Access and Child Contact Centres in England and Wales: 
An Ethnographic Perspective

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SUMMARY. Access centres are a recent development in service provision for 
families facing difficulties over child contact following divorce or separation. The 
author has worked for over two years as a volunteer at an access centre and 
provides a personal view of key issues in the organisation and operation of access 
centres. Discussion of detailed case material throws light on the paradoxes which 
arise when a pro-access ideology is exercised in an informal setting.

The growth of the access centre movement
In recent years there has been a significant rise in the profile of voluntary 
sector agencies and organisations concerned with family issues at divorce 
and separation. Marriage guidance services, family mediation services, 
divorce centres and pressure groups such as Families Need Fathers and the 
National Stepfamily Association are available to assist families and 
individuals in dealing with the longer term consequences of relationship 
breakdown. A relatively new addition to this network of services are child 
access or contact centres, venues which can be used by couples experiencing 
difficulties over arrangements for a child to have contact with a non-resident 
parent after divorce or separation.

Over the past five or six years there has been a growing number of access 
centres throughout England and Wales. There is now a central co-ordinating 
body, the Network of Access and Child Contact Centres (NACCC), with its 
own committee and newsletter. This organisation brings together the 40 or 
so existing services and provides a forum for the sharing of experience and 
expertise with the increasing numbers of new and planned services (NACCC, 
1993). The use of these services by divorced and separating couples is likely 
to be given considerable impetus through policy and legislative changes 
intended to reduce state support for non-nuclear family forms. Principle in 
this regard is the Child Support Act 1991 which puts fathers under pressure 
to maintain an economic tie with their offspring. The linkage between 
paternity and economic support may well result in large numbers of fathers
wishing to see a return for their outlay and using access centres as a means to initiate or resume relationships with offspring that in the past might have been allowed to lapse.

Many access centres have developed as adjuncts to the provision of family conciliation and, like family conciliation services, they proceed with a basic recognition of the profound impact that an unhappy divorce or separation can have on a family. Access centres seek to ameliorate these effects for parents and particularly for children through the provision of support and expertise in the form of an appropriately staffed, neutral venue for child contact to take place. However, whilst there is a common objective within the access centre movement there is considerable variation in the manner in which services are provided. For example, there are differing degrees of involvement with the courts, of co-operation with probation services and of pro-active involvement with clients, with some services playing an advocacy role and others striving for neutrality. In many ways the development of the access centre movement is at a similar stage to that of family conciliation a decade ago: ad hoc service development in response to a recognised need, issues of ownership of the developing service (probation led or voluntary sector?), and the vexed issue of power and coercion being exercised in non-statutory and ‘informal’ settings (see Davis, 1988 for an overview of these issues). All of these difficult issues have been debated long and hard in the move towards a properly funded and integrated network of family conciliation/mediation services. As far as family conciliation is concerned, this particular journey is far from over and still seems a long way from the recommendations of the Finer Report (1974) which first advocated comprehensive steps to civilise the divorce process and its aftermath (see Walker, 1991). Access centres are currently embarking on a similar journey and will no doubt encounter many of the same problems and pitfalls on the road to an established, effective, properly funded and professional service. This paper offers a contribution to the parallel debates which are emerging regarding the form and function of access centres in England and Wales.

The evidence upon which this paper is based is derived from my experience as a volunteer with an access centre run by the Durham County Family Mediation Service (DCFMS). I have worked with this centre on a regular basis since its inception in the summer of 1990. This experience has enabled me to develop something akin to a participant-observer's perspective on the working of this access centre and to highlight some of the key issues encountered in the first two years of its operation. The methodology employed dictates that the account given here is essentially qualitative and as such it precedes a more comprehensive, quantitative evaluation study of the Durham service being carried out by the Relate Family Studies Centre at the University of Newcastle.
Disputes over child arrangements and the access centre

The most common pattern of child arrangements among service users is that children reside with their mothers. It is therefore fathers who live away from their children and who are having problems maintaining contact with them. At the time of writing, the Durham access centre had 82 cases which had been closed and of these no less than 77 (94%) recorded the mother as the parent with whom the child(ren) resided. In the five remaining cases, the child(ren) were living with their father in three (4%) cases, in one case residence was with a foster parent and in the final case the residence was split with one child residing with each parent. It would therefore seem that in the context of post-divorce conflicts over contact, ideas of ‘joint parental responsibility’ do not exist in the abstract but tend to be worked out against a dominant pattern of family relationships. In other words, it is men, at least in the short term, who are the main beneficiaries of the service.

