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Cultural Interview

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Assignment 2

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## **Multicultural Constructs**

Canadian First Nations people are undeniably a deep rooted and yet diverse entity in Canadian culture. Their history stretches back countless generations, and their culture is unique in so many ways. This paper will outline a few of those unique characteristics, as well as provide specific considerations for counsellors to remember when working with First Nations clients.

The constructs I will highlight are centered around an interview I conducted with Jackie, a Blackfoot First Nations woman (name changed).

### **Central Multicultural Theoretical Constructs**

There are several main cultural constructs that are integral components of First Nations life and important for others, including counsellors, to understand. They are: traditional values, spirituality, dependency, prejudice, family dynamics, and the influence of residential schools. Some others that may be considered but go beyond the scope of this paper are gender, socio-economic status, addictions, education, or religious affiliations. The next part of this paper will identify how and why the first six are relevant.

#### *Traditional Values*

The First Nations people across North America exist as many separate sub-cultures. There are over 1.4 million Native people in Canada, living in more than 600 communities (Statistics Canada, 2011). Each of these communities is unique in a certain way, and yet, they share many common traditional values. Brant (1990, as cited in Blue, Darou, and Ruano, 2010) points out that most First Nations cultures share certain values in regards to harmony, community, and the earth (p. 265). These are reflected in Blackfoot culture as well.

One traditional value that stands out in most First Nations belief systems is respect. Respect for land, animals, plants, people, and for themselves (France, 1997). They demonstrate that respect in their interactions with each other, in their interactions with nature, and in the way

that they treat themselves. They believe that people are not separate from other things in the world. As people, we are “just another living breathing creature among many” (France, 1997, p. 2).

### *Spirituality*

Spirituality is another core value embedded in First Nations culture. It is embedded in that they do not separate spirituality from everyday life (Morrissette, 2008). This is a key component of their culture and will influence aspects of the counselling process such as assessment and intervention.

Space does not allow me to go into great detail on the topic of the spirituality of First Nations People. Briefly, their spirituality is deeply connected with the earth, as their values are. They see spirituality in the trees, animals, the rocks, and in many other elements of nature (France, 1997). To a large degree, these connections develop through ceremonies like smudges, healing circles, the pipe ceremony, potlatches, and others (“Aboriginal Medicine and Healing Practices”, 2009). Many of these ceremonies are specific to individual tribes, and yet there is a commonality to them that is remarkable. In general, they are used to bring them closer to the source of good, what they often refer to as the Great Spirit. It is to this Great Spirit, perceived everywhere, that they turn to in times of need (Dugan, 1985, as cited in France, 1997).

### *Dependency*

The history of First Nations treatment by colonial powers is complex. Colonial powers, and more recently the Canadian government, have invested billions of dollars into programs to support the First Nations people. While many of these programs are successful, many have not been. Alfred (2009) outlines how the First Nations are in a state of “near total psychological, physical and financial dependency on the state” (p. 42). Obviously, levels of dependency will

vary, but counsellors should be aware that this is now a part of First Nations identity, not by choice, but by circumstance.

### *Prejudice*

Prejudice is defined as “an unfavourable opinion or feeling formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason” (Dictionary.com, 2014). Much has been written about how First Nations people have been affected by prejudices of others. It is not the intent of this paper to delve into the specifics of these prejudices. However, it is valuable to understand that there are deep rooted prejudiced attitudes among Canadian populations against the First Nations people that will impact their ability to function in society. In addition, there may be underlying prejudices among counsellors as well (Bowers, 2010). Counsellors who intend to work with First Nations clients will need to do some soul searching to ensure that this does not hinder the counselling process.

### *Family Dynamics*

Family dynamics influence all cultures in different ways. First Nations people in particular have strong connections with extended family (Blue, Darou, and Ruano, 2010). Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Bockern (1990) explain the influence of extended family on the development of First Nations youth. Children often view uncles and aunts the same way that they see their own fathers and mothers. This leads to more connections with extended family members, and family decisions involve more than just direct family members.

