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5-23-2004

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Lohmann, Roger A. and Lohmann, Nancy, "Multiple Roles of a Rural Administrator" (2004). *Faculty Scholarship*. 795.
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The Multiple Roles of a Rural Administrator¹

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The reader may wonder why a chapter on administration is included in a book dealing with rural social work practice. While there may be some differences between administration in a profit setting and administration in a nonprofit or governmental one, administration is administration, isn't it? To which we respond, yes and no.

Basic administrative procedures are the same regardless of geographic location. The same accounting standards apply to agencies in rural settings as are applicable to those in urban ones. The same expectations exist for accountability, sound personnel management and other administrative tasks regardless of setting. A discussion of these basic procedures is available in a number of sources including Lohmann and Lohmann (2002). In spite of such similarities, the setting does impact the way administrative tasks are fulfilled. This chapter focuses on the ways in which the location of a social service agency in a rural area or small town influences the performance of administrative duties.

The chapter discusses primarily nonprofit social service agency administration although there are some references to administration in federal, state or local government agencies. The chapter also focuses on the chief executive of the agency; much of the content, however, is relevant for other employees who have administrative assignments. As the title suggests, the primary focus is on the many roles that a rural administrator must perform.

A large number of rural and small town agencies are nonprofit, and most of those are small. In many agencies, the administrator may be the only professional staff member and, in some instances, s/he is the only staff member. Both Young and Martin (1989) and Horejsi (1979) refer to the one-person social welfare agency or department often found in rural areas. Similarly, data on nonprofit organizations suggest that the majority have only a few employees and budgets under \$100,000.

¹ Preprint. A later version of this article appeared as Chapter 9 in *Rural Social Work*, Nancy Lohmann and Roger A. Lohmann, Eds. New York: Columbia University Press. Pp.

Rural social service administrators are often not prepared for the many roles that they must carry out in such settings. This is because professional social work education tends to prepare students more thoroughly for direct practice roles than for administrative ones. While one chapter cannot remedy that deficit, it can alert potential rural administrators and currently struggling ones to situations that they may face.

Unlike many other chapters in this book, this chapter does not contain extensive citations of the literature. This is because there is very little literature dealing with social service administration in rural areas to cite. A search of *Social Work Abstracts Plus*, for example, for articles containing “rural” and “administration” identified 56 articles. Most of the articles identified, however, were selected because administration was in the name of an agency mentioned, such as the Administration on Aging, or the address of an author or a reference to a Presidential administration, such as the Clinton Administration. While the relevant literature identified is cited, the chapter also draws on the authors’ experiences as administrators in rural areas and the anecdotal experiences of others.

The Multiple Roles of a Rural Administrator

One of the more significant differences between the administrator in a rural or small-town setting and the administrator in an urban setting is the many roles that the rural administrator must typically play. The rural chief administrator, especially in a small agency, must be ready to carry out almost any of the roles associated with agency administration, often engaging in several responsibilities simultaneously. The roles may include not only all facets of direct service but also those of personnel director, budget officer and accountant, building and maintenance supervisor, volunteer coordinator, fund raiser, client services supervisor, group developer, community organizer, public educator, policy specialist and director of public relations and marketing. An urban agency is likely to have employees or volunteers focusing on several if not each of these roles, which allows the chief administrator to focus exclusively on administrative roles such as agency direction and vision.

The many functions that must be performed by the rural chief administrator create challenges. Few administrators, no matter how talented, are equally effective at this wide range of roles. Thus, it is likely that not all functions are completed with an equal level of skill or expertise. Further, there is a natural tendency to focus on those things that an administrator does well because they are often more enjoyable and rewarding. That may leave other functions of equal importance undone or neglected.

Conscientious administrators, worried about their lack of expertise in some areas, may find themselves identifying ways to develop such expertise. One of the authors, for example, when administering a rural multiple-county poverty agency, completed a full year of accounting classes to overcome his concern about his level of expertise in that area. Had he been in a more urbanized area, he could have simply contracted with a qualified accountant some of the functions that were of concern to him and avoided a lot of night classes. In the rural community, however, there was no one with whom to contract.

The administrator in a small rural agency may also feel professionally isolated. Not only may there be few professional colleagues in the agency, there may not even be many in the community or county. Social worker Emily Williams, for example, reports that there are only eight social workers within 200 miles of her home in South Dakota (Stoesen, 2002). Both authors recall that less than two decades ago there were no MSW's employed in the city of (then) 23,000 where we teach. If the agency is the branch of a larger program or affiliated with a regional or national agency, colleagues in other offices may be willing to reduce the sense of professional isolation by discussing shared concerns or problems. Participation in professional continuing education activities may also provide a temporary solution to feelings of professional isolation. However, the isolation that the administrator feels can be difficult to remedy.

