Empowering a Feminist Ethic For Social Science Research: Nebraska Sociological Feminist Collective

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Empowering a Feminist Ethic For Social Science Research: Nebraska Sociological Feminist Collective

Beth Hartung, Jane C. Ollenburger, Helen A. Moore and Mary Jo Deegan.

An ethic defines the general nature of the morals, rules and standards governing the conduct and choices of individuals as well as members of a profession (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971). A feminist ethic for social science research specifically orders these general issues to recognize and account for women's continued oppression within a patriarchal social system and academic disciplines. A feminist ethic identifies this continued oppression as a major contradiction of our research, work and social structure. Within social sciences generally, and sociology specifically, little attention is paid to the underlying patriarchal ethic which informs theory, method and substantive issues.

We preface this collection with a definition of the assumptions that underlie a feminist ethic for research and study. Our discussion amplifies four key issues: (1) the objectification of women as research objects; (2) research by, for, and about women; (3) language as used and abused in sociology; and (4) the gatekeeping process in employment, funding and research. In reality, these areas are inseparable. This book reflects the overlap among them, enhancing its continuity and comprehensiveness.

* Some portions of this paper are derived from "A feminist ethic for social science research." Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 6 (1983): 535-543.
Feminist scholarship is at cross-purposes with traditional social science. This observation is neither surprising nor profound, but it is the basis for a complex set of problems which need continual re-analysis in the social sciences. The authors in this book are mostly academic sociologists and psychologists who examine their disciplines to illustrate historically-situated problems of patriarchal bias and plausible ethical responses. An ethical agenda is introduced here and elaborated throughout the readings which follow. Each author/researcher also provides a reflexive statement of political and ideological commitment to her topic.

In this introductory essay, we focus on sociology, our own discipline, to frame and introduce the articles which follow. Sociology is particularly culpable, having made public claims to address the problems of minorities and oppressed people. During the past two decades, sociologists have generated significant discussions of the politics and ethics of doing research on sex, class and race (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967; Gornick and Moran, 1971; Ladner, 1973; Acker, 1973; Millman and Kanter, 1975). However, the recent publication of the revised Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association (ASA Footnotes, April, 1982) does not reflect the power or the substance of these arguments. This revised code was an effort "to sensitize all sociologists to the ethical issues that may arise in their work" and to examine those principles which "may occasionally conflict with more general ethical concerns."

For those feminist scholars trained in the social scientific framework, which is historically bounded by a
patriarchal academy, the conflicts presented by the ASA agenda are personal and political, public and private. An academic feminist is indeed a contradiction (Freeman, 1979; Leffler et al., 1973). Academia is fed by the scientific status quo with occasional pretensions to the safety of liberalism, e.g., revised ethical codes. In contrast, feminism is fundamentally subversive and critical. As scholars we are marginal insiders at best, speaking the language of our particular discipline. As wimmin we are outsiders, marked by "otherness" (Westkott, 1979). "From the start, persons who are sorted into the male class and persons who are sorted into the other are given different treatment, acquire different experience, enjoy and suffer different expectations" (Goffman, 1977:303; emphasis added). As feminists, we are compelled to take a critical, activist stance which both encompasses and transcends sociology.

In the following discussion, we explicitly attack the traditional canons of sociology. Our cultural background in the United States and the cultural bias of the sociological discipline threaten to narrow our focus. But the goal and framework of the feminist ethic are by no means restricted to sociology or sociology as practiced in the United States. Sociology is only one vehicle for implementing a feminist ethic which crosses discipline boundaries and draws upon the experiences of wimmin throughout first, second and third world nations.

Our discussion revolves around the pursuit and use of knowledge. We propose a feminist ethic that restores the balance between the means and ends of research, confronts the racist, imperialist, classist, able-bodied.
heterosexist and sexist assumptions prevalent in the social science research agenda (revised or not) and combats patriarchal and masculinist structures inside and outside the academy. Rejecting "business as usual" in the study of wimmin means that data collection for the sake of knowledge alone cannot be tolerated. The research act must be a social, economic, and political act which, as a priority, empowers wimmin outside of the academy.

