

Multicultural Competence: Barriers to Demonstrating Inclusive Supervision Practices

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Abstract

In a previous study, the authors critically examined the specific practices of supervisors who were identified as multiculturally competent to understand and frame a model of supervision based on social justice and inclusion [22]. This current study aimed to further inform this model of supervision to specifically identify barriers or challenges that supervisors may encounter in demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship and adopting a more inclusive approach to supervision. Four specific barriers were identified which may hamper successful inclusive supervisory practices. Implications for practice are also shared.

1. Introduction

High attrition of entry-level student affairs professionals remains a concern for the profession [16]. Reasons for departure are numerous, and inadequate supervision is consistently identified as a factor [4], [16], [21], [23]. Supervision is one of the most critical and time-consuming functions of a student affairs professional's portfolio, yet despite this, supervision is not a competency in the curriculum of most graduate preparation programs [16]. Supervision is often learned through professionals' lived experiences, basing their personal approach to supervision on mentors and supervisors they have most admired. Conversely, poor supervisory experiences often create barriers in the supervisory relationship and can negatively impact a young professional's experience and longevity in the profession [16]. What is missing in these approaches to supervision is an intentionality that moves beyond one's likes and dislikes to a unique and individualized approach that fosters inclusiveness, multicultural competence, and satisfaction within the supervisory relationship.

While previous research on effective supervision has described a collaborative and developmental model [21], [22], [23], [24], the research has not specifically examined the impact of supervisors' multicultural competence on the supervisory relationship, or more specifically the impact of supervision conducted through a lens of social justice and inclusion. While previous studies in the counseling field have linked lower supervisor multicultural competence to the negative experiences

of supervisees [1, 13] this relationship has not been fully examined within the field of student affairs.

2. Literature Review

A review of literature on multicultural supervision and the barriers to implementing an inclusive approach revealed supervisor's cultural awareness and identity are factors in effective and satisfactory supervision. Dressel et al. [7], in their review of behaviors associated with successful and unsuccessful multicultural supervision in counseling, identified a supervisor's lack of awareness of his or her own racial, ethnic and cultural bias as the most detrimental to successful multicultural supervision. Some of the associated behaviors included lack of sensitivity to the impact of culture or becoming defensive about multicultural issues. Other harmful behaviors, like cultural stereotyping, unintentional racism or approaching issues from a colorblind perspective, have also been linked to a negative impact on the supervisory relationship [2], [12]. Furthermore, when supervisors had a higher level of racial or cultural consciousness than their supervisees, they were more equipped to bring up conversations about cultural issues, creating a more culturally inclusive environment [6], [8], [11], [14].

Differences between supervisor and supervisees' cultural identity is also widely cited as a potential barrier to effective supervision and satisfactory supervisory relationships [3], [9], [20]. There is a myriad of cultural differences that can exist between supervisor and supervisee including socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, occupation, nationality, education, and language barriers. Differences in cultural backgrounds may create the potential for dissonance and tension in the supervisory relationship, particularly when coupled with a supervisor who possesses little multicultural competence or the ability to communicate across those differences. Previous research has demonstrated that supervisors and supervisees with similar racial identities and cultural beliefs were more likely to emphasize these issues in supervision [14]. Similarly, supervisors who shared similar cultural experiences with their supervisees were seen as creating a safer environment for cultural differences to be discussed within the context of supervision. Given the inherent

power differential in every supervisory relationship, it is important to consider the impact of cultural differences between supervisor and supervisee and why supervisor multicultural competence is important.

3. Methodology

The data presented here is part of a larger study that examined the specific practices of student affairs supervisors who were identified as multiculturally competent by supervisees. This paper specifically focuses on the challenges supervisees identified that limited their supervisors' ability to effectively demonstrate multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship.