Technology may be used to reduce isolation. Membership in electronic discussion lists can be a way to communicate with and seek advice from professional colleagues who may be geographical distant. The NASW Rural Social Work Caucus maintains a discussion list focused on the interests of rural practitioners. It may be accessed at <http://www.uncp.edu/sw/rural/index.html> Through that web site, other listservs focusing on rural interests may be identified.

Sundet and Cowger (1990) found isolation to be an important factor in their study of the sources of stress for rural child welfare workers in two Midwestern states. Other factors identified in the rural literature (worker visibility, role contamination, resources paucity, job status and client affecting work) were not found to be significant contributors to stress. They indicated the following implications of their findings for rural administrators planning staff training.

..Administrators of agencies with a heavy concentration of rural personnel need to realize that staff development is as much a means of alleviating professional isolation and the stress associated with it as it is of developing or enhancing professional skills. And those who conduct agency-based training for rural staff need to be aware in their pedagogical methodology of the

need of the staff to share and interact with on another (Sundet & Cowger, 1990, p.108-109).

This quotation by Sundet and Cowger points up another aspect of professional isolation uniquely affecting social administrators: The admonitory tone of their language (“administrators...need to realize”) suggests that administrators are somehow grounded, secure and fully-integrated social beings not subject to the same stresses of isolation that they are being admonished to understand. Yet, the reality is that not only are rural administrators subject to the same isolation as other rural professionals, in many cases, they carry an additional level of isolation and remove from their co-workers that goes with being “the boss”.

Yet, we must be careful not to over-state the matter. While such isolation can produce stress, it doesn't necessarily result in burnout. Rohland (2000) surveyed the executive directors of all Iowa community mental health centers to assess the relationship between burnout and the work environment. The findings indicated that rurality was not associated with burnout. Rurality was defined by location in a rural county, having fewer employees, having a smaller budget and spending more time on direct clinical care.

In the absence of professional colleagues who can reinforce the commitment to professional norms, it may be difficult to resist the pressures toward conformity often found in rural areas. While there would not appear to be anything inherent in rural areas that would require conformity, the experience of many is that conformity to community norms and standards is a common expectation in rural areas. The norms and standards may deal with matters of dress or sexual orientation. They may also deal with professional values like confidentiality and self-determination. The administrator may find that there is pressure from local residents to reveal more about agency clients than is consistent with professional norms or that local residents don't understand why clients are allowed to determine for themselves the actions that they wish to take. It can be helpful when resisting those pressures to have professional colleagues with whom one can consult or commiserate but such colleagues may not be available to the rural administrator.

The homogeneity of local norms and standards in a rural community may also be less accepting of diversity, at least if we are to believe the testimony of many urbanites. There may still be chauvinistic expectations about the status of women in the community that can make it difficult when the agency administrator is a woman. Many rural communities are not racially diverse and there may be difficulty accepting someone in a position of authority who is from a racial or ethnic background different from that predominant in the

community. A sexual orientation other than heterosexual may also be difficult for the local community to accept.

Another challenge for the administrator is to identify ways in which agency clients can receive supportive services that in more urbanized areas might be available from other agencies. For example, a study in Arizona found that rural older people entered institutional care at younger ages and with lower levels of functional impairment than did urban elders (Greene, 1984). One explanation for this is the absence of supportive community services that would allow the rural elders to remain in their own homes. As the rural administrator and his/her staff attempt to deal with issues like this, they may find themselves feeling frustrated by the lack of realistic alternatives.

The administrator and staff may be tempted to expand the agency beyond its original mission to create the needed services. In some instances, such expansion may be possible but in other instances, expansion may dilute the agency's effectiveness in meeting its mission. The agency may work with others in the community to create needed services. However, often the funding or critical mass of clients needed to support additional services may be absent. Natural helpers may be used to provide alternatives to formal organized services in rural areas (Germain & Patterson, 1988). Often, however, it is not possible to create the full range of supporting services available in more urbanized areas and thus, as in the example above, clients end up in services providing more than is needed – or end up with no services at all.

Other Employees in the Rural Agency

While many rural agencies have only one or two staff, some have multiple employees permitting a greater division of labor. Even when there is funding for staff, recruiting staff with the needed skills can be a challenge for the rural administrator.

