

Information for QSW-17-0166.R4 – Using reflexivity journaling to lessen the emic–etic divide in a qualitative study of Ethiopian immigrant women

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Abstract

This article explores the use of journaling about reflexivity as a method of lessening the etic–emic divide in a cross-cultural qualitative study. The journaling process discussed demonstrates reflexivity as personal introspection, social critique, and biography in a study of 14 women who immigrated from Ethiopia to the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The author conducted face-to-face interviews and intentionally journaled about her reflections as she recruited participants and conducted interviews over a one-year period of time. The reflexivity journal process highlighted both similarities and differences between the researcher and participants.

Keywords

Reflexivity, immigration, cross-cultural, qualitative synthesis, journal

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Defined as intentional self-awareness about the reciprocal influence of the researcher–participant relationship on the research process (Gilgun, 2006), reflexivity creates a means through which the researcher’s background, experiences, emotions, values, and even biases are not ignored or neutralized. Instead, these variables are viewed as important contributions to the process of co-constructing knowledge (Gilgun, 2006; Longhofer and Floersch, 2012; Probst, 2015). The process of journaling about reflexivity provides the qualitative researcher a heightened awareness of both differences and similarities between the researcher and participant. In turn, journaling aids in closing the gap between etic and emic perspectives (Pike, 1967).

In this article, we examine how the researcher’s own personal positions influence her qualitative study of 14 Ethiopian immigrant women in the United States (Oliphant, 2017). The researcher was a white, native-born U.S. citizen and doctoral student, from an upper middle-class background. There were researcher–participant differences in nationality and culture, race and ethnicity, class and education. These differences were compounded by the power dichotomy of “researcher” and research “subject.” Although the researcher and participants shared the same gender, and half of the women were mothers like her, their cultural differences were significant. Participants were all African-born and immigrated at age 18 or older; their ages ranged from 20s to 60s, and a few were now college graduates. The researcher kept a journal to record her field notes and reflexivity as a way to monitor her own self-awareness and explore her thoughts and emotions that emerged throughout the project.

The original study was grounded in social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Harpham et al., 2002) and examined how Ethiopian immigrant women use social relationships and networks to transition post-immigration in Washington, DC. The first author coded and analyzed the data using the qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005); more specifically, she considered the interview transcripts as texts to analyze through open coding, theme identification, and analysis of themes compared to existing theory (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Teater, 2011). Throughout her research process, she journaled about writing and beta testing the interview guide, recruiting participants, conducting a pilot interview to determine if changes needed to be made, and completing her interviews. Although English is taught beginning in primary school in Ethiopia, there were language barriers, including accent or dialect usage issues; this journal helped the researcher recognize the need to be aware of language, cultural barriers, and nuances.

This article is an examination of how reflexivity and journaling influenced the qualitative researcher, providing an increased awareness of both differences and similarities between the researcher and participant. The following is a review of the literature on reflexivity and journaling about reflexivity during a qualitative study. After the review, the first author gives a first person chronological account of the journaling process in this particular study to examine how her own personal, political, socio-economic, and power positionalities vied with the perspectives of

the participants and impacted her own professional and personal development. A novice investigator conducting a dissertation study, the researcher experienced reflexivity journaling as an invaluable component of the qualitative process. The authors suggest that a similar journaling approach may be beneficial to researchers new to qualitative inquiry.

Literature review

A growing body of literature has defined reflexivity as attunement to the reciprocal effect of the research phenomena and researcher–participant relationship on qualitative processes (Finlay, 2002; Gilgun, 2006; Longhofer and Floersch, 2012; Probst, 2015). A reflexive approach attends to the researcher’s context—personal and emotional self, social and cultural identity, unconscious biases and motivations, and conscious reactions and responses—and records how the researcher influences the design of the qualitative study and the collection and interpretation of data. Similarly, reflexivity considers how the research context—the external voices of the participants and the phenomena under study—affects the internal world of the researcher (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012). Through an intersubjective process, reflexive researchers “become aware of their own projections, attachments, assumptions, agendas, and biases—like an eye that sees itself while simultaneously seeing the world” (Probst, 2015: 38).