3.1. Data Collection and Participants

Using criterion and network sampling, student affairs professionals across the United States were solicited based on our professional networks and various professional listservs. A total of fifty participants responded. All respondents were asked to complete an intake form, which included demographic information and an exclusion question based on their perception of their supervisor's multicultural competence. To participate, participants had to: (1) be currently employed as a student affairs professional; and (2) identify their supervisor as being multiculturally competent. A total of 46 participants met the criteria and were included in our pool of eligible participants. We randomly selected every fourth person within the pool to derive our initial sample and then analyzed the sample to ensure it was representative of the diversity of our participant pool [17]. A final sample of 12 participants were invited to participate in a 45-60 minute semi-structured interview (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Racial Identity	Gender Identity	Age Range	Position Level
Smitty	African-American/Black	Male	21-30	Entry-level
Samson	African-American/Black	Male	21-30	Entry-level
Neil	Asian-American	Male	21-40	Mid-level
Nathan	Caucasian/White	Male	31-40	Senior-level
Sally	Multiracial or Biracial	Female	21-30	Entry-level
Melody	Caucasian/White	Female	41-50	Mid-level
Lisa	Caucasian/White	Female	21-30	Mid-level
Katlyn	Hispanic/Latino(a)	Female	21-30	Mid-level
Katie	Multiracial or Biracial	Female	41-50	Mid-level
Crystal	Hispanic/Latino(a)	Female	21-30	Mid-level
April	Multiracial or Biracial	Female	31-40	Senior-level
Anessa	Caucasian/White	Female	41-50	Entry-level

The semi-structured interview protocol asked participants to define multicultural competence, reflect on their experiences working with diverse others, and describe the challenges supervisors encountered demonstrating multicultural competence. Some questions from the protocol included: (1) What does your supervisor do that

demonstrates multicultural competence?; (2) Describe a time where you felt that your supervisor's skills and practices embodied the essence of multicultural competence.; and (3) What challenges might supervisor's face in demonstrating multicultural competence?

3.2. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established during analysis and presentation of the findings. We established analytical trustworthiness by reading the transcripts separately, participating in open coding [5] and listening to all of the audio recordings [18]. Member checking was also utilized for verification purposes. All participants were emailed the researchers' interpretations of the accumulative data and asked if the findings were an accurate portrayal of their experience. Participants were also invited to add any additional information that might help further explain the phenomena. Responding participants indicated the themes were indicative of their experience and understanding.

3.3 Data Analysis

During the initial analytic reading process, the challenges that supervisors encountered demonstrating multicultural competency emerged when participants were asked directly as well as during their discussion about effective practices. Because of this salience, we explored further factors that may prevent supervisors from effectively demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship. The participant stories were analyzed using a constant comparative method [19]. Following Patton's direction of grouping similar participant responses to questions from the semi-structure interview protocol, we first individually read all the transcripts and identified language that related to challenges demonstrated by the supervisee's supervisor as well as from the participants' supervisory experiences. Next, we followed Glaser's [10] recommendation of creating categories from key issues. We conducted open coding on the identified data and developed codes. Then, we re-read the transcripts utilizing the identified codes. When new codes emerged, researchers met to discuss if the new code should be included. If all three authors agreed, it was a salient new theme it was added to the list of codes and transcripts were reread and coded according to the new structure [5]. All transcripts were reread and recoded with the final set of codes.

4. Findings

Analysis of the data revealed four themes or barriers to demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship: (1) fear of vulnerability, (2) lack of authenticity, (3) lack of identity awareness, and (4) lack of trust in the supervisory relationship.

4.1. Fear of Vulnerability

Participants indicated that supervisors might be challenged in demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship based on a fear of appearing incompetent. The fear of vulnerability or exposing areas of ignorance was described by April, a multiracial senior level profession. She believed her knowledge about certain populations, which her supervisor appeared to have little knowledge about, made her supervisor uncomfortable. She explained, "I think the challenge that some supervisors have is working with someone who...is very competent in their own skill, [someone] who may not need a lot of hand holding and possibly outshine their supervisor." Supervisors who are unwilling to admit their lack of knowledge in some areas of equity, inclusion and social justice may be threatened by supervisees who are more knowledgeable in these areas. In these particular situations, a supervisor's ego often creates a barrier to inclusive supervisory practice.

