A Dilemma-based Approach to Teaching Ethics: Life Lessons for Family and Consumer Sciences College Seniors

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In a capstone course for family and consumer sciences (FCS) college seniors, students used a dilemma-based approach to evaluate and articulate their personal and professional values as well as those of others. Qualitative data were collected across four years to examine the impact of course content and pedagogical approach on student definitions of the terms "ethics" and "morals" as well as their identification of personal and professional values. Content analysis of data suggests that students may adopt more complex social values and demonstrate an improved ability to articulate their values as an outgrowth of their involvement in ethics education. The pedagogical framework appears to have increased student appreciation for diverse opinions, openness to alternative positions in the reasoning process, and a more invested sense of professional and social responsibility.

Recently, widespread professional misconduct has signaled a general decline in professional ethical standards (Allen, Bacdayan, Kowalski & Roy, 2005; Callahan, 2004). Further, cheating has increased in high schools and universities (Graves, 2008; Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2011; Mangan, 2006; McCabe, 2005). Universities have long been charged with the professional preparation of students (Farnsworth & Kleiner, 2003). Such evidence suggests a mandate to integrate ethics as a required curriculum component.

Review of the Literature

Unethical Behaviors among Students

Unethical behavior in college is understandable because many children today are taught from a very early age to win at all costs (Callahan, 2004; Giacalone & Promislo, 2013). Peer pressure and readily available technology prompt students as early as junior high to do whatever is necessary to conform to peer group expectations (Norquist, 2005). High school students cheat to gain entrance to prestigious universities: "The evidence is that a willingness to cheat has become the norm" (Josephson, as cited in Callahan 2004, p. 203). Galloway (2012) reported 93% of high school students in an upper middle class community had cheated at least once, while in another study, 80% of high-achieving students admitted to some form of academic dishonesty (Who's Who Among American High School Students, 2000).

Confusion about what behaviors are considered unethical may constitute part of the problem (Jones, 2011). In one study, a majority of high school students recognized unethical situations and identified ethically appropriate behaviors; however, more than one-fourth of the students did not recognize unethical situations, and 44% of students indicated they would participate in unethical behavior (Vincent & Meche, 2001). Hard and Conway (2006) proposed that academic misconduct is multi-dimensional, ranging from the form of work submitted (research papers, final examinations) to misconduct that is spontaneous or pre-planned to students receiving or providing assistance. Given this multi-dimensionality, it is understandable that students may be confused about exactly what constitutes unethical behavior.

A majority of college undergraduates and graduates have cheated (Mangan, 2006; McCabe, 2005; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001; Simkin & McLeod, 2010). In a study of 1051 undergraduate and graduate business students, Nonis and Swift (2001) noted that: (a) students who believed that cheating or dishonest acts were acceptable were more likely to engage in such behaviors; and (b) students who engaged in dishonest acts in college were more likely to engage in such acts in the workplace. This suggests that cheating may have become normative behavior for today's student. Therefore, it is important to increase students' awareness and understanding of unethical behavior in order to foster academic and, ultimately, workplace integrity (Graves, 2008; Shurden, Santandreu & Shurden, 2010). Also, practice-based examples may enable students to freely express their viewpoints on ethical situations (Randall, Mitstifer, Brandes & Collins, 2007).

By way of context, in 1998, the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) approved the *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for Family Scientists*, a formal code of ethics for the family science discipline (Adams, Dollahite, Gilbert & Keim, 2001; Adams, Keim & Dollahite, 1997). Adams et al. (2001) investigated the positions of 357 family scientists on ethical issues associated with the adopted principles and concluded there was a fundamental need for better education regarding ethical principles and guidelines and a strong desire among family life professionals for ethical guidance.

Academic Debate over Ethics Education

Scholars disagree about the effectiveness of ethics education (Daehlen, 2005; Leo, 2002; Nesselroade, Williams, Nam & McBride, 2006; Rasche, Gilbert, & Schedel, 2013) as well as the effectiveness of approaches to teaching ethics (Allen et al., 2005; Carroll, 2005; Kayes, 2002). Traditionally, ethics has been taught in the fields of medicine, nursing, healthcare and counseling. New empirical evidence shows that students benefit from and appreciate ethics education (Lau, Caracciolo, Roddenberry & Scroggins, 2011). Consequently, business schools and other disciplines that prepare students for professional careers have introduced ethics into their curriculum (Adams et al., 2001; Carroll, 2005; Farnsworth & Kleiner, 2003; Humbarger & DeVaney, 2005; Paulins & Lombardy, 2005; Roubanis, Garner & Purcell, 2006; Rasche et al., 2013).

