
PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS AND IDENTITY

Rethinking Dabrowski's Theory: I. The Case Against Primary Integration

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Some terms of Dabrowski's theory are misleading. The construct of level and the concepts of integration and disintegration mean different things. The concept of primary integration as a starting point for personality development is untenable in light of research on child development. In its place, Level I as a type of development that is constrained by social pressures and the effort to succeed in life will serve better. Milgram's studies of obedience and Bandura's of the ways of bypassing one's conscience are sufficient to explain how the Level I type of integration can take hold of a person. The descriptive term of disintegration is too extreme and too limiting to enclose the diversity of processes at each level that also include partial integration. Common errors that have crept into the usage of the theory are identified and corrected.

Keywords: Dabrowski's theory, Dabrowski's theory errors of usage, developmental level, developmental potential, early attachment, identity formation, mechanisms of disengaging one's conscience, obedience to authority, partial integration, positive disintegration, primary integration

Dabrowski's theory was introduced to gifted education over 30 years ago, and until recently little effort has been directed toward examining its defining concepts (Mendaglio, 2008; Zielinski, 1997). Terms like *developmental potential*, *disintegration* versus *integration*, *levels*, *dynamisms*, and *multilevel* versus *unilevel process* call for examination in the light of accumulated knowledge, by which I mean not only research based on the theory but, rather, any relevant psychological research. Because this article assumes some knowledge of the theory, the reader needing an introduction can turn to readily accessible sources like Ackerman (2009), Daniels and Piechowski (2009), or Mendaglio (2008).

The very nature of the theory is sometimes debated: Is it a theory of emotional development, a theory of personality, or a theory of moral development? It appears to be all three. The theory defines five levels, yet they do not form a stepwise progression. Is Level I the starting point? Does Level II represent development in Dabrowski's sense? What is the nature of developmental potential for different types of development? These and other questions need to be

examined within the logic of the theory, case studies, and research.

Some people feel attracted to Dabrowski's theory because it addresses the inner struggles to become an authentic self, struggles that also put one at odds with social reality. Many others, however, feel put down by the theory feeling that it is elitist.

A theory of personal development has to be tested, for plausibility and promise, against the person's own knowledge and experience. By developing appropriate research instruments, we test the validity of the theory and its defining concepts. Applying theory to practice, as in counseling or teaching, is another way to acquire an understanding of the theory. No theory can be spared errors of interpretation; clarification and correction are then in order. To *rethink* (1971) is to consider afresh. To this end, errors that obscure need to be cleared away.

COMMON ERRORS

There are at least six common errors:

1. To refer to the theory of positive disintegration as a stage theory confuses the different meanings of *stage*

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and *level*. The theory describes developmental levels. Each level defines a different kind of universe and a different developmental process within it (Piechowski, 2008). To misconceive the levels as stages exposes the failure to realize how great the divide is between levels II and III and how basic the difference is between unilevel and multilevel processes. The unilevel process does not convert into a multilevel one. The latter has to arise from its own specific sources in the developmental potential. A flatland does not become a mountain unless there is a force to push it upward.

2. To refer to the *stages* of positive disintegration as realizable within one lifetime follows hypnotically from Error 1, because stages suggest development throughout the life span. The mistake is to equate the scale of levels with an ontogenetic sequence. Paradoxically, Dabrowski himself slipped at one point and committed both errors. To give the theory a formal structure, Dabrowski and Andrew Kawczak, a philosopher, formulated 72 hypotheses (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 132). In hypothesis 2 they said, “The full cycle of ontogenetic development of man includes five main stages” and then listed the levels of development through positive disintegration. The two basic errors are: saying that development through positive disintegration goes through stages, and that they fit into the stages of life span development. Furthermore, hypothesis 2 implies something utterly impossible—that a person could start at Level I and reach Level V. As we shall see, Level I cannot be the starting point.
3. The concept of *overexcitabilities* is often erroneously called a *theory of overexcitabilities*. Overexcitabilities are nothing more than descriptive characteristics of an intensified quality of experiencing. Nervous systems vary in regard to how high and how long they can sustain stimulation. They also vary in the degree and range of stimulation as well as sensitivity—the qualities of experiencing. One quality refers to a higher level of energy (psychomotor overexcitability); another to a heightened sensory experience (sensual); another to extended capacity of imagination (imaginational); another to a passion for knowing, understanding, and solving problems (intellectual); and yet another to a highly charged emotional sphere (emotional).
4. To regard with disdain Level II and the process of unilevel disintegration is an error coming from lack of understanding and compassion. An enormous amount of human suffering and unhappiness is bound here. A large portion of world literature is about this kind of human condition and it can be deeply moving. Furthermore, there is plenty of room for the development of the self in Level II (Piechowski, 2008).
5. To not separate the man from his theory is the error of confabulating opinions with what a theory formally

