. For each reported partner transgression, participants reported how happy/sad they were as the victim ("Right now, how happy do you feel about your partner's hurtful behavior?"; for all items 1 = *very sad*, 7 = *very happy*). For each reported own transgression, participants reported how happy/sad they were as the perpetrator of the transgression ("Right now, how happy do you feel about your hurtful behavior?"). All items were reverse-scored for clarity of presentation in the results.

Results

Data had a four level structure in which reports about transgressions were nested within type of transgression within person within couple. Because these nested observations violate the ordinary least squares regression assumption of independence, we used multilevel modeling to conduct unbiased hypothesis tests (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). We conducted a multilevel regression analysis—much like a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) but accommodating the nested structure of the data—predicting sadness about the transgression from type of report (affective forecast, empathic forecast, or actual experience) and

the target of the forecast's role in the transgression (victim or perpetrator).

Was there a *level bias* in *affective forecasts*? Yes. When collapsing across role, participants overestimated the sadness that they would feel about a transgression against their partner, $\beta = .61, t(7916) = 19.35, p < .0001$ (see Fig. 1; compare the average of the two bars on the left with the average of the two bars on the right), supporting **Hypothesis 1**. Was there a *role bias* in affective forecasts? No. Although participants reported actually feeling sadder in the perpetrator role than in the victim role, $\beta = -.25, t(7913) = -5.25, p < .0001$, as illustrated by the difference between the black and white bars on the right, they also forecast feeling sadder in the perpetrator role than in the victim role, $\beta = -.31, t(7913) = -6.39, p < .0001$, as illustrated by the difference between the black and white bars on the left; the 2 (type: affective forecast versus actual experience) × 2 (role: victim versus perpetrator) interaction did not

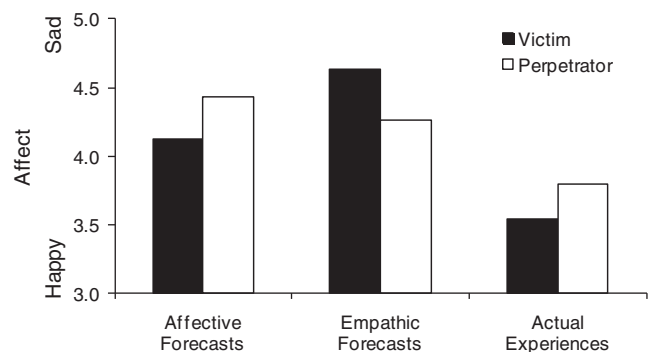


Fig. 1. Affective forecasts, empathic forecasts, and actual experiences of happiness/sadness about relationship transgressions experienced in the victim and perpetrator role.

approach significance, $\beta = -.05$, $t(7913) = -.86$, $p = .39$. In short, the difference in sadness between the victim and perpetrator roles was not significantly different in the actual experiences compared to the affective forecasts, supporting **Hypothesis 2**: Individuals accurately predicted that they would feel worse as perpetrator than as victim.

Was there a *level* bias in *empathic* forecasts? Yes. When collapsing across role, participants overestimated the sadness that their partner would feel about a transgression in their relationship, $\beta = .82$, $t(7916) = 25.82$, $p < .0001$ (compare the average of the two bars in the center with the average of the two bars on the right), supporting **Hypothesis 3**. Was there a *role* bias in empathic forecasts? Yes. Participants mistakenly forecast that their partner would feel sadder in the victim role than in the perpetrator role, $\beta = .37$, $t(7913) = 7.54$, $p < .0001$, as illustrated by the difference between the black and white bars in the center. Moreover, the 2 (type: empathic forecast versus actual experience) \times 2 (role: victim versus perpetrator) interaction was significant, $\beta = .62$, $t(7913) = 9.81$, $p < .0001$, indicating that the difference in sadness between victim and perpetrator roles in the actual experiences was significantly reversed in empathic forecasts, supporting **Hypothesis 4**.

Discussion

In a longitudinal study of romantic relationship partners, we compared individuals' forecasts of their own and their partner's affect regarding relationship transgressions to their own and their partner's actual affect once such transgressions occurred. Forecasts of emotional responses to transgressions in romantic relationships were predictably faulty in some respects but accurate in another. Consistent with **Hypothesis 1**, there was a level bias in affective forecasts: Individuals overestimated the sadness that they would feel in both the victim and perpetrator roles; this level bias is consistent with the bulk of previous affective forecasting research, but extends affective forecasts into the new domain of relationship transgressions. Consistent with **Hypothesis 2**, there was role accuracy in affective forecasts: Individuals correctly forecast that they would feel sadder as the perpetrator than as the victim, perhaps because they were cognizant of the negative feelings that accompany committing an offense that potentially harms their partner and relationship (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Consistent with **Hypothesis 3**, and in parallel fashion to affective forecasts, there was a level bias in empathic forecasts: Individuals overestimated the sadness that their partner would feel in both the victim and perpetrator roles. Interestingly, and consistent with **Hypothesis 4**, there was a role bias in empathic forecasts: Individuals mistakenly forecast that their partner would feel worse as the victim than as the perpetrator.

