Leisure as Process and Change:

What do Older People Say?

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of leisure as process and leisure as change. Drawing on recently completed research, which used a case study approach to explore the ways in which older people constructed their leisure through engagement with community theatre, I discuss how some qualitative research methods are supportive of emergent theories about leisure as a process of change. When 'subjects' of research become co-participants in the construction of new meanings, then a picture of leisure as a process can emerge. Process implies change over time, and so the conceptualisation of leisure as process allows us to recognise change as a fundamental aspect of the leisure experience. The paper concludes that if we are to embrace change in leisure studies we need to examine both our research methods and the ways in which we 'deliver' leisure services.

Introduction

The research on which this paper is based involved older participants in three cycles of community theatre (Burden, 1997). In the process of the research journey, an underlying theoretical perspective which supported Rojek's (1989) conceptualisation of leisure as process, emerged. In summary, this perspective implies:

- Agency theories of leisure are useful in understanding leisure but are incomplete because they do not take sufficient account of powerful discourses such as capitalism and patriarchy which have been shown to shape and constrain our leisure. Clarke and Critcher (1985), for example, discuss how our freedom in leisure is in fact shaped by our location in a capitalist system, and Wimbush and Talbot (1988) and Bella (1989, 1992), amongst others, have written about the constraining impact of patriarchy on women's agency in leisure.
- Structural theories of leisure are incomplete because they assume that power is hierarchical and operates in one direction only. In other words,

our experiences of leisure are entirely shaped by the social systems in which we are embedded.

- Leisure is different for different people and changes over time in both personal and social terms.
- The significance of difference and change which has been identified in recent leisure research (Freysinger, 1995, 1995a) indicates that leisure might be more fully conceptualised as a process (Rojek, 1989).

In recent years, there has been a trend in leisure research towards the discussion of leisure as a contested site (Rojek, 1995). Use of terms such as the 'negotiation of leisure' implies the possibility of change at both the personal and the social level (Burden, 1997). In this paper, I will focus particularly on how the meanings of leisure that emerged in this research were associated with personal change.

Research process

This research project, which ran for four years from 1993, used participant observation of three cycles of community theatre, together with semi-structured interviews with participants, to develop grounded theory about the meanings of leisure for older people. Classification of older people has tended to be based on the patriarchal structuring of the paid workplace. Retirement from paid work at 65 years has been regarded as a significant turning point in the ageing process. My particular research interest, however, lay with the ageing experience of women, although some men also took part. For women, significant change points in terms of menopause and children leaving home usually occur at an earlier age. Some of the women participants were in their 40s and 50s, while others were aged 80 years and above. This allowed some comparisons to be made between late mid-life and older participants. The NU*DIST data analysis package was used to manage the data.¹

The research processes that emerged showed some of the characteristics of action research in that the community development approach used in community theatre is intended to facilitate social and personal change. Zuber-Skerritt (1991) identifies three forms of action research: technical, practical and emancipatory. In technical action research, the facilitator is an outside expert depended upon by the participants. Practical action research involves co-operation between the facilitator and the participants, but the facilitator still has a leading role, encouraging participation and self-reflection. In emancipatory action research, the responsibility for bringing about change in an organisation or system is shared equally by all participants.

The data gathering role in my research remained consistent across the three cycles of theatre building, in that I used participant observation and semi-structured interviews with all participants. My role in relation to the participants varied, however, depending on the needs of the group and included co-participant, project facilitator, process documentation and so on. This engagement allowed me, as a researcher, to engage with participants in a process of change which continued outside of the research. It also ensured that research interviews were open and free-flowing.

The feminist agenda which I adopted in the research places emphasis on the need for researchers to position themselves with the participants in the research process. Research participants may well be groups of people who are conventionally excluded from decision-making processes (Oakley, 1980, 1981; Smith, 1991). This value position of the researcher in relation to the researched necessitates an examination of the power relationships between research participants.

Reflections on power in the research process

In my research I looked for methods which, firstly, minimised the power imbalance between researcher and researched, and secondly, were critical of constraints operating against participants' experience of leisure. I consider the constructivist view of the person and of knowledge to lend itself to research methods which value research participants as active in the construction of their own standpoint. These methods also acknowledge that reality can never be wholly known because it is constructed in a unique way from each world position. Parer (1996: 81) describes the constructivist view of the person in ways which reflect Kelly's (1983) existential sociological view of leisure identity as self-actualizing, in the process of becoming and striving for personal autonomy even whilst constrained by social circumstances.