Although there are high levels of involvement by extended family members in the rearing of First Nations children, there is also evidence to show that the bonds between children and their fathers is especially strong. Edward John, the Grand Chief of the British Columbia First Nations Summit, stated that “fathers and grandfathers may be the greatest untapped resource in the lives of Aboriginal children and youth” (Ball, 2012, p. 373). Ball makes the argument that there should be more emphasis on tapping into First Nations fathers’ abilities to contribute to the

development of their children. It seems that fathers were traditionally a larger part of the education and rearing of their children than they are today. The one identified factor that has interrupted this is the implementation of residential schools.

### *Residential Schools*

One of the most powerful things that has affected the culture of the First Nations people is the attempt to educate and assimilate them through residential schools. Blue, Darou, and Ruano (2010) refer to it as “driving the Indianness out of them” (p. 266). Residential schools were used by twenty-five different religious orders to assimilate First Nations people into the dominant society (Bull, 1991). It is important to note that it was not just the Catholic Church that was involved, but there were many different churches that followed the same model, and they were all sponsored by the Canadian government. (Morrissette, 2008).

The parallels between the residential schools and the concentration camp model are striking (Blue, Darou, and Ruano, 2010). First Nations people were stripped of their identity and forced to submit to the dominant culture. Although these schools no longer operational, and the Canadian government officially apologized for them in 2008, the effects on the First Nations people are long term and irreversible. The extended and intergenerational effects of mental, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse are realities they face today.

### **Interviewee Background**

Jackie is a middle aged Blackfoot woman from southern Alberta. She is the youngest child of a family of twelve. Her father was a respected elder in the Blackfoot community who was very instrumental in the development of the Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump international historic site. Jackie was the only child in the family who was not educated in a residential school. As a result, her upbringing was significantly different than any of her siblings in that her father had much more influence in raising her according to traditional Blackfoot culture. Jackie spend

31 ½ years as a First Nations liaison worker in the public school system. She currently works as an early childhood educator.

## **Application of Constructs – The Interview**

### **Multicultural Constructs and the Interview**

In my interview with Jackie, the constructs of traditional values, spirituality, dependency, prejudice, family dynamics, and residential schools were identified by her as integral components of her culture. She clearly stated that she felt that it would be important that counsellors have a clear understanding of them when counselling First Nations clients.

#### *Traditional Values*

Jackie outlined for me how the Blackfoot nation is a part of the greater First Nations community. She then described the seven core values of the Blackfoot people and how they are represented by animals. The following chart summarizes them:

<b>Value</b>	<b>Animal</b>	<b>Description</b>
Love	Eagle	To feel true love is to know who we are as a person.
Respect	Buffalo	The essence of respect is to give.
Courage	Bear	Courage is listening to your heart and doing the right thing even when no one is looking.
Honesty	Dog	Honesty is being true to your word.
Wisdom	Beaver	Wisdom is using your gifts and talents to build a peaceful world.
Humility	Wolf	Humility is considering others before ourselves.
Truth	White Buffalo and the Sun	Truth is to know and understand true principles.

Jackie explained how the First Nations way of life is rooted in the land: “But when we lived off the land, when we lived within our tribes off the land this is what we live by” (personal communication, February 26, 2014). First Nations values were based on how they interacted with the land. It was this land that provided them with the necessities of life. Brant (1990, as cited in Blue, Darou, and Ruano, 2010, p. 265) also states that most First Nations communities share values related to harmony, community, and the earth. These values not only formed what

they identified to be human core values, but their connection with the land is an intrinsic part of their being. It was touching to hear Jackie relate how her father was born. He was born “in a teepee, down in the river bottom.” This was a very important part of who he was, and consequently, who she is. As a result, there exists a deep connection between her and the land.

It was not just the connection with the land, but other traditional values as well. Jackie stated that her “father having those values, and teaching them to us, that defines me as a person.” One other value she identified was respect, relating how her father “taught us to respect all mankind, no matter who. Nobody is up here, and nobody is down here. As people, we are all one and we are all level, and we look up to one creator and the creator looks after all of us.” She believed very strongly that people are meant to exist at an equal level, and that the notion of social hierarchy is not part of First Nations culture.