Wilson (1999) argued that ethics education better prepared female nursing students to resolve ethical dilemmas. In her study, as a consequence of ethics training, females who exhibited an ethic of care orientation incorporated the male-oriented ethic of justice reasoning into their evaluation of ethical dilemmas. However, teaching ethics aimed at forcing life sciences students to accept certain values may create problems (Clarkeburn, 2002). The focus should, perhaps, be on the process of moral decision-making as well as ethical sensitivity. Further, teachers must help students to understand the concept of ethics while modeling professional ethical behavior (Anderson, 2005). Nonetheless, Rasche et al. (2013) warned of a gap between "upbeat rhetoric" about ethics education and the actual integration of ethics concepts into required curriculum.

Ethics education should also be tailored to students who reason at different levels of understanding. In one study, students in an introductory ethics course learned about ethics; however, the students' personal values remained essentially unchanged (Klugman & Stump, 2006). The authors concluded that introductory classes caused students to reflect on their choices concerning right and wrong without necessarily prompting changes in moral position. Older students experience a natural progression in understanding and reasoning abilities

(Clarkeburn, Downie, Gray & Matthew, 2003; Davis & Welton, 1991), so discussions of ethical dilemmas may be more effective for upper-level students who can look beyond the basic tenets of ethics to their practical application in moral reasoning (Shurden et al., 2010).

Woogara (2005) expressed concern that teaching ethics in large, diverse classrooms may be counterproductive because students enter the classroom espousing different cultures and beliefs. Leo (2002) blamed postmodernism, suggesting that we have arrived at an era of moral relativism in which individuals, as products of a modern culture, are encouraged to view their own cultural norms as universal standards. Truth, then, becomes "whatever the tribe or individual says it is" (Leo, 2002, p. 14). Postmodernists might suggest that there are no universal ethical standards. Conversely, ethics education may enhance an individual's ability to reason on a moral level regardless of cultural norms (Klugman & Stump, 2006).

In a study of the impact of ethics training on student perceptions of Maccoby's instrumental values, Allen et al. (2005) found that increased emphasis on ethics in the curriculum did not significantly change perceptions of the importance of "head" (thinking aspects) and "heart" (feeling aspects) values. The authors suggested this was a consequence of the emphasis on logic and reasoning in the curriculum. Daehlen (2005) also found minimal changes in students' ratings of intrinsic and extrinsic job values as a result of higher education, and Etzioni (2002) concluded that business education not only fails to improve moral character, but weakens it. Still, in a recent study of education students, researchers found that principled moral reasoning can improve through educational intervention, even in the short span of a single college semester (Cummings, Maddux, Cladianos, & Richmond, 2010).

In sum, requiring ethics education may help bridge the gap in trust and legitimacy experienced by businesses and professions. Moreover, acquiring skills to recognize and analyze ethical issues elicits a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility and permits tolerance of moral disagreement and ambiguity (Farnsworth & Kleiner, 2003). Universities are already charged with conveying discipline-based core values and with socializing students to oversee and maintain such values. The issue, then, may not be *whether* ethics is taught, rather *how* it is taught.

A Dilemma-based Approach

Kayes (2002) summarized three historical approaches to teaching values and ethics. The values clarification approach (Rokeach, 1973) helps students understand their own values orientation, providing an increased level of self-awareness, causing them to confront inconsistencies. Kohlberg's (1981) moral reasoning approach incorporates critical thinking and the application of values to outcomes, requiring students to defend their values position using progressive developmental stages. Thus, Kohlberg shifts emphasis from identifying values to applying those values to a situation requiring action. The third approach, the ethics instruction approach, emphasizes application of normative models of decision-making in applied settings, including utilitarianism, the Kantian categorical imperative, and Aristotelian virtue ethics (Kayes, 2002).