Contact between fathers and children breaks down for all kinds of reasons; callous lack of concern on the part of fathers is often cited by mothers with whom the children live; abiding hostility and intransigence on the part of embittered mothers is often cited by fathers who live apart from their children. The result is a fractured triangle in which there is considerable pain for the father at the prospect of not having a relationship with his children; conversely, it is the very fact of this relationship which may be the cause of distress to the mother. The child is caught somewhere in between, the subject of competing versions of what are in his or her best interests. In the midst of the considerable sadness, anger and confusion which follows the ending of long term relationships the access centre aims to provide a positive, supportive and non-judgmental place for mothers, fathers and children to meet. In such an environment it is hoped that an estranged couple might begin the painful process of separating defunct roles as partners in an intimate relationship from ongoing ones as mothers and fathers. In this regard the access centre works within a broader pro-access, pro-relationship ideology of the Children Act 1989. Implicit in the running of the centre are assumptions about joint parental responsibility, that is, contact with the non-custodial parent is to be encouraged and joint parental decision-making concerning dependent children is the hoped for ideal.

Why parents come to the access centre

There are three main types of access difficulty which bring parents to the access centre, namely, establishing contact, re-establishing contact and maintaining contact. A brief discussion of each of these circumstances highlights the range of issues raised in the operation of access centres and sets the scene for a discussion of some key policy questions for the running of the centre.
Establishing contact

An important category of access centre users are those couples who have split up at a very early stage in their relationship. Toddlers and small babies are a frequent sight in the playroom of the centre. For example, of the 82 closed cases, nine (11%) indicated that fathers were seeking access to a single child who was under 12 months old. These cases would include couples who had only lived together for a short time as well as couples who had never lived together at all, that is, cases in which the parental relationship ended during pregnancy. In cases where access is taking place to babies with whom the father might have had very limited contact, the main problem is one of establishing contact for the first time. Interventions of this kind raise a special set of considerations for access centre staff. Is practical, educative-type assistance appropriate? How much should a floundering father be helped? Where does support and reassurance end and coercion begin? What are the ethics involved in supporting paternity that has little more than a biological basis? Cases such as the following encapsulate these issues.

CASE STUDY

Arthur and Sandra were referred to the access centre by a court welfare officer. Arthur was seeking access to his son who he had not seen since his birth some ten months earlier. Arthur and Sandra were not married and nor had they lived together. Their relationship had ended in extreme acrimony during the pregnancy and it was with considerable reluctance that Sandra agreed to use the access centre. She was extremely anxious about having any contact with Arthur and alleged that he had subjected her to serious assaults during their relationship and during the pregnancy. She was implacably opposed to future access. For his part, he spoke of his deep desire to establish contact with his son particularly as he had ‘missed out’ on the childhood years of a son by an earlier marriage who was now an adult and with whom he had only recently established contact. He felt he was older and wiser and despite the acrimonious ending to his relationship with Sandra he was desperate to ‘make a go’ of his relationship with his son.

The first meeting was scheduled for a maximum half an hour. The coordinators report for the day recorded in the space for the date of the next meeting ‘never again!’. The meeting ran into difficulties before it even started with myself and another volunteer engaging in what might be described as ‘feverish diplomatic activity’. In order to get the meeting to go ahead we had to shuttle back and forth between two frightened and anxious adults (each of whom stressed that we should be careful not to be taken in by the play acting of the other!). The meeting did go ahead, in a separate room from the main playroom - mother and father at opposite sides of the room,
the baby playing on the floor in the middle and two volunteers attempting to be as unobtrusive as possible. For half an hour Arthur simply watched the child playing on the floor, after which the mother picked up the child and left the room.

The couple went on to use the access centre a further 15 times over the year that followed. The visits were facilitated considerably by the support of female volunteers who enabled all parties to gain confidence. Over the course of the year Arthur had access to his son alone at the access centre and latterly would take him out in his pushchair for walks round the town. Sandra would simply drop off the little boy at the door. Despite certain adjustments on her part to the relationship that was developing between father and son, there was still a deep seated antagonism to Arthur and he was deeply mistrustful of her. This meant there was little confidence on any body’s part regarding what would happen once they stopped using the access centre and began to make their own arrangements for access.