THE OBJECTIFICATION OF WIMMIN

The revised ASA code exhorts sociologists to "strive to maintain objectivity and integrity" and to adhere to "the highest possible technical standards in research." The a priori status of quantitative and technical methods at the apex of sociological ethics generates a hierarchy of acceptance and circulation of positivist methods and assumptions. Social science researchers use the rhetoric of objectivity to legitimate their vested interests and contributions to knowledge. A feminist analysis and ethic must demystify objectivity in sociology, which can mask the objectification of wimmin and all minorities.

The definition, use and rationalization of objectivity dichotomizes the researcher's view of the world. For example, in sociology (Smith, 1974a; Reinharz, 1985), history (Lerner, 1979), anthropology (Slocum, 1980), linguistics (Penelope, 1978), and other social sciences (Spender, 1981b; Lowe and Hubbard, 1983), women as research object represents either a deviation from the male standard (norm), or she is subsumed by the male-biased research paradigm. The gap between knower and known becomes ever more rigid in the pursuit of objectiv-
ity; the scientist becomes expert in knowing wimmin's lives. Wimmin (as researchers and as subjects) are implicitly removed from active roles in the traditionally male spheres of analysis and technical research.

As research subjects, research assistants, or as helpful (and often unnamed) spouses in dissertation and manuscript acknowledgements, wimmin's contributions are manipulated or made invisible. The male is socially recognized as the rational manipulator of data and the source of legitimate resources, skills and funding (Goldsmith, 1980). This research bias excludes wimmin from revising oppressive and distorting methodologies.

The lack of research by and about the "other" (wimmin, minorities, the working class, the disabled, lesbians and gays) until the last two decades leaves us relatively bereft of information for these groups. In many subdisciplines of sociology we lack baseline data (e.g., Daniels, 1975; Roberts, 1981 a, b) yet the rich oral and folk information in wimmin's lives are discredited as data bases. Whether these omissions are "more puerile than prejudicial, more accidental than intentional" is unresolved (McCormack, 1975). Feminist researchers must remove the "people = male" bias and acknowledge wimmin's voices (Silvira, 1980) to highlight the class, race and other significant differences among our lives.

The diverse range of issues in feminist research ethics is reflected in the first set of readings in this volume. Smith persuasively argues in her work "The deep structure of gender antitheses" that capitalism and
patriarchy form one side of a dialectic in opposition to feminism. Feminist antitheses require a new way of speaking in the social sciences. In her essay on prostitution entitled "Researching prostitution: Some problems for feminist research," Smart focuses on the contradictions of long and short-term goals of feminist research activities. While acknowledging the personal distress of hearing the voices of those who "enforce the law," she works to identify the current legal, social and economic conditions of prostitutes. She then raises the long-term agenda of confronting women's bodies as commodities. She calls for a flexible system of feminist ethics, including the study of powerful men and the institutions they control.

Bart, in her article "Lesbian research ethics," proposes that feminist research stands to demystify the world for wimmin, and that being a lesbian researcher requires more than being a "good" researcher. She focuses on key issues of responsibility to research subjects and research training within the academic enterprise. Williams provides a classic statement on the importance of Black wimmin within the social sciences in her essay "On the ethics of research on the triple oppression of Black American women." The range of family and work roles held by Black wimmin have been distorted by Anglo-centric and androcentric public policy research. A focus on theory and praxis within the capitalist, racist and sexist economy forms the focus of her critique.
RESEARCH BY, FOR AND ABOUT WIMMIN

The issue of power is integral to research and is a key to confronting the various oppressions inherent in that agenda. Through the patriarchal research process, the responsibility for defining, accusing, disciplining and eradicating anti-woman activities is left to the powerless. Research subjects, research assistants and "others" do not participate in the human subjects review processes within institutions, nor in the grant review activities of major funding agencies. Their critique of the ethics or process of a research project is unheard, enabling the researcher and the research institution to maintain a patriarchal enterprise (Reinharz, 1985).

Critiquing sociology as practiced begs the question of how we can empower a feminist ethic. To what extent are women exploited on the grounds of enlightened academic self-interest? To what extent does research on women through the auspices of traditional institutions benefit women? These are questions of ethical conduct.