Method

The NCFR code of ethics for FCS professionals encourages teachers to emphasize the role of ethics in the related professions while maintaining a vested interest in the student (Roubanis, Garner & Purcell, 2008). An AAFCS conference-based Roundtable on Ethics (2005) invoked the following principles for FCS professionals: professional competence, respect for

diversity, scholarship and research, confidentiality, conflict of interest, and responsibility to the profession. McGregor (2005) extended this thinking to the workforce, suggesting that FCS professionals strive to produce research and acquire higher education so as to maintain proficiency, accept changes in leadership, and work to sustain the profession. Following is a description of a university course that prepares FCS students to address and accommodate professional ethics.

For the instant course, the author found merit in all three of Kaye's (2002) approaches, incorporating them into a pedagogical constructivist framework to create an environment in which students draw upon personal experiences to build new knowledge (Paulins & Lombardy, 2005). It might be argued that integrating different reasoning approaches enhanced the value of differing opinions and decision processes. Finally, the varied analytical approaches grounded the new knowledge that resulted from evaluations and discussions of the ethical dilemmas.

Indeed, this paper has two purposes: (a) to present the reconceptualized content and pedagogical approach of an FCS capstone ethics course, and (b) to determine, using a before-and after research design and qualitative analysis, whether this course impacted students' articulation of personal and professional values and their understanding of "ethics" and "morals" over the term of a semester.

Course Structure and Study

The FCS Department of the southeastern university at which this course was taught houses several professional programs: Nutrition & Dietetics, Hospitality Administration, Interior Design, Fashion & Retail Merchandising, Family Studies, and FCS Generalist and Teaching Certification. All student majors must successfully complete *Senior Seminar for FCS Professionals*. Course content was developed to convey the basic tenets of ethics and moral reasoning through topical readings and structured analysis of ethical dilemmas with an aim to better prepare students to address future professional issues.

In the first half of each semester, students read about and discussed ethics. Readings included *The Cheating Culture* by David Callahan (2004), *How Good People Make Tough Choices* by Rushworth Kidder (2009), short news articles, and business-related excerpts. Daily, students formed small groups to discuss dilemmas and solutions, after which they informally presented their analyses, prompting further class discussion. The analytical structure followed Kayes (2002, p. 310):

1. Think critically about the problems,
2. account for the multiple competing values that arise during decision making,
3. recognize and explicate personal values and their influence on decision making, and
4. apply ethical decisions by analogy.

Students learned fundamental philosophical approaches to resolving dilemmas: utilitarianism, Kantian categorical imperative, and Aristotelian virtue ethics, along with Kohlberg's (1981) moral reasoning stages. They practiced applying each of these types of reasoning so that (a) alternative solution processes were explored, and (b) different opinions were acknowledged and appreciated. Students conducted analyses both in groups and individually, orally and in writing.

Initially, dilemmas of a general nature provoked discussion and encouraged students to openly express opinions and explore personal moral positions. The teacher played the role of

facilitator, encouraging debate, prompting explications, and ensuring that all students had a chance to voice their opinions. Dilemma content then progressed to professional situations, including topics such as client confidentiality, discrimination, and business tactics. Having previously examined personal values, students were thus prompted to explore those values in a professional context. Dilemmas that invoked social and moral responsibility at both group and individual levels were also introduced, encouraging students to consider aspects of moral responsibility to their profession and to society.

Another course requirement was the submission of weekly reflection journals. The instructor responded to all submissions, creating a private dialogue that allowed students to elaborate upon classroom discussions. For example, students offered personal thoughts about dilemmas or related issues –reflections perhaps not fully communicated in the class or that resulted from further thought. Students often discussed issues in their personal life. Many drew upon dilemma resolution structures in order to work their way through an issue.

In the present study, qualitative data were collected over four years (eight class preparations). Students answered the following questions in their first journal, and again as part of their semester-end journal:

1. Define the term "ethics."
2. Define the term "morals."
3. What are five personal values you think are important?
4. What are five professional values you think are important?

The aim of the study was to determine the impact of the course content and instruction method on student perceptions. Content analysis of responses was conducted to: (a) extract general themes, and (b) identify changes that occurred during the semester as a result of course exposure and pedagogical approach.