### *Spirituality*

When I asked Jackie about how spirituality and faith were important to her culture, she stated that spirituality is an integral part of their day to day lives. “It’s the spirituality of the living of every day” is how she put it. Spirituality is not something that is tacked on or superficial, but it is a part of their inner selves. Jackie also related how ceremonies are important to them. Again, she spoke of her father as a sun dancer, as being the owner of a medicine pipe bundle, and about his involvement in the Brave Dog Society. She told me how he would have a pipe ceremony after the first thunder was heard in the spring to welcome in a new year. In Blackfoot culture, a new year coincided more with the beginning of spring than with the calendar year. These and many other ceremonies bring them closer together as a people, and foster their spiritual growth.

### *Dependency*

I was somewhat surprised to hear Jackie caution me about the danger of a dependency relationship developing between a counsellor and a First Nations client. While dependency is not unusual in counsellor-client relations (Tate, 1997), I had not anticipated that this would be as much as a problem between a white male counsellor and a First Nations client. I would have expected challenges in developing a strong therapeutic relationship, but not so much with dependency. Jackie warned me about it, stating that “they look for your vulnerable part.” Once the client has found that, they may try to use this to their advantage. This is apparently a historical phenomenon (not a cultural one) that has developed over generations and while the counsellor should not assume that all First Nations clients will be this way, awareness of it may certainly prevent dependency from occurring.

### *Prejudice*

Jackie began attending a public school in grade four and spoke about how she experienced prejudice because of who she was. She didn't even know what the word prejudice was at the time, but she certainly knew that what she was experiencing didn't feel very good. In her own words, she related that “it bothered me and it hindered me personally and emotionally facing that, and I'd go home and tell my parents and my parents explained to me what I was facing.” Her parents were very supportive, again highlighting the importance of family in her life. They would talk with her about how she treated others, and through them she also learned the power of forgiveness.

### *Family Dynamics*

Jackie's relationship with her father was clearly a very strong one. She related how she was the youngest of twelve children, and the only one in the family who did not attend a boarding school. As a result, her connection with her father was significantly different from that



of any of her siblings. In her words “I was blessed to be raised at home with my parents, so I’m kind of different from my siblings because of that.” Jackie obviously was close to her father and learned much about traditional Blackfoot culture from him. He was a well-respected elder of the Pikani Nation, was very instrumental in the founding of the Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and he was recognized worldwide for his efforts to preserve traditional Blackfoot culture.

Jackie also related how it saddened her that, although she was close to her father, she did not have the opportunity to interact with her siblings in ways that were traditional to her culture. She stated that “[she] was robbed of being raised with my siblings and getting to know who they are.” She felt that in this way there was something missing in her upbringing.

One thing that I noticed that seemed different from what seems to be traditional in First Nations culture and what Jackie experienced was that she did not identify much of a connection to extended family. When she was describing to me the value of family, I asked her if she meant father, mother, and siblings, or extended family as well. She replied that it was mostly direct family. It seems that her situation in this regard might have been somewhat different from many other First Nations families.

### *Residential Schools*

Jackie’s family was unquestionably affected by residential schools. All of her older eleven siblings left home to attend them and she spoke to me about how this affected her. She spoke with sadness about how she never had the opportunity to get to know her brothers and sisters very well. By the time they graduated from the boarding school, they moved on with their lives, and she missed getting to know them on a personal level. Jackie stated that “I was robbed of being raised with my siblings and getting to know who they are.” I did not have time to ask

her if she knew what their experiences were like at these schools. For her personally, however, the fact that she was the youngest, and that all the rest left home to be educated, she felt that she missed out on cultivating personal connections with her siblings. Given the importance of family in First Nations culture, this was a big hole in her life.

## **Counselling Considerations**

### **Professional Practice Considerations**

#### *Respecting Values*

Standard II.14 of the CPA Code of Ethics (2000) states that psychologists should “sufficiently sensitive to and knowledgeable about individual, group, community, and cultural differences and vulnerabilities to discern what will benefit and not harm persons involved in their activities” (p. 17). This would be one of the main things that would have to be considered when working with First Nations clients. Their culture is unique and there will be many aspects of it that counsellors will not understand. However, the responsibility of the counsellor is still to be sensitive in a way that clients feel that their values are accepted.