The revised ASA code remains ambiguous about harassment and exploitation, despite specific discussions of norms and behaviors regarding sexual abuse and its economic consequences for victims (Evans, 1978). This exploitation must be tied explicitly to the oppressions of sex, race, class, sexual preference and rank. The ASA code defaults responsibility for these definitions, accusations and redress to the powerless. A feminist ethic acknowledges these oppressions by analyzing and breaking down the age, sex and rank groupings within the academy. This is particularly true for graduate students.
and non-tenured faculty whose work is often misappropriated or maligned as non-academic. In addition, the contributions of "others" in the office, in the field, and as informants must be validated, fairly compensated and publicly acknowledged.

According to the ASA code, we "must not make any guarantees to subjects. . . unless there is full intention and ability to honor such commitments." In a feminist ethic, we must not undertake research until and unless we can make guarantees to our informants. In the past, advocacy research has been relegated to the sidelines as "non-academic" and the ties between theory and praxis have been denied. Feminist scholars often lose professional legitimation for their research when they return investments to wimmin and contribute to significant social change.

The research of male academicians/technicians on wimmin is often an invasion of wimmin's privacy. The sexual objectification of wimmin in the behavioral sciences is a clear example of the outcome of cross-sex research in which a feminist ethic is not employed. We encourage wimmin in the social sciences to recognize their own "insider" roles, talents and perceptions and to engage in a research dialogue that empowers all wimmin. We must acknowledge the advantages and responsibilities of our participation in sexual, familial, academic and political relations which inform our ideas.

In the second set of readings, we are provided both specific and general maps for feminist ethics in the research process. When examining the interaction of
violence and sexism in rape, Bristow and Esper approach the research process with a heightened consciousness of oppression in "A feminist research ethos." They contrast the "interrogation" of "respondents" with a true dialogue that regards research participants as experts on their own experiences. These dialogues are extended to the internal dialogue of the researcher (critical awareness) and dialogues with society (reporting). In her article "Research as critical reflection: A Study of time, self and communicative competency," Malhotra integrates symbolic interaction, phenomenology, and critical theory to define research as a critically reflective process. By incorporating participants in each stage of the research process, the line between "researcher" and "participant" was continually erased. By reviewing and using multi-methodological approaches to alleviate repressive and exploitive aspects of research about oppressed groups, the small groups empowered themselves in their everyday lives. Shapiro and Reed turn their attention to the practice of evaluating feminist activities in "Illuminative evaluation: Meeting the special needs of feminist projects." In their model, they combine qualitative and quantitative techniques and discuss the stance of the objective feminist evaluator in her roles as critic, colleague and consultant. Their analysis includes the role of staff input to the research process and its benefits.

Feminism, Language and Ideas

Language is a critical dimension wherein the patriarchal values and prejudices embodied in the discipline come to light. Offensive language goes
hand-in-hand with oppresive research and theory. Sociological language reflects the patriarchal features of language in general, as well as creating its own unique ethical problems. The generic use of "man," "mankind," and "he" as well as the spelling of "woman" and "women" illustrate the historical trend of men to aggrandize their own sex (Penelope, 1978). Even when sociological research demonstrates the effects of language on consciousness, these efforts are ignored or labeled "trivial". Schneider and Hacker (1973) tested the hypothesis that "generic" man is generally understood to include wimmin, but found that the concept "man" clearly meant male individuals.

Sociologists consistently use the passive voice in writing and reporting research and theory. The researcher removes the self from the report, creating an illusion of objectivity. Thus it appears that "institutions act" instead of sociologists interpreting actions conducted in, and enforced by, institutions. The researcher can abdicate responsibility for the ethical and political concerns of research subjects. The passive voice also invokes the ambiguous "they" or the unnamed "expert."

Thus, in sociology and other academic disciplines, wimmin are symbolically annihilated, i.e., (1) under-represented or absent; (2) trivialized and victimized; or (3) delegated to "hearth and home" (Tuchman, Daniels and Benet, 1978; Stimpson, 1980). Through the narrow selection of sociological questions, wimmin are omitted from the research agenda or confined to the areas of family or sex role development. Wimmin's position in social stratification, productive home labor, racial and
ethnic groups, etc., has historically been subsumed under their family status (i.e., the husband's status).

