Differences Between Values of Australian Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students

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Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the students - particularly those from Kumbari/Ngurpai Lag - for participating in this study. We also wish to acknowledge the contribution of unknown reviewers who made very helpful suggestions after reading an earlier version of this paper.

Full reference: Fogarty, G., & White, C. (1994). Difference between values of Australian Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal students. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology*, 25 (3), 394-408

Abstract

In this study, the Values Questionnaire developed by Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) was used to examine differences in the values held by a group of Aboriginal university students (N=112) and a group of non-Aboriginal students (N=106) studying at an Australian university. Results indicated that the Aboriginal group placed greater emphasis on values associated with Tradition, Conformity and Security and significantly less emphasis on values associated with Achievement, Self-direction, Stimulation, Hedonism and Benevolence. These data, in conjunction with a separate analysis of the ten highest ranked values for each group, support the view that the main differences between the groups lie in values serving collective (Aboriginal) as opposed to individual (non-Aboriginal) interests. These findings are consistent with previous research (eg. Christie, 1987) on the world view of traditional Aboriginal people and suggest that even among younger, more "Westernised", representatives of this culture, collective values are likely to be strong determinants of behaviour.

Differences Between Values Held by Australian Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students

The impact of Aboriginal students in Australian universities began to be felt in the mid to late 1980's as the Australian government took steps to increase the participation rates of Aborigines in higher education. During this period of expanded educational opportunity, however, little systematic attempt was made to understand the values of the culture from which these students came, or to determine the extent to which the students themselves held values which might be at odds with modern educational aims. The present study attempted to fill this gap in our understanding by firstly reviewing what is known about traditional Australian Aboriginal values and, secondly, by sampling the values of Aboriginal students participating in a Western-based higher education system and comparing these values with those held by a comparable group of non-Aboriginal students.

Researchers in cross-cultural psychology have long stressed the role of cultural outlook in educational achievement. Levi-Strauss (1962/66), certainly a pioneer in cross-cultural studies of cognition, spoke of "magic" and "science" as two parallel ways of acquiring knowledge which are valued differently by different societies. Vernon (1976) proposed that a major part of cultural differences rests on differences in motivation. Goodnow (1976) reminded us that our definitions of what is "good" are based upon our own particular system of values, not necessarily shared by other cultures. Berry (1984) demonstrated that cultural groups differ on dimensions such as preference for holistic rather than analytic problem solving strategies and preference for collective discussion as opposed to individual reflection as the basis for decision making. Berry (1988) further drew our attention to the importance of these background factors when he argued that a special effort should be made to understand cultural values and goals for cognitive development before trying to assess competence in any non-Western community. By and large, this has not happened for the Australian Aborigines. As Christie (1985) has asserted, educating Aboriginal people through formal schooling has been largely a matter of imposing the Western world view upon the Aboriginal one.

In examining traditional Aboriginal culture, the concept of world-view often emerges. Although different definitions exist, a world-view can be considered as the set of ideas and beliefs which a group of people hold about the world and the people and things in it (Christie, 1987). In examining differences between Aboriginal and White Australian society, researchers are often struck by the large differences and contrasts in world-view held by the two societies. Christie (1985) noted in particular the emphasis placed in Aboriginal culture upon qualities and personal relationships and responsiveness to the environment. Survival depends on cooperation and coexistence. Harris (1988) found evidence of five major differences between the cultures. These differences were in the following areas: a) Aborigines view knowledge as owned, or looked after, by particular people whereas in Western society knowledge is freely available to those who choose to seek it; b) the Aboriginal culture places a greater emphasis on the quality of personal relationships; c) Aborigines have a more passive view of the environment, preferring to adapt to it rather than manipulating it to suit themselves; d) the Aboriginal view of the world is essentially a religious one, as opposed to Western 'scientific' viewpoints; e) the Aboriginal world view holds that most of the major changes have already taken place and that a perfectly good social system already exists - this again is opposed to Western concepts of progress, development, change and control.