allows one to say. The theory is stated most completely in Dabrowski’s later works (1977a, 1977b, 1996). He expressed his opinion on many issues. People who knew him recall such utterances, and some present them as if they were part of the theory or flowing from the theory. One typical example is that he judged sensual and psychomotor overexcitabilities as lower forms of overexcitability, which he did not consider contributors to advanced development. And, if they happened to be very strong, they would stand in the way of advanced development. A high level of energy is often manifest in people who are valued greatly for their advanced development; for example, Mohandas Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Paul Robeson, Peace Pilgrim, Dag Hammarskjöld, Bishop Tutu, and Nelson Mandela. It rather shows that a high level of energy contributes to advanced development (Zielinski, 1997). In regard to sensual overexcitability, it is enough to point out that mystical poetry is highly sensual, such as in the *Song of Songs*; or that of Rumi, Omar Khayyam, Saint John of the Cross, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. In an empirical study, both psychomotor and sensual overexcitabilities correlated modestly but significantly with Dabrowskian developmental level (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983).

Another example of Dabrowski’s untested yet often repeated view was that about 70% of the population is confined to Level I. Other theories, especially Kohlberg’s and Loewinger’s, have differentiated a number of levels of ego and moral development that stay within Dabrowski’s Level I (Piechowski, 2003; Ruf, 2009). This differentiation tells us that Dabrowski’s Level I, and the other ones as well, are broad categories with ample room for further distinctions.

6. To see a generic reference to the theory, *Dabrowski’s theory of emotional development*, as a substitution of its proper name, *theory of positive disintegration*, is an error of not understanding the difference in the categories of terms. A generic name refers to what the theory is about; a proper name is a theory’s specific name.

MISLEADING TERMS

Dabrowski gave descriptive names to the five levels:

- Primary or primitive integration* for Level I;
- Unilevel disintegration* for Level II;
- Spontaneous multilevel disintegration* for Level III;
- Organized, or directed, multilevel disintegration* for Level IV; and
- Secondary integration* for Level V.

Can the concept of level be the same as the process within it? The concept of level is an abstract, structural concept. It refers to the organization of a person's inner psychic milieu; in other words, the psychological space in which inner life unfolds. However, Level I is without an inner psychic milieu: "At the level of primitive integration, strictly speaking, there is no inner psychic milieu" (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 24). Consequently, no inner development takes place, only a presumably rigid integration. Inner psychic milieu, or internal mental environment, "arises later . . . as developmental dynamisms are formed, particularly those of an autonomous nature such as the third factor, inner psychic transformation, authenticity, personality ideal, education of oneself and autopsychotherapy, the ability for meditation and contemplation" (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 24). To those familiar with the theory, it will be clear that in the cited passage Dabrowski skipped over Levels II and III and listed dynamisms characteristic of Level IV. Though other statements make clear that Level II has an incipient inner psychic milieu characterized by instability and changeability (Dabrowski, 1970) and that the inner psychic milieu begins to form in earnest at Level III.

What is the condition, or state, of a person when positive disintegration is not taking place? Obviously the person has to function with a degree of consistency and reliability, to be in a state Dabrowski called *partial integration* (Dabrowski, 1977a, 1977b). I find it misleading to call something a *disintegration* when it also contains an *integration*. However, the concept of *level* easily includes both. Therefore, we will gain in clarity if we use the terms Level I, II, etc., and reserve the descriptive labels of disintegration for the processes within a level. Consequently, we can identify behaviors, values, and attitudes characteristic of a level without thinking of them as necessarily involving a process of disintegration. Miller's assessment coding system does just that (Miller, 1985; Miller & Silverman, 1987).

THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CORE OF HUMAN NATURE

No consistent picture can be found in Dabrowski's descriptions of primary integration. They range from *psychopathic* to *normal* (by which he meant *not multilevel*). In *Mental Growth Through Positive Disintegration* (Chapter 8), there are two relevant definitions:

PRIMITIVE INTEGRATION, or primary integration, an integration of mental functions, subordinated to primitive drive (cf.). There is no hierarchy of instincts; their prevalence depends entirely on their momentary greater intensity. Intelligence is used only as a tool, completely subservient to primitive urges, without any transformative role. Interest and adaptation are limited to the satisfaction of primitive desires. There is no inner psychic milieu, no mental transformation of stimuli, and no inner conflicts. Primary integration in infants

is limited to the satisfaction of the need for food, sleep and motion.

PRIMITIVE DRIVES are those drives which are simple, automatic, involuntary, unconscious or with relatively low degree of consciousness, stereotyped, constitutionally determined, e.g., low levels of the sexual or maternal instinct. (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 176)

By *low levels* Dabrowski does not mean that they are weak but low in his developmental hierarchy.

The concept of primary integration—originally called *primitive* integration by Dabrowski—was not examined until Margaret Schmidt showed in her thesis that it largely corresponds to the concept of authoritarian personality (Schmidt, 1977). Authoritarian personality results from strict parenting and social pressures that enforce conformity and respect for authority; that is, those who hold power. Therefore, it is not an integration either inherited genetically or arrived at by the individual himself.

In theories like those of Adorno, Kohlberg, Loevinger, and Peck and Havighurst, the lowest levels of character development are like those in Dabrowski's Level I (Schmidt, 1977). When character is deficient, love and caring are almost always lacking in the formative years of early childhood. What we also know today is that physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children is commonplace. In Ruf's (2009) study of highly gifted adults, 56% of her subjects suffered emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Only the few who are resilient can overcome it (Anthony, 1987; Higgins, 1994). Dabrowski could not consider any of this because he was developing his theory in the 1950s before the most significant findings about abuse appeared in the literature and before the advances in research on early childhood.

Harry Harlow's (1958) investigation of the mother–infant bond in monkeys provided evidence that not the mother's milk, but the mother herself, was the object of the bond. The emotional need for comfort, not the physical drive for food, creates the bond. In 1969, John Bowlby published *Attachment*, a magisterial volume describing the biological basis, the evolution, and the behavioral control system that governs the mother–child bond. The emotional intensity of this bond is evident in the severe distress of the infant on separation from the mother. This bond is the foundation of our emotional development. Grave consequences result when this bond is broken. We are designed for social reciprocity and emotionally satisfying mutual engagement from the very start. We are social from the day we are born, and we fully expect to be cared for and loved. Further research showed that children have an innate sense of right and wrong and that they are empathic from early on (Damon, 1988; Gopnik, 2009).

In light of our knowledge of early child development, Dabrowski's concept of primary integration has no empirical basis. *Primary* means first in line or the earliest, and this

position is held by an emotional, reciprocal, profoundly social bond. Babies are immensely open to experience and to intense learning (Gopnik, 2009). If there is to be an integration, it has to take place later. Dabrowski never described how this “primary integration” comes about. It seems to just be there, fully formed.

The concept of primary integration also lacks a theoretical basis. It is inconsistent with other terms of the theory itself. Dabrowski developed his theory to capture the emotional processes of self-evaluation, maladaptation, and spiritual seeking that he called *multilevel*. For such development to be possible, a multilevel developmental potential must be present.

DEVELOPMENTAL POTENTIAL

The concept of developmental potential is logically necessary. Weak developmental potential limits development; strong developmental potential makes it possible to go far. By definition, primary integration has a developmental potential so limited that inner transformation, the essence of multilevel development, is out of reach. Consequently, the theory makes it clear that primary integration is not where development can start under any conditions.