In a concerted effort to integrate dictates of naturalistic inquiry as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility and dependability were achieved through the collection of data over a prolonged period (four years) from every student who took the course. Further, journal responses were directly transcribed (trustworthiness) and became the text from which the analysis was conducted. Transcriptions provided thick description (rigor) from which thematic analysis could be conducted. Moreover, study outcomes were discussed and enriched using actual quotes from student entries. A final methodological step addressed confirmability when two small groups of students were selected to review the proposed themes derived from the content analysis, then to reflect upon conclusions drawn.

Study Outcomes and Evaluation

A total of 254 students completed the course during the four-year period, with an average class size of 30 students. For analysis, all student responses to each journal question were transcribed and grouped as either Beginning-of-Semester (BOS) or End-of-Semester (EOS) comments. Once grouped, the responses were analyzed in order to identify prominent themes (using repeated key words or phrases) associated with each question. Finally, BOS findings were compared to EOS findings for each question.

In general, the greatest changes in student responses occurred in the definition of the term "ethics" and, to a lesser extent, in the definition of the term "morals." While important distinctions were evident between student identifications of personal and professional values,

there was less change across the semester in values cited for either domain. The discussion that follows integrates direct quotes from students in order to best reflect and support study conclusions.

Definition of ethics. At the beginning of the semester, common themes in response to the definition of ethics question were (a) the role of society (law) in determining right and wrong; (b) the logic or set of principles applied to determining actions; (c) the importance of morals as a reasoning premise; (d) the link, even interchangeability, between morals and ethics; and, (e) the underlying role of personal and professional values.

Initially, students defined ethics as rules "dictated more by what society deems as correct, proper, acceptable, and appropriate." Often, students suggested that ethics were a result of the group's (society's) decision of what was right and wrong, culturally accepted, and a guide to individual actions. Repeatedly, students referred to ethics as "guidelines," "standards," "principles," even "laws" used to guide both individual and group behavior.

One student defined ethics as "a set of *reasons*, or the *basis* behind how I make decisions." Another wrote that ethics were "a person's rationale about different situations and their key to answering difficult questions." Students viewed ethics as fundamental to existential action. "I think ethics has to do with our choices based on what we would do when put in a dilemma or situation. This defines who we are." Some saw no difference between ethics and morals. Both concepts were viewed as values, or beliefs, perceived as logically compatible. In other words, ethics and morals could not be distinguished. Students also perceived a link between personal and professional ethics. For example, honesty was the value most often cited for both personal and professional values. Integrity was also identified as important in both domains (Tables 1 and 2). One student said, "My personal values are similar to my professional values, but, in a way, the people in your professional life can be like your family." Another student noted, "My job is who I am."

End-of-Semester (EOS) responses revealed that students were better able to distinguish a difference between ethics and morals, describing ethics as socially constructed standards. Explanations evoked the following themes: (a) conscious choice of principles, actions; (b) social code of values; (c) underlying importance of morals; (d) appreciation of varying points of view; and, (e) importance to a professional standard of conduct.

One student wrote that ethics are "the ability and choice to do the right thing by a set of standards that have been established," while another stated that ethics permitted one "to know how to deal with situations in the most positive way and to try and benefit both sides in the workplace and in everyday life-- being able to identify both positive and negative outcomes that arise, and knowing how to handle them in the best possible way." In other words, students expressed more investment in ethical standards. While some continued to acknowledge society's role in providing guidelines for behavior, many more felt increased personal accountability.

Morals were still included in some definitions of ethics, often in reference to a "code of values" that underlies the standard by which one behaves. One student defined ethics as the "system of morals and values." Another stated, "Ethics is having morals." But, many more had teased apart the two definitions, identifying ethics as individually determined, but socially enacted.

A marked EOS change was the valuing of differing viewpoints. "Ethics is what comes after you know where you are standing in life on certain situations. You have to take into account that there are different ways to look at situations even though you do not feel the same way." Students recognized not only the importance of appreciating differences of opinion, but also of

inclusiveness in making choices. One student wrote that ethics had to do with "the way you rationalize situations, how you derive your answer, which is how we come up with multiple answers. There is never one way to solve things." Such responses indicate the effect of the pedagogical dilemma approach. Clearly, students understood the importance of diverse positions.

