

## **SOCIALISATION AND COMMUNICATION OF WOMEN SCHOOL MANAGERS: A RURAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is based on the findings of a qualitative study that was conducted at a rural secondary school in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The aim of the study was to explore the communication strategies of a woman principal given that socialisation into gender positions is considered a major influential factor. The school was identified by means of reputational sampling. The article endeavours to show through the findings of the study that rural women educational managers' communication relationship with the teachers can be largely marked by "respect" grounded in their traditional customs. Although socialised into a particular style of communication, their communicative behaviours also result from the context in which they grew and in which they find themselves, one common to all principals, males or females. They are able to use both feminine and masculine styles of communication and succeed in their management. Therefore, communication can be improved by combining both feminine and masculine styles of talking.

**Key words:** communicative competence; socialisation theory; poststructuralists; cultural tradition; respect

### **INTRODUCTION**

All social systems require communication for meaning to be transmitted and information exchanged. Poor communication may often be the source of an unnecessary, dysfunctional network. The development of good functional networks may be strengthened through good communication. More importantly, effective communication is the key to enhancing employee commitment, performance, motivation and empowerment (Djordjevic & Cotton 2011).

In addition to these basic functions, internal communication is important in order to enhance the understanding of corporate strategy, mission and values; to strengthen corporate culture and to enable change (Brassington & Pettit, 2007). Effective internal communication is present in organisations where employees are well informed about the future direction of the organisation and, at the same time, their voices are heard in the decision-making processes. Communication serves three major purposes: it allows members to coordinate actions and share information and it also serves social needs. Thus, according to Shambalala (2010), communication reinforces and transmits organisational values and norms and educates all stakeholders to the organisational culture.

This also applies to educational management. Principals need communication skills in order to interact with teachers. A principal's ability to influence and manage people hinges on his or her ability to communicate in a variety of ways with different people.

Effective communication can be hampered by different factors. Perceptual factors are some of the barriers to effective communication. The way we perceive people is the starting point of how we communicate. It is easier to communicate if the frames of reference between people are more similar; likewise, it is difficult to communicate if the frames of reference between people are different.

Literature (Kaiser, Haller, Schimits & Nitsch 2009; Palomares 2009; Stout & Dasgupta 2011) suggests that, generally, men and women communicate differently and often these differences lead to miscommunication among co-workers. Further, poststructuralist research shows that while females are likely to use verbal and non-verbal behaviour, which is equated with powerlessness, males use communication styles that are associated with professionalism and power (Coates & Cameron 1990). What is critical here is that women's communication should not be characterised as deficient, since it has positive features. Thus both men and women can learn from both gender communication styles and these aspects can be integrated into the managerial communication. In fact, Mills (2003 169) advises that we should move beyond binary thinking and global statements about the conduct of men and women and look at both genders as being able to, in their particular circumstances, "reaffirm, negotiate with, and challenge the parameters of permissible or socially sanctioned behaviour".

Research also indicates that while differences in communication styles of both genders can be attributed to many factors, however, socialisation into gender positions is clearly a major factor (Thakhathi 2001). When women occupy management positions, they must often confront their "inner voices", which suggest managers are male, and deal with structural inequalities in their organisations (Aker 1993). The critical issue is that even though women are socialised differently, their socialisation shapes them to be flexible and to be able to use different styles of communication in order to run their schools effectively. Moreover, female managers may also adopt male communication styles in order to discharge their responsibilities.

This article endeavours to show through the findings of the study that was conducted in a rural area in South Africa, that, women educational managers' communication relationship with the teachers is marked by "respect", grounded in their traditional customs. Although socialised into a particular style of communication, women's communicative behaviours result from the context in which they were raised and in which they find themselves. This is true for all principals, both males and females. In addition to socialisation, their communication is also shaped by particular historical and socio-economic conditions that generate problems both women and men must face. This study further revealed that feminine communication does not necessarily hinder the position of a principal or the sound management of the school. Traditional expectations of communication can also be transcended in a sensitive and flexible way and subordinates can be able to cope with ambiguity in the professional setting.