While the rural labor market may offer many potential employees who are not without their strengths, the potential employees may not have the level of expertise, skill or experience sought. The budget, for example, may provide enough funding that an accountant could be hired. However, the rural labor market may not yield the necessary qualified applicants. If the local labor pool only includes potential employees who have taken a few accounting courses but none with a degree in accounting and experience, the available funding alone may not be of much help.

While staff with the needed skills can in some instances be recruited from other areas, such recruitment efforts are not always successful, and can at times be locally controversial. Some research has found that salaries for comparable employees tend to be lower in rural than urban areas, reducing

the appeal of an available job (Kim & Johnson, 1984). Attractive as the quality of life in a rural area is to many, there are others uninterested in living in an area where they may feel professionally isolated or as if they are living in a goldfish bowl (Stoesen, 2002). In many communities, urban norms of specialty and training are not well understood and importing 'outsiders' to fill local jobs, when local people are unemployed can run counter to some very powerful sentiments. If recruitment efforts are successful, those recruited may find themselves distrusted and ignored because they are outsiders (Murty, 1984).

Even contracting for services may not solve the expertise and experience issue. If there is no one with whom to contract, contracting isn't a realistic solution to staffing problems. A study of contracting for mental health services in California found that 62 percent of the rural programs perceived no or little competition for contracts and that rural programs contracted significantly less than programs in urban areas (Libby, 1997). Where contracting is a possibility, the limited number of potential contractors and resultant lack of competition may mean that the costs of contracting are greater (Ward, 1992). Thus, even if potential contractors are available, the cost may make such contracting infeasible.

The available employee pool may not include the range of diversity desired in many social service agencies. Thus, the administrator committed to hiring a diverse staff may find it difficult to do so.

Non-professional employees, like others in the community, may have difficulty understanding professional norms like confidentiality expectations and client self-determination. While such employees may have limited contact with clients, they may have routine access to files or overhear conversations about clients and not realize that divulging such information to those outside the agency is inappropriate. While orienting employees to confidentiality expectations is important in all agencies, it may be especially important in the rural agency because the size of the community is such that inappropriately revealed information may quickly circulate.

Volunteers may be a way to expand the staff of a rural agency. Many urban agencies make use of formal and informal programs of volunteers that help the agency perform needed functions. If such volunteers are available in rural areas and if they can accept the need for confidentiality and other professional expectations, they can serve as a useful enhancement to agency services.

Volunteering is certainly not a new concept in rural areas. Co-ops are found in many rural areas and the cooperative grain elevator in the rural Midwest is, after all, a group of local residents volunteering to work together to meet each other's needs. The casserole delivered to the home when there has been a death in the family also represents a form of volunteer service.

The idea, however, of volunteering for a local social service agency is a less familiar one in many rural areas and the rural administrator may need to be proactive to develop such a program.

The availability of potential volunteers who can assist the agency may also limit the use of volunteer programs. The limited population in rural areas reduces the pool of potential volunteers. Transportation issues may also limit the number of volunteers. The volunteers available may not have the skills needed by the agency. However, rural administrators in areas that have become attractive to professional retirees who are moving into the area may find an ample supply of skilled volunteers available and feel like they have hit gold.

Volunteers (and employees) from the area may be helpful in educating the larger community about the services that the agency provides and may help legitimize the agency. The agency, even if the director is from outside the geographic area, will be seen as less foreign and more acceptable if local residents are associated with it as volunteers and employees.

Dual Relationships in the Rural Agency

One of the most troubling ethical issues for administrators and employees in rural social service agencies is that of dual relationships. This issue as it relates to direct practice is discussed in another chapter of this book.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (1999) specifies the following with regard to dual relationships:

Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client. In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries. (Dual or multiple relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business. Dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively.)

It is difficult to avoid such relationships when working in a rural community. Clients may include your child's teacher, the person who repairs your car or the uncle of the agency secretary. Even if administrators are not directly providing services to such clients, since their agency is, the chances are there will be relationships that could be classified as dual or multiple because the agency provides services.

As the Code of Ethics indicates, the administrator needs to establish boundaries when dual relationships occur. Those boundaries may include advising the client of the times and places that it may be appropriate to discuss the services being provided by the agency or a complaint about the agency. A discussion with your child's teacher, who is also an agency client, at the PTA meeting with other parents in the room is likely not appropriate, even if the teacher is comfortable with such a discussion.