In contrast to positivist research, where objectivity is valued and personal reactions are bracketed, attention to unfolding reflexivity is generally valued by qualitative researchers, particularly those who hold the constructivist view that knowledge is co-created and a collaboration between the researcher and the research subjects (Ben-Ari and Enosh, 2011; Charmaz, 2014; Finlay, 2002; Probst, 2015). According to Longhofer and Floersch (2012), reflexivity “is essential to a science of social work” (p. 512). Yet, attention to reflexivity does not guarantee the rigor of qualitative research (Finlay, 2002; Lynch, 2000), and, says Finlay (2002), the reflexive process “is full of muddy ambiguity” that can leave researchers “negotiating the swamp” of “the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice” (p. 209).

Numerous scholars suggest that researchers can become more attuned to the opportunities and challenges of the reflexivity process through the use of regular reflexive journal writing, which occurs at the beginning and during the course of the research project (Barry and O’Callaghan, 2008; Berger, 2015; Dowling, 2006; Markham, 2009; Ortlipp, 2008; Probst and Berenson, 2014). As a strategy to deepen self-awareness and analysis, journaling provides a place for researchers to record their research design, assumptions, and action-plans; document field notes about all aspects of the research project; examine thoughts about apparent differences in the social and cultural contexts between self and others; explore impressions of the interview process; and reflect on the interpersonal relationships that develop during data-gathering. Specifically, countertransference and unconscious mental processing that become triggered in the research process (Marks and

Mönnich-Marks, 2003; Meek, 2003) may become more apparent through journaling, because “our ideas become clearer when we write them down. . . Writing forces us to make connections and concretely declare these connections” (Banks-Wallace, 2008: 24). In other words, through writing a reflexivity journal, researchers have an opportunity to “connect thought, feeling, and action,” which allows “new and revised insights to emerge” (Barry and O’Callaghan, 2008: 55).

Journaling about reflexivity is particularly important when the researcher is an outsider or “a stranger to the culture” (Berger, 2015: 228), because studying the unfamiliar can be challenging; the researcher may be unable to recognize or interpret clues that would be easily discerned by an insider. Pike (1967) introduced the seminal concepts of etic and emic standpoints; etic refers to studying human behavior from outside of the system and emic is studying from within. Similarly, Markham (2009) recommends the use of journaling to keep in mind how the “local” researcher may be viewing “global” outside phenomena and proposes that “situating one’s research is a way of enacting global sensibilities” (p. 17). In order to situate oneself, Markham suggests that researchers should repeatedly ask, “How do I know that? So what? Why did I conclude that? What led me to that perception?” (p. 10).

Efforts have been made to categorize and define various types of reflexivity in order to understand the reflexivity process that becomes apparent through journaling. The typology proposed by Finlay (2002) includes five types of reflexivity, which are: (1) *introspection*—one’s own reflection and insight about personal experiences; (2) *intersubjective reflection*—exploration of “mutual meanings emerging within the research relationship” (p. 115); (3) *mutual collaboration*—co-operative dialogue between researcher and participants; (4) *social critique*—analysis of the shifting power positions in the research relationship; and (5) *discursive deconstruction*—attention to “the ambiguity of meanings in language used” (p. 222) and how this affects the research. Similar to Finlay, Longhofer and Floersch (2012) propose seven modes of reflexivity but place particular emphasis on the *personal (or standpoint) mode* of reflexivity, defined as the way the researcher’s personal context, power relations, and emotions influence and are influenced by the research process. Study aims, theoretical underpinnings, and methodological approach shape the type of reflexivity most emphasized in a qualitative study.

In transnational research, which examines participant migration across political and geographical boundaries, Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2016) recommend *biographical reflexivity* as the preferred means of attending to the researcher and participant relationship, especially when all parties in the research process have personal migration histories. This mode of reflexivity focuses on the biographical experiences that occur in the research process, reflecting on “the researcher’s own experience and involvement as an interactive, relational act in the research process” (p. 748). Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2013, 2016) point out that social scientists studying different cultures historically have valued positivist scientific methods, but scientists now realize that reflexivity is critical to transnational knowledge development. Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2016) consider

biographical reflexivity in narrative research as a useful approach “to reflect methodologically the meaning of (one’s own) entanglements in a research process” (p. 748).

Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2016) offer the following questions for the researcher to explore in doing biographical reflexive journaling:

1. What personal experience do I have with my research topic?
 2. How did I come to study the specific topic in the field?
 3. What is my relationship to the topic being investigated?
 4. How did I gain access to the field?
 5. How does my own position (age, gender, class, ethnicity, economic status, etc.) influence interaction in the field and the data collection process?
 6. What is my interpretation perspective?
- (p. 749)

Meek (2003) added another layer to the complexity of qualitative research in arguing that the unconscious plays an important role in qualitative research. “Inadvertently the researcher selects a question or project that in some way represents an internal conflict, something with which the researcher struggles with in their life. At some point, a related conflict is encountered in the research project...” (para. 30)

The following is a presentation of how the researcher of the current study on Ethiopian immigrant women addressed Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti’s (2016) biographical questions, Meek’s unconscious internal conflict claim, and other personal and cultural concerns. Even journaling itself carries cultural weight with it; it is the researcher’s culture that privileges writing and treats a written journal filled with self-reflections as a tool in a research method.

Self-reflexive journaling from first person standpoint of the researcher

From the beginning of this research project, I was keenly aware that I was an outsider to the cultural phenomenon I was studying. Although I do not have a personal migration history and the current study does not meet the full definition of transnational research, the six questions proposed by Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2016) for understanding biographical reflexivity provide an appropriate overview to illustrate many themes that emerged in my journal.

What personal experience did I have with my research topic? In an initial journal entry, I wrote the following:

I approached this research study from an etic, or outsider, perspective. I am not Ethiopian, nor have I even visited Ethiopia. I have not immigrated to another country

nor had to build a life in a new culture. I have approached this subject not as an expert, but as a learner who was taught from the women who own these experiences.

In these words, I was actually focusing on “one-way migration processes seen from the perspective of the country of arrival and its national interests” (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti, 2013: 249). I did not have my own biographical history of migration to influence my understanding of the stories I would hear from these 14 women. Nevertheless, the additional five questions proposed for doing biographical reflexivity offer a meaningful guide to question, even post-research, how my personal identity and values were woven into the study at all levels.

How did I come to study this specific subject? An excerpt from my journal at the beginning of the research process answers several questions regarding why I was studying this phenomenon. I wrote the following to explain my initial professional interest:

This topic is an extension of my long professional and personal interest in international social work and women’s empowerment issues, which were first ignited when I learned of micro credit lending in a Master’s degree social work course. Since then I have spent time in Central America, worked for a humanitarian organization serving South America, and researched and written about international women’s empowerment issues.

The literature was rife with studies of immigration, particularly Latin American and Asian, and even African immigration had been examined. But, African women? That is where I found silence in the professional knowledge base. What did that mean for this study—or other studies where outsiders are trying to offer a glimpse of the experiences of a hidden population? How would those gaps influence what I asked or did not ask?

What is my relationship to the topic being investigated? My personal history was not the sole reason I became interested in Ethiopian women. The following addresses the development of my relationship to the topic:

One of the things I love about my neighborhood in my Washington, DC inner suburb is the vast array of people that I meet in my daily interactions. When at the neighborhood park, public library, or local elementary school, I meet people from all over the world with fascinatingly different experiences. When we first moved into this location, I was surprised and a little delighted to discover Ethiopian bread, called injera, sold at the gas station right alongside the cup-of-noodles and quarts of milk typically found at convenience stores all across America. Our public library hosted an Ethiopian coffee ceremony on a Saturday morning to provide insight into the culture of our many Ethiopian neighbors. As I walk my son to school in the morning, I have a chat with the crossing guard on my way home. It turns out that this 70-plus year-old white man is married to an Ethiopian woman. Over the course of time, I have learned about his world travels, his wife and her children’s migration to the U.S., the struggles of her children to adapt and earn an education, and the various jobs she has had here

in the U.S., including her abandoned catering business. I have heard about wedding and holiday celebrations, holy days, and fasting seasons. I have learned about the network of Ethiopian friends and acquaintances that he and his wife associate with in the U.S., as well as the family and friends still back in Ethiopia. I wanted to learn more, especially when I went to the literature and found that there was an astounding lack of literature available—we do not have a record of these women's experiences.