These descriptions of world view paint an interesting picture of traditional Aboriginal society but what do they tell us about the values of students, now somewhat removed from this context? Although writers such as Christie and Harris were careful to confine their

observations in relation to world-views to the more traditional communities in which they worked, they also suggested that there are significant continuities within all Aboriginal groups in Australia (Christie, 1985, Harris, 1990). If this is the case, Aboriginal university students should exhibit value profiles which are compatible with the world views attributed to their traditional culture. Other lines of research suggest that this might be the case. Berry (1970) used the term "marginals" to describe Aborigines caught between cultures. He found that people in this situation tend to reaffirm or retain traditional values. Dawson (1969), in research with groups of semi-traditional, semi-modern, and modern Aborigines, reported that Aborigines in all groups showed a tendency to retain their traditional character and resist the adoption of Western values.

These latter researchers were, of course, talking about "values" rather than "world views", but the two are not so different. In many ways the values framework is probably a more familiar setting for cross-cultural research on aspects of cognition. Kearney and Fitzpatrick (1976), in reviewing research on social change amongst Aboriginal Australians, observed that much of the literature emphasises the crucial role of a person's individual value system in shaping the direction of change -towards assimilation or towards ethnicity. Feather (1986) described a long-standing cross-cultural research programme based in Australia which has used Rokeach's Value Survey (RVS) as its main psychometric instrument. In more recent times, this programme has adopted the Values Questionnaire (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990), a derivation of the (RVS), for its investigation of cross-cultural value differences (Feather, Volkmer, & McKee; 1992). This was also the instrument chosen for the present study and some comments on its derivation are warranted.

Schwartz (1991) describes values as terms that point to the important human goals or motivations about which people communicate. In developing a theory of a universal psychological structure of human values, Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) proposed that there were three universal human requirements to which all individuals and societies must be responsive. These were (a) needs of individuals as biological organisms, (b) requisites of coordinated social interaction, and (c) survival and welfare needs of groups. They further contended that these requirements must be represented cognitively, taking the form of values and that through socialisation and developmental processes, individuals learn to represent the requirements as conscious goals and values and to attribute varying degrees of importance to them (Schwartz and Bilsky, (1990).

Early research by Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) had identified eight distinct motivational values which could be derived from the three universal human requirements. Further research (Schwartz, 1991), utilising a newly developed 56 item questionnaire, yielded a number of additional motivational values resulting in ten, possibly eleven, distinct motivational categories. This revision was based on the analyses of interrelations among 56 values in 40 samples across 20 countries. In a more recent revision of the theory, Schwartz (1992) settled upon 11 dimensions. The motivational types and associated values of the revised theory are as follows:

1. Self-Direction (creativity, freedom, choosing own goals, curiosity, independence);
2. Stimulation (variety, excitement);
3. Hedonism (pleasure, enjoyment of life);
4 Achievement (ambition, success, capability, influence intelligent);
5. Power (authority, wealth, social power, public image, social recognition);
6. Security (social order, family security, national security, reciprocation of favours, cleanliness, sense of belonging, healthy);
7. Conformity (obedience, self-discipline, politeness, honouring parents and elders);

8. Tradition (respect for tradition, humility, devoutness, acceptance of one's portion in life, moderation);
9. Benevolence (helpfulness, loyalty, forgiveness, honesty, responsibility, truth, friendship, mature love);
10. Universalism (broadmindedness, social justice, equality, world at peace, unity with nature, wisdom, protection of the environment);
11. Spirituality (spirituality; meaning in life, sense of inner harmony, sense of detachment).

Quite clearly, there is considerable conceptual overlap in the usage of "values" and "world view". Some researchers (eg. Graves, 1967) have actually interpreted "world view" in terms of value systems. At the individual item level, and perhaps at scale level as well, the Values Questionnaire appears to capture much of what has been discussed under the heading of "world view". The views attributed to the Aborigines by Christie (1985) and Harris (1988) would seem to be captured by types 6-11 in the above list, what Schwartz & Bilsky (1990) would refer to as "collective" (Hofstede, 1980) values. Types 1-5 reflect "individualistic" values and these are markedly absent in the descriptions given by Christie and Harris of traditional Aboriginal society.

