

Adrian Adams / Peter Erath / Emmanuel Jovelin (Editors)

Social Work and Science – An uneasy relationship?

Contributions on the occasion of the conference on “Social work in scientific debates”,
Lille March 12 – 14, 2007

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Preface

Emmanuel Jovelin Professor at the Social Institute Lille-Vauban at the Catholic University of Lille, France; and Convenor of the European Social Work Seminar: Social Work and / within the Scientific Debate, Catholic University of Lille, March 12th – 14th 2007.

Social work is a diverse occupational sector deeply anchored in the history of 20th century Europe, the post second world war welfare state systems and the English speaking countries of the world. The emergence of the social work professions, although situated and contextualised by historical, cultural, economic and political factors as represented by the diversity of the forms it has taken in different countries, has also been shaped by theoretical reflection and empirical enquiry (*Erath/Hämäläinen* 2000).

Social Work has thus sought to establish its legitimacy and credentials by reference not only to its immediate relevance to local and immediate social problems, but also by virtue of its enduring and generalised approach and methods.

The papers presented here, prepared for the 2007 conference on the relationship between social work and scientific method reflect the variety of positions towards the scholarly, scientific, practical and moral imperatives behind the social work endeavour.

Introduction

Adrian Adams, Canterbury Christ Church University

Competing purposes and rationalities within the education and practice of social work in Europe

Social work is a complex enterprise that refers to and draws from a wide range of often contradictory or incommensurate interests, purposes and knowledge forms. From this eclectic background social work is continuously reconstructed within evolving welfare models and systems.

In particular two cross cutting debates can be identified as influential in shaping the social work discourse. The first approaches social work as primarily a moral endeavour, the purpose of which is to protect, care and support vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and individuals. The second relates to its claim to be a legitimate discipline and profession with robust foundations and an adequate body of knowledge and skills grounded in scientific, systematic methods. It is from the interplay of these two currents that social work practice takes on its various forms and directions at different times and in different welfare regimes. The relative weight or attention given to its *factivity* – the knowledge or evidence base to which it refers or its *validity* - the moral or ethical dimension, reflects the competing orientations and ambitions within social work education and practice and the different claims that are made upon it by social, political and economic forces. However behind the respective claims and counter claims is the primary the question that is the focus of this publication:

“By the application of which criteria can and should we judge what constitutes good or best practice in social work?”

In this publication we present three approaches from competing paradigms for responding to this question. The first approaches the quality of social work practice by reference to its epistemological foundations by reference to its theorising and scholarship. The second by an evaluation of the reliability of the available evidence for evaluating the efficiency or effectiveness of the outcomes of different social work methods of intervention. The the third evaluates social work by

reference to the moral purpose or ethical good or benefit that it intends or achieves. From here we can recompose the question of how to evaluate social work education and practice as:

“Is the quality of social work practice best evaluated through moral reasoning and judgement or by its application of scientific rigour and method?”

Both paradigms follow their own discourse and histories and have their advocates and detractors, between whom arguments and debates flow. These arguments are then absorbed into and reflected back through social work values, knowledge and skills as they are defined, taught and practiced.

However, a choice between or attempt to combine morality and science to guide social work practice remains problematic. The problem at the centre of the question, ‘how do we evaluate social work practice?’ turns upon whether we are satisfied that the moral purpose of social work can be achieved by the application of a scientific method, or to put it another way, are the methods of social work practice adequate to solve the problems it meets.

Social practice, the actions and interventions undertaken on behalf of or in the interests of both the individual and the collective, is presented with problems possessing both moral and practical dimensions. In particular the contradiction between the promotion of the liberal ideal of the unencumbered, autonomous, self-contained individual in contrast to the other-orientated, altruistic obligated member of a moral community has become increasingly acute within modern / late modern societies. Tensions and conflicts between individual and collective interests and claims to ownership and entitlements now lead to difficulties in clearly identifying and calculating individual and collective benefit and reaching agreements about what constitutes responsible strategic action by individuals and social institutions.