In sum, my curiosity about Ethiopian women was sparked by new relationships I was developing with individuals in my neighborhood and by the realization that I was living in the midst of a community of Ethiopian women who had recently immigrated to the U.S. And I knew very little about them. I discovered many barriers separating us in U.S. society—socio-economic status, what neighborhood you live in, whether you live in a single family house or rent an apartment, whether you drive a car or take public transportation, what grocery stores you frequent, what after-school activities you can afford for your children.

Meek's (2003) articulation of the unconscious in my selection of this topic did not emerge yet at this point in the process. Certainly, I recognized I had long been interested in women's empowerment issues, but the unconscious influence would not be uprooted until much later—through the journaling process. For example, I noted in my journal that at times I was not able to gain direct access to women participants without going through a male gatekeeper, such as a pastor or community agency director. One woman's husband even served as the ultimate gatekeeper. The participant had invited me to her home to conduct the interview. As I discussed the consent process, the participant insisted on calling her husband on the phone and having me explain it all to him. He gave his consent for her to consent, as long as it was understood that there were to be no questions about what had happened in Ethiopia. Ultimately, these repeated themes of men controlling the women's story emerged as the unconscious struggle (Meek, 2003) that had led me to this research topic. This struggle is one that lessened the gulf between the participants and myself. Despite what differences we had, we were all experiencing the world through the patriarchal system.

How did I gain access to the field? Gaining access to the field proved to be the biggest challenge of the study. I posted flyers in public libraries, gave flyers to Ethiopian acquaintances such as my pediatrician, visited many Ethiopian restaurants and cafes, and attended local Ethiopian religious services. The recruitment process was much more discouraging and frustrating than I anticipated. My journal provided an opportunity for me to examine my emotions, observations, and log the process of trying to gain access to the field.

Common entries in my journal included, "I feel so discouraged;" "I was a bit discouraged;" and "This is so frustrating;" and, even once, "I am starting to feel like a door-to-door salesman. It was cold and I was fighting back tears of discouragement, but I went on inside." I had multiple cancellations, no-shows, and countless incidences of women saying they would call to set up an appointment, but never calling. Sometimes I felt myself becoming irritated with the participants for

cancelling, while at the same time recognizing the challenge of their lives in terms of lack of access to email, tight living circumstances, shift work, and child care issues. I realized the participants might also have been afraid or concerned about talking to me and may have had feelings about not wanting to share their stories. I began to recognize this pattern of potential participants saying they would call, but they would not follow through with that agreement. I described it in my journal:

I arrived at the end of the service and the first woman I greeted coming out took my flyer and said she'd call—in a manner that I have heard so many times and understand completely as a way to get away from me.

I also referred to this in my journal as women “blowing me off.”

How did my own position influence interaction in the field? As a natural born citizen of the U.S. with white skin and privileges of class and education, I entered the field in a position of power, compounded by the dichotomy of “researcher” and research “subject.” I tried to be conscientious about leveling that power differential with the participants in as many ways as possible—meeting in a location of the choosing of the participant, clearly explaining the voluntary nature of the research, listening with respect, honoring confidentiality, and incorporating what I learned about Ethiopian culture as I progressed in the research process. For example, partway through the data gathering process, I found a quote in my review of the literature that helped me understand what I was experiencing:

Ethiopians are very proud and try their best not to ask for favors. But if they do ask, it is best to agree to do it, even if you think you might not be able to do so. The Ethiopian friend always understands if you explain that circumstances made it impossible to fulfill the promise. He will, nevertheless, greatly appreciate the fact that you agreed to try to help in the first place. (Milkias, 2011: 290)

This quote helped me realize that the women were agreeing to the “favor” of participating in the interview, even if they were not actually going to be able to do it. In their culture, this demonstrates that they were willing to help, but it just did not work out.