### **Gender Socialisation Theories**

As children learn to speak, they also learn about or gain insight into the cultural knowledge regarding beliefs, subjectivities, emotional positioning, linguistic and non-linguistic information as well as all practices valued by the community in which they find themselves (Ochs &

Schieffelin 2008; Morita 2009; Duff 2010a; Duff 2010b; Duranti Ochs & Schieffelin 2012). Thus, according to Duff (2010b: 174):

The core theoretical premise of language socialization is that language is learned through interactions with others who are more proficient in the language and its cultural practices and who provide novices explicit and (or) implicit mentoring or evidence about normative, appropriate uses of the language, and of the worldviews, ideologies, values, and identities of community members.

The relevance of the socialisation theory in this article lies in the fact that socialisation is one of the factors that contribute to the differences in the communication styles of women and men and, hence, different communication strategies. Thus, it is important to examine socialisation theories to understand why this is the case.

To discuss gender socialisation, it is important to first differentiate between the terms “gender” and “sex“. Gender and sex are different terms, although often used interchangeably. Sex is the biological or physiological difference between women and men, differences in genitals and reproductive capabilities (Haldeman 2012; Measor & Sikes 1992). Thus, it relates to chromosomes, hormones and sex organs. Gender is a social construct, which denotes the specific social and cultural conduct of women and men in specific historical or social environments (Haldeman 2012; Measor & Sikes 1992). Sex is a biological element that is the same in any culture and what sex means in terms of gender role as a "man" or a "woman" in society can be quite different cross culturally. These gender roles affect the ways in which women and men communicate.

Socialisation is defined by Berger (1979: 62) as “the process by which an individual learns to be a member of his or a society”. It is the way we learn the patterns of thought and behaviour considered acceptable in our society.

Socialisation theorists argue that the learning of gender roles takes place first through observation, then by imitation (Garret 1978: 22). Societies have patterns of socialisation which encourage males to become masculine and females to become feminine. Parents and other adults (including teachers) differentiate between males and females in terms of their interaction with them (Davies 1992).

According to Kelly (1981), children may either learn the appropriate behaviour through observational theories or through reinforcement theories. In observational theories children learn by imitating and in reinforcement theories, parents and other adults reward the appropriate behaviour and children learn to anticipate what will produce approval and, adjust their behaviour accordingly.

The second group of socialisation theories focuses on cognitive development. Children are regarded as essentially self-socialising. They first develop the categories and then fit themselves into these same categories. Kelly (1981: 74) indicated this clearly when she said that "children develop a number of categories into which they fit their world, and they form rules about the categories". Sex is one of the primary categories for people and, being secure in sex, is one aspect of competence in organising experience. Society presents our image of what is

feminine and masculine to children, they then put together a cluster of attributes, which they label as masculine or feminine, and try to copy the appropriate cluster.

If the roles of men and women can change over time or from one society to another, then it may well be true that an array of differences between man and women are indeed socially constructed. However, children who are socialised into gendered patterns are not just passive inheritors of these gender patterns (Acker 1993; Jones 1993; Walkerdine 1981; Weiner 1994). Walkerdine (1981), for example, points out that during socialisation each person is active in taking up the discourses through which he or she is shaped. In addition, she adds that what it means to be a "woman" and/or to be acceptably feminine, shifts and changes in culture and history. Children who are socialised also resist and refuse, as well as accommodate and collude. In agreement with this notion, Duff (2010) indicates that when children learn to talk, they are not just socialised into the pragmatics or sociolinguistics, but also into ideologies such as respect, social stratification, ranks, roles and values, which they, in turn, may either adopt or, rather, contest or resist. This is suggested in those situations where men or women behave differently from accepted ways of behaviour, for example, gays, lesbians, tomboys and strong heterosexual women or passive heterosexual men.

Though socialisation influences the communication styles of women and men, poststructuralists like Jones (1993) Walkerdine (1981) and Weiner (1994) usefully provide new possibilities for understanding women's socialisation, in ways which go beyond seeing women only as "disadvantaged" and socialised within patriarchal structures. Davies (1989: 57) indicates that, post-structuralist theory offers possibilities of seeing the self as continually constituted through multiple and contradictory discourses that one takes up as one's own in becoming a speaking subject. One can develop strategies for maintaining an illusion of a coherent unitary self through such strategies as taking of roles through denial of contradiction, or one can examine the very processes through to which the constitution of self takes place.