Glancy (1993: 45) regrets the reluctance by leisure researchers 'to plunge wholeheartedly into the kind of research that offers a different way of knowing a subjective point of view'. Pure phenomenology, located in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Ortega y Gasset and Merleau-Ponty, calls for an openness to our own experience in its immediacy, rather than interpretation of experience as narrated by another (Crotty, 1996: 6). New phenomenological methods of research, as described by Glancy (1993: 46), require researchers to achieve intersubjectivity as one means of ensuring validity. Intersubjectivity requires that the researcher should empathise with the research participant in order to understand the personal meanings constructed by people experiencing leisure.

Intersubjectivity, however, requires only that the researcher develop a meaningful relationship with each of the participants, which facilitates her or his interpretation of the meanings constructed by a particular participant. The identification of common patterns amongst individual participants allows the researcher to generate theory. Intersubjectivity does not require the researcher to facilitate relationships between participants as well as between the researcher and the individual participants. Thus, whilst intersubjectivity in itself may facilitate researcher understanding, it does not facilitate connections between the research participants themselves. Yet it is the connections between people - the collaborations - as well as individual enablement which appear to be significant in the process of empowerment through research. Thus, whilst the research findings on which this paper is based are primarily associated with in-depth interview data, it is relevant to acknowledge the wider context in which both intersubjectivity and the possibility of social change were pursued.

Leisure research to date has been primarily concerned with a linear progression: of data gathering and analysis, followed by theorising and statements of policy implications, followed by the implementation of research findings in practice. In this process it is the researcher who defines the problem, analyses the data gathered through one-to-one interactions between researcher and researched, and develops a theoretical perspective based on that analysis. Action research, on the other hand, seeks to bring about both increased understanding (research) and change (action) through a collaborative process whereby the participants in the research devise the purposes of their group and build relationships with each other as well as with the researcher. In this process, theory and practice are intimately associated and enable an increased richness of relationships between people as they work towards change at the personal and social levels. This process of change was expressed in several ways in the research reported here, but for this paper I will now focus on change in relation to personal meanings of leisure.

Leisure meanings

The constructivist approach to leisure research begins with the premise that people construct their own leisure meanings in a process of negotiation. Social environment shapes leisure meanings, and personal constructions of leisure may shape social environments. As Kelly (1983: 9) puts it, 'If leisure is neither totally segmented and separated from other roles and relationships nor fully determined by them, then some sort of dynamic relationship is implied.' He adds, 'This relationship may be conceptualized as a dialectic in

which the social and the existential in tension, with both synergy and conflict, produce actual leisure choices and investments' (Kelly, 1983: 10).

The women of ICY TEA, a women's theatre group based in Inala, Brisbane, were the first participants in the research. Following my interviews with them, I reflected in my research journal that the women did not talk about leisure as a separate category or talk about leisure at all, unless I used the word first. When I asked about leisure towards the middle of the interview, Anglo-Australian women started talking about things that they 'should' be doing for fitness or health, such as walking or swimming, even though those things were not a part of their lives. In the case of Aboriginal women, leisure was simply not a word they used to make meaning of their lives. This initial impression was confirmed in later interviews with women from different social and cultural backgrounds.

It doesn't mean much to me, I know what makes me content, and I know what irritates me. Leisure is when you're feeling content and happy, and I don't know what else to say. Just pleasure: pleasure and leisure go together. (Merrie, aged in her eighties)

Yet even though interviewees did not use the term 'leisure' as a part of their everyday lives, they were active in constructing meanings out of their experiences of life and these meanings included aspects of leisure which have been identified in the literature (see for example, Freysinger, 1995; Samdahl, 1992; Henderson, 1990; Henderson and Rannells, 1988; Howe and Rancourt, 1990). Meanings of leisure identified in the research reported here included pleasure, fun and enjoyment, but also involved the negotiation of a balance between self-direction or agency and social connection, between relaxation and action, and between change and routine.

Although enjoyment was identified as a common element of leisure, in the case of most of the people involved with this research there was also a strong element of doing something that was self-directed.