Abolishing the concept of primary integration does not mean that the concept of Level I should be abolished. Unreflective and egocentric people, who can be self-serving and manipulative, do exist. The question is how they developed from socially responsive and empathic babies with an innate sense of right and wrong. We have to ask how these early qualities become subverted.

Children grow up with the prejudices and dogmas of their parents and of the supporting social network. One way that positive disintegration is often launched comes from the realization that the prejudices and dogmas one has been fed are wrong.

In childhood we either join cliques or are pushed outside. We experience in-group belonging and engage in power play by discriminating against those outside or, conversely, we are the target. When we are members of the power group, usually the majority, we tend to be blind to the violation of the rights of the minority. And there are distinct mechanisms by which we are capable to gradually, even unconsciously, little by little, get around our conscience, our innate sense of right and wrong.

MECHANISMS OF DISENGAGING ONE'S CONSCIENCE

Albert Bandura (1986) identified eight mechanisms by which people can temporarily disengage their conscience while retaining positive self-regard: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility,

disregard of consequences, dehumanization, and blaming the victim.

1. *Moral justification* takes place when, for example, one is persuaded that “killing the enemy” serves a higher moral purpose such as protecting one’s country.
2. *Euphemistic labeling* serves to mask the true nature of unethical behavior; for example, in a competitive situation cheating becomes *strategic misrepresentation*.
3. *Advantageous comparison* serves to minimize reprehensible behavior by comparing it with someone else’s actions that are much worse: “What I am doing is not as bad as what they are doing.”
4. *Displacement of responsibility* is exactly what occurred in Milgram’s obedience experiment (Milgram, 1974). Uncritically following orders weakens personal restraints and at the same time lessens concern for the well-being of others. Obeying orders is not automatic:

It requires strong sense of responsibility to be a good functionary. . . . The self-system operates most efficiently in the service of authority when followers assume personal responsibility for being dutiful executors while relinquishing personal responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. (Bandura, 1986, p. 380, emphasis added)

5. *Diffusion of responsibility* takes place when a group as a whole decides on unethical action though individually the group members would not agree to it or when, with a complex harmful task, there is subdivision of labor such that each segment of the task does not have an obvious relationship to the outcome.
6. *Disregard or distortion of consequences* occurs when harm is inflicted at a distance; for instance, dropping bombs from a plane and calling it destroying “targets” rather than killing people.
7. *Dehumanization* shuts off one’s conscience when those who are harmed are seen as less than human; for example, when aborigines were hunted as game or when prejudice denigrates minorities and refuses them equal rights. Bandura points out that:

[Many] conditions of contemporary life are conducive to impersonalization and dehumanization. *Bureaucratization, automation, urbanization, and high social mobility lead people to relate to each other in anonymous, impersonal ways.* In addition, social practices that divide people into in-group and out-group members produce human estrangement that fosters dehumanization. (Bandura, 1986, p. 382, emphasis added)

8. *Attribution of blame*, or blaming the victim, takes place when the mistreated are seen as *deserving* the mistreatment or as having brought it upon themselves.

The above mechanisms are the ways in which normal, decent, law-abiding persons may find themselves in situations that temporarily make them do what Dabrowski saw as *psychopathic* behavior. Such behavior is deprived of consideration for others. The behavior is not a personality structure but the consequence of a culture that increasingly puts distance between people.

“PRIMARY INTEGRATION” IS NOT PRIMARY

If there were to be such a thing as primary integration, then we must ask what is being integrated, when does it start, and how does it develop. Dabrowski never addressed this question other than to say that “primary integration in infants is limited to the satisfaction of the need for food, sleep, and motion” (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 176). The accumulated knowledge of the nature of the mother–child bond made this old view obsolete. Erik Erikson proposed the principal tasks of emotional growth to be developing trust, autonomy (the initial sense of self), initiative, industry, identity, and intimacy (Erikson, 1950). No hint of integration here until we arrive at identity formation. James Marcia defined *identity* as:

an internal self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history. The better this structure is, the more aware individuals appear to be of their own uniqueness and similarity to others, and of their strengths and weaknesses in making their way in the world. The less developed this structure is, the more confused individuals seem about their own distinctiveness from others and the more they have to rely on external sources to evaluate themselves. The identity structure is dynamic not static. (Marcia, 1980, p. 159)