The point of such arguments would be to provide alternative subject positions for women (and men) in which they might, at any time, be both powerful and powerless in different contexts and sometimes active or sometimes passive. This implies that women managers could simultaneously show both feminine masculine communication styles.

## **METHOD**

A qualitative research design was used to understand and describe the communication strategies of a woman principal in a secondary school. The research was conducted in a secondary school in Limpopo, South Africa, which was identified by means of reputational sampling. The school and its principal were nominated by a senior official in the regional department of education on the basis of the principal's long experience as principal (11 years), sound management of the school and the consistently good matriculation results obtained by learners. It was a qualitative case study, where the principal and the teachers working under her supervision were investigated, in depth, for an unbroken period of one month. Six teachers, three males and three females, were selected by the researcher, by means of judgement sampling. The findings of the inquiry were exploratory and descriptive. The primary aim was to understand and describe the communication strategies of the principal as experienced by her and the staff from their own frame of reference.

### **Data Collection**

The main data collection strategies were individual interviews with the principal and teachers, respectively, school documents analysis and observations. In-depth interviews, resembling ordinary conversations, were conducted in the school environment. The interviews were recorded on audio tape and later transcribed. The period of field work also allowed the researcher to "shadow" the principal as she carried out her daily tasks. Moreover, the researcher attended all formal meetings held at the school and observations were recorded as extensive field notes. School documents, used by the principal in the execution of her school administrative duties, included the school's minute book, information book, school journal and school policies. Multiple data gathering strategies enabled the researcher to validate the interview data.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of data obtained from the observations, individual interviews and documents was done thematically, which entailed identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data (Yin 2010; Saldaña 2012). In trying to make sense of the data, transcriptions of interviews and field notes were read and re-read and tentative categories and sub-categories emerged. Literature, observation and experience assisted the researcher in identifying the final categories. Extracts from the raw data were selected and either paraphrased or suitable quotations from the written responses were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories. The interview data has not been edited for expression. However, because the participants were second language speakers of the English language, the data has been partially edited for linguistic accuracy to eschew from incomprehensible meaning of what they expressed. However, the researcher did not completely alter the style and rhythm of the participants' speech patterns. The research was limited to a single site and a small sample, typical of qualitative research, and is not generalisable in any way. However, the findings do suggest patterns that are useful, particularly where they are corroborated by the large corpus of literature dealing with women in education management and gender specific styles of communication, which has been carried out in a variety of contexts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher ensured the use of informed consent forms, discussion of the interview agenda and timeframe, and the use of tape recorder to ensure accuracy of information. In addition, the participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study, on which this article is based, suggest that socialisation is one of the factors influencing communication of women managers. This was evident in the data submitted by both the principal and teachers. As much as culture had a lot to do with her communication, it was also evident that during socialisation, the principal was not just a passive recipient of socialisation (Walkerline 1981), as she also used some of the masculine form of communication in her interaction with teachers.

## A Traditional Extended Family

While differences in communicative styles of women's and men's communication can be attributed to many factors, socialisation into gender positions is emerge as a major factor with regard to the differences in the way women and men talk. This emerged in the interviews with the principal (Martha, pseudonym) and the teachers.

It is normal practice in African communities for members of the extended family to be part of the nuclear family unit. Some live communally, that is, all married brothers and younger girls live in one big family, with the parents controlling them. However those married brothers not living in one family would always have parents, cousins, and other family members (who are not part of the nucleus family). Older sisters get married and be part of extended families in the families of their husbands. To confirm this, Scheeckle and Sprecher (2004) describe a black extended family as multigenerational, composed of parents, grandparent(s), children, adult married children, grandchildren, cousins and other additional adults, who may not be blood relatives. Thus, in the family, the child is socialised by parents and other people like grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. The principal (Martha) was also brought up in a family, which at times, had additional members, explaining that, "For quite some time we were staying with cousins, from my father's side." She further stated that, "My father was very close to his mother-in-law. As my grandmother was around, then the three of them would sit and speak.