The use of oppressive language and ideas has important implications for the theoretical development of sociology as well as for the public policies which are derived from sociological research. By defining norms and values for women through the authority granted to objective science, sociology supports the oppression of women. By inhibiting the understanding of our oppression(s), this oppression is especially severe for women who are multiply oppressed (Deegan, 1985).

Women of color are consistently misrepresented by sociologists. For example, the 1965 Moynihan report explained Black economic problems as a consequence of a pathological family structure with absent fathers and domineering mothers (Moynihan, 1965; 1968). By virtue of a "strong matriarchal drive", Black women were accused by white sociologists of "castrating" Black men (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967). Wallace (1978) and Hooks (1981) critique the sociological myth of the Black woman as "castrator" and "matriarch" both for its normative distortions and its significant negative effect on the Black political movement in the United States. Wallace also notes that white male researchers have appealed to Black men's sense of patriarchy, thereby forcing Black women to rank their oppressions.

Lesbians are also oppressed by the language and theory of sociology and are subsumed under the topic of (male) homosexuality in the area of deviance. Lesbians and gays are classified as deviants from the heterosexual
norm and contact with them leads to a "contagion of stigma" (Kirby and Corzine, 1981). The sociological language used to study homosexuality implicitly takes the homophobic, heterosexist and masculinist perspective, omitting lesbians from discussions of family, reproduction and politics. By focusing on the research subject as "other" and by using the "people = male" paradigm, the sociologist perpetuates his/her ethical distance and can ignore the lived consequences of research for wimmin and minorities.

Sociology as a discipline perpetuates an elitist concern for positivist science, rather than tendering revolutionary or socially responsible analysis. In "Prescribed passivity: The language of sexism" Julia Penelope (Stanley) argues that "generics" such as "man" and "mankind" document the structure of thought giving power to men. The use of these words in advertisements, literature, and formal theory augment the spoken word. The female is the antithesis of the male in our language, so what is defined as male is defined positively. Language shapes a disturbingly negative reality for those who are female, reflecting an entrenched patriarchal "semantic space." Levy then further delineates the gender bias common to domain assumptions, language structures and operationalization in her article entitled "Gender bias as a threat to construct validity in research design." While reviewing this work, she concludes that the reformulation of mainstream research must avoid the pitfalls of disadvantaging males or introducing "estrocentric" bias. The social construct of science is a political process that employs reductionist models taken from the biological and natural sciences to legitimate male power.
In the next essay, "Sociology of medicine for whom? Feminist perspectives in a multi-paradigmatic sociology of medicine," Clarke identifies the complex practice within the sociology of medicine that reflects three major sets of ideas: positivism, naturalism and activism. Each perspective has particular advantages and disadvantages, but the positivist approach is the most legitimated, financed and enacted. It is also least able to explain change or women's experiences. Critics of positivism, as well as patriarchy, find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position in terms of the ability to practice and implement their ideas. In her article "Lesbianism, feminism and social science," Whisman uses political lesbianism and anti-pornography feminism to demonstrate some parallel problems in general social theory. She concludes that these problems are often rooted in the class background of feminist theorists who may be trained in sociology. The competition over definitions by feminists, lesbians or sociologists illustrates "what happens when social theories become ideologies."

GATEKEEPING IN EMPLOYMENT, PUBLICATION AND RESEARCH

The effects of "objectivity" and lack of access for the powerless are further compounded in publication and research funding. People who certify others are gatekeepers; they control access to resources. In academia, the most important resources are jobs, publications and money. Career advancement is marked by the successful completion of stages guarded by gatekeepers who distribute these scarce resources (Caplow and McGee, 1958; Van den Berghe, 1970). To implement a feminist ethic, feminists
need to successfully bypass gatekeepers, to break down barriers, and, most importantly, conceive of alternatives to the present oppressive system of power brokerage.

A sociologist's entry into the job market is linked directly to graduate training and sponsorship. A prestige system undergirds the entire gatekeeping process; institutions are ranked according to their value and achievement of excellence by positivist standards. Access to mentors and institutions (assistantships, fellowships, grants, etc.) is a key mechanism in gatekeeping. By omitting wimmin from professional full-time positions in major graduate institutions, feminist mentors are rare (Hughes, 1975; Rossi and Calderwood, 1973). Patriarchal sponsorship is called, appropriately, the "old boy" network. Thus a massive, systemic hierarchy exists prior to any student's entry into the system, and certain ideas and ways of doing sociology are defined a priori as less acceptable than others.