One gets the impression that if fatherhood did not ‘happen’ at the access centre then it would be unlikely to do so anywhere else. Given that failed relationships and the unanswered questions which these create can throw dark shadows over entire lifetimes, this role is a crucial one. The access centre therefore may play a very important role in determining the development, or otherwise, of relationships between fathers, mothers and children. This raises important questions of policy as to how to deal with cases in which a man’s link with his child is premised on biological paternity and little else. In such cases one is prompted to ask just what are the most appropriate models of fatherhood for the access centre to reinforce?

Re-establishing contact

The second category of problem brought to the access centre concerns fathers wishing to re-establish contact after having lost contact some years previously. No less than 20 (24%) of the 82 closed cases recorded a break in contact of 12 months or more between father and child(ren). The longest gap recorded in these cases was four years although in this case the meeting never actually took place. However, reunions after gaps of two and three years are not uncommon. Typically, fathers in such cases were coming back to have another go at establishing their relationship. Many of these cases probably began as problems of the type described in the previous section with parents having separated when a child was very young and the father, having been waiting in the wings, is attempting to resume access at a point when the child is three or four years old. Fathers in these cases have usually tried to achieve their objectives by legal means, initiating sporadic solicitor activity, contacting the courts, having welfare reports prepared and so on, but to no avail. For them the access centre presents itself as another desperate chance to regain contact.
CASE STUDY
Susan married John when he was in the services and moved to army quarters in Germany. A year later a daughter, Laura, was born. However, when Laura was five months old Susan suddenly left with her and returned to her parents home in England. Some access took place whenever John was home on leave but this was sporadic and regularly broke down even though John eventually left the army and lived near to his ex-wife and daughter. When they were referred to the access centre by a court welfare officer, Laura was five and access had not taken place for the past 26 months. Prior to the first meeting between John and Laura an issue arose about names. Susan had a new partner who Laura referred to as ‘dad’ and she was concerned about what John was to be known as. Susan had explained the situation to Laura and was keen that her new partner remain ‘dad’ to Laura. After some skillful negotiation by a volunteer John accepted that he be called by his first name whereas the new partner be known as ‘dad’. The meeting went ahead in a rather matter of fact way with Susan dropping off Laura at the access centre and quickly leaving the building. With some assistance from one of the volunteers Laura was re-introduced to ‘John’ and very soon they were playing together on their own. They attended the centre on three occasions which appeared to go well for both father and daughter. However, two further appointments were cancelled by John; although Laura could operate quite happily with the re-defined roles it appeared that John was having considerably more difficulty.

The distress of parents under these circumstances is often palpable as they struggle to maintain dignity in the face of profound personal crises. Becoming a father who does not live with his children for many men involves a stunning sense of peripherality and dispensability which leaves them sad, angry, and bewildered. Some men spoke of their feelings of humiliation and embarrassment at having to use the access centre to see their children. For them use of the centre was somehow linked with that most negative of stereotypes, a ‘bad’ father, when what they most desperately wanted to be was a ‘good’ father.

Maintaining contact
The third type of circumstance in which the access centre is used is when feelings surrounding the ending of a relationship are running high and there is a considerable amount of blame and recrimination. An indicator of this may be seen in that the referral forms in almost half of the closed cases (49%) recorded that violence had been alleged or had actually taken place between the parents at some point in the past. In such circumstances, trust is the first casualty and continuity of contact between a father and his children is disrupted, perhaps irreparably. The access centre can provide a safe, neutral
venue at which parents have an opportunity to disentangle personal acrimony from mutually recognised and often mutually supported parental roles. Use of the access centre can provide a vital bridge enabling a parent to come to terms with the profound adjustments which divorce and separation bring in their wake such as re-housing, re-marriage, new financial circumstances of either themselves or their ex-partners.

Having given some impression of the types of circumstance which lead parents to use the access centre I now turn to a discussion of the setting in which the difficult and often painful business of meeting and spending time with estranged family members is conducted.