With respect to our knowledge base, we now recognise that it is not possible to sustain an entirely modern orientation or apply a singular model or solution to complex social issues. Increasingly we appreciate the situated, contextualised and contingent nature of both public and private behaviours, interactions, relationships and attachments and the complexity of social, material and mercantile

exchanges. We are now compelled to recognise the influence of the extra-rational, cultural norms and psychological motivations so that it is difficult to sustain the view that everything can be explained through the assumption of substantive rationality and utility maximisation. Individual rational choice and the calculation of material gain or social advantage does fully account for why and how we behave the way we do.

The organising principles of utility, uniformity and categorization that characterize the administration of the modern state and the systematic extraction, collection, measurement and calculation of data that characterises the systematic scientific model are being challenged by the re-emergence of pre-modern constructions of morality grounded in religious and cultural meanings, previously discredited metaphysical and grand theories that seek to relate the individual to the social and post modern approaches that celebrate individuality, diversity, difference and dissent.

The papers presented here, originally prepared for presentation at the European Social Work Seminar: Social Work and / within the Scientific Debate, Catholic University of Lille, March 12, 13, 14 2007, provide us with an opportunity to explore fundamental concerns and the increasingly contingent foundations of social work through considering both the relation between Social Work, Knowledge Values and Skills and the accuracy and the validity of the information available to guide us and consider the extent to which the source of knowledge that should guide social work is that which emerges through experience, participation and practice or that which is captured through detached observation, measurement and replication.

Part 1

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: SOCIAL WORK AS A SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE

Theory building, research and knowledge transfer in social work

*Peter Erath*¹

Introduction

In most European countries there is now an ongoing debate about the status of social work as a scientific discipline and the academic respectively non-academic professional status of social workers. The arguments which try to undermine the position of social work vis-à-vis other social sciences as e.g. sociology, psychology, education, etc. are well-known; and broadly argue that social work is either a multidisciplinary subject covered by all social and human sciences (Bommes/Scherr 2000) or a field which can scientifically be assigned to other reference disciplines as e.g., pedagogy (Thiersch 2002).

In Part 1 of this paper I consider the relationship between science and practice from a systemic-theoretical background.

In Part II I examine how far social work as an academic discipline has reached a satisfying scientific level, through three questions:

- 1) If all scientific disciplines require their own unique theoretical orientation that distinguishes them from other subject disciplines; does social work possess such a perspective of its own?
- 2) If the construction of social work as a scientific discipline requires a sufficient body of theories, models and debate, i.e. an established discourse, which can be subjected to the scientific model; is there an adequate discourse of social work available?
- 3) If in order to fully establish social work as academic discipline there is a need for empirical research; is social work ready and willing to subject itself to the rigour of scientific method?

¹ This article is based on a lecture, held at the University of Kuopio, Finland, on February 14th 2008. Part I and II of this text were already published in: *Kent Journal for Social Work Theory and Practice*.

Finally Part III I present some crucial results of a research study about the response of German social workers to the concept of evidence based practice – with insights into the actual situation of social work in Germany.

1 Some introductory remarks: social work as practice and science

That social work requires a more scientific approach is not really denied by anybody. But there are at least two arguments which point out that there are fundamental difficulties in its achieving the status of an autonomous science.

- ? Scientists from different social sciences argue that social work can't be an autonomous discipline because it is being too much dependent upon other disciplines e.g. pedagogy, sociology, psychology, etc. (Bomes/Scherr 2000, 225ff.).
- ? Social work managers fear that such a science would lead practitioners to a theoretical and empirical alienation from everyday work decisions and not really help to improve the efficiency of social work as practice (Schmitt, 1997).

In order to promote the argument for a science of social work it is necessary to demonstrate why these difficulties are unfounded. For this we can use a systemic perspective (Luhmann 1990) and ask, about the “difference” between (1) different scientific disciplines, and (2) about the “difference” between scientific knowledge and practical experience / expertise.

(1) The “difference” between different disciplines, isn't according to Luhmann, grounded in different subjects but in different “theoretically enforced differentiations”. Thus the origin of a new discipline is the scientific system itself.