We now have a reasonable answer to the question about what is being integrated: drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history. The integration, if there is to be one, takes place in adolescence and young adulthood. Marcia (1980) found four patterns by which identity develops: *Foreclosure*, *Moratorium*, *Identity Diffusion*, and *Identity Achieved*. Achieving mature identity involves undergoing an identity crisis, no doubt involving some form of positive disintegration. Dabrowski was well aware that adolescence is a time when physical and cognitive changes precipitate a period of disintegration.

Foreclosure is a way of achieving identity without going through an identity crisis but instead following one’s parents in the choice of occupation and religious and political beliefs. Foreclosers are low in self-directiveness and high in need of social approval. In tests of cognitive tasks, their impulsivity results in more errors. In college they are well behaved, diligent, and happy. They come from families

with dominating fathers where emotional expression was not encouraged.

In *Moratorium* the identity crisis continues through exploration of possibilities. Commitment to a choice of occupation and one’s religious and political beliefs is deferred. Young people in moratorium tend to be unconventional—emotionally volatile and intense, thriving on intense relationships, pursuing self-knowledge, and having a tendency to being competitive with others.

Identity Diffusion characterizes young people who have tried several identities but did not settle on one. They tend to be withdrawn, out of rhythm with the rest of the world. They tend to adopt cynical attitudes toward issues facing them and the larger society. Somewhat wary of peers and authority, they retreat into fantasy. They feel rejection and detachment from their parents, especially their fathers.

Finally, *Identity Achieved* characterizes those who have resolved their developmental crisis through a thoughtful decision process in regard to their occupation and political and religious beliefs. They feel supported by their families.

Of the four patterns, only foreclosers and those with achieved identity represent a form of integration, though neither pattern resembles Dabrowski’s conception of quasi-psychopathic, antisocial, rigid integration. However, foreclosers by themselves are not integrating anything but taking up a ready-made template that makes them feel secure in their identity.

Waterman (1985) found that by the end of college about 32% of college males were classified in foreclosure and about 40% in achieved identity, for a total of 72%. Because the foreclosers are unreflective, though rather happy, they come close to fitting some form of primary integration. The achievers of identity do not because they went through a process of reflecting, evaluating, and finally choosing who they are going to be. It needs to be remembered that these results apply only to males and consequently to no more than 36% of the population with “integration.” Identity achievement in women is more complicated because of greater emphasis on relating, motherhood, and reconciling occupation with raising a family. All four patterns constitute the population of normal males, working, obeying the law (more or less), and participating in the life of their communities.

Life presents conflict, pressure, and stress. Can personality tests distinguish between individuals who can resist pressure and those who cannot? Groundbreaking experiments by Stanley Milgram showed that they could not.

OBEDIENCE AS COOPERATION

In Milgram’s (1974) obedience experiment, male subjects were placed in a learning situation with an unseen partner hidden behind a partition. The researcher, a person with authority, asked the subjects to administer electric shocks to the partner whenever he made a mistake. When the electric shock was strong, the subject could hear his partner’s cry of pain (simulated by a voice on an audiotape). In the

experiment, under the repeated insistence of the impassive authority figure, 26 out of 40 men continued to administer electric shocks despite their unseen partner's loud cries of extreme pain. The final dose was lethal. Then silence.

The experiment demonstrated the subjects' willingness to cooperate with the researcher, a person of authority. Proximity of an authority figure is a powerful factor. No less is the natural human willingness to cooperate. Many of the 26 subjects who continued up to the lethal dose experienced a growing conflict but felt that the responsibility rested with the researcher.

Personality tests did not distinguish those who continued the experiment to the mortifying end and those who refused to do so. Many other variables, like religious affiliation and military history, also failed to distinguish the two groups. Clearly, a demanding situation has more power over how people act than any personality attributes. That type of situation activates the mechanisms of disengagement of conscience identified by Bandura.