The Meeting Place

The Durham access centre is referred to less formally as ‘The Meeting Place’ and its name is intended to convey a sense of the style of service which is on offer to families: quite simply a place to meet which is neutral and safe and which does not carry the rather legalistic overtones which the terms ‘access’ and ‘contact’ are apt to carry. The Meeting Place is located in a large community-use building in the middle of Durham City. There is a large, well-equipped play-room, a coffee bar and numerous smaller rooms located around the building which can be used as waiting rooms and for quiet discussions. These factors are important given that men, women and children often arrive in a state of great anxiety regarding the meetings. Of particular importance in this regard is the issue of safety.

A place of safety

Mothers may be coming to the Meeting Place having been victims of violence or simply with the fear of violence. Either way, it is imperative that the question of safety is handled with the utmost care and sensitivity. This is greatly facilitated by the structure of the building which is somewhat labyrinthine; it has two stair cases but has only one exit and this is overlooked by a kitchen area which is always staffed. Together these features ensure that the two main conditions likely to be stipulated by mothers in cases where there have been difficulties with an ex-partner can be easily met. These are that a father should not be able to abscond with a child and that the access can take place without the parents actually meeting. The use of separate waiting rooms and staircases ensures that only those who wish to meet actually do meet.

A place to talk

Couples often come into the Meeting Place with deeply held resentments and disagreements. Each parent has a story to tell and these stories invariably justify why they have acted, and go on acting as they do, and,
more often than not, they act the way they do, not because they want to, but because they see the behaviour of their ex-partner as giving them no choice - 'if he didn't act like that, I wouldn't act like this' - and, of course, vice versa. The stories which legitimate such behaviour are told at length to judges, welfare officers, counsellors, conciliators, solicitors to say nothing of the families and friends of separating couples. They are also told to the staff of the access centre who can often assist couples to break out of a negative spiral of allegation and counter-allegation perhaps just by listening. Neither counselling nor conciliation are in any way objectives of the access centre, but it is clear that when people who are angry, distressed and in conflict are treated with empathy and understanding, these occasionally emerge as natural by-products.

**Public forum: private emotion**

The management of intensely private interactions in what is clearly a public forum raises important questions of privacy. The difficulties that mothers, fathers and children have in relating to one another are often stark and the fact that this might be being witnessed by up to eight other family groups only adds to the awkwardness. How then should this be handled? More private venues are available. Separate rooms are offered where this is thought appropriate but such offers are generally turned down. Mothers and fathers are often fearful of meeting and to do so in public would appear to be preferable to the risk of direct and private confrontation. Indeed, the presence of numerous children in the main playroom creates an air of normality which reduces the likelihood of children, mothers or fathers feeling under pressure. Ultimately, the cordial, business-like atmosphere of the main playroom serves to take much of the stigma out of the encounters which go on. A momentum of civilised and respectful interactions serves to carry parents through feelings which in other circumstances would lead to distress or destructive exchanges.

However, the atmosphere of normality generated in the playroom is inevitably fragile and can only incorporate small degrees of disruption. A major difficulty here is one of establishing appropriate levels of intervention. On the one hand children, mothers and fathers may require assistance and support in managing a difficult and painful encounter. On the other hand, however, it is crucial that families do not feel policed and draw as much as possible on their own resources in managing their differences and reconstructing relationships. After all, this is what will have to be developed if relationships are to thrive beyond the access centre. However, just as too great a presence can result in parents being made all too aware that they are parenting under highly anomalous circumstances; too little staff presence can leave them feeling vulnerable and isolated.
The access centre and parental responsibility

Despite attempts to impart to parents a feeling of control over their affairs, there is often a feeling of powerlessness for men and women who use the centre. Mothers see themselves as being pressured by their ex-partners and by those who are apparently acting to promote father-child contact. For fathers the power of decision-making is seen to lie predominantly with the mother - possession is indeed nine-tenths of the law. The result is that the parent with whom the children live, can effectively veto suggestions put forward by the other parent who may have to swallow hard to accept terms and conditions which are less than favourable - for example, lengths of time for access, who can be present, confinement to the building, staggered departures etc - and in these the access centre would appear to collude. This imbalance in decision-making power, although to a large degree inevitable, poses a certain dilemma for access centre workers. On the one hand, this could rightly be interpreted as a failure to work with the Children Act in that it dismisses or over-rides a father's rights when he has the children on access. On the other hand, the access centre could not work as a non-coercive agency in which power resides with the users were it not in the first instance to allow the parent with whom the children live to dictate terms.