“The function of science is based on a possible reorganisation of the possible, on a new combination – and not on an illustration of the present, on a doubling of the subjects within knowledge. What within the scientific system is seen as unit (e.g. as thing, as system, as atom, as process), is owing its character as unit to the science; to the idea, and to itself.” (Luhmann 1990, p. 328)

So, if a new discipline has to be developed out of the scientific system as a “movement of differentiation within the system” (Luhmann 1990, p. 447), then a science of social work would have to demonstrate both its unique scientific ori-

Social Work at the Interplay between Scientific Knowledge and Experiential Knowledge: The History of the Relationship between Science and Practice within French Social Work

Brigitte Bouquet

There has recently been a resurgence of the long-standing debate over the place of social work in the sciences and its aspirations to be treated as a scientific discipline, grounded in a desire to unify cognitive activity and social intervention. As this argument has evolved, this has entailed raising questions of whether social worker practice can be conducted through a scientific method, whether its orientation towards action and professionalism are obstacles or assist in the formulation of this project? These issues are thus institutional, professional, and epistemological in nature. That is why, in addressing this complex problem, we must consider its social, historical context.

From a micro-historical perspective, this debate will be considered from three perspectives: differences of position and status, conflicts of knowledge and development of a discipline.

Differences of position and status

The ongoing tension between social researchers and social practitioners, reveal a concern for identity and territory. The history of French social work partly explains its current situation in this debate: the centres of formation of social work in France originated outside of the State sector. Therefore, they were not, with some exceptions, integrated within the university until the 1970's and it is only since 2001, that there has been a chair of social work at the National school of engineering in Paris (CNAM). For the centres of practice, the link with the university is quite recent, developed between some voluntary conventions and selected universities to create a bachelor's degree

This has three consequences:

- 1) Social work is not considered as an academic discipline but as a field of practice.

Aspects of Research of Social Work in Finland

Juha Hämäläinen & Pauli Niemelä

On the early historical background of professional social work in Finland

The historical roots of the professional social work in Finland lie in several activities of social care, especially in the fields of poor relief and child protection. Already at the end of the 19th century there was a legislation-based system in which municipalities were responsible for social care of people in different kinds of social needs. It is rather difficult to define the origin of professional social work exactly.

In the field of professional education of social care some activities were already established at end of the 19th century, for example the training of kindergarten teachers. After the independence of Finland from Russian rule in 1917, education of social educators and managers for children's homes began as a reaction to the orphan problem caused by the Finnish Civil War. A special step was taken in the development of professional social care by establishing the Civic College (Yhteiskunnallinen korkeakoulu) in 1925. This was actually the basis of the development of academic social work.

The legislation-based poor relief and child care were primarily organised by municipalities, but in many activities NGOs played a pioneering role in terms of developing forms and methods of the care, educating staff for activities and promoting political awareness on social needs and the need for social reforms. The historical roots of professional social work were influenced by both official and unofficial activities.

There were aspirations for driving social care activities to scientific basis already in the early days of the field but research operations were rather modest and unsystematic. However, the development of professional social care activities was connected from the very beginning with the knowledge of human nature and society produced mainly by progressively developing social, health and educational sciences.

Social Work in the Netherlands: the possible tension between Science and Practice

Jelle A. Terpstra & Frans M. van der Veer

Introduction

The Social Worker is a key figure in the everyday life of many people who, due to special circumstances, rely on special forms of care in order to function in society in a meaningful way. The Social Worker primarily works in the context of a client's everyday life. He must be able to analyze the client's situation, including his outlook on life, the existing limitations and obstacles, his behaviour and the social factors that have placed the client in this vulnerable position. The manner in which the Social Worker intervenes in the lives of various target groups – upon request, or on his own accord – depends on different factors. The professional context obviously includes the social developments that influence the target group as well as the Social Work profession. In addition, there is a continual debate on what constitutes good social care. Is it mostly a technical and socially based act, or is a personal connection most important? In our view, it is not a choice between one or the other. Rather, a combination of the two approaches is meaningful. However, the sequence is important and irreversible: social care can only take place when the client and Social Worker have accepted each other! Different empirical studies point out that the quality of the relationship between the client and Social Worker is conditional for the success of the treatment. When a client feels that the Social Worker is understanding and is involved, the treatment is more effective than the implementation of distinguished therapeutic intervention methods without the personal connection.¹

Development of society and welfare policy

The social context of the Social Worker is dynamic by definition. Processes of modernization characterize current society. Modernization first of all refers to processes of change that take place in the long term in society as a whole. Macro-social changes, however, have consequences for the personal environ-

¹ Remmerswaal, J., *Handboek groepsdynamica*, Soest Nelissen, (2003)

The Consequences of Modernisation for Social Work

Oldrich Chytil

Abstract

Social work is inseparably connected to the project of modernity, which it is agreed is entering a second, post industrial phase, characterised as post, high or late modernity. As the emergence of social work is closely tied to the development of industrialised societies it is necessary to discuss the consequences of late modernity for social work. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the role and function of social work under conditions of post-industrial late modernity as well as on the possible scenarios of social work development.