The "world view" and "values" approaches offered two different ways of studying the values of students, each with associated advantages and disadvantages. An approach based on analysis of world views offered continuity with previous research with Aboriginal communities but appeared unsuited for distinguishing groups that may not be anywhere near the extreme positions described by Christie and Harris. The values approach is not limited in this way. For the purposes of this project, it had a number of other advantages: a) the conceptualisation of values, as operationalized in the Values Questionnaire, covered a wider range of value/motivational constructs than the dimensions referred to in the world-view literature; b) it offered benchmarks for unselected Australian samples (Feather, Volkmer & McKee; 1992) as well as data on numerous other cultures; c) the Values Questionnaire lends itself quite readily to quantitative applications, an important long-term consideration in the overall research programme of which this study forms one part. For these reasons, it was adopted as the framework for the present investigation of the value systems of Aboriginal Australian university students.

Method

Subjects

A total of 112 Aboriginal and 106 non-Aboriginal (otherwise unselected) students studying at the University of Southern Queensland participated in the experiment. The Aboriginal students were predominantly from rural, semi-urban and urban environments with very few, if any, from what could be considered traditional Aboriginal communities. The majority of these students had spent at least 10 years in Australian primary and secondary schools prior to enrolment in the university. Despite their largely non-traditional background, the students tended to identify strongly with their Aboriginality The non-Aboriginal sample was predominantly of Anglo-Saxon origin. Data was collected largely in the first Semester during 1991 and 1992. Subjects were enrolled in a variety of courses including Psychology, Nursing, Education, Management and Arts. Non-Aboriginal students received a 1% credit toward a Foundation Psychology unit they were undertaking for completing the Values Questionnaire. Aboriginal students other than those undertaking psychology units did not receive credit and were asked individually to participate by one of the experimenters The sex composition in both groups was predominately female with males comprising 37.7% of the

Aboriginal group and 25.5% of the non-Aboriginal group. The mean age for the Aboriginal group was 26.96 years and for the non-Aboriginal group 24.54 years.

Materials

The Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) developed by Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) and modified by Schwartz (1992) was used. As used in this study, the Questionnaire simply required each respondent to rate the importance of each of 56 values as guiding principles in their lives.

Procedure

Subjects collected the questionnaire, completed it in their own time, and returned it to the experimenter, usually one day later.

Results

In order to control for possible response sets associated with the use of the rating procedures, raw data were transformed using a procedure recommended by Bond (1988) and Feather (1992). This involved converting each subject's ratings for the 56 values to standard scores based on that subject's distribution of ratings. Mean standardised item ratings were then obtained for all 11 scales. Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for all scales are presented in Table 1. The reliability estimates were calculated from the untransformed data.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Samples

Aboriginal	**Students**			
Value Domain	*Mean*	*S.D.*	*Reliability*	*N of Items*
Achievement	.06	.38	.60	5
Power	-.89	.57	.72	5
Self-Direction	.18	.37	.63	5
Benevolence	.34	.36	.69	7
Tradition	-.45	.48	.59	5
Conformity	.36	.42	.46	4
Universalism	.21	.34	.73	8
Security	.20	.30	.47	7
Spirituality	-.17	.50	.57	4
Stimulation	-.40	.67	.64	3
Hedonism	-.05	.64	.46	2
Demographic	*Vars*			
Age	26.96			
Years schooling	11.01			
Non-Aboriginal	**Students**			
Value Domain	*Mean*	*S.D.*	*Reliability*	*N of Items*
Achievement	.22	.42	.75	5
Power	-.96	.55	.72	5
Self-Direction	.36	.39	.69	5
Benevolence	.48	.28	.73	7
Tradition	-.78	.52	.53	5
Conformity	-.06	.41	.65	4
Universalism	.21	.41	.81	8
Security	.13	.34	.67	7
Spirituality	-.14	.55	.52	4
Stimulation	-.16	.60	.64	3
Hedonism	.20	.62	.61	2
Demographic	*Vars*			
Age	24.54			
Years schooling	13.16			

The main aim of the project was to test for differences between groups but it was also important to see whether these were affected by sex. Accordingly, a 2 x 2 (Group by Sex) between groups analysis of variance was conducted on all 11 scales of the Values Survey using the MANOVA procedures from SPSS/PC+. Seven cases were rejected from the analysis due to missing data. The interaction term was not significant ($F_{11,197} = .90$, $p = .54$) but main effects for group ($F_{11,197} = 6.8$, $p = .00$) and sex ($F_{11,197} = 2.49$, $p = .01$) were both significant. Univariate F tests for group differences are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Univariate F-tests for Group Differences.