The changed understanding of ethics has implications for professional applications. "Ethics are the values and standards we use in our decision making process without giving certain types of people priority over others." One student identified ethics as "the backbone to the professional side of life." Students appeared better equipped to set and abide by ethical standards in their respective professions.

Definition of morals. Beginning-of-semester themes in student definitions of the term, morals, were succinct. Students viewed morals as personal, internalized and derived primarily from family values. Morals were characterized as the guidelines for personal conduct, for knowing what was right and wrong, serving as the foundation of one's character.

"Morals are more personal" wrote one student. They are "what is inside of each individual." "There are no rights or wrongs because morals are personal." Students described morals as a personal code of conduct, "standards of human conduct, a set of convictions that guide me in decision making." Morals are grounded in family values, instilled at a very young age, possibly even extending to include culture and "surrounding environments." Many viewed morals as the foundation for personal judgments of what is right and wrong and as providing direction for future actions. One student wrote that, "morals are what builds good and bad character."

End-of-semester definitions of morals followed similar themes, emphasizing family as the source of acquired, internalized values. Students continued to view morals as the underlying codes by which an individual judges right and wrong. Many distinguished a difference between morals and ethics, but also acknowledged an important connection between the two.

One student defined morals as a set of "internal laws that people *want* to obey," connected with one's inner circle – family and friends. Morals are personal beliefs that guide individuals in their choices, such as "doing something good to help someone, being kind." Morals define and reify the individual. "Certain things don't have a price tag, cannot be replaced or taken away. These are your morals. They hold intangible value and define a person's personality, not the way they think, but why they feel that way. Morals are the depth of your conscience. They are the reason, concern, heart and soul of your mind." In EOS statements, there was new evidence, however, that the basis of such beliefs could and should be reevaluated, or at least expanded.

In conclusion, one student cautioned, "Remember that ethics and morals are intertwined." Another stated, "I still do not know how to explain the difference between the two. I do know there is a difference though." Such comments, while tentative, suggest a different understanding of ethics and morals as a result of class interactions. While students better articulated the change in their understanding of ethics, they also better understood that morals and ethics are different, yet complementary. It *is* difficult to discuss ethics without introducing the notion of morals and values and, by contrast, it is difficult to discuss morals and values without inferences about ethical principles and belief systems. Class discussions appear to have enhanced reflection.

Personal and professional values. Several conclusions may be drawn from student responses to questions about their personal and professional values (See Tables 1 and 2). First, with the exception of "honesty" and "integrity," there were few instances in which students identified the same personal and professional values. Second, there was little change over the

semester in the personal values articulated by students with the exception of increased EOS social consciousness. Finally, BOS professional values included commonly recognized values such as respect, accuracy, punctuality, ambition, and commitment. These values were reiterated at the end of the semester but several more complex values such as accountability and sense of accomplishment were introduced.

The marked delineation between personal and professional values was intriguing. If students view values as internalized codes of conduct that frame individual behavior, personal values should underpin professional behavior. Conversely, if students view the two domains as entirely separate, then it makes sense they would articulate different value sets. Class discussions identified conflicts that may arise when individuals bring differing sets of values to the workplace. Students may not yet appreciate the associated implications.

Several personal values identified by students were spiritual (Table 1). Such a finding was not surprising given the demographics of the student population in this southeastern university. Other values emphasized family and the importance of relationships, love, and honesty or trustworthiness. Many values recalled such accepted institutional codes of conduct as the Boy/Girl Scouts: reliability, obedience, courage. All of these values were restated at the end of the semester.

Table 1

Most Frequently Identified Personal Values at Beginning- and End-of-Semester

Personal Values	BOS	EOS
Honesty/Trustworthy[a]	109	98
Family	83	66
Church/God	70	50
Loyalty	39	45
Friends	42	39
Respect	29	29
Love	26	24
Integrity	19	22
Education	19	15

Note: BOS = Beginning-of Semester and EOS=End-of-Semester

[a]The author concluded that these terms held similar meanings; therefore, responses were tabulated together.

The finding of few EOS differences in personal values is congruent with Klugman and Stump's (2006) findings among college seniors versus freshmen. Perhaps student values were reified by exposure to class content. Importantly, though, students identified more social, or global, values at the end of the semester. For example, EOS personal values included conscientiousness, selflessness, generosity, and responsibility. It may be that the course emphasis on personal and professional responsibility encouraged reflection and integration of new values. Such a conclusion parallels the finding that the course prompted students to reevaluate and modify their definition of ethics.