#### *Understanding Culture*

First Nations people interact with each other and with non-First Nations people in different ways than other cultures do. According to the same CPA standard (Standard II.14), if a counsellor is planning to engage in counselling with First Nations clients, they have a responsibility to educate themselves about the specific nuances of their culture. This education could be done by personal research (library, internet, etc.), by engaging in conversations with First Nations community members, or by attending certain ceremonies. In our interview, Jackie indicated that if a client invites you to a ceremony, it would be a good idea to go. Most ceremonies are open to the public to observe. Counsellors could also engage their First Nations clients in this process. Let them be the experts and help you to understand their culture.

*White Counsellors, First Nations Clients*

Smith & Morrisette (1998) conducted a study on the experiences of white counsellor who work with First Nations clients. The study highlighted the challenges, but also the successes of the different members of the study group. In his conclusion, he emphasized the need for creativity and flexibility; as well as a willingness to step outside of their traditional counselling methods, and to involve the broader community. Some of the suggestions provided in the study to empower white counsellors are:

- Increased levels of supervision by experienced multicultural counsellors.
- The development of professional support groups.
- Informal networking/mentoring relationships with elders and traditional healers.
- High levels of personal motivations to working with First Nations clients.
- Professional development to promote multicultural competencies.

*Other Considerations*

Another thing that counsellors should consider is the setting in which the counselling takes place. For example, the symbol of a cross in a room may trigger things for First Nations clients who have been adversely affected by residential schools. Some counsellors may do counselling in client's homes. In these situations, what is common etiquette in First Nation homes? What about eye contact? Direct eye contact may be perceived as confrontational (Blue, Darou, and Ruano, 2010). In general it would be wise to spend some time in dialogue with clients about cultural rules of behaviour.

**Specific Counselling Techniques**

Counsellors in general have many different techniques that they use with clients to enable them and their clients to reach their goals. Many of them are basic strategies that help to develop

connections and trust, others are specific to certain presenting problems. The next section will present several of these, along with specific nuances to consider when using them with First Nations clients.

### *The Therapeutic Alliance*

A strong therapeutic alliance is of particular value in any counselling relationship. Carl Rogers identified this in his work with client more than fifty years ago (Rogers, 1957). One of the five predominant themes that came out of a study by Smith & Morrissette (2001) was establishing relationships. They found that it was particularly difficult for white counsellors to connect with First Nations clients. The reason for this is in part because First Nations people tend to have a more collective notion of life (McCormick, 1997). They are not used to the one-on-one psychoanalytical approach that most counsellors are trained in. Techniques that commonly work to build the working alliance may take a bit more work, or the counsellor may have to try different approaches so that that mutual trust can develop.

### *Space and silence*

The effective use of silence is a powerful tool in any counsellor's toolbox. Silence gives the client time for reflection, for gathering of thoughts, and allows space for deeper feelings and emotions. Such basic counselling skills are equally important when dealing with First Nations clients. First Nations people are often somewhat more relaxed and may even benefit more than others from some time to process what you said, and to formulate their response. In addition, there may be language barriers and time may be needed to translate what you said in their own minds. Counsellors who don't allow them the space and time to process things may have difficulty cultivating a strong working alliance. Morrissette (2008) states that: "For the most part FN clients are reserved and soft-spoken. A lack of expressed emotion should not be misconstrued as disinterest or indifference" (p. 70). Respecting their space, giving some time,

and allowing some amount of silence will often lead to First Nations clients developing a greater level of respect for the counsellor.

### *Storytelling*

Storytelling in First Nations culture is traditionally been a way to transmit healing messages (Blue, Darou, and Ruano, 2010). They would use stories to pass on cultural legends, to teach the young important cultural values, and to move them to new learning. A white counsellor may not have the ability to tell stories in the way that the tribal elders do, so they should be cautious in trying this technique. Listening to stories, however, may be a powerful way to connect with First Nations clients and learn things about them. Smith & Morrissette (2001) identify that “listening to stories became an integral part of the counselling relationship” (p.80). The same authors state that the stories that First Nations clients tell may seem unrelated at first, but their suggestion is to let them talk because that is their cultural way of expressing themselves. They will often use stories to share information, or as a roundabout way to disclose information, or to provide you with a different perspective. Aside from that, their stories will provide you with a wealth of information about their culture, and by giving them the chance to talk, you create an atmosphere of trust and respect.