Variable	F (df = 1, 207)	p Value
Achievement	8.07	.005
Power	0.77	.382
Self-Direction	13.00	.000
Benevolence	10.37	.001
Tradition	22.45	.000
Conformity	37.15	.000
Universalism	0.07	.796
Security	4.99	.027
Spirituality	0.22	.640
Stimulation	8.55	.004
Hedonism	7.95	.005

It can be seen that the Aboriginal group scored more highly on Tradition, Conformity, and Security. It had lower scores on Achievement, Self Direction, Benevolence, Stimulation and Hedonism. Further indications of value differences between the groups can be gained by looking at rankings of the ten most highly rated items for each group. These are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Mean Ratings of the Ten Highest Ranked Values for Each Group

Aboriginal Students			Non-Aboriginal Students		
Rank	Value	Mean	Rank	Value	Mean
1	Family Security	6.07	1	Family Security	5.71
2	Honouring Parents	5.86	2	True Friendship	5.67
3	Healthy	5.62	3	Healthy	5.64
4	Honest	5.59	4	Self-Respect	5.59
5	Choosing own goals	5.47	5	Choosing own goals	5.49
6	True Friendship	5.46	6	Inner Harmony	5.45
7	Self-Respect	5.43	7	Honest	5.43
8	Equality	5.41	8	Freedom	5.37
9	Politeness	5.36	9	Mature Love	5.33
10	Social Justice	5.33	10	Successful	5.33

Examination of this table indicates that Family Security was the most highly rated item for both groups. Five other values are common to both lists, although their rankings are not identical. The four unique items in the list of the Aboriginal group were Honouring Parents, Equality, Politeness, and Social Justice. The four unique items in the list of the non-Aboriginal group were Inner Harmony, Freedom, Mature Love, and Successful.

As mentioned previously, there was also a significant effect for sex. Standardised scale means and univariate F tests for these data are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Standardised Scale Means and Univariate F tests for Sex (df = 1,207)

Variable	Male (N = 69)	Female (N = 149)	F value	p Value
Achievement	.13	.14	.035	.853
Power	-.86	-.95	.476	.491
Self-direction	.25	.28	.000	.988
Benevolence	.34	.44	1.915	.168
Tradition	-.53	-.65	1.083	.299
Conformity	.26	.11	3.325	.073
Universalism	.22	.21	.036	.849
Security	.10	.20	7.190	.008
Spirituality	-.27	-.11	4.827	.029
Stimulation	-.16	-.34	5.774	.017
Hedonism	.13	.05	1.795	.182

These univariate tests show that males valued Stimulation more highly than females but that females placed higher values on Security and Spirituality.

Discussion

An important question that needs to be addressed is whether the data obtained are reliable. Internal consistency estimates (Cronbach's alpha) are shown in Table 1. The figures for the non-Aboriginal group range from 0.53 to 0.81 and, with the exception of three scales, are either equal to or greater than those reported by Feather et al. (1992) for an unselected Australian sample. The estimates for the Aboriginal group are generally less than those for the non-Aboriginal group, with estimates ranging from 0.46 to 0.73. With small numbers of items in each of the scales, these internal consistency estimates are not surprising but they are a warning that some of the underlying dimensions may not be well-represented by scale scores.

It would be unwise to base all conclusions stemming from this study on between-group comparisons. In the present study, significant differences have arisen mostly as a matter of degree, rather than direction, of values held. Accordingly, results for each group are first discussed separately and, where possible, anchored to outside findings so that some estimate can be made of the stability of these data.