That effectiveness of gatekeeping can be gauged by the job placement of wimmin scholars. Wimmin graduates from elite institutions in sociology experience greater downward mobility on the job market than their male peers (Welch and Lewis, 1980). Part-time and temporary positions in sociology, as elsewhere, are "women's issues" because wimmin are over-represented in these positions (Tuchman and Tuchman, 1982). The temporary or part-time scholar is confined to piece-work teaching, which restricts research and job security. With heavier teaching loads and less institutional support for travel, research, and other professional needs, productivity in terms of written publication is difficult. Hierarchical control is
maintained further in a self-perpetuating system that restricts symbols and resources of prestige. Those outside the system remain outside, those inside tend to remain inside if they adhere to narrowly defined academic norms.

Feminism is a key way of thinking about research that is suppressed within this structure, and continually held outside of it. Freeman succinctly summarizes the barriers that confront wimmin who achieve academically:

Research on women, for example, is rarely read by male colleagues, and is largely considered to be at worse faddish, and at best narrow. Even if one has written twenty papers on extremely diverse aspects of woman's existence, it is still considered to be in the same subfield and hardly comparable to five good papers on voting statistics or Melville's novels (Freeman, 1979:29).

Students and/or faculty who question the ideological patriarchal structures are seen as "not very bright" or "not sociologists" because they do not appear to understand how a "value free" profession operates. Academics view criticisms of the system as signs of weakness in the "other" student/faculty, rather than legitimate critiques.

Journal policies operate with similar rhetoric about supposedly apolitical, objective standards of excellence. A major mechanism to ensure this egalitarian claim is the democratic peer review. Referees are selected from among recognized leaders in the field, interested readers or
recommended names that gain the attention and approval of editors and their review boards. Feminist referees are rarely included since those who dominate both numerically and ideologically are not feminists, and are often bitterly anti-feminist. A circular process operates: feminist writers cannot get published, so they do not become recognized reviewers. Feminism is defined as ideological (as opposed to scientific and objective), thus feminist authors are not "excellent." The democratic review by positivist peers virtually guarantees that feminist writings are not published. Acceptance and rejection are seen to reside in the canons of knowledge and the judgment of one's peers, not as a reflection of discriminatory treatment. (We lapse into the passive voice to deliberately invoke the authority of the discipline.) This review process is, after all, the same evaluation process that others undergo. Some researchers are viewed as successful and feminists are not. Dissenting voices are stilled.

Similarly, the basic reason that feminists cannot obtain research money is that the feminist agenda conflicts with the patriarchal system. Computers, interviewers, assistants, and other research resources are outside the pocketbook range of all social scientists, but feminists bear the brunt of this discrimination. Wimmin's conflicts are evidenced in a widening range of government funding policies. Kutza thoroughly documents the gender-biased payment structure of U. S. government benefits for disabled wimmin:
Marginal improvements in program specifics will not solve what is a continuing problem for women - the strong relationship between program benefit entitlement and labor force participation. As long as the major (and most generous) disability protection programs are premised upon a model of life-long, full-time employment outside the home, with disability being explicitly defined in a work-related context, women will continue to be disadvantaged" (Kutza, 1981: 315).

The government will not pay researchers to tell it to spend more money on wimmin or, if needed, less on men.

Research support often comes from feminist action programs and we must enlarge these efforts. Wimmin's inequalities will otherwise be systematically and deliberately ignored or reinforced by mainstream academic research. In a capitalist society, public and private funds are denied to researchers who empower wimmin. In the final set of papers, Stewart argues in "Feminism and Sociology: An unfortunate case of non-reciprocity" that feminist efforts within sociology have been suppressed, yet the possibility remains for compatible and mututally reinforcing work. Feminists have vigorously participated in creative sociological research, often crossing disciplinary lines to enlarge their analyses. In contrast, many sociologists have maintained a defensive posture and created barriers to the incorporation of feminist conclusions. In their article entitled "Am I my sister's gatekeeper? Cautionary tales from the academic hierarchy," Cook and Fonow argue that to safeguard feminist discourse, we must stimulate and protect its
production by critically analyzing the process of feminist scholarship. While highlighting the structure of patriarchal authority and scientism, they also caution against the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of gatekeeping.