Introduction

Social work is inseparably connected to the project and development of modernity (Rauschenbach, 1992: 26). Modernity At present, modernity is understood has having entered a second phase of development. The first stage of modernity is associated with the era of industrialisation (Merten, 1997:8) and subsequently posts Second World War welfare states. Since the mid 1970's and the emergence of the service and communication economy, many of the certainties which existed in the previous stage have been disappearing and much remains unclear about the direction of future development. Things considered as unproblematic in the 1950's turned out to be serious problems by the turn of the century, in relation to both ecological and social issues.

In my opinion, discussions on this topic occur rather sporadically and in Europe, for the most part, it is the German authors who take an interest in, and follow, this topic.

Recently, the role and goals of social work in post-industrial society, characterised by a reflexive or fluid modernity have become the topics of international conferences and of interest across Europe, particularly in Germany and the UK. For example, the 5th Federal Congress of Social Work held in Kassel (FRG) in 2003 dealt with the role of social work in the process of forming the social; an international conference held in Ostrava in 2005 dealt with transformations of

Part 2

***EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES:
APPLYING SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY TO
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EDUCATION***

Social work and scientific construction

Jean Foucart

This paper, in response to the conference question: "Does Social Work constitute a scientific discipline?" firstly argues that social is too eclectic and pragmatic to meet conform to scientific rigour, but secondly can be explored as a discipline. As such the paper examines the specifics of multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary practices as applied to social work.

A) The constitution of a discipline

A unique or autonomous discipline is determined by having the characteristics of self defined boundaries, language and techniques and possibly by its own theories.

In the twentieth century, the development of sciences has encouraged the researchers to establish the object of their studies into simpler elements, which has entailed a subdivision of the existing disciplines and the proliferation of new specialities. This disciplinary specialisation has accelerated until it has turned into a parcelling up of knowledge, hence the explosion of the increasing numbers of disciplines, with academics and researchers retreating into their own disciplinary silos to study within more and more specialised fields. Consequently, achieving a unity of knowledge has become impossible as no one can encompass all the entire scope of human knowledge which, like the division of labour in the nineteenth century, had been rationalized and fragmented.

The disciplinary organisation of sciences such as we now know it, does not only reflect the divisions between knowledge forms, it is also a product of history which, dates back from the nineteenth century and the development of universities and institutions of modern research.

B) A science of social work?

Following LADRIERE's (1975) definition of a science, we can situate the professional orientation of social work:

A UK perspective on developing an evidence base for social work practice: some gaps and some opportunities

Esther Coren

Abstract

The evidence informed practice agenda is becoming a reality in UK social work and social care. Whilst there have been developments that enable the participation of various stakeholders, the practitioner voice remains largely unheard, and the knowledge base inconsistently utilised in practice. This paper argues that this is a major deficit within the wider agenda, and points to the potential role for social work education in joining up this gap.¹

The question of whether social work has a scientific basis is brought into sharp focus with current debates on the notion of evidence based or evidence informed practice. This set of ideas seeks to provide a rigorous foundation to practice intervention through the application of research evidence, clinical expertise and service user needs and preferences.

An earlier version of this chapter was originally published in the Kent Journal of Professional Practice in February 2008. The paper has a mainly UK focus although it does draw on debates and literature from the international arena. It is hoped that this chapter might stimulate debate at a European level and enable shared learning based on responses to any similar issues experienced in neighbouring jurisdictions.

