

# Creativity, fantasy, role-play and theatre in social work: A voice from the past or steps for the future?

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**Abstract:** This article considers the development of social work research and social work practice. In contrast to the usual emphasis on evidence based studies and tools in social work research the article argues for the development of quantitative studies and tools and proposes creativity, fantasy, role-play and especially Forum Theatre as key elements of this development. This approach is compatible with Flyberg's 2002 concept of 'actual science' – a context-dependent methodology oriented more towards subjects than objects – or 'phronetic social science' – where judgements and decisions are based on values. Both approaches have the capacity to incorporate the complexity of social work, to involving users and social workers in research processes, and to build up knowledge production from the bottom up. The article also argues that creativity, role-play, fantasy and Forum theatre are as necessary and useful in developing social work practice as in facilitating the research process.

**Key words:** science war; quantitative studies; evidence based science; forum theatre; binding fantasy; phronetic social science; actual science; user involvement

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## Introduction

In efforts to discuss the themes of this article, it is necessary to introduce a focus in the critical debate about knowledge-production in social work and also to look at the different directions that have been taken by social work and social work research.

This article starts by focusing on what could be called 'the science war' between evidence-based research/standardised social work and non-evidence-based/non-standardised social work. It then goes on by focusing on user involvement and user experience, because involvement is a central issue in Forum Theatre, and because user involvement is a central part in knowledge-production in social work. From that point of view, the article will focus on possible creative tools to involve users in social work/social work research – and especially focus on what is called the 'theatre of the oppressed' or Forum Theatre. This article closes with the introduction of the Danish researcher Bent Flyvbjerg's concept of 'actual science' – a kind of research that, according to the author of this article, is able to include and promote creative and involving aspects in both social work and social work research.

## The science war?

In a modern world where concepts like evidence-based knowledge, new public management, measurably effective help and best practice are in focus, one could imagine that creativity, fantasy, role-play and theatre would stand out as a voice from the past. The focus here is not, though, to give attention to old-fashioned concepts. The agenda is rather to make past and future – or different concepts – meet and challenge each other instead of fighting each other. Old truths, methods, theories or concepts are not to be replaced by totally new ones. New concepts are always developed and modified out of the old ones – sometimes out of a critique of the old concept, but never without a connection and without parts of the old concept inside the new one. Therefore, the agenda of this article is also to reinstate a focus on 'old truths', because they are still to be changed and developed.

Through the last five to ten years we have seen – at least in a Nordic context – that so-called evidence-based practice, evidence-based knowledge-production and evidence-based research has become the focus of social work development. Sometimes it is not only presented as an interesting focus, but also as *the* truth in developing social work. This concept also seems to erase other concepts or at least claim that other concepts are old-fashioned and useless in modern social work practice. In Denmark, statements like 'the only way to get knowledge about what works and to develop social work practice' about evidence-based research and quantitative studies – and 'useless in actual social work' about qualitative studies and methods, have become the dominant discourse. As well as arguments pointing out that we know

too little about social work, too little about the consequences of and experience from social work, have too little practice oriented/practice based knowledge and have too little evidence of what works and what does not work. Statements and arguments that in some ways look like a claims-making process started by powerful politicians and organizations against qualitative research and in favour of evidence-based 'new beginnings'. It is, however, interesting that we will find exactly the same arguments for qualitative studies and research. Qualitative research is also pushing towards more knowledge about consequences of and experience from social work as well as seeking to build up designs and knowledge from practice. And it is also built on evidence. Evidence is not only connected to systematic measurements. It is also connected to qualitative studies built on open-ended interviews and observation.

To make it very clear: this points out that it is impossible to have research areas which are not based on evidence. It is not about pros and cons towards evidence, but about what kind of evidence researchers want to produce and how researchers and society use it. This has also been stressed by the Danish researcher in social work, Søren Peter Olesen, who has put forward the following remark: 'All qualified, documented and reflected knowledge of social work is welcome' (Olesen, 2004, p.9 [my translation]).

Social work practice and social work methods are marked by the complexity of social problems and the lives of human beings. To develop social work research and to focus on the need to constantly build up knowledge of and in social work research must be as complex as social problems themselves. In my opinion, social work will be left behind if one 'research freeway' is chosen instead of different paths.