### *Ceremonies*

Healing is a process that involves different dimensions. Culture is one of them. Vontress (2005, as cited in Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010) states that “the most effective therapeutic agents are those who embody the culture of their clients” (p. 285). As non-First Nations counsellors it may be challenging for us to do this. Bojuwoye & Sodi (2010) identify some of those challenges.

One particular challenge for counsellors is in the use of ceremonies. Unfamiliarity with the nuances of ceremonies may create barriers that prevent First Nations clients from exploring ceremonies as a therapeutic tool. However, it should be remembered that in First Nations culture,

ceremonies were an integral part of personal development as well as personal healing. For example, sweat lodges are used as a method of mental and physical healing. The question then arises how non-First Nations counsellors can integrate ceremonies into therapy. It would have to be done in close consultation with an elder or a spiritual leader who fully understands the use of ceremony. It would be just as unethical for a counsellor to use ceremony inappropriately with First Nations clients as it would be for a counsellor to practice any other intervention method in which he is not sufficiently trained. For the most part, the client should be referred to someone who is able to provide such ceremonial support. At the same time, it would definitely be helpful to attempt to understand the uses of ceremony by debriefing, or by attending the ceremony if at all possible.

### *Spirituality*

Spirituality is an element of therapy that should not be ignored. It can help counsellors to understand presenting problems but also be used as a way of healing or personal growth. It is somewhat unreasonable for counsellors to be experts on the myriads of belief systems that exist worldwide. Even among First Nations cultures there are many differences in spirituality. McLennan, Rochow, & Arthur (2001), state that counsellors “need to be careful not to stereotype clients based on their religious affiliation and need to check whether client beliefs match the counsellor's understanding of the particular faith.”

However, spirituality should not be overlooked just because the counsellor is uncomfortable with it. Reconnecting First Nations clients with their traditional spirituality can assist them in dealing with issues in their lives. Again, allowing the client to use available sources to do this can be very empowering. These sources could be family members, elders in the community, or others whom they may connect with on a spiritual level. The counsellor could play the role as facilitator in this process.

A cautionary note is in order here however. Counsellors should be careful that they don't assume that reconnecting clients with spirituality will take care of all problems. Blue (2010) provides an interesting anecdote in his personal introduction where he was confronted by a medicine man from a nearby reservation who told him that he should "start dealin' with the problems that [he was] trained to work with and I will work with the spiritual problems that people have" (Blue, Darou, and Ruano, 2010. P. 259). Spiritual leaders have their role but should not be expected to solve everything.

### *Family Systems*

Many counselling techniques are centered on one-on-one interaction between the counsellor and client. This model may not be the most effective when counselling First Nations clients. McCormick and Amundson (1997) state that "for many First Nations clients, personal change occurs in the framework of the family and the community" (p. 173). Many of their traditional ceremonies and spiritual belief involve the strengthening of the family system. Counsellors should keep in mind that individual counselling techniques may not be as effective with First Nations clients as they are with people from other cultural groups.

### *Career & Occupational Counselling*

Career and occupational frustrations are often a part of the lives of clients who are struggling in life. The complex dynamics of the First Nations situation often makes their career situations very difficult. Variables such as reservations, education, living in remote locations, low levels of employment opportunities, and many others can make it very challenging for First Nations people to reach their career aspirations or to

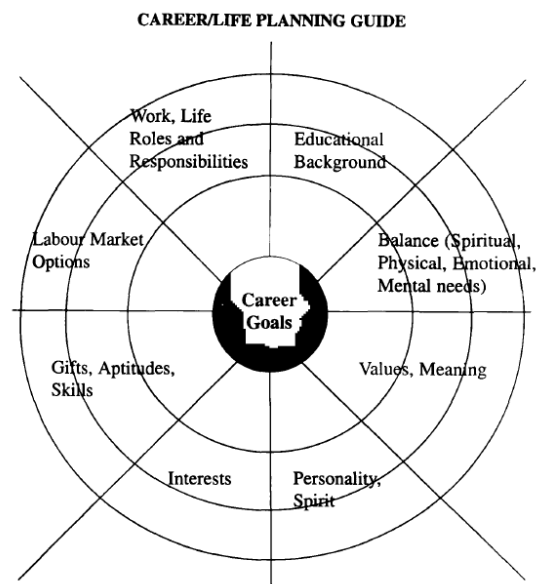


Figure 1: McCormick & Amundson (1997)

reach their career potential. Counsellors should consider career counselling as an option when dealing with First Nations clients. They should be aware, however, that typical western models of career counselling may not be entirely effective with them. McCormick & Amundson (1997) present a career-life planning model for First Nations people. Figure 1 illustrates how their model integrates elements of First Nations culture into a model to be used with First Nations people.