I think leisure is enjoying myself. That's all I consider leisure. Sure sometimes when you think of leisure, you think of lolling around and doing nothing, but I don't - I'm not that type. I find the right time of day occasionally when I can say the day's my own and I can put my feet up and read a book or something, but leisure to me is enjoying myself as opposed to doing the housework or the gardening - it's leisure! That's all it means to me, enjoying, how one wants to use that time. (Jackie, aged in her sixties)

Whilst the major defining aspect of leisure for Jackie was enjoyment, she also associated qualities of self-direction ('the day's my own', 'how one wants to use that time') and action ('not the type to do nothing'). She also contrasted it to work ('doing the housework or gardening'). Vera, in her fifties and who, unlike Jackie, had gained a tertiary education later in life, was more articulate about self-direction:

I think the things I mostly consider as leisure is time when I can make a choice about what I'll do - I'm not tied in to doing certain things at certain times - I've actually got time when I can play the piano, watch something on TV, write something, do some knitting or some tapestry or something like that, or even go out but I don't have pressure - no pressure to do x by x time.

Leisure, like enjoyment, was not seen as fixed but, rather, as different for different people, as well as changing at different times of the life cycle. 'So leisure's relative for people', said Jack, aged in his seventies. Jackie said:

Leisure is something different to every person. Some find leisure doing the garden, some people might find it leisure just doing a bit of housework, I don't know, I don't know how you define what leisure really is unless that person enjoys doing it.

Jackie's friend, Lottie, aged in her sixties, also acknowledged that leisure meant different things to different people:

Everyone's an individual. What makes one person happy doesn't necessarily make another person happy. As I say so long as I was always doing something I was quite happy. Whether it was working or whether it was painting the town red.

Even in a very close marital relationship such as Ada and Eddie's (aged in their sixties), where most hours of the day and night were spent in each other's company, there was an acknowledgement of the right to pursue different leisure interests. Eddie said, '... well I walk, I always have a walk in the morning, and Ada doesn't like walking, so I just go off. Ada wouldn't dream of walking'.

Barbara, aged in her sixties, made a virtue of the differences between her own and her husband's interests which they pursued separately and then shared in conversation. Tania, aged in her sixties, regretted the differences between her interests and those of her husband. 'No, unfortunately, you see

we're completely different. (Pause.) Sport has been his interest and he's never been interested in the arts . . . '

Some participants also acknowledged that a search for difference was implicated in leisure, particularly travel, even though they also found that the logistics associated with travel were hard work.

I think I just like moving from one place to another - it's why I walk so much - I like moving and I like seeing difference - I like to see how other people live - and I like to go to nice places. And I like nice food and I think it just opens up a lot of options to you. Keeps you renewing your perspective on the world instead of getting stuck in one sort of mould. And I mean travelling is one of those other things you'd hardly say that it was leisure - I mean it's hard work - it's really extremely hard. But it's enjoyable. (Diana, aged in her forties)

Dot, aged in her sixties, also recognised this need for difference in her leisure. ' . . . somehow I feel like I'm always seeing the same old people and that's like the same routine, y'know I'd like to make it a little bit different every now and again'.

Leisure and change

In her study of leisure meanings for mid-life (36-43 years) men and women, Freysinger (1995a: 69) identified change, which she described as time away or separation, together with variety or difference, as fundamental to the leisure experience. Perceived choice in change led to what Freysinger termed relaxation, enjoyment or rejuvenation. Perceived choice and relaxation have both been identified in other studies of the meaning of leisure. Freysinger suggests, however, that her identification of the significance of change was a new contribution to knowledge arising out of her qualitative research approach which explored the dialectical meaning-making process associated with leisure in the context of every day life.

My research supports Freysinger's finding in relation to another group of people, particularly those in their forties and early fifties. My research, however, also indicates that change is part of the dialectic of leisure rather than an essential part. In other words, the significance of change as an aspect of leisure is dependent on individual circumstances. For example, there is evidence in my research that some people use their leisure to build routine into their lives rather than explore change. Women such as Vera, aged in her fifties, who was grappling with mental illness and could not handle too much change in her life, sought out repetitious leisure activities.