Taking the Aboriginal data by itself, the first point to note about the scale scores is that the Aboriginal group held values that conformed to some extent with those associated with what Schwartz et al. (1990) described as "collectivist", as opposed to "individualistic", aims. The evidence for this lies in the higher ratings awarded to Benevolence (0.34) and Conformity (0.36) and the relatively lower ratings they awarded to Power (-.89). Additional evidence comes from Table 3 where nine of the ten most highly ranked values for this group support the collectivist tendency.

When the data for the non-Aboriginal group is considered, a picture emerges of a group that mixed both collective and individualistic values. Power (-.96), Benevolence (.48) and Universalism (.21) support a collectivist orientation but these are offset to some extent by

Achievement (.22), Self Direction (.36), Tradition (-.78) and Hedonism (.20). Further evidence can be found in Table 3 where three of the individualistic items found their way into the top ten rankings. These results support earlier findings that both individualistic and collective values are seen as important by Australians (Feather et al., 1992). Indeed, the standardised mean value scores for this group are remarkably similar to those reported by Feather et al. for their unselected sample with an average difference between the two data sets of just 0.08. They are virtually identical. There is every reason to suppose that the non-Aboriginal group used in the present study is reasonably representative of the general student body and can serve as a comparison group.

Between group comparisons (Table 2) showed that Aboriginal students rated Tradition, Conformity and Security values higher than did the non-Aboriginal students. Values associated with Conformity, Tradition and Security tend to serve collective interests and are largely concerned with stability of society and close-knit harmonious relations where the interest of the person is not viewed as distinct from those of the group (Schwartz, 1992). Tradition values also imply a respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture imposes on the self. The greater concern for Security could well reflect the uncertain position of the Aboriginal in Australian society. A very small part of the population (1.5%), the Aboriginal people have struggled to find their place in modern Australia. The finding that Aboriginal students had significantly lower scores on Achievement, Self-direction, Stimulation and Hedonism suggests a less-ready acceptance or endorsement of individualistic type values. Values associated with Achievement, Self-direction, Stimulation and Hedonism tend to serve individual interests and are concerned with desires for mastery, openness to change, arousal, esteem and social superiority (Schwartz, 1992).

An examination of the mean ratings of the ten highest ranked values for each group (see Table 3) reinforces the impression gained from the separate group analysis: basically, both groups see the same things as being important with a somewhat greater intrusion of individualistic values in the list of the non-Aboriginal groups. There were four items in the Aboriginal students' list which were not in the other list (Honouring Parents, Equality, Politeness and Social Justice); they were all to do with collective values. Of the four items which were unique to the non-Aboriginal list, two supported individualistic orientations (Freedom and Success). These findings tend to support what is known about Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals from previous research. Feather (1980), using the Rokeach Value Survey, compared a sample of "White" Australians with a sample of Papua New Guineans and found that the former showed greater relative concerns with affiliative values and values relating to fulfilment and self-definition; the Papua New Guineans showed concern for equality, security, comfort, peace, obedience, ambition, and the welfare of others. There is a similar differentiation between the populations sampled in the present study. Eckermann (1973), working with a sample of Aboriginals from the same region as that used here, reported that Aborigines are strongly group-oriented and lack "initiative". The present research shows that they are group-oriented and that they do not value personal achievement as much as non-Aboriginals.

One of the aims of this study was to look for evidence of continuity between the value systems of Aboriginal students and those attributed to traditional Aboriginal culture on the basis of studies of world view. These studies had portrayed the Aborigines as being concerned with maintenance of social order, showing preference for religious as opposed to scientific explanations, favouring collective as opposed to individual effort (eg. Harris, 1988). The present finding that Aboriginal students favour collective over individual interests lends support to the contention that there are significant continuities in regard to value orientation within all Aboriginal groups (Christie, 1985, 1988; Harris 1988; 1990). The Aboriginal

students who participated in this study came largely from rural towns and cities throughout Queensland, Northern Territory and Northern N.S.W. and in the main, could not be considered as originating from traditional Aboriginal communities. Yet there can be no doubt that they retain many traditional values, although perhaps in weakened form. The present group is collectively minded, but not in an extreme way. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the rating of Tradition. The Aboriginal students rated it more highly than the non-Aboriginal students but it was one of the lowest rated values for both groups. This may be one instance where there is a discontinuity between traditional Aboriginal values and the values held by Aboriginal students.