In practice, this dilemma is overcome by attempts to ensure that the terms under which the access centre is used are agreed in advance - in a sense this is the contract which is drawn up between parents and the centre co-ordinator. The problem arises when parents attempt to change the nature of the contact on the day of the meeting. Sometimes this can be quickly negotiated in a way that is acceptable to all concerned and as a general rule parents are given as much latitude as possible regarding what they do at the access centre with their children, provided they are in full agreement. However, this is not always the case and requests for changes felt to be quite reasonable by one parent often bring anger from the other in a way which jeopardises the access. Such conflicts often arise on the spot and in ways which it would have been difficult to anticipate. For example, one man brought his elderly parents from Scotland to see their grandchild but this was refused by the mother causing major anger and distress all round. On another occasion a man showed up with a video recorder to film his son and this caused a strong protest. In such circumstances, volunteers find themselves troubleshooting and negotiating, shuttling back and forth and, if this fails to resolve the problem, trying to explain to a father why he cannot do something which he sees as perfectly reasonable.

CASE STUDY

The Needham family had used the access centre on numerous occasions in order for Geoffrey to have access to his two daughters. Mrs Needham usually
arrived alone and there had never been any problem. However, on one particular occasion she arrived unexpectedly with a man who it later transpired was her new partner. Before the new partner could be properly introduced and some plan of action devised, Mr Needham came out to meet the children and was somewhat taken aback to find the new partner there. The changeover thus took place in an extremely tense atmosphere. Mr Needham subsequently expressed his concern that the new partner was present and that he had not been consulted. I took the issue up with the woman explaining that it was quite in order for new partners to come but that it might be better if we could arrange it in advance so that Mr Needham and the new partner didn’t meet. She pointed out that she had been unwell that morning and her new partner had come for support. It also transpired that on alternate weeks Mr. Needham and her new partner met at a local swimming baths when access took place and were on quite friendly terms. She had thought there would be no objection raised. After further discussion it was clear that his objection to the new partner being there was triggered by her objections at a previous session to members of his family having any access to the children.

What might appear as petty exchanges between the parties can have major impacts on the family and particularly the children; they also can have a serious impact on the generally relaxed atmosphere of the centre. ‘Scenes’ make people uneasy, they highlight the fact that parenting is happening under anomalous circumstances.

**Treading a fine line: coercion in an informal service**

Those who use the access centre do so voluntarily. There are rules and conditions which are made clear to them before they attend and having accepted these it is generally believed by staff that parents are coming of their own free will. This is a very important tenet of those who run the centre and it is unlikely that the organisation could work in the way that it does if parents were present under duress. Although informality and voluntarism on the part of clients is aspired to in theory, it can nevertheless be compromised in practice. The balance which must be struck is indeed a delicate one. The service inevitably deals with people who would rather not be in the situations in which they find themselves. They, like every body else involved, would like simple, individual solutions to what are in fact complex collective problems in which there are competing versions of what has happened in the past and what ought to happen in the future. Given that these versions are likely to be far apart (otherwise the parties would not be at the Meeting Place!), considerable care has to be taken by staff to ensure that undue pressure is not being brought to bear on mothers, fathers and
children to reach solutions which satisfy the powerful whilst coercing the weak. Access centre staff must therefore walk a fine line between support and encouragement on the one hand and pressure and coercion on the other. This balancing act may be made considerably more difficult by external pressures which frequently enter into the working of the access centre as a result of referrals by the courts and probation service.