The ongoing discussion about evidence and non-evidence-based knowledge is essential, but it is also necessary to make the discussion respectful towards the different approaches. As mentioned above, in Denmark qualitative studies are looked upon as out of time while quantitative studies are both argued to be the only way to develop social work and to be underdogs in comparison with qualitative studies in social work. It is therefore vital that evidence-based research and knowledge-production is developed especially in social work, but to claim that evidence-based approaches are subordinated to non-evidence-based approaches – as Professor Karin Tengvald from the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare argues (Tengvald, 2005) and researchers from the University of Tennessee, University of South Florida, Hunter College and Florida International University argue (Blackburn, 2004) – is a way to twist the discussion. Or in other words: it is just another way to support the claims-making process.

In 2000 and 2001, there was a tough discussion in Sweden on this matter based on the Swedish project *National support for knowledge development in the department of Social Services*. The discussion shows that the – almost ancient – science war has become a present part of current discussions about social work research and social work practice. In the Swedish project knowledge production and practice development was built upon a need for more effective and systematic measurements

in social work. On the one side – represented by the aforementioned Karin Tengvald – it was claimed that social work, especially from a user point of view, needed to develop systematic and exact knowledge production built on tried-out experiences (Tengvald, 2001; Tengvald, 2005). It was claimed that it is possible to study the effectiveness of different kinds of social work, but that social work – in order to do this – needs to draw on quantitative methods. This is because that these kinds of methods are used too little in social work and because findings from quantitative studies are easier to pass on to social workers (Tengvald, 2001, pp.20-21). On the other side – represented by Sven-Axel Månsson, Professor in Social Work – it was claimed that social work research needed to develop quantitative methods as a part of developing social work research, but that focusing entirely on evidence-based research, measurable elements and quantitative methods almost relates to an old and positivistic or medical approach, where it is possible to delimit social work from the context, from complexity, and which thereby leaves out the holistic approach needed in social work (Månsson, 2000; Månsson, 2001). At the same time, it was claimed that these kinds of analyses rarely give better or new knowledge to social work (Månsson, 2001, pp.18-20).

In Denmark, the two important institutions the Campbell Collaboration Centre and the Danish National Board of Social Services are closely associated with a traditional view on evidence-based knowledge-production and the development of quantitative research methods as well as with the idea that development in social work is connected to creating standards and rational methods. Both institutions have been established within the last five years and are sponsored by the Danish parliament.

Quantitative studies and evidence-based studies are not, as argued above, underdogs in actual discussions and development as these kinds of methods and work are well supported by authorities and politicians. On the contrary, focus has to be placed on the lack of development in qualitative research methods, in knowledge production based on the complexity of social work and on non-standardised methods and tools in social work. It is in the light of this knowledge that many paths are to be developed at the same time. The path of systematic measurements will risk leaving out the social and interactive contexts and the importance of relations that are the core of both social life and social work. A traditional evidence-based research approach will pose a risk that

the researcher finds the world too messy and untidy to study which makes him construct a reality which suits the methods better

as the Norwegian Professor in social psychology, Tor-Johan Ekeland formulates it. (Ekeland, 2005, p.41 [my translation]).

To demonstrate that researchers (this author included) should not argue for or focus on one path alone, an example of a project will be presented – a project I have been involved in myself. This has mostly developed on the basis of a quantitative

understanding and built on an interest in what can be measured and how it is possible to study the effectiveness of social work. Through recent years, three researchers from Aalborg University (Maria Appel Nissen [see Nissen, 2005], Lars Skov Henriksen and myself) and representatives from Århus County have worked on producing indicators for measuring the effectiveness of social work with institutionalized adolescents. It was challenging for the three researchers to work on developing indicators to measure the effectiveness of social work with adolescents at risk who have different problems, needs and backgrounds. What has been concluded so far about the process is:

- It is difficult to measure social work and experience from social work;
- It is possible to develop indicators out of assumptions if they are differentiated and if researchers are constantly sceptical and critical;
- It is only possible to measure what has been decided to measure – this means that it is not possible to say anything about areas that have no indicators;
- It is impossible to have indicators for everything;
- The quantitative study would be better if it was supplemented with a qualitative study;
- Developing indicators is a long process involving social workers in a ‘working group’ both to help to develop indicators and to establish a dialogue with practice about the project at an early stage – and in that way starting information about the project very early in the process.