The over-riding constraint on Vera's life was her own ill-health which was first manifested during her forties and following the break-up of her marriage. For Vera, leisure was the pursuit of non-stressful activity, ' .. it means taking things quietly - when I went to the party, it was fun, but it was still rather stressful'. The pursuit of better health through health care routines structured her life in ways which were similar to the structuring of paid work, but she found that this routine sometimes had leisure-like qualities. Writing also worked in this way for Vera although she had only taken it up in her forties.

The use of terms such as 'habit', 'regular' and 'routine' indicate Vera's efforts to bring structure into her life. Vera's discomfort with sudden change, which she had begun to cope with more effectively through her engagement with community theatre, influenced her choice of leisure activity.

At the moment I'm doing a lot of knitting and even though that's producing a product in a way it's relaxing - it's the same with tapestry and a lot of stuff like that - those crafts - you can get into a sort of almost a state of meditation while you're doing it sometimes - it can be very relaxing - especially something that's got some - repetitiveness to it.

Thus, although Vera recognised the work-like nature of knitting ('that's producing a product'), she found the 'repetitiveness' relaxing. Similarly, men such as Eric, aged in his sixties, who was also living with life-threatening illness, used his craft involvement to build work-like routines into his life.

There was also evidence that in later life beyond the mid-fifties, when paid work roles and family situations are changed, the meanings of leisure as difference or change from other aspects of life become blurred. This may be due to the loss of contrasting experiences to act as boundaries in describing the experience of leisure. Where work and family commitments are demanding and stimulating, for example, leisure tends to be focussed on relaxation as a contrast, difference or change. When paid work and family commitments are no longer imperatives, leisure takes on new qualities where the dialectic of difference and change are negotiated within a life context where everything may be regarded as leisure. As Barbara put it, ' . . . But it's all leisure now, really'.

While the significance of leisure as change or difference from other aspects of life was evident for research participants in their forties and early fifties, and thus supported Freysinger's work, in later life the identification of change as a fundamental aspect of leisure was more complex. It was not a defining element of leisure but rather a dimension of the negotiation of life in general.

Several participants drew out the contrasting nature of their leisure experience when they were in or out of paid work. In the first case study, Polly, aged in her forties, spoke of the deadening impact of paid work in her family and leisure life, and Jackie, like other women, confirmed the self denying nature of some paid work situations.

When you're working you just feel too tired to do a lot of things. By the time you've finished working and you've done your housework and everything else, you just want to sit down at nights and weekends and just relax a bit.

Diana had also found paid work prevented her from experiencing leisure:

And I think a lot of people end up doing a lot of nothing when they have got what you call non-work time because it takes that long to recover. And I found that I just ended up taking the shortest possible route. Your spare time just got filled up with the easiest things to do which was going out drinking often with the people you worked with.

Others also acknowledged that leisure had changed for them over the life cycle but they could now recognise that the essence of leisure for them was choice. Both Debbie, aged in her forties, and Vera, in her fifties, spoke of the break-up of their marriages in terms of freedom because they were able to start pursuing activities which interested them.

. . . I think just getting freedom - not freedom to go silly or anything like that but, em, not feeling trapped in a marriage that I wasn't happy in - just being able to do the things that I really wanted to do but I felt, em, sometimes that you couldn't do the things that you wanted to do. ... well things like my music I'm able to do openly and go to places that - because he wasn't really in to music, and never appreciated my music - so now I'm able to do that - express myself in theatre or through music.

Like Debbie, Vera had also found that change point liberating.

Look I just tried so hard to fit in, but I couldn't. So when I actually got out of the marriage and found that I could actually explore what I liked, it was so refreshing and so exciting - and getting into feminism was absolutely marvellous - so I'd say that's where Uni in Sydney was just wonderful, getting into that. Especially the older women's network. It

wasn't called that - it was OPT and it was an older women's support group.

Barbara, who had also acted to remove herself from an abusive marriage, but was now enjoying her third marriage, found that leisure, '... changed so much. Every so often when I'm at different times, it changes'.

Kelly (1983: 73), referring to these life-course changes in leisure meanings, suggested that: 'Yet to be studied in detail is the possibility of shifts in leisure roles in the later establishment period when children have become more independent in their leisure and parents are free to redevelop leisure investments that are personally fulfilling.' Kelly (1979: 85) noted 'One issue that remains to be investigated is whether or not leisure identities can replace those related to other roles in providing meaning and integration to life in the third age. Can leisure become, for some, a central set of role identities around which life can be reoriented?'