The evidence informed practice agenda has become widely adopted in UK policy areas, from its roots in medicine and allied fields, extending into education, housing policy and also into social work and social care. Within the social work and social care arena a number of national initiatives have been developed and funded, including the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE, www.scie.org.uk), Research in Practice (RIP, www.rip.org.uk), Making Research Count (MRC, <http://www.adss.org.uk/research/makingcount.shtml>), and more recently, to mirror the functional separation of adult and children's services, Research in Practice for Adults (RIPfA, www.ripfa.org.uk).

¹ Many thanks to Professors Mike Fisher (SCIE) and David Gough (Eppi Centre) for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Evidence informed practice: The Causes, effects and effective responses of client violence against social workers

Brian Littlechild

Introduction

This article examines the important elements for an evidence base in relation to an issue which is often ignored in the literature and research; the effects of stress and violence on social workers and their professional practice.

Whilst social workers and their managers cannot always be expected to predict when client violence against them might occur by means of examination of research findings and systematic review of the literature, in this area, as in others in relation to social work practice, such analyses can provide the knowledge base for the foundation upon which an evidence based social work can be built. The importance of such evidence based work, it is suggested, should always be measured against the value of the findings of such systematic review of the evidence, which can be applied to the management and practice of social work, rather than just published in academic journals. In the case of violence against social workers, the knowledge arising from an examination of the evidence base needs to provide guidance for managers and social workers on how best to support, prevent, and deal with the after effects for workers and his /her clients; the latter group because, as will be demonstrated in this article, actual or threatened violence from clients can affect the service received by those clients, and indeed, the protection of clients, such as in child protection work in the UK.

The article will set out what knowledge we have accrued in relation to the effects of such aggression and violence from clients/service users, particularly in child protection work. Issues of what types of research need to be undertaken in order to accumulate an effective knowledge base are addressed. It is argued that it is necessary to gain evidence of how social work practitioners experience their work, and agency support mechanisms in relation to that work, in order to fully appreciate and plan for the most effective social work practice. This is particularly so, as we know that social workers construct their own realities and attributions within their work, which lead to actions which are not always foreseen

by policymakers and higher level managers; in order to understand the reality of social work and social workers', and other professional groupings, decisions and actions (Gelsthorpe and Padfield, 2003; Evans and Harris, 2004). A vital element of any evidence base is used knowledge and consideration of how social workers perceive their world of work and their professional agency within it.

The extent of the problem

Violence towards has been an area of concern in the United Kingdom since the late 1970s (Brown, Bute and Ford, 1986; UNISON/BASW, 1996).

The British Crime Survey is a large scale survey of citizens' experiences of victimization of crime and violence carried out by the Government's Home Office, and in 1999, specifically addressed employees' (in all the different occupational settings) of violence at work. The result of this very large-scale (15,000 respondents) study demonstrated that social workers are at particular risk (Budd, 1999). Against an average of 1.2% of all occupational groups reporting assaults, 9.4% of social workers and probation officers reported assaults. This was the highest of any of group apart from the police. Against an average of 1.5% of all occupational groups reporting threats, 9.5% of social workers and probation officers reported such threats. This was the highest of any occupational group.

In North America, rates of violence against social work staff were examined by, amongst others, Macdonald and Sirotych (2001). Schulz (1987) found in the findings from research of social services workers in the United States that 3% had been shot at, and 25% of correctional workers had been attacked with knives. In the United States, Horehsi, Garthwait and Rolando (1994) found that violence against child protection staff in a rural county was a problematic issue. Such findings demonstrate that research on such matters has to take into account cultural and legal differences between countries; so for example the legalization of the ownership of firearms in the United States, means that this is probably a far greater feature in the United States than in countries where weapons are not so freely available.

Preparation for Practice: examining the evidence, constructing the experience: the UK Perspective

Bob Cecil & Louise O'Connor

Abstract¹

This paper explores the concept of 'Preparation for Social Work Practice' as part of the new agenda for social work education and training in the UK (DOH 2002). Overall it presents the key themes that emerged from the authors' evaluation of a new 'Preparation for Practice' module delivered to a cohort of undergraduate social work students at a London university and locates these within wider policy and practice developments in the social work field. There is a continued move towards evidence-based practice in UK social work and as social work educators the authors were keen to ensure that this recent requirement of assessed preparation for practice within the social work curriculum becomes an evidence informed activity.