### *Circle of Courage*

While not a specific counselling technique, a model that counsellors should be aware of when working with First Nations clients is the Circle of Courage. This model draws on Native tribal wisdom, the work of early youth-work pioneers, as well as youth development research (<http://www.reclaiming.com>). The four elements of the Circle of Courage are belonging, independence, generosity, and mastery. Reclaiming Youth International provides training in how to implement this model in work with youth. The model can be used with youth from different cultural backgrounds as well, but as the core element of it draw from First Nations tradition, counsellor who work with First Nations people should definitely consider integrating it into the counselling process.

### *Other techniques*

There are many other techniques available to counsellors: solution focused, cognitive-behavioural, existential, client centred; or more specific ones like EMDR, somatic experience, emotional regulation, and many others. It is not the intent of this paper to go into each one on detail. Some core techniques, strategies, and skills have been identified that counsellors who work with First Nations clients should be aware of.

### **Self-Reflection**

I have found this exercise to be extremely valuable to me both on a personal level and a professional level. I grew up in Southern Alberta, close to two of the largest Native reservations in Canada. I was very influenced by a culture that stereotyped First Nations people. about eight



years ago, I attended a workshop on the Circle of Courage model by Larry Brendtro. This was a real turning point for me in how I viewed First Nations people and their culture. My family and I have recently moved to a farm that is only a few kilometers away from the Piikani reservation. We've already met several local First Nations people, and more and more I am developing an appreciation for their culture. I'm beginning (I believe only in a very small way) to understand how past injustices have affected them as a people and the struggles they encounter every day as a result. When I first saw this assignment, there was no question in my mind about what culture I wanted to focus on. Jackie (who is a colleague of my wife) provided me with a wonderful interview that highlighted many of the considerations that Counsellors need to remember when working with First Nations clients.

During my research, I began to wonder if it would even be ethical for a white male counsellor to attempt to counsel First Nations clients. There seemed to be so many nuances and ways in which things could go wrong. There were so many cultural aspects that are difficult to understand and if misunderstood could derail the counselling process. However, I discovered that these challenges can be overcome if one is careful to respect the individuals, and to allow them to be the cultural experts. Regardless of how much I may try to educate myself about their culture and try to be sensitive to it when using certain counselling techniques, the fact is that I will never fully understand the complex dynamics of it. Ultimately, the most effective counselling for First Nations clients would be done by First Nations counsellors. However, in time, I would like to make myself available for them if needed. The skills I have learned and the attitudes I have developed do give me some level of confidence for this, and yet, the points listed above from Smith & Morrisette (1997) are good reminders that, as counsellors, we need ongoing and sufficient supervision, training, and cultural networking.

I discovered throughout this process I will never be an expert in First Nations culture. I do believe that I have developed an appreciation for their culture, that I can be sensitive to the challenges that they face, and that I have some tools that will enable me to be helpful to them. However, in order for First Nations clients to draw on the strengths of their culture, and experience the healing opportunities available through their culture, I (and the client) will need to utilize the cultural community resources that are available. This may include tribal elders, ceremonies, family, etc. I have also discovered that many of the First Nations core beliefs translate into other cultures as well. For example, the ways in which they bond with nature and the land can be used as grounding and calming strategies for others as well. I appreciate the multiculturalism is much more than First Nations people, but I do believe that the appreciation I have developed for them will translate into working with other cultures.

I would also like to point out that it was somewhat frustrating to encapsulate the volumes of information available into the scope of this paper. Each of the constructs listed above could have stood alone as a research topic and it was difficult to limit each of them to a few paragraphs. I've attempted to focus on key concepts that emerged from the interview.

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