The fear of vulnerability may prohibit supervisors and supervisees from engaging in fully transparent, open, and honest communication, particularly around diversity issues. Lack of vulnerability in the relationship may manifest as divisive and argumentative, rather than open and inclusive. When conversations become argumentative, supervisors and supervisees begin to judge each other, shutting down the ability to learn and grow. Anessa, a White entry-level professional, cautioned against this approach, adding:

[Supervisors] need to be able to...have difficult conversations with [supervisees] that are developmental, not punitive...So I think that [supervisors]...need to develop some type of authentic approach that allows for difficult conversations while still being...assertive.

Anessa's reflection illuminates the power dynamics in supervisory relationships but also suggests ways that supervisors can assert power and demonstrate vulnerability.

Vulnerability on the part of the supervisor indicated a level of humanity to the supervisee; a raw emotion that some supervisees found comforting and a necessary component to relationship building.

Crystal, a Hispanic, mid-level professional, commented on this importance as well as the detriment caused when vulnerability was lacking in the relationship:

If [supervisors] don't know what [supervisees] need, it's really hard to support us. If [a] supervisor isn't willing to open up or doesn't feel comfortable or is just like I'm not going to put myself in this vulnerable situation...it can be tough to forge those relationships.

Crystal's comment illustrates the importance supervisors' vulnerability plays for some supervisees when forging a supervisory alliance.

4.2. Lack of Authenticity

An additional barrier in demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship appeared to be supervisor's lack of authenticity surrounding issues of inclusivity and social justice. This approach to inclusivity resulted in supervisees feeling disenchanting and questioning the intentions of their supervisor. Melody, a White, mid-level professional stated, "I'm just picturing someone trying too hard and it being obvious that they are trying to be multiculturally competent and it would seem to be like an assertion into the normal routine as opposed to the way things are." In a similar sentiment, Melody said, "I can spot when someone is [trying to be multiculturally competent]. They got a memo that said we should be more multiculturally competent, and they started doing something or did something or put some new things in place." Sally, a multiracial entry-level professional reinforced this sentiment as she described previous supervisors who lacked multicultural competence as,

Saying things just to seem they are inclusive but not really believing it. Where your outspoken values don't match your actions. So, for example, there is a co-worker who I know struggles with this, who talks a lot about her love for social justice but has never gone to any multicultural event hosted by myself or my student groups. So I get the impression that there is a lack of congruence there.

This statement demonstrates the importance of supervisor's inclusive actions and practices, which become evidence or proof of a supervisor's intentions. Inclusive supervision practices must be consistent as they reflect the integrity and authenticity of the supervisor.

Supervisors who did not consistently or authentically address issues of inclusivity or social justice in the supervisory relationship lacked a genuine approach, evidenced by the incongruence

between words and actions. Reflecting on her experience as a supervisor Sally asserted, “Sometimes we try to be multiculturally competent, but it doesn’t come off as genuine.” As an example of being disingenuous, Neil, an Asian-American mid-level professional, spoke about his frustrations with supervisors who claimed to be multiculturally competent but did not make a genuine effort to pronounce his name correctly stating, “...they never cared about saying peoples name correctly. It really bothers me. I don’t care if you get it wrong. I need you to try. So telling me or asking me to call me by my initials is not ok.” He went on to say,

The problematic supervisors that I’ve had have asked those questions [if they could use my initials], perhaps out of discomfort, how they are feeling at that point. ...they’re not really having time or patience to sticking around to find out [what it’s like or how to say my name].

The intentions of supervisors to be inclusive can easily be questioned, as in Neil’s example, when the approach lacks authenticity and care. The challenge for supervisors in demonstrating multicultural competence becomes one of both genuineness and consistency, where supervisors’ values and actions align, resulting in a more authentic approach to issues of inclusivity. Those who do this effectively, their efforts appeared natural and effortless. Melody reinforced this as she described those who are effective in demonstrating multicultural competence within the supervisory relationship, “It’s really sort of organic to the work that we are doing, it’s not like someone is trying.” This description emphasizes the need for authenticity in one’s approach to inclusive supervision, where espoused values align with intention and action.