In relation to her socialisation, the principal pointed out in her interviews that her father had a significant influence on her academic life. This is common in many African families, where parents who had received formal education, even if they are not highly qualified, encouraged their children to study. On the one hand traditional communities believed that girls should not be educated; it is, therefore, interesting that her parents ignored what was culturally a norm by allowing and encouraging her to further her education. The principal's strong personality was also greatly influenced by her father. She related the following:

*The way I was brought up, my father was very strict ... if he is happy about something, he'll say it and that is how he treated us as a family. If my father said well-done he really was happy, but if he wasn't satisfied he would say I'm not happy with this. So, even now that I am a manager you know, when I am satisfied, I do say it and when I am not satisfied rather than keeping quiet I do communicate and say it.*

This was also confirmed by the way that she behaved during the period of the study. On two occasions she called the teachers to her office in order to congratulate them for tasks they had completed well. Likewise, she called in the acting Head of Department of Agriculture to express her unhappiness about learners who were making a noise outside the classroom when they were doing their practical work. This was said in a polite, but authoritative manner.

Nonetheless, even though the principal was greatly influenced by her father, she

still pointed out that she consciously refused to be influenced by some of the behaviour she considered not good:

*So if you made a mistake they [her parents] usually wouldn't take the trouble to explain in detail what it is that you have done wrong. ...I try not to do that, I want a person to know if I say I'm not happy about this then they must know exactly what it is that they've done wrong.*

The principal's refusal to follow the behaviour of her father in this regard, because she did not agree with it, supports the poststructuralist view that children are not just passive ciphers when they are socialised into gender patterns of behaviour. They also resist and refuse as well as accommodate and collude (Netshitangani & Msila 2014).

### **Beyond a Traditional Family's Borders**

Socialisation is not limited to the home environment, but it happens outside of the family environment too. It was evident that when she grew up, the principal also related well to other people outside the boundaries of her home. It seemed, however, that she did not only play with children of her own sex, as most children did and as was expected by the community. Thus, when responding to the question, "Did you relate more to boys or to girls?", she answered:

*I related well with both genders, because I remember there was one good friend of mine, Simon. And there is one other good friend of mine, Mkgadi [girl's name]. I remember when we first went to school; other children would tease us and say I am Simon's wife, because we were so close.*

It is not unusual that the other children laughed at her when she had a male friend, because according to their culture, mixed-gender playgroups were not encouraged. One of the teachers, Bele, a female teacher, explained how girls and boys were expected to relate to each other in their culture:

*...boys and girls were not allowed to communicate, especially if you are not related somehow. So, the girls were told, no don't play with boys and the boys were also told that you mustn't play with the girls.*

In that community, participants expressed that not only were boys and girls discouraged from mixing, but boys were also taught not to respect girls. According to Holmes (2013), although both parents encourage boys and girls to be polite, mothers and fathers supply different models. Indeed, Mateosi, a male teacher, showed how they were taught to communicate with girls:

*In our culture, normally you find that when we speak as boys we are more arrogant when we talk to girls because we were taught in the initiation school that if you are a man you have to be seen that you speak as a man does. So, in a way, when I am speaking with someone else who is a girl then I*

*must show. So that is why I am saying, because of that the culture has a big influence on the way I talk.*

Moreover, this community is patriarchal like many other African communities. According to Mkhwanazi (2012), the dominance of men and the subservience of women in African communities are based on traditional values, which are highly patriarchal. Thus, some elements of cultural ideology explicitly devalue women and men accorded more prestige.

Teaching children how to speak, as different sexes, is not unique to this cultural group. Literature shows that it is a universal phenomenon that when children learn interactional routine, they also learn an understanding of the social role appropriate for their age and sex (Duff 2008). Thus, language learning is highly social and cultural and culture, itself, is instantiated and reproduced in linguistic interactions (Duff 2008: 2). Hence, for example, swearing is mostly considered as masculine. Therefore, a communicative competent person would have appropriated the culture's core values, beliefs and dispositions plus other kinds of knowledge (Duff 2008).