In the earlier section in this paper, I have pointed out the following issues:

- In order not to become methodologically blind, it is necessary to explore different areas and to develop both quantitative and qualitative studies/methods in social work;
- In order to design a good research project in social work, it is necessary to make use of experience from social work and practice knowledge/intuition about processes;
- It is necessary to place special emphasis upon qualitative studies and methods, upon complexity, upon intuition, as it is these areas – and not traditional evidence-based research – that are subordinated.

### **Why do we need role-play, theatre, creativity and fantasy in social work?**

User-involvement, it seems, is a universal ideal and maybe the highest aim of all in social work. As mentioned above, it has been argued that quantitatively-based and

standardised social work will both be more successful for social workers and easier to involve users in. In the following passages, I will argue that this is not true, and that the above mentioned approach should be viewed as economical and structural, operating systems on management and political levels and not on user-levels, and as ways of establishing top-down instead of bottom-up knowledge-production.

In Morris B. Parloff's words: Using a manual will at least give the therapists something to do while the patient improves (Parloff, 1998, p.380) – it means that standardised social work first of all provides the therapist or social worker with control, not the user.

To understand that manuals and quantitatively-based research are more top-down and less involving, it is necessary to look upon user experience and user needs. Findings from my own research show that users in both institutional settings and in social service settings concentrate on two conditions when they are asked about their contacts and experiences with social workers:

- They want a close relationship with social workers;
- They want to be respected and involved in the whole process of presenting, appraising, deciding, acting and evaluating their needs and problems (Uggerhøj, 1996, pp.35-36).

It is the human or inhuman behaviour of the social worker with which users are concerned when talking about relationships. The social worker is the system and the person that holds the power, which makes her crucial to what happens in the user's future life and crucial to the user's capability for receiving support. Building relations is the keyword to power for users. In building up a relationship with a social worker, users attach importance to the social worker's sense of:

- *Engagement*: time to talk, concentrating on the user, listening actively;
- *Human decency* making the conversation both professional and informal, using experience from the social worker's own life, acting funny, angry and happy;
- *Sincerity* making clear what the agency expects from the user, telling how the agency appraises the family and their problems, telling the user the content of the actions towards them, and showing the social worker's own position (Uggerhøj, 1996, pp.36-45).

According to users, involving and respecting involves:

- Using users as experts in their own life;
- Making plans and goals together with the user;
- Offering right of access to case-records;
- Sending reports/summaries and written down decisions to users;
- Letting users decide where the conversation or the meeting takes place;

- Giving information to users about basis of legislation (Uggerhøj, 1996, pp.48-63).

To users, the social worker's capability of building up a relationship containing engagement, human decency and sincerity is the foundation of involvement. Without this it will be very difficult to establish respect and involvement. At the same time, it seems that user-involvement very seldom occurs in everyday social work. Instead of building up user-involvement, social workers, it seems, are strengthening their powerful position.

Another study shows that civil rights and user-involvement are subordinated to family treatment and therapy in social work. Instead of informing users about their rights, social workers initiate family treatment. Not because they are against informing about rights, but because they find that treatment is much more necessary – and even more interesting – as they think that information about civil rights will disturb or even prevent building up relationships between users and social workers. The study also shows that users disagree with that view held by social workers. They find that information about civil rights is a part of building up good relations (Nielsen & Uggerhøj, 2005). If you compare these studies, it is seen that social workers must give special attention to relationship and to power and powerful positions. If users are to be invited into social work – to be involved – social workers must pay attention to their own engagement and human decency; elements that are impossible to standardise and elements that are to be used in different ways towards different kinds of users.