CONCLUSIONS

A feminist ethic differs from the traditional sociological ethic in several fundamental ways. Traditional social scientists seek knowledge for the advancement and enlightenment of the discipline itself; in contrast, feminists analyze social oppression to empower wimmin and minorities. The traditional scientist is accountable only to the profession. The feminist sociologist is also accountable to her peers, the wimmin's movement, a feminist ethic, wimmin, and oppressed peoples.

In this introduction, we framed key biases and assumptions prevalent in sociology as practiced in the United States. Established ethics continue to uphold objectivity as the pinnacle of sociological research. To this end, an artificial dichotomy between theory and practice is maintained. Wimmin's work as secretaries, interviewers, wives, and graduate students is defined as unimportant and thus exploitable by researchers. The research conclusions generated by studies of wimmin continue to reflect male resources, biases and lack of reflexiveness. Likewise, sociological language omits wimmin, trivializes their oppression, defines them primarily in relation to a husband and family, and perpetuates harmful myths about wimmin. Finally, through the gatekeeping process, feminist work is kept out of
publication and widespread circulation. The result is that the patriarchal sociological method continues unchallenged for the most part.

There are several levels on which feminists can and do put a feminist ethic into practice. Despite existing barriers, feminist sociologists can walk a thin line between co-optation and expulsion from the field. Many feminists are politically active outside the discipline, working for long-term changes. Others work behind the scenes. Practicing feminist ethics inside the academy will not provide prestige or advancement in the field. We make myriad small compromises to gain and hold positions in sociology. Our danger lies in our privileged positions; we must analyze and challenge the underlying patriarchal structure of those positions. Our challenge lies in working for significant change inside and outside the academy even as we are a part of it.

EMPOWERING A FEMINIST ETHIC

The following are suggestions/challenges to all who labor in the discipline:

End the Objectification/Exploitation of Wimmin in Research:

Learn, accept and use qualitative, historical and other methodologies which highlight wimmin's oppressions.

Learn, critique and use research techniques withheld from wimmin in the past.
Institutionalize reflexiveness, self-criticism and accountability in the research process.

Stress theoretical development as well as methodological efficiency.

**Empower Research By, For and About Wimmin:**

Conduct liberating research which enables wimmin to speak about their own lives, e.g. publish the words of housewives, third world wimmin, lesbians, etc.

Specify the conditions of wimmin in all areas of sociological specialization (medicine, law, theory, race and ethnicity), not merely in marriage and family or sex roles.

Rotate the manual/theoretical work or incorporate it into one process rather than falsely dichotomizing work.

Acknowledge/recognize the importance of coding, interviewing, and similar activities, giving credit where it is appropriate.

Recognize the importance of teaching as a dialogue that empowers students, and expands our own understanding, even though few rewards are offered by the discipline.
Confront the Abuse of Language:

Critique patriarchal language, theory and concepts.

Use language that is non-exclusive, accessible and de-mystified.

Eliminate English chauvinism by incorporating bilingualism in journals, abstracts, course syllabi, and so forth.

Stress the active voice instead of the passive voice.

Bypass Gatekeepers and Create New Forms of Feminist Criticism:

Improve access to sociological/feminist conferences through sliding fees, accessible language, recruitment of community participants.

Improve access to journals in the same manner: recruit non-academic research reviews, especially by groups who are "objects" of research; generate cross-disciplinary feminist reviews.

Empower feminist ethics and feminist accountability in the development of feminist journals; create shared decision-making processes which involve boards and editors with more input from readers and the general public; change standards of excellence to include controversy, the goal of liberation and the importance of practice/reinvestment of research;
change reward structures to emphasize public recognition of feminist accomplishments; institutionalize the rotation of even feminist gatekeeping positions.

Support feminists in the discipline(s) by passing on knowledge, rather than withholding and creating a new scarce resource.

Create inclusive feminist support/study groups.

Become feminist mentors who open the field to new scholarship and new politics and new methods to empower all wimmin.

Generate alternate forms of professional recognition, scholarship and evaluation

These guidelines for a feminist ethic in the social sciences are not a completed mandate, but a responsible attempt to formulate rules for moral action.

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