The words and actions of the participants in my research indicate that women in particular are able to pursue active engagement with life and leisure as they move into a period of life where they are less constrained by family imperatives. This is not, however, a result of leisure roles replacing work or family roles, but rather a shift in the way in which people engage with the construction of their lives in general at a time when some constraining aspects of their lives are changing. For Tai, aged in her fifties, this change had come in moving to another country from her own country where her life had been very constrained:

... and when I came to Australia, I think that my life has become another life, and now I try to enjoy the whole day today and not to think about tomorrow, because I don't know if I'll be alive tomorrow or not, so I enjoy the whole day today is my motto for life.

For Sarah, aged in her seventies, the change had come when she had used unpaid work as an avenue towards the fulfilling involvement that she could not find in the meaningless social round of a middle class retiree.

... And it wasn't very long before I realised that I wasn't going to be able to live that sort of hedonistic life ... I suppose I was unsettled. So when we moved down here, and then I went overseas in '79, and when I came back, the pregnancy termination bill was on the agenda, and I joined the women's movement, children by choice in particular, and I've never been bored since, never had time to be bored.

The construction of leisure as changing with life stage was also highlighted by the differing meanings that people put on leisure when they were dealing with particular dilemmas in their lives. Dot, aged in her sixties, was actively pursuing ways of overcoming her shyness which she sometimes experienced as social isolation, and the search for companionship was integral to her leisure. Jack, aged in his seventies, had recently been widowed and now missed companionship in his life. For him, our research interview constituted 'leisure': 'Well at the moment I'm having a good conversation with you, and I'd say that's leisure'. Thus, in the case of Dot and Jack, both of whom were widowed and lived alone, leisure was about a search for companionship even though they each pursued solo interests as well. By comparison, Tania, who was in her sixties, lived with a partner who expected her to provide housekeeping services. She was also often on call to babysit her grandchildren. According to Tania, 'Leisure is being able to sit down with a book, sit down and read, to me its leisure, to be left alone for a while, uninterrupted, not to be interrupted'. Tania's use of the word 'uninterrupted' and the phrase 'to be left alone' indicate that she valued being alone because it meant freedom from the demands of others.

Tania's dominant constraint of family responsibilities had shaped the meaning of leisure for her as being time on her own, whereas Dot's sense of leisure had been influenced by her dominant constraint - lack of companions. According to Dot, 'Yes, I think the secret is to join in a few things and make friends, y'know, to relax, sort of thing, like socialising'.

The research also provided evidence to suggest that leisure may serve both as distraction preventing reflection, and as an opportunity to come face-to-face with self and reflect on the realities of life. Despite an emphasis on individualism, work and leisure are both organized in the modern industrial world in ways which prevent us from exploring ourselves. Whilst a dominant theme for most people in this research was the value of living a busy life, a few participants also articulated the value of time free to reflect, or, as Matty expressed it, 'Being able to sit and stare'. Mary, aged in her fifties, talked about making a day completely free of commitments, even leisure commitments: 'I want to have a day for nothing. It will be interesting to see what I do'. Diana, aged in her forties, most clearly articulated this aspect of leisure as time that was not taxing, that did not make demands, and so allowed her to find out what she really wanted to do:

And I suspect that is leisure for me - it's doing nothing . . . When I have absolutely nothing to do. I haven't set myself any project, I don't have any projects or things that I have to do. It's just having nothing planned so

that you make a decision from minute to minute literally about what you're going to do.

Like Mary, Diana valued this experience for two reasons: 'You're not taxing yourself in any way. You really don't know what you're going to do. And in some ways it's very interesting to see what you end up doing'. In Diana's definition, leisure was contrasted with work in terms of the contrast between either internally or externally imposed pressure and complete absence of constraint.

Oh well, working under pressure, then you suddenly have nothing to do, it's sort of like, you meet yourself again. It's difficult to describe it in words. (Pause.) 'Cos you have to, you almost have to look at yourself. It's not being distracted or you haven't set up distractions for yourself.