The role of the courts
An important source of access centre referrals is the courts who generally use the service in two ways. Firstly, as a way of testing the water in what look like difficult access cases picked up fairly early on in the legal processing of a divorce. Secondly, and rather more commonly, it would appear that the courts tend to use the access centre as a last resort for cases that have already been through considerable amounts of fruitless court activity. Clearly, the access centre is a new option and may well provide a vital alternative for desperate parents locked in conflict over child arrangements and already well into the system. Whilst it would be wrong to advocate the severance of this potential lifeline there are problems regarding the relationship with the courts and in particular the manner in which referrals are made. One of the key problems is that referrals are on occasion backed up with formal, written court orders. Sometimes instructions are given verbally by a judge and at other times they might be written as an instruction to be followed pending a report or formal court order. Orders and instructions such as these are backed by the considerable authority of a judge and immediately contravene any notion of voluntary participation with which the service might hope to operate. Indeed, on one occasion when it was pointed out to a judge that he had no authority to order people to use the access centre his reply was something along the following lines ‘if I can make an order stating that access should take place in MacDonalds, I can make an order stating that access should take place at an access centre!’. This state of affairs is compounded by some solicitors who also fail to see the importance of voluntary participation. On one access centre referral form the question which asks whether both parents agree to use the service, was answered ‘no’ by the referring solicitor, but written beneath was ‘but at the Children’s Appointment the judge apparently said that a referral could be made’. Even though voluntary participation may indeed be stressed at the time of referral, it is still likely that parents will attach considerable weight to the pronouncements of the judiciary, especially if backed up by a solicitor.

A blurring of boundaries
Further ambiguities creep in at the interface between formal and informal services regarding the pretext under which couples attend the centre. For
example, the information passed on to clients and access centre staff in one case referred to a couple using the access centre for four sessions prior to the preparation of a welfare report. This led the father in this case to request that his access be supervised more closely. He was rather puzzled as to how a report could be properly prepared when, as he saw it, he and his son were just being left to get on with it. The task of explaining the confusion was not an easy one. As far as he was concerned the court had sent him to a place where some kind of surveillance would take place which would form the basis of a report fed back to the courts and the access centre was being lax in its duties in this regard. Similar confusions have arisen over use of the terms ‘supervision’ and ‘supervised access’ in communications originating from the court. Supervision logically implies a supervisor which is a role the access centre is desperate to eschew. Boundaries are further blurred on the occasions when probation officers have called in to the access centre to see their clients and to chat with them about their access.

The blurring of boundaries in this way is by no means a common occurrence but, as the following case illustrates, those running the service can be left with some difficult contradictions to deal with.

CASE STUDY

Charlie Smith had come for access to his baby daughter as stated in an order for defined access which he had pursued for some months through the courts. The terms of the access were preceded by a solemn undertaking to the court that he would not harass, obstruct or approach his ex-partner. There was some ambiguity because it appeared that approaches were legitimate if in connection with access. Dawn, his ex-partner, was not at all happy about the access but came because she had been ordered to attend by the court. She was at the time living in a women’s refuge and had with her a non-molestation order which stated that Mr. Smith, because of earlier threats and intimidation, was not to come within a specified number of yards of her. They had three visits which went reasonably smoothly with Dawn spending quite long periods with Charlie and the baby on the first two visits. This was something that they worked out entirely on their own and which left those of us who had gone to extravagant lengths to make sure they did not meet somewhat bewildered. On the third visit, however, Charlie approached Dawn in a state of frustration wishing to talk about the access; I intervened as she was clearly upset by his approach and suggested that his action was not helping the situation and asked him to leave the room where she was. At this point he presented me with the court order which he saw as giving him the right to approach his wife if in connection with his access - as he had been doing for the last two weeks. In the meantime Dawn left the building and contacted the women’s refuge who in turn called the police who were asked
to provide protection for her on her journey back to the refuge. This role was eventually taken on by a volunteer who escorted Dawn to a nearby bus-stop.

In this case, despite clients' pre-session agreements over the conditions of access, the access centre had become a place where the blurred edges of the legal system were being argued out - after all both clients had their pieces of paper to wave, both of which seemed valid in the circumstances. A further consequence which became all too apparent in this case was the impossibility of neutrality. The man was quick to point out that I had effectively sided with his wife to uphold her rights whilst denying him his.

**Conclusion**

High divorce rates bring with them profound transformations in patterns of family life. This is particularly so in relation to father-child relationships which are especially vulnerable at divorce. These changes often challenge accepted models of continuity in family and kinship relationships and increasingly involve the mediation of informal agencies and civil institutions (Robertson 1991). Access centres constitute an important development in this regard both as services which are intended to ameliorate the consequences of changes in family life and also as important sites where the restructuring of family relationships actually take place. This paper has sketched out some of the key issues to have emerged in the development of one particular access centre. It is hoped that this will form a basis of a more extended discussion of policy and practice regarding an increasingly important area of provision for families after divorce.

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**References**