Reading this quote was an important moment in my process and enabled me to alter my position or standpoint as researcher. I began to take the rejections much less personally and realize that this was part of the cultural learning I was gaining through this research process. This was also one of several times when I was reminded that I was not part of the community and did not share the trust of the group. I reflected in my journal:

I am discovering that my etic (outsider) position is more of a barrier than I realized it would be. I think I really need to find people who can vouch for me because I am not one of the community.

Despite my outsider status, the difficulties in recruitment actually helped to immerse me in the community in ways I would not have been if I had experienced a quicker and easier recruitment phase. I wrote in my research journal:

I have had some wonderful, rich learning experiences in “pounding the pavement”—visiting Ethiopian churches, restaurants, community centers, migrant services offices. Talking with parking attendants and pastors, contacting professors and embassies. Finding out about Amharic story times at Silver Spring Library. . . . The list goes on. Even though my research is still from the “outsider” perspective, I think it has really enhanced my research to have had these experiences.

What was my interpretation perspective? I used a hand-held audio device to record the interviews, sent the file to the transcriptionist, and then interpreted the data based on the written transcript of the interview. However, in journaling, I realized that I was interpreting in some ways immediately and concurrently with my data collection. Recognizing my own opinions, enjoyments, and even judgments of the participants was perhaps the most powerful aspect of journaling.

When I did finally find women willing to talk to me, I expressed some discomfort at the feelings I had of liking certain participants more than others. To my embarrassment, I recognized judgements I was making about participants. Demonstrating how journaling can reveal countertransference and unconscious mental processing (Marks and Mönnich-Marks, 2003; Meek, 2003), I wrote:

Quite frankly, the woman from the café really bothered me in many ways. I felt like she was privileged and entitled (which I know sounds crazy because she is working at a café, living with a cousin, and has very little materially in this country). But her attitude just seemed to me like she thought she knew everything and was looking down on a lot of people (intellectual snobbery). To me, she didn’t recognize the depth of the help she had received and thought she had done it all on her own. Even though she didn’t have to pay rent, had help finding a job, etc. And maybe it was the comparison to the woman I interviewed immediately before her who is working so hard at gaining an education as well as contributing financially to helping her family, volunteering as a tutor, etc. And she articulated the struggles she has faced in a humble (my value laden word) way. Afterward I kept thinking, “How do I raise my children to be like this first woman instead of the second woman?” (I know—terrible when I’m supposed to be a nonjudgmental social worker!!) Anyway, there are my biases laid out bare.

This was an important issue for me to discuss in the journal because it helped me identify my bias in the co-construction process with the participants (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti, 2016). How would I represent her viewpoint in the study? How could I keep my own biases from overtaking her experiences as I was the teller of

the story? Keeping the journal also kept my mind engaged with memories of the participants, even after events were over. I wrote:

I've been thinking more about my interviews from Saturday and some of my personal responses and biases. I think I should record them in order to be honest and help make sure this process is transparent and focused on the research findings, not letting my personal biases cloud it—or at least recognize how this affects it. I guess I just realized I was being really judgmental in my head and I ought to acknowledge it so I can help to keep that out of my findings.

After another interview, I found my journaling as a place to self-reflect and again identify where my own biases were evident. I wrote in my journal:

One area that I need to identify as my bias was when she was talking about her boyfriend and how he pushed her to go to school and plan for her future and helped her enroll for school and make a resume. I felt concerned that she was too dependent on him, or maybe was giving him the credit for her successes. I worried that she wasn't recognizing that she can navigate this without her boyfriend. Not to say that his support wasn't valuable, but I felt a sense of dependency almost, which concerned me and sent up some red flags for this former women's shelter worker. But maybe, too, I'm just a Western woman who needs to recognize the differences in gender relations based on cultural differences.

This journal entry illustrates how cultural differences were evident in my struggle with gender issues and the different ways of relating based on culture; I had to recognize I was privileging my nation's view of women's roles and opportunities. When I interpreted the data and looked for the themes that emerged, I was constructing a "success" story as one in which women achieve financial independence, bodily autonomy, and even increased equality in household management chores. Instead, I realized I needed to tell her story according to her perspective, her goals for relationships, her family, and her community life. Most importantly, the journaling impacted the findings of this research by helping me see that I must not make the all too common assumption that "all Ethiopian immigrant women" think, act, or feel the same. Although I sought to identify themes and commonalities, there was a need to respect and appreciate the individual reality and experience of each participant. Was I able to do that? Upon further reflection and experiences, especially in the months and years following the study, I would propose that I certainly did not capture the range of experiences of Ethiopian immigrant women.