Again, previous findings using different instruments lend support to these conclusions. Kearney and Fitzpatrick (1976) studied samples of Aboriginal Australians from some of the same localities used here. Their samples varied in the degree of assimilation and integration into Western culture. They found that the more acculturated sample, defined in terms of extent of city versus rural dwelling, had shifted towards Western values. The university students who participated in the present study held similar values to the highly acculturated sample reported by Kearney and Fitzpatrick. This was a little surprising given that "highly acculturated" in their study simply meant "city dwelling". The university students might have been expected to show an even greater shift to Western values. Although it is difficult to make comparisons across the studies, the values of the two samples appear to be similar. The Values Questionnaire data from this study gives some interesting insights into why Aboriginal groups with much exposure to Western culture still retain strong traces of what might be regarded as "Aboriginal values". Keats (1986), in tracing the development of values, argued that they are complex and stable, the result of a long process of development, and most heavily influenced by the individual's parents. The very high value assigned to "Honouring Parents" may help to explain this ability to retain a number of traditional values.

Sex differences were also explored in this study but only to determine whether they had a moderating effect on differences between groups. The interaction term was not significant and there is little that can be said. The finding that males scored more highly on Hedonism and that females scored more highly on Spirituality and Security are in line with the findings of Feather (1980) and Feather et al. (1992).

In summary, the main aims of this study were to a) discover the value system of Aboriginal students attending university, b) explore value differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal university students, c) seek evidence of continuity between the values shown in (a) and those attributed to traditional aboriginal culture in studies of world view, d) examine the role of sex differences in (b). The study has been largely successful in these aims. With regard to (a), it has been shown that Aboriginal students rate collective values more highly than individual values. They also obtain higher ratings on collective values and lower ratings on individualistic values than a comparable group of non-Aboriginal students. With regard to (b), we have shown that where there are differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, they mostly support the interpretation that the former group is more concerned with collective values, although the latter group is also slightly inclined in this direction. The Aboriginal group is certainly more consistent in its orientation. Regarding (c), we can say that the Aboriginal students have values that are probably somewhere between those typical of non-Aboriginal Australian society and those typical of their traditional culture. There is no evidence on where they might be on this continuum because we cannot fix the position of a traditional group. With regard to d), the evidence indicates that where group differences in values are found, they tend to be the same for males and females.

These findings do have implications for understanding the general position of Aboriginal students in our education system. The first point to be made is that any difference

in values must be considered important. Understanding the similarities and differences shown in this study will lead to a better appreciation of the issues involved in Aboriginal education. A low regard for individualistic values may not be detrimental to the interests of a group if it is shared throughout the society, as appears to be the case with Chinese (Bond, 1988) and Hong Kong Chinese (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990), but it can be a distinct disadvantage if the larger part of the society does not share these views. The differences on Achievement and Self-Direction values, in particular, may well hinder academic progress. A second point that can be made is that is always unwise to assume that people who have shared major experiences - in this case, many years of identical education curricula - necessarily share the same values. We tend to assume that they do and, as Feather (1980) has shown, assumptions about the value systems of other cultures can be very wrong indeed.

Finally, this study has a number of limitations including the fact that it has not yet been established whether the values themselves have the same meaning in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian culture. The moderate internal consistency reliability estimates obtained in this study - and also present in the Feather et al. (1992) data - raise questions about interpretation, measurement and structure. Schwartz & Bilsky (1990) claim that the theory is universal and that its universality has been establised in a large number of cross-cultural studies. We have no evidence to contradict this position, but would like to test it. This question will be addressed as the sample becomes larger and structural analysis becomes feasible.

A further limitation of this study is that it has not attempted to evaluate the educational significance of the changes observed. Given the statements made by Berry (1988) regarding the significance of values and goals in understanding cognitive achievement, it is important that the relationship between values and academic success be explored. It is quite possible that an orientation towards collective values and a tendency to downgrade individualistic values will work against students in an academic setting. Data which will enable a test of hypotheses relating to this issue have been collected over the past three years and relationships are currently being explored by the present authors.

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