Diana also recognised that her way of looking at leisure distinguished her from others whose emphasis might be on 'busyness'. 'I think I make a point of making free time but I think other people probably make a point of not making free time. It's a big difference but it's a philosophical difference in how I use my life'.

Leisure, change and process

Rojek (1989) critiques both 'agency' and 'structure' theories as offering incomplete understandings of the meanings of leisure. Both approaches are founded in false dualisms, and Rojek (1989: 79) claims that process is a more useful construct in that it allows a more fluid interpretation of leisure meanings which take account of changing relationships in a total life context.

'Leisure' was not a term readily used by the older people in this research since they associated it with terms such as 'pastime' and 'hobby' which do not convey the richness of engagement with life which some felt was fundamental to their happiness. This finding supports Mannell's (1993: 127) identification of a growing belief among researchers that leisure needs to be conceptualised as having more than simply pleasant, diversionary and escapist characteristics.

The negotiation of the different behavioural continua that constituted a leisure experience for participants in this research suggests the perception of leisure as 'difference' both in terms of contrast to other aspects of life and in terms of individual choice. This supports Freysinger's (1995a) finding that change is fundamental to leisure for the mid-life American women who participated in her study. However, when leisure is conceptualised as a

process, it necessarily involves change over time or 'movement' as Rojek (1989: 79) suggests. Freysinger (1995a) discusses change as 'difference from other aspects of life' and this was certainly evident in the ways in which women who were in their forties and fifties in this research talked about their leisure.

This conceptualisation of change, however, maintains leisure in a dualistic framework where it is regarded as an aspect of life different from work and family but necessarily shaped by them. A shift in thinking about leisure away from activity', 'time' or even 'experience' to one of 'process' allows the researcher to contemplate the negotiation of change or difference in a world which is not structured by work or family. This shift in conceptualisation is more relevant in the case of people who have moved beyond midlife and are negotiating lives in a context that no longer includes paid work or nuclear family responsibilities.

Conclusion

Leisure was not a term which participants in this research used easily. However, by attending to broader dimensions of people's lives, this research was able to demonstrate that older people constructed leisure in their lives in fundamental terms of pleasure and self-direction. Within that framework, leisure was negotiated in a dialectical process which enabled different outcomes according to changing circumstances. These leisure choices ranged from: relaxation to demanding purposive activity; from solitary to social; from private reflection or 'me time' to public expression of agency. Leisure was therefore an expression of difference between people as well as an expression of contrasting difference within the lives of individual people. Leisure also changed throughout the narrative of people's lives.

In this paper, I have briefly examined how research processes may seek to build connections between people as well as between the researcher and the researched. In this way, a deeper understanding of the meaning of leisure as a process of change emerges. Meanings of leisure change at different points in the life-cycle, and in different personal circumstances. Many women adopt leisure activities such as community theatre at points of change in their lives. In the case of Ena, for example, who was in her sixties, this change point had been when her children left home:

I think the big change is the kids growing up and you realise they've got their own life and therefore I realised that I've got to make my sort of enjoyment or something - my own, like joining the theatre group and all

that was my thing - like they're doing their thing I'm doing mine - I think that was a big change.

Others reported that engagement with community theatre led to changes in their lives as they used the space provided by their participation to work through issues of concern, and build networks with others as a means of addressing those issues. For example, Vera's engagement with community theatre represented one of her strategies to regain the sense of freedom she had felt prior to her illness:

... but the idea of creating a script out of our own lives, really that's very creative, and it's very freeing somehow - freeing. It gives your spirit a chance to grow somehow and expand - I suppose it's the creative thing in it - I find that really exciting and even seeing it happening to other people and being part of it happening to the group, that's always really great fun.

Leisure studies practitioners and researchers are in a unique position to facilitate the enabling aspects of leisure engagement at both a personal and social level. Approaches to service delivery and research which adopt a developmental and collaborative position, are more likely to achieve outcomes which take account of leisure as a process whereby individuals negotiate their own meanings. In that process, participants may take control of their own lives, for when self-direction is identified as a defining characteristic of leisure then the facilitation of enabling action for individuals and for communities becomes an important goal for academics and practitioners alike.

Note

¹ 'NU*DIST' is an acronym for 'Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising'. The program was developed by Lyn Richards, Sociology Department, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

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