In introducing involvement of users in social work to social work students, importance has to be put on skills in being human, sincere and personal in a professional way – through reflection, discussions and role-plays. Social workers must be able to see and place themselves in the user's position – even to feel the user's position – to really understand and experience how it is to be a user. Through this experience, social workers will be more able to be engaged, sincere and decent. Furthermore, social workers must learn to reflect and discuss both their own and the user's positions. To train others to understand different positions, it is necessary that social workers also learn about different perspectives, theories, methods and views of human nature; and moreover, learn that there are different ways of defining social problems, different ways of defining social work, and that there is a big difference between a psychodynamic, a behavioural, a systemic, an interactional and a critical perspective, in both theory and in action (Payne, 2005; Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2006). Part of teaching students about perspectives, theories and methods is naturally close to being standardised, but the teaching also needs to involve discussions and reflections between professors and students and among students. Maybe this is even the most important part of teaching – to show that there is no truth or that truth is to be discussed. Again it is important to include well known theories, discussions or reflections with no right answers. It is necessary to use more creative educational methods like role-play and theatre to embrace the complexity in

building up relationships and in involving users – as well as to make social workers think for themselves and to get the skills ‘under the skin’. Students must learn how to find a balance between well known theories/methods and unknown actions based on creativity and fantasy.

If social workers are only taught what works in which situation and/or what best practice is, they will strengthen their powerful position and they will leave out the possibility of involving users. At the same time it is important to notice that standardised methods and tools in social work will be developed and put into work by the one with the most powerful positions, which is not the user but the social worker and the system: the politicians and the administrators. In this understanding quantitatively-based research and standardised social work are oppositional to, instead of supporting, user involvement. Or as Norwegian Tor-Johan Ekeland puts it:

Several studies indicate negative consequences of standardised therapy as the therapist becomes rigid ... less effective, less obliging and more defensive and authoritarian. (Ekeland, 2005, p.41 [my translation])

### **Why do we need role-play, theatre, creativity and fantasy in research?**

Just as social work has to be formed with and within the context of social problems and in connection to actual institutional and organizational frameworks – and in collaboration with users – research in social work also has to be connected to the context – or at least it is necessary to work on developing research designs and methods that will be able to incorporate the complexity of social problems and social work. This is especially the case if knowledge-production is to be developed in ways which are ‘bottom-up’ instead of ‘top-down’, and if users are to be involved in the process.

Social work research findings show that it is crucial to be aware of power relations. These findings also need to be applied to research processes in social work if power issues in the generation of knowledge are to be addressed. As presented above, social work embodies power and social workers have to work hard to redistribute power or at least avoid power remaining with the social worker. Findings also show that one way to do this is to practise acting – as users have stated in the above studies – like normal human beings: engaged, human and sincere (Uggerhøj, 1996, pp.36-45). Social work research could benefit from applying the same findings and using the same methods: role-play and theatre as these approaches are ways to try to share power or actually hand over power. Without these perspectives, research may be designed by researchers with little connection to practice and knowledge will be produced top-down from researchers to practice instead of also bottom-up from practice to research – which will make it less sensitive towards social workers’ and users’ needs.

Jan-Håkan Hansson – chair of ‘The National Support for Knowledge Development in the Department of Social Services’ in Sweden – states that evidence-based social work will imply power displacements towards users (Hansson, 2003, p.198). Research methods and questions can be directed very strictly towards users within standardised designs – and in that way produce more knowledge about user experiences and needs. But that is not displacing power towards users, as the design, goals, methods and questions are planned and worked out by the researchers or the founder of the specific project. Hansson also states that contract groups, longitudinal studies, control over informants and effective programs are some of the keywords in terms of maintaining scientific certainty (Hansson, 2003, p.195) – elements that will put the researcher and not the user in power. In that way evidence-based practice and research are rather at risk of diminishing participatory research processes.

One way to make power visible and adaptable is to frame power in a totally different setting: The Forum Theatre. The Forum Theatre is a method designed to share experience and needs and also to hand over power to oppressed groups. Forum Theatre or The Theatre of the Oppressed was developed by the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal in the 1950s and 1960s. His explorations were based on the assumption that: first, a dialogue is the common, healthy dynamic between all humans, and secondly, when a dialogue becomes a monologue, oppression ensues. Forum Theatre is designed to bring the audience into an active relationship with the performed event, a training ground for action not only in these performances, but for action in life and a possibility to change the setting and the roles (Paterson, 1995).