4.3. Identity Awareness

Participants believed that having a lack of awareness about one’s identities and the identities of others could be a barrier to effectively demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship. As previously stated, student affairs professionals often use their own experiences with supervision to inform their supervisory practices. Thus, the lens that they use when viewing problems is grounded in their past supervisory experiences as well as their knowledge and experiences navigating the world through their identity worldview. A supervisor’s inability to acknowledge the limitations of their worldview can be a barrier in demonstrating multicultural competence. Samson, an African-American entry-level professional stated, “One of the challenges...is having a sound understanding of your identity pieces and knowing the limits.” Nathan, a Caucasian senior level professional agreed. When

supervisors do not acknowledge the power, or lack thereof, associated with their identities, it impacts their behavior and negatively affects their supervisory relationships. For example, Nathan’s supervisor assembled an advisory board to make policy decisions. The team consisted of all Caucasian males. It was unclear to Nathan if his supervisor recognized the message he was sending to his colleagues by having an all-Caucasian male planning team. To Nathan and his peers it was clear that there was a lack of understanding of the privilege that came with the supervisor’s identities as well as a lack of appreciation for varied opinions that often present themselves when diverse teams are assembled. The supervisor’s lack of acknowledgement created an uncomfortable working environment. Rarely did anyone but Caucasian males seek one-on-one supervision with the supervisor. Nathan explained,

I’ll call [it the] power circle...[or the] decision making circle... all had the same identities, they were all White males. And not that they were bad people, but there was just no understanding or effort to understand how others...might have felt about things or might perceive policy [changes]...[Because of this behavior] I never saw anybody else with any other identity in an individual meeting with this person...[his behaviors were] components of multicultural incompetency.

According to Nathan, individuals who were not a part of the planning team felt isolated and undervalued. Sally, an entry-level biracial female, experienced something similar at her institution. It was Sally’s perception that her supervisor thought he was being inclusive yet he never invited anyone who was not Caucasian into program planning meetings. Sally explained:

Though they may be forward thinking White men, or think they are, I don’t necessarily know that [any of them]...get that the real decisions made on campus actually assert the privilege and the power they have as White men...[ultimately causing] equity [issues] for women and minorities on campus.

In general, participants agreed that a lack of action, such as inviting diverse members to be involved in creating policy and procedures, was a behavior that demonstrated to them that their supervisor lacked an awareness of theirs and others’ identities as well as multicultural competence.

Participants acknowledged that overcoming barriers associated with multicultural competence and identities can be challenging. A supervisor can be aware of the power and privilege associated with their particular identity yet still be unsure of how to

demonstrate their understanding of that knowledge in practice. For example, Nathan identified as upper-middle class and stated that he was knowledgeable, theoretically, of the power and privilege attributed to him based on his middle-class status. Yet often, when interacting with supervisees, he would not recognize his privilege, or he would be unaware that he should execute behaviors that would allow his supervisees to recognize that they he had an understanding of his privilege in the context of supervision. Nathan explained,

...[I come from] an upper middle class background, well educated. And sometimes I think we are not always able to easily see issues...when issues of social class crop up in our work environment. So that I think that was the biggest blind spot for both her and for me [his supervisor]...we were aware of it, but being aware doesn't always mean we are great at identifying when it exists.

Nathan's example illuminates the need to move beyond awareness to practice. The lack of knowledge of how to move from awareness to practice is considered a barrier associated with identity awareness.

In addition to being aware of their own identities, supervisors need to be aware of the identities of their supervisees. When supervisors are not knowledgeable and culturally aware of their supervisees' identities they tend to make assumptions about their supervisees' solely based on their identity. For example, April, a senior-level multiracial female, stated that her supervisor made assumptions about her knowledge of African American students on campus because he perceived her to be African American. Thus, he assumed she did not need any additional training to prepare to work with African American students. April argued,

...I don't know everything and as a person of color there is an unwritten expectation for me to be a certain way. For me to know it all when it comes to [African Americans]...that I'm supposed to already be this expert, not really. I'm still working on it myself...

This type of cultural assumption on the part of the supervisor, not only has the potential to negatively impact the supervisory relationship, but could also be detrimental to April's identity development.