The high proportion of people who obeyed the authority figure to the end demonstrates that the concept of *primary integration* does not fit reality. It is the response to the situation, and the person's assigned role in it, that for a period of time leads to harming others. Does this make people part-time psychopaths, as Dabrowski would have it?

A person who goes through life in more or less conventional ways is, presumably, the sort of person who is most susceptible to the dehumanizing conditions of our civilization. It is possible that the person's identity pattern can make some difference, but probably not much. It does not happen overnight. Bandura said that "self-inhibitory devices will not instantaneously transform a considerate person into a callous one. Rather, the change is usually achieved through gradual disinhibition in that people may not fully recognize the changes they are undergoing" (Bandura, 1986, p. 385).

Disengagement of conscience through these mechanisms may be an everyday phenomenon, but it has an opposite in the humanizing power of acting on a sense of common humanity when persons are visible, known, suffering, or in need of assistance. We should not think that some sense of common humanity is necessarily absent at Level I.

HIGHLY GIFTED "PRIMITIVES," REPRESENTATIVES OF LEVEL I

Self-serving, egocentric people who have little consideration for others do exist. Should they be counted among "normal" people or rather among those that Dabrowski assessed to have some degree of psychopathy? And where do they come from?

In her research on highly gifted adults, Deborah Ruf (1998, 2009) found five such individuals, two men and three women, ages 46–59, IQs 155–184. One of the men had tremendous adjustment problems in school because of his dyslexia, which in those days was not understood. Both

men were successful and satisfied with their lives. The three women all suffered serious abuse and had very difficult lives. One of them became a prolific writer and active in politics. The other two raised their children and were learning about their giftedness in their adult years.

A closer look at their life stories showed that except for lack of reflection and absence of inner transformation, there is little in these cases that meets the criteria of Level I. Ruf made a valiant effort to point out lack of empathy and a rigid psychological structure. But what stands out is that the women were abused and had troubled childhoods. They blamed others, or the circumstances, for not achieving more. This appears understandable in view of the blows they sustained.

Ruf obtained scores on a Kohlberg-type moral reasoning test (Rest, 1986). The three women scored low at the preconventional level (sometimes nicknamed punishment-obedience and instrumental hedonism orientations). One of the two men scored high at the conventional level (law and order); the other man's score was not obtained. A tentative comparison of Dabrowski's and Kohlberg's developmental levels suggests that the preconventional and the conventional levels of moral reasoning are encompassed within Dabrowski's Level I (Piechowski, 2003). Thus, on the one hand, Ruf's placement of these five cases at Dabrowski's Level I appears supported but, on the other hand, the cases show little to meet the criteria of primary integration: desire for material gains, goals of attaining power or fame, ruthlessly competing with others, provoking conflicts with others, and showing evidence of a rigid psychological structure. There is only some evidence of egocentrism, lack of self-reflection, and perhaps lack of expressions of empathy. Consequently, if these cases represent Level I, and they do, they do not fit Dabrowski's criteria of primary integration. These cases help us to see that it makes sense to separate the concept of Level I from primary integration, a descriptive but ill-defined term.

Level I has received no attention in research. It deserves extensive study together with a review of relevant psychological studies of normal and gifted people, people who are making a valiant effort to adapt to the demands of work and the typical tasks of adult life. Kohlberg's first four stages, and Loevinger's first three or four, offer the means of fine differentiation within Dabrowski's Level I (Greene, 1982). Scales of authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, empathy, and the like should also be helpful (e.g., Caruso & Mayer, 1998; Hogan, 1969; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997; Ray, 1976, 1982).

ENVOI

Taking a fresh look is a wholesome analytic exercise. Dabrowski created his theory prior to the research on early attachment and the evolutionary design for social bonding that governs our life from the first hour of our existence.

Consequently, the concept of primary integration cannot be maintained. Research on identity formation suggests how an integration can be achieved in adolescence. However, Dabrowski's characterization of primary integration as self-serving, manipulative, and lacking in consideration for others is more negative. The type of behavior that involves harm to others is most often transitory and adopted under conditions of obedience to authority and other mechanisms that bypass one's conscience. This fits precisely with Dabrowski's concept of Level I. Therefore, the concept of primary integration should be abandoned and replaced with Level I.

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