A typical Forum Theatre workshop contains four steps:

- *First step:* the workshop starts with the collection of background information on the selected issue in groups – could be user involvement or experience from collaboration between social workers and users. This information starts the workshop, but is also used throughout the games and exercises
- *Second step:* the play/game;
- *Third step:* the discussion of the content of the play/game and reconstructing bits, parts or the whole scene. The actors are asked to play a special role in another way in order to find new ways of solving the problems shown on stage etc.;
- *Fourth step:* a replay of the play/game often two, three or four times and often involving spectators – or ‘spect-actors’ as Boal calls them – as actors or as directors (Paterson, 1995).

### **Forum theatre in research/social work: An example**

In research focusing on user involvement in a social department setting (Ejler et

al, 2004), three groups of users (young people with disabilities, older people and families at risk) were invited to participate in three different workshops. At each workshop 5-6 groups of approximately 10 people were formed to discuss problems in the collaboration with social workers. The discussion was built upon stories from different difficult meetings with social workers. The Joker – the leader of the workshop – picked out a relevant story from one of the groups and asked ‘the story teller’ to introduce the story and people involved in the story. Hence the Joker asked the professional actors to play the story. After the first play the users were asked if this was correct and normally both the story and the roles were changed a little and the play was played once more. After the second play all spectators were asked to comment on the play and to come up with ideas to solve the difficulties or the conflicts. The actors then played the story one, two or three times more from the direction of the spectators – or the ‘spect-actors’ – who were also invited to play roles themselves.

The role of the researchers was to record and observe the stories, the discussion and the ideas of problem solving, in order to get more knowledge about and new pictures of collaboration between social workers and users, both as a part of an explorative phase where interesting issues connected to the research questions are developed and as a part of the actual data collection. Another way to collect data could have been to interview individuals or groups of users. In carrying out research on the issue of collaboration and power relations it is however essential to attend to the issue of power within the data collection very closely. It is necessary not to reproduce the scene that normally takes place when users meet social workers. Carrying out individual or even focus group interviews puts power on the shoulders of the researcher who has planned the interview and who will be asking the questions. By gathering together 20, 30 or 50 users, the collective coherence automatically changes the setting and hands over power from the researcher to users. The story of collaboration – or other issues – will be told in a much stronger way than one user can do it in an interview. The experience from the research is that users – or informants – need to feel worthy, experience respect from others and need to have power to become useful informants – or one could also say to become useful users. All three characteristics seem to be present in the Forum Theatre workshops.

It is possible to link this experience from research directly to social work. Not in all situations and not as a new truth, but as a tool to work more consciously on the possibility of changing the setting and the roles and from that point, create a new basis for a dialogue that will make it possible to involve users in both the overall planning of social work and the specific work on their personal problems. The difference between research and social work is that social workers need to participate in the Forum Theatre instead of just doing observation. If, however, social workers are participating in the workshop as ‘spect-actors’ they must accept that they have to discuss, direct and act together with the users.

The example above shows how it is possible to use experience from practice in

the research process and to use experience from research in everyday social work. It also points out that creativity and fantasy are essential elements in developing both social work and social work research. If social workers and/or researchers want to capture the complexity of practice and also want to break down barriers they need to relinquish control and let processes develop their own flow. The Norwegian sociologist Yngvar Løchen has called this approach a *binding fantasy*. Løchen explains:

Binding fantasy is the most important tool of the intellectual sociologist [or the social worker, LU] ... The intellectual sociologist won't get anywhere without fantasy. New and action-causing acknowledgement [or knowledge-production, LU] can only be established through fantasy. But fantasy must not be wild and dissolute. It has to be used in a binding way ... this is a fruitful state of tension where both sides are filling in each other. On one hand, the binding side stimulates fantasy by preventing it turning into abstraction; on the other hand, fantasy gives binding dimension and substance. (Løchen, 1993, p.36 [my translation]).

And Løchen goes even further when he emphasises that it is necessary to loosen the traditional ideals of science if sociology is to be developed. If sociology is still to be respected some of its sterile features have to be changed by accepting that science also can be developed from patterns in artistic activities (Løchen, 1993).