There are important theoretical implications of these findings. First, the findings regarding empathic forecasts have implications for the emotion intensity bias, the notion that individuals typically perceive their own affective experiences to be more intense than the affective experiences of others (Chambers & Suls, 2007). In contrast, we found that empathic forecasts for the victim role were more intensely sad than affective forecasts for the victim role, $\beta = .51$, $t(7913) = 12.06$, $p < .0001$. Second, the findings extend past work on empathic forecasting. The level bias of overestimation of affect in empathic forecasts is consistent with the only other work on empathic forecasts (Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Pollmann and Finkenauer found that empathic forecasts were not moderated by variables such as the individuals' closeness to the other person (stranger versus friend) or whether or not individuals had themselves just experienced the event. However, our examination of the victim versus perpetrator role revealed a critical divergence between affective forecasts and empathic forecasts: Individuals correctly forecast that they would feel sadder as the perpetrator than as the victim, but inaccurately forecast that their partners would feel sadder as the victim than as the perpetrator. In fact, empathic forecasts for the partner as victim were the most inaccurate of the four types of forecasts.

There are some notable strengths of this research. One strength is that it extends affective forecasting research into a new domain. The vast majority of affective forecasting research (and the only work on empathic forecasting) has focused on events that simply happen to people (e.g., the outcome of an election; Gilbert et al., 1998). For the sake of methodological simplicity, researchers typically have focused on events that (a) are dichotomous (i.e., have two mutually exclusive outcomes), and (b) will occur on a specific future point in time. Thus, clear affective forecasts can be made for all possible outcomes and actual experiences can be assessed at a predetermined time. No previous research had examined affective forecasts in an ecologically valid context of interdependent behaviors people may or may not enact in the future and for which multiple roles (i.e., victim and perpetrator) exist.

A second strength is that our assessment of forecasts and responses utilizes the state-of-the-science measurement strategy. Levine, Lench, Kaplan, and Safer (2012) recently published a set of empirical studies and a meta-analysis suggesting that the often-obtained impact bias in affective forecasting is at least partly due to a procedural artifact. Specifically, they demonstrated that individuals tend to misinterpret questions about how they would feel in general at a future date as asking how they would feel about a focal event (e.g., the outcome of an election). When forecasting questions were posed more precisely—that is, when it was clear to participants that they were to forecast their *general* affect, the impact bias was significantly reduced and individuals made accurate affective forecasts of their future general affect. In our work, we asked participants to make forecasts of and report their actual emotional responses to the focal event in particular (i.e., each of the 20 transgressions). For example, we assessed affective forecasts regarding partner transgressions with the item "...how happy would you feel about your partner's potentially hurtful behavior?" and we assessed the corresponding actual experiences with the parallel item "...how happy do you feel about your partner's hurtful behavior?" (emphasis added). Thus, our work does not suffer from the procedural artifact identified by Levine et al. (2012).

We see great potential for future research in this area. First, the finding that perpetrators felt sadder than victims (and that individuals accurately forecast this difference) has implications for the study of forgiveness and related processes. Future research could investigate how emotional responses as well as forecasts unfold over time for both roles in the aftermath of transgressions in relationships, as has been done with relationship breakups (Eastwick et al., 2008). Second, future research could address whether the pattern of level and role biases for affective and empathic forecasts extends to other contexts, such as positive events (e.g., sacrifices for partners) or positive and negative events in non-romantic relationships (e.g., friendships). Research on empathic forecasts in particular is shockingly sparse. Third, whether or not the role bias for empathic forecasts—individuals mispredicting that their partner will feel worse as the victim than as the perpetrator—extends to other domains, what might account for it? Future research could explore potential causes of the role bias for empathic forecasts, which could stem from affect coregulation or an empathy gap (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Schoebi, 2008; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). It also is possible that individuals may overestimate the degree to which their partner's emotional life is dependent on the relationship with the individual. In other words, a type of egocentric relational focalism may cause individuals to overestimate their partner's dependence on the relationship (versus other domains of their life) for happiness, which, in turn, may lead them to overestimate their partner's sadness as the victim of their transgressions. Perhaps any such relational focalism would be more likely to occur in especially close, committed relationships, as a type of inclusion of other in the self process (Aron & Fraley, 1999).

In sum, emotional time travel is error-prone; though individuals correctly forecast that they would feel sadder as a perpetrator than as a victim, they overestimated the intensity of their sadness in both roles. Empathic forecasts combine emotional time travel with mind reading,

so perhaps it is not surprising that individuals had greater difficulty making accurate empathic forecasts; they not only overestimated the intensity of their partner's sadness in both roles, but they also mispredicted that their partner would feel worse as a victim than as a perpetrator. Both affective and empathic forecasts of hurtful behaviors are important because individuals presumably make decisions regarding a number of partner-relevant behaviors (e.g., keeping a secret, flirting with others) in part on how they think it will make them—and their partner—feel.

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