Finally, a supervisors' identity in and of itself can be considered a barrier as supervisees often make assumptions about their supervisors' competency based on what they perceive their supervisors' identities to be. Neil, a mid-level Asian American male, stated that he considered himself to be multiculturally competent and he strives to utilize

inclusive supervisory practices yet he often comes across as non-inclusive to his supervisees. He believes this is because they are assessing his competence based on perceived identities and the stereotypes associated with them. Reflecting on his own supervisory experiences Neil said:

I think I've had at least one or two students every year for the last four years I've been in this position... who have told me that there have been certain parts of my work life, my supervision style, that have had some... sort of negative connotation [for them] because of where they come from and who they are.

Thus, Neil argued that supervisees also have a significant role in the supervisory relationship. If supervisees have preconceived notions about a supervisor based on their identity it may be challenging for the supervisor to be seen as multiculturally competent.

4.4. Absence of Trust

Supervisors' identity and positional status were considered to be natural barriers to establishing trust. The majority of participants believed that most supervisees do not initially trust their supervisors. The power dynamics within the relationship makes it difficult for supervisees to initiate difficult conversations or divulge anything that would make them appear unqualified for their position. Thus, it is up to supervisors to establish trusting relationships with supervisees where they feel comfortable discussing difficult topics without the fear of repercussion. Establishing these trusting relationships is not easy. It takes time and recognition of the power and privilege dynamics within each individual relationship. Nathan, a white senior-level practitioner said,

I think particularly when you're working with people who have very different identities than you, you have to earn their trust first. And that is always the challenge. Because I mean, I know in my own experience some people just simply distrust people who they perceive to be in power.

Other times a lack of trust stems from a misunderstanding. As supervisors and supervisees view things through different lenses, true intentions are often misconstrued. Neil discussed how having a different worldview with one of his supervisees caused his supervisee not to trust that he would do all that he could to help students of a particular identity.

You can have a different lens and that can be perceived as a lack of multicultural competent...I have a student who works with the LGBTQ house

and have always had issues with me and my handling of certain situations where it involves students who are queer...It is difficult for me to communicate my multicultural competence to this person when they think I'm being unfair and not taking into account the hindrances posed by their students' identities.

Other participants discussed the impact of untrusting supervisory relationships. Sally, an entry-level biracial female, stated that she was close to her supervisor and generally felt comfortable talking to her about most things. Although they never had a conversation about power or privilege, she perceived her supervisor to be fair. When an uncomfortable incident occurred she decided to bring it to her supervisor's attention trusting that she would work with her to resolve the issue. Unfortunately, her supervisor was not helpful, and, in fact, suggested that Sally had a role in causing the conflict. Sally challenged this line of thinking and told her supervisor she expected her to be more supportive. The negative exchange changed their relationship, leaving Sally to distrust her supervisor, which negatively impacted her work experience. Sally explained,

I went to her home for meals with her family for thanksgiving when I couldn't go home to see my family. We were very close but when I started to challenge her and tell her I didn't feel like she was supporting me we kinda just stopped talking, which was pretty awkward and uncomfortable... I think our relationship is beyond repair in terms of feeling comfortable again...[This is what happens w] hen your outspoken values don't match your actions...

Sally's example illuminates how supervisors can earn trust as well as lose it when their actions are not deemed supportive by their supervisee. The example illuminates the complexity of supervisory dynamics and barriers' impact on the supervisory relationship within student affairs.

5. Discussion

Findings from this study revealed the barriers and challenges that supervisors may have in demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship or modeling an inclusive approach to supervision. The inability of supervisors to demonstrate multicultural competence and approach supervision from a lens of social justice and inclusion creates an environment where supervisees feel undervalued and unappreciated for the knowledge and skills they bring to their position. As evidence, participants frequently cited examples where they were certain that they had more

knowledge than their supervisor. Rather than being appreciative, supervisees indicated that supervisors became defensive and argumentative. These behaviors stifled the supervisory relationship and prevented conversations about issues of equity, inclusion or social justice. Educating supervisors on how to move beyond their fear of vulnerability may be essential to improving supervision in the field of student affairs.

Supervisees also observed that supervisors who were challenged in demonstrating multicultural competence sometimes lacked authenticity in their approach to issues of diversity in the workplace. Meaning supervisees believed their supervisors were attempting to be inclusive as a part of their job requirement rather than a genuine belief that it was important in the supervisory relationship. While the intent of supervisors was not known or examined in this study, one consideration for this appearance of forced effort may be a lack of understanding and skills related to infusing social justice and inclusion into their supervisory role and responsibilities. Our findings echo previous research, which has equated poor supervision with poor modeling of professional attributes, and professional apathy [15], which may make a supervisor appear less authentic in their overall approach to social justice and inclusion efforts. In addition, supervisors may generally lack the competence and training to be able to think about supervision in this capacity.