Many BOS professional values were re-identified as important at the end of the semester (Table 2), including leadership, drive, ability to communicate effectively, quality, and punctuality. This suggests that upper-level students have acquired the “language”

Table 2

Ranking of Repeated Professional Values and Values Cited Only on BOS or EOS

Repeated Professional Values[a]	BOS Only[b]	EOS Only[c]
Honesty, Trust	Independence	Communication
Respect	Wisdom	Creativity
Punctuality	Skills/Competence	Problem-solver
Integrity/Dignity	Respect for Authority	Resourceful
Hardworking	Consistency/Accuracy	Compromise
Team Player	Cleanliness	Ability to Motivate
Other Values:		
Dedication/Commitment	Patience	Honor
Responsibility/Accountability		

Note: BOS = Beginning of Semester; EOS = End of Semester

[a]Column indicates values that were most often repeated from BOS to EOS. They are ranked based on the number of times repeated.

[b,c]Columns indicate those values cited only at BOS or at EOS. Not ranked.

of the professional workplace, articulating values viewed as important by their professions. Students recognized the importance of skill, competence, efficiency and creativity, but new EOS values included problem solver, sense of accomplishment, ethical conduct, and compromise. Again, these new values indicate a broader and deeper understanding of just what values may be relevant in the professional work environment. Certainly, understanding the importance of compromise reinforced EOS comments about ethics, i.e., that alternative points of view should be acknowledged and appreciated.

Implications for FCS Educators and Researchers

Despite scholarly disagreement about ethics education at the university level, there can be no disagreement that professional misconduct is of increasing concern. In the service-based professions characteristic of the FCS discipline, there is a real need to protect and nurture individual and social well-being. Adams et al. (2001) articulated as much in concluding that FCS professionals would be receptive to ongoing professional ethical guidance and better education about ethical principles.

The present study provides empirical evidence that ethics education can positively impact future FCS professionals. Specifically, the pedagogical framework of the course led to positive changes in student views, including increased appreciation for diverse opinions, openness to considering and integrating alternative positions in the reasoning process, and a more invested sense of professional and social responsibility. This finding suggests that college students who are exposed to a structured, yet reflective, review of ethics theory and moral reasoning, and who are guided through the resolution of ethical dilemmas, may be better prepared to address ethical issues in their future professions (Cummings et al., 2010).

The benefit of such critical exploration and reflection has several permutations. In many journal entries, students expressed a sense of personal growth that should, in fact, help them in the future. “I thought I was not ready for this class, [but] I have learned more about myself and I

have begun to think about others more than myself. It is probably one of the most personally beneficial classes that I have taken."

Relying upon Lincoln and Guba's (1985) position on transferability (as it relates to the conventional concept of external validity), this study utilized the full range of students who completed this course over four years, thereby providing thick description for independent interpretation. However, transferability is limited to the judgments of the "applier" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 316). Other limitations include the acknowledgment that development of themes and interpretation of raw data still remain somewhat subjective. And finally, this study did not seek to separately elicit or highlight differences in perceptions based on cultural expectations or values. Further research should compare the immediate impact of ethics education on FCS students with the long-term impact on the practices of FCS professionals. Further, it would be helpful to track evolving reasoning processes that occur as a student progresses through his/her college career. Students who took this course voiced the opinion that the course content should be addressed both at the beginning as well as the end of their college careers. Would an earlier introduction of these concepts change the responses and processes in the capstone course?

The dilemma-based approach to learning about ethics was well received. Students became very engaged in discussions. Could other pedagogical approaches be effective in teaching ethics? Additional research might investigate the reasoning behind the personal and professional values identified by students and why personal values changed so little. Finally, in this study, students identified different sets of personal and professional values. How might this impact professional behavior as well as personal well-being, even professional well-being?

Universities are charged with providing critical preparation for a student's professional career (Farnsworth & Kleiner, 2003). It makes sense, then, that university and FCS educators accept the responsibility of preparing students to recognize and effectively address the kinds of ethical dilemmas they will encounter in their chosen professions.

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