The paper first seeks to contextualize the study by providing an overview of some of the main debates and issues surrounding current social work practice in the UK. It does this first by showing how recent changes to social work and social work education are located in a broader context of the Modernising Social Services agenda (Modernising Social Services 1998). It then explores the growth of new managerialism and rationalism in social work and other public sector services and how this has influenced service organisation and delivery. The paper then examines both the tensions and opportunities that are emerging within an evidence-based practice culture.

In the second part of the paper, the authors give an overview of the 'Preparation for Practice' module and outline the evaluation methodology. The findings provide some insight into how students at the start of their training begin to conceptualise the professional social work role and task. Further, the findings also identify those aspects of the curriculum and its delivery that were seen as effective in helping students understand the nature of social work and suggest ways in which students might be further prepared for the realities of contemporary social work practice in the UK.

The paper concludes by discussing the type of knowledge and experience that is needed for those at the start of their training and emphasises the need for educators to make an active contribution through field research to the knowledge base which informs social work education. Finally the authors present a 'Preparation for Practice' model based on their findings.

¹ This paper is based on an earlier version by O'Connor, Cecil and Boudini, 2007

Throughout reference will be made to literature from the fields of social work, education health, and social work education. This emphasis reflects the current focus on inter-professional practice and learning which is central to developments in UK social work education and practice.

Key Words: Evidence-based practice, Preparation, Professionalism, Observational Learning, Communication, Emotional Literacy, Reflection.

1 Introduction

1.1 Changes in public services and professional social work

Recent changes to the delivery of social work services and to the professional training requirements in the UK can be understood within a broader context of the Modernising Social Services agenda (Modernising Social Services 1998b, paragraph 1.1). The policy objectives and intentions of the incoming Labour government in 1997 overall were to modernise the social services and to improve the status of and confidence in, the social work profession. The reform of the structures of social work regulation was reflected in the remit of the profession's regulatory body, the General Social Care Council (G.S.C.C.) and heralded a new direction for those working in social work and social care.

The GSCC has issued codes of practice for both employees and employers. (GSCC, 2002).and has defined its dual role as a 'guardian of standards' and 'champion of the profession' (GSCC,2002:1).The need to improve standards and the quality of practice was further emphasised by the Health Minister, Jacqui Smith:

Social work is a very practical job. It is about protecting people and changing their lives, not about being able to give a fluent and theoretical explanation of why they got into difficulties in the first place (Community Care Live Conference, 2002).

Together with the Codes of practice (GSCC, 2002), a further influence has been a much greater emphasis on service user and carer participation and knowledge within social care (Social Care Institute for Excellence ,2003, Beresford, 1994,Evans, 1999,Croft and Beresford,1992, Beresford et al, 1997). The centrality of their views and perspectives to the design and delivery of social work services has been highlighted by observers from the field: "the panoply of new

Child of a lesser God? Knowing-in-action as a central feature in Interprofessional and Interorganisational Education (IPIOE)

Antonio Sama

A) Introduction: The reasons for Interprofessional and Interorganisational Practice (IPIOP)

Interprofessional and interorganisational practice is not something we are asked to deal with just now, the centrality of this topic is embedded in the recent history of health and social care sector in Europe. With health and social care sector I bring together legislative, financial, methodological, professional, organisational changes as well as changes in the profile of users, cares and their needs occurred in Europe in the last two decades.

Interprofessional and interorganisational practice is rooted in the nature itself of the cases social care agencies and social workers are required to deal with. Citizens become users when an agency (entitled to do so by a superior authority) assess that they have one or more needs that can be looked after by that agency. In that precise moment the boundary between ordinary citizenship and needy citizenship is crosses, and usually the assessment identifies a plurality of needs that cannot be met by just one professional or just one social care agency. Thus collaborative practice is an essential element of any social care professional and agency.

Alongside the 'ontological' dimension of interprofessional and interorganisational practice in health and social care there is the 'contingent' dimension to be taken into account. The contingent dimension is linked to the drive by the historical and political trends that we can recognise in the each European welfare system. This chapter assumes that today's contingent dimension can be summarised in the modernisation agenda.

Contingency dimension

There are several forces at play in the current state of social and health and social care sector: from the gaps in the legitimising processes that social policy and its costs are experiencing in the European public opinion and political par-

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