Supervisors' lack of awareness of their identities and the identities of others seem to contribute to supervisees' perceptions of challenges supervisors encounter. This behavior was observed amongst supervisees when supervisors organized committees or made assumptions about supervisees based on their cultural or racial backgrounds. The lack of awareness caused supervisees to not trust their supervisor, creating a barrier to inclusive supervision. This finding is not surprising as previous research indicates that cultural differences between supervisor and supervisee can be a barrier in supervisory relationships [3], [9], [20]. Supervisors who hope to foster an inclusive supervisory relationship should acknowledge cultural differences and similarities, particularly as they relate to the power differential in the supervisory relationship, and adopt a professional praxis that is built on self-awareness.

6. Implications for Practice

The findings from this research study present several implications for student affairs practice and areas for further research and inquiry. First, the examination of inclusive supervision practices from a barriers perspective provides a framework and further justification for competency and skill development in professional preparation programs,

particularly as it relates to enhanced identity of self and others. This research supports consistent curriculum that provides opportunities for students to examine their own identities as well as the identities of others. Graduate programs should also provide considerable opportunities for the development of self-awareness surrounding personal values, beliefs, assumptions, and biases and how those impact one's work with others, specifically in the supervisory relationship. Supervision should be taught not only as a function of operation, but as a matter of personal foundations for ethical practice. Similarly, the findings support additional development in the competency area of social justice and inclusion, specifically related to identity awareness and the influence of this competency area on supervision practices.

In addition to curricular impact, the findings from this study present further areas of development and reflection for current supervisors in the field. Supervisors should consider their current supervisory relationships from a multicultural perspective and whether they reflect principles of inclusivity. The barriers identified in this study provide points of critical self-reflection for supervisors who may be struggling to build effective and inclusive supervisory relationships. Self-reflections on supervisor vulnerability may involve examining how frequently one admits to having limited knowledge on cultural issues or how comfortable one might be in knowing less than those they supervise. Self-reflections on supervisor authenticity may involve how genuine one appears in their social justice and inclusion efforts based on their consistency in both thought and action. Supervisors may reflect upon their supervisory relationships and whether they have established trusting relationships, reflecting comfort with both challenge and support. And finally, a supervisor's awareness of their own identity and the identity of those they supervise appears to make a difference in the supervisory relationship. Supervisors should be intentional in understanding how their identity and the identity of others impact their supervisory relationships and the environment.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative study provides a rich context in which to think about inclusive supervision from a barriers perspective. A limitation of this study, however, is that it is informed solely from the supervisees' perspective. Additional research might consider examining the same question from the supervisors' perspective to enhance understanding and to test the consistency of these findings. Specifically, what do supervisors identify as barriers to demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship? An additional limitation of this research surrounds participants' understanding

and definition of multicultural competence. The study solicited participants who identified their supervisor as multiculturally competent, but did not provide consistent criteria for establishing supervisor multicultural competence. While this was intentional by design, as the original study sought to identify what multicultural supervision looks like in practice, the lack of a consistent definition of multicultural competence allows for various interpretations of barriers to demonstrating multicultural competence. In the hopes of obtaining a more grounded perspective, future research in this area might consider providing participants with a shared definition or model of inclusive supervision.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to enhance our understanding of an inclusive model of supervision based on examining the barriers to demonstrating multicultural competence in the supervisory relationship from the supervisees' perspective. The findings suggest that supervisors' fear of vulnerability, lack of identity awareness and lack of authenticity all may negatively impact the supervisory relationship. The findings also suggest that a lack of trust within the supervisory relationship may also have significant implications for supervisors who want to embrace a more inclusive approach to supervision. Student affairs professionals who would like to enhance their supervision approach with an intentional focus on being more inclusive should consider the factors above, reflecting upon their current supervisory relationships and whether there is evidence of these barriers.

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