The point here is that socialisation through culture influences the way people speak, though it may not be the only influential factor at stake. Nyawa, a female teacher, also pointed out that, indeed, culture is a factor when it comes to the communicative styles of men and women:

*And somehow as you grow up as young girls and boys it is taught to you even if it isn't formal, but informal, you somehow get the teaching from the society that this is how girls should talk, this is how boys should talk.*

Therefore, though the society does not approve of boys and girls being friends, the principal (Martha) had a good relationship with boys, which then confirms that children who are socialised are not just passive recipients of social and cultural norms. As suggested by poststructuralists, during socialisation each person is active in taking up the discourses through which he or she is shaped (Davies in Weiner 199: 64). Such independence of thought might have moulded the principal into the strong character she currently is. Such strength is normally associated with masculinity by the society. Hence, the communication of the women managers in rural areas is the result of influences of all that they had associated with.

### **Cultural Role Transference**

Women tend to transfer their cultural family roles to their work environment. This notion is clearly elaborated on by Reay and Ball (2000 in Popescu & Gunter, 2011: 268) that women managers are always drawing on a range of subjectivities at times as a maternal figure, at times as stereotypically female, but at other times constructing an identity as a powerful person which always cuts across and conflicts with other historically derived aspects of feminine subjectivity.

In the study, it was revealed that Martha, the principal, also treats the school community as a family, which may also be seen as evidence of her socialisation was evident when she introduced the researcher to staff members. She stressed that the community should



treat the researcher as one of the family members. The same point was made to the learners. It was revealing that the principal included all the staff as family, as she even introduced the researcher to the lady responsible for cleaning the school. In one of the casual discussions with the researcher, Martha related to the researcher how she came to adopt the culture of viewing all the members of staff as family:

*After I was offered a job as a principal, I went to a certain old lady (now retired) and asked her to give me any tip available that will help me become a good principal. She told me that the way to succeed as a principal is to treat all the workers the way you treat your own family members.*

Consequently, Martha does not differentiate between the communication skills she applies in the family and that which she uses in a business setting. She explains as follows:

*I think as a woman and as a mother ... when I communicate with younger people even if it's in a formal situation, I do it more or less the same way as I would communicate with my own children.*

Netshitangani and Msila (2014) also point out that when women enter management positions, they tend to transfer their domestic experiences to their work situations. The point here is that women do not neatly separate personal and public roles, experience or knowledge. They draw on their experiences as mothers when working with children and colleagues and they allow personal feelings to shape their work when dealing with staff and pupils.

Below, Nyawa, one of the teachers, explains how women principals regard the school as a home. She, however, also associates communication style with management style. She states that a weakness of women principals is that they regard schools as their homes: "And the most weakness is that they regard the school as their home, they want everything to be the same as their home."

Transferring their family roles to their work environment is seen as a weakness instead of strength. This is in agreement with the general perception that everything associated with femininity is seen as a weakness, but this feminine management style "also bring advantages as personal and professional lives intermingle" (Popescu & Gunter 2011: 267). It is not surprising that the communication style and organisational skills used to manage a home and to care for the family are also applied in the running of the school.

### **Respect Within a Traditional Community**

By and large, the principal and the teachers pointed to culture as one of the factors that influences and shapes the different communicative styles of women and men in their community, which may not necessarily be the case elsewhere. Research shows that respect for elders is a crucial component of the black child's socialisation and it is part of character building. (Greenfield & Cocking 2014; Renzaho et al. 2011). Twum-Danso (2009) also

points out that, like other African societies, Ghanaians teach children how to talk and which language to use. She (Twum-Danso 2009) goes on to show that children, who show disrespect in how they talk to elders, get severe admonishment and punishment. Thus, respect is emphasised in the socialisation of African children. Martha's culture stresses respect for elders and seniors when communicating. Thus, Martha commented about respect and communication.

*...some grown-ups were passing and they were drunk and then we commented that the old woman is drunk. My father, said to us you don't say that about an elder, they are not drunk but, they are 'full'... "You don't talk to adults like that; ..." When my father and my mother were talking, somehow automatically you felt you were not supposed to be there. ...even communication between my eldest two siblings, ...you wouldn't be listening when they were talking.*

Martha goes on to relate that the school also reinforced this cultural value that was taught at home:

*The world was more an extension of what happened at home, you don't speak to an adult this way. So as a result don't expect an adult to speak that way...*

Bele conveys how speaking with elders, within the traditional, is linked to non-verbal actions in showing respect:

*With the girls, when they go to the elderly people, they have to kneel down and talk. To kneel is to show respect to the older people that you're talking to. Women must also show respect by kneeling down when they talk to men.*

In this community, girls are not only taught to kneel when talking to elders but girls and older women are taught to kneel when speaking to men. This practice has entrenched sexist attitudes in men and women. A strong culture of male dominance pervades and persists within schools. Mkhwanazi (2012) suggests that patriarchy also contributed to the subordination of women. She (Mkhwanazi 2012) argues that the dominance of men and the subservience of women are based on traditional values, which are highly patriarchal and into which they were socialised when they were young girls. Thus, some elements of cultural ideology explicitly devalue women, and men accorded more prestige. Such patriarchal attitudes complicate the relationships of the women principals, with both the men and women teachers who work with them. At the same time, this study raised new issues shaping professional communication, such as how to find a balance between respect for age and gender, respect based on the fact that the woman is the principal and their (the male teachers') leader.

The findings of the study, however, showed that the principal seemed to have the respect of the teachers (both males and females); regardless of the fact that she was a woman. Thus, in this culture, males are formally and informally socialised into disrespecting women, however, in this situation where there is a woman leader, she

receives respect despite her gender. This was confirmed by both male and female teachers, who indicated that they respected her:

*If she's persuading me to do something I don't want, then I won't show her that I can't or give her excuses, because I don't think that it's good to say that "I don't want to", even if in my mind I'm saying it ... it's out of respect ... You can see that this person is older than me, you cannot just use these harsh words, it's not nice.*

Bele, a male teacher, does not feel offended if interrupted by the principal. When responding to the question, "How do you feel when you are interrupted by the Principal?" he said this: "I take it good because she is my senior."

Thus, communication relationship between this principal and her staff both men and women was overlaid by the fact that there was a stronger relationship of respect, grounded in the fact that she was their leader who was also older than them.

However, the two female teachers explained how women would normally be expected to behave in that culture and how it influences the way they communicate:

*According to our culture, our women should be submissive to the males. Even though a female has something genuine to say, it will be disregarded because it's a female. (Nyawa)*

*In our culture, women should not be seen to know more if there are men, ... (Derby)*

This corresponds with the views expressed by Rush and Allen (1990), who remarked that according to some cultures, it is taboo, illegal or a sin for women to speak in public. Thus, women tend to talk significantly less than men in mixed sex groups. Therefore, when women do not speak, the silences are often the direct consequences of social, sexual or economic oppression (Rush & Allen 1990).

The male teachers also spoke about their society's expectation of how men and women should communicate, which were revealed in the following statements by Mateosi, "The women are expected to listen to their husbands, in other words what a man says is final." and Bele, "Women are not allowed to question the men."

While, the culture encourages male dominance, the communication between the principal and her teachers is also shaped by cultural values that encourage respect for older people and respect for leaders. Thus, men respect a woman who is their leader.

## CONCLUSION

What seemed to emerge in this study is that, as much as different sexes are socialised into having different communicative styles, they also choose to use communication styles that are not consistent with their socialisation confirming the view by poststructuralists which says

that children are not passive recipients of their socialisation. In general, the communication of the woman principal was marked by "respect", based on the traditional customs practiced in her community. Thus, the communication of women and their staff may be shaped by the context, personality and the cultural location.

The communicative styles of women managers in rural communities cannot be explained in terms of gender alone. Their motherly care and love can be explained in terms of gender in that women are socialised into their role of "nurturer". However, it can further be explained in terms of their dedication to their work, because all principals, whether men or women, are by virtue of their position, expected to ensure that teachers, learners and support staff in schools behave and work to their fullest potential. The communicative styles of women managers can also be attributed to other factors, such as modernisation, exposure to other cultures through education and technology, the impact of Western culture and its associated values.

Furthermore, while it is evident that women principals' communicative activities are gendered, it is also clear that other communicative behaviours result from the social and environmental contexts in which they were raised and in which they find themselves, ones common to all principals irrespective of gender. A particular historical and political legacy or specific socio-economic conditions could generate circumstances that both males and females will have to face. Again, this study also reveals that women can be good communicators, despite the cultural barriers that may exist. In this study success was also possible because the teachers, too, tried to compromise some of the cultural expectations for the smooth running of the school.

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