## **Actual science**

The Danish researcher Bent Flyvbjerg has called the aforementioned knowledge-production or research *actual science*, defined as, for example, context-dependent science and science oriented more towards subjects than objects (Flyvbjerg, 1991, pp.159-162). According to Hunter and Tsey (2002) Flyvbjerg is posing the following questions: why is social science losing out in the current Science War? Why is social science becoming more and more marginalized in academia and in society at large? What can be done to make social science matter again? As Hunter and Tsey put it in their article: Flyvbjerg's answers to his own questions are fairly straightforward. As social scientists we have, he argues, become our own worst enemies because of our attempts to be something that we are not and will probably never be. We spend our precious energies and resources vainly trying to use methods and approaches that natural scientists have successfully employed in producing cumulative and predictive theories (Hunter & Tsey, 2002). To restore social science to its rightful place in contemporary society, Flyvbjerg suggests that researchers return to classical traditions of social inquiry and re-orient practice towards what he calls 'phronetic social science'. For Aristotle, *phronesis* was the highest of three intellectual virtues where judgements and decisions were based on values, and as such, quite distinct from

*episteme* (analytical) and *techné* (technical) knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp.55-60). He also argues that both natural and social sciences have their own strengths and weaknesses depending on the subject matter and social scientists therefore need to reflect a lot more on these differences so that it is possible to capitalise or build on their strengths, rather than vainly mimic their natural science counterparts. He sets forth his views in the following way:

Where natural sciences is weakest social science is strong (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.53)

and:

Just as social sciences have not contributed much to explanatory and predictive theory, neither have the natural sciences contributed to the reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interest, which is the prerequisite for an enlightened political, economic, and cultural development in any society, and which is at the core of *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.3).

Characteristics of *phronetic* research include getting as close as possible to the reality being studied; use of narrative or story-telling; emphasis on ‘cases’ and ‘contexts’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp.131-140) – with the words of Jan Fook *by recognising the role of context*’ (Fook, 2005). *Phronetic* research aims to unpack, through concrete examples and detailed narratives, the ways in which power works with particular consequences, and how power might be changed and work with different consequences. As Flyvbjerg cautions, the *phronetic* researcher needs to approach their work in the knowledge that no individual is experienced and wise enough to provide ‘complete’ answers to these questions, whatever such answers might be, because experience and wisdom of that kind should not be expected from social scientists. The role of the *phronetic* researcher then is to provide only partial answers to what needs to be done as input to the ongoing social dialogue about the problems and risks faced by society and how things may be done differently (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.61) – which will challenge social workers in practice not just to adopt findings but to critically reflect on them. These are characteristics and approaches – ways of developing actual science and social work research – which are very different to what is called evidence-based research characteristics. A problem in this approach might be that the researcher never knows what will happen, but perhaps good research is about *not* knowing instead of knowing. Or as the aforementioned Løchen puts it:

It is important that he or she who seeks to produce recognition must let anxiety come over her or him (Løchen, 1993, p.51 [my translation]).

## Closing remarks

This article began as a presentation at the Nordic Social Work Research Association (FORSA) conference 'Social Work in the information Era – Polarisation and New Paradigms in Knowledge Production', Helsinki 2006. It is suggested that evidence-based services are connected with sophisticated feedback and evaluation methods. The discussion and the findings presented in this article shows that feedback and methods in both social work and social work research are very sophisticated, irrespective of the methodological roots: evidence-based or non-evidence-based areas – all have to be developed in very sophisticated ways.

Although Flyvbjerg's focus on phronetic social science is very interesting it does not mean that social science has to concentrate only on 'classical social inquiry'. Social science must continuously develop new ways of carrying out social inquiry. To use the headlines of the article voices from the past and steps for the future are not contrary to but depending on each other.

Instead of looking at role-play, theatre, creativity, binding fantasy, phronetic research and actual science as old fashioned or useless in modern social work, this article concludes that both social work and social work research need these kinds of approaches both now and in the future. Although it is necessary to develop traditional evidence-based methods in order to improve social work, evidence-based research and standardised social work are useless without developing qualitative studies and methods at the same time – if research and social work are to grasp the complexity of social problems. Qualitative studies and methods have the capacity to involve users and work on power-relations and knowledge production from a bottom-up position – which is a necessary focus in social work. Instead of trying to diminish complexity, both social work and social work research need to develop more complex ideas of professionalism (Fook, 2005).

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