The impact of the women's stories on me, personally, was powerful throughout the research process, and the self-reflexivity journal gave space to explore within myself. In my journal, I shared moments of reflection that had been shaped by the experience of sitting and listening to the voices of these previously untold stories. It also helped me to identify how my position (class, ethnicity, economic status,

etc.) impacted the research process and co-construction of knowledge (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti, 2016). I wrote in my journal:

I was reflecting on driving home from my gym at 6:30 in the morning. The streets are dark, but I see mothers pushing strollers to the bus stop and young boys (8 or 9) around my son's age riding their bikes with backpacks on. This is the immigrant community. The women are dropping kids at daycare via bus before they head to cleaning jobs. The little boy is headed to some kind of before school care in the early cold hours. I think about my privilege juxtaposed with the hard lives of so many people around me. People that are all too often invisible. Somehow this research has helped me see people around me, I have a better sense of what their daily life looks like, what some of their struggles might be. Not that everyone is the same, but that there are some common struggles.

Discussion

Throughout recent qualitative research development, scholars have recommended self-reflexivity journals to increase the trustworthiness and rigor of their studies (Barry and O'Callaghan, 2008; Berger, 2015; Dowling, 2006; Markham, 2009; Ortlipp, 2008; Probst and Berenson, 2014). The journal entries presented above illustrated the use of reflexivity as biography (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti, 2016), reflexivity as introspection and social critique (Finlay, 2002), and reflexivity from personal or standpoint modes (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012). The journal further illustrated how unconscious mental processes (Marks and Mönnich-Marks, 2003; Meek, 2003)—such as views and biases about power and gender roles—emerged through the journaling process. Altogether, attention to reflexivity revealed that biography, personal context, power relations, and emotions influenced, and were influenced by, the research process.

This reflexivity journal became an important tool to address how the personal and professional collide during qualitative research. For example, the biographical reflexivity questions proposed by Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2016) offered a framework that reached deeper into the researcher's personal history to examine why this topic mattered to her as a person and as a researcher, how she chose to study it, and how she accessed participants in the field, while keeping in mind her positionality.

The journal also enabled the researcher to explore her feelings (introspection) and opinions (social critique) regarding her relationship to the participants, her understanding of gender and culture, her assumptions about what it means to be an Ethiopian immigrant in today's society, and how social capital theory could explain this process. But it was her personal (standpoint) mode of self-reflexivity that shaped how she viewed power relations. Although from a dominant white culture, she too had experienced "otherness" as a woman. The feminist lens through which she viewed the immigrant women in this study markedly impacted her notion of reality and, therefore, the co-constructed reality presented in the findings of this research.

Finally, the journal highlighted some of the challenges the researcher faced in keeping boundaries professional as her own personal emotions emerged. For example, she faced feelings of guilt for having enough money and privilege when some participants were struggling to secure the basic necessities of life or were going for years without being able to see loved ones. The journal offered a tool to think through considerations about whether feelings of guilt impacted how the researcher told the stories, or if the researcher created a more heroic picture of the participants as a way to assuage her own feelings.

Despite providing an avenue to explore these personal and professional considerations, journaling could not provide a checklist to ensure elimination of bias, a guarantee of reliability, nor a safeguard to protect against the pervasive influence of the researcher's viewpoints on the research. Yet, journaling *was* useful in providing a venue for this researcher to experience introspection and deconstruction (Finlay, 2002); to answer useful biographical framework questions (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti, 2016); and to work through the influence of the unconscious on qualitative work (Meek, 2003), such as emerging feelings of guilt. Similarly, the journal was instrumental in helping this researcher experience a commonality with participants who initially seemed a world apart from her. The method of journaling about reflexivity was vital to this study's findings, and it can serve as a valuable contribution to the qualitative research process in general.


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