The administrator also needs to help other agency employees, not all of whom may be social workers, to understand how to manage dual relationships and what they mean for client privacy and confidentiality. While the actions required may sometimes be perceived as un-neighborly in the rural area, helping employees and clients understand why such actions are needed may help mitigate the situation. Employees may also need to be coached in ways to establish appropriate boundaries without appearing abrupt in interactions with clients and other community residents. Murty (1984) indicates that, "Firmness in protecting confidentiality, once it is understood, will be respected by the community and will help to establish trust" (p. 19).

The administrator and employees may find themselves disclosing more personal information than would be the practice in a more urbanized setting. It may sometimes be difficult to establish when such disclosure represents acceptance of and conformity to local norms and when it crosses a professional boundary. Murty (1984), in writing about rural mental health workers, indicates that such disclosures are often expected and, even if not expected, given the "fishbowl" nature of rural life, may be difficult to avoid. She suggests responding to one or two personal questions and then returning to the purpose of the meeting (Murty, 1984, p. 18).

While the Code of Ethics deals with relationships with clients and former clients, the rural administrator needs to recognize the personal relationships among other service providers that may influence service delivery. Dunlap and Angell (2001), when reporting on rural coalition building, describe the family and friendship ties that affected the involvement and cooperation of participating coalition agencies in rural Ontario. In the instance that they describe, those relationships facilitated service delivery. They indicate that the existence of previous ties was reported by participants to have contributed to the development of coalitions (Dunlap and Angell, 2001, p. 44). In other instances, past or current relationships may help explain resistance to cooperation.

Fundraising

With declining federal support for social services and state budget cuts in state-supported programs, obtaining the funding needed to support social

service agencies has become much more difficult. Social service agencies, even small ones, are increasingly turning to fundraising in an effort to supplement declining public funds.

Fundraising in rural areas and small towns can include applying to a United Way for funding. Of the 1400 United Ways, approximately 300 are in what are defined as metropolitan areas leaving perhaps as many as 1100 in nonmetropolitan areas. In some cases, these are what are usually thought of as small, rural communities. In other cases, they may be regions where rural areas are part of a larger United Way service area. As a result, there are many rural areas that are covered by a United Way. In many instances, the United Way covers one or more counties including both rural and more urbanized areas.

Participation in a United Way can enhance the agency's budget. In a county or multi-county United Way area, there may be a redistribution effect with resources raised in the more urbanized areas supporting both urbanized and rural services. Such redistribution can be helpful to the rural area because local resources may be more limited.

Several surveys have found that most Americans report charitable giving; churches are included among those organizations to whom gifts might be made. Keirouz (1998) summarizes the findings from polls of Indiana residents, Michigan residents and a Gallup poll of the United States conducted for the Independent Sector. In Indiana, approximately 90 percent of those polled reported a charitable donation with most (64 percent) reporting a donation of less than \$500.00 in the previous year (p. 2). Almost half of the Indiana sample of 505 residents lived in small towns or rural areas (p. 6) but differences in donation rates or levels are not reported by residence. In Michigan, 85 percent reported making a donation and the Gallup poll found that 69 percent reported donating (p. 3).

Other than the fundraising that occurs through the local churches and the special fundraising drives that may be undertaken to send the high school band to a major parade, there is generally limited fundraising in rural areas. In part, this is because resources are usually more limited. Another chapter in this book deals with rural poverty and the data found there illustrates the reduced financial resources usually found in rural areas. It is often assumed that the resources are too limited to make fundraising efforts worthwhile.

Assuming that donation rates in rural areas roughly parallel the findings in rural Indiana, Michigan and the national poll, it may be that there are greater possibilities for fundraising (or philanthropic sufficiency) in rural areas than are generally thought (Lohmann, 2003). It will likely be even more difficult for rural agencies to obtain private funds to substitute for the public funds that may have supported social service programs in the past than it will be for urban agencies to do so. However, rural administrators

should assess the possibilities for fundraising in their area rather than assuming such efforts would be unsuccessful.

Seeking grants can be another form of fundraising that can help assure the survival or expansion of rural social services. Friedman (2003) reports Kraybill and Labao's (2001) finding that the grant-seeking capacity in rural areas is lower than in urban areas. In particular, they found that only 28 percent of the rural counties employed grant writers. While specialized grant writers are not essential for obtaining grant funding, having personnel dedicated to seeking and applying to possible funding sources may enhance the chances of success.

Several sources focused on rural services identify possible funding sources. The Rural Social Work Caucus web page includes information about organizations to which one might apply for grant funding at <http://www.uncp.edu/sw/rural/grant.html/> The Rural Assistance Center web site (<http://www.raconline.org/>) includes a searchable funding database. That site also provides links to other sites with funding information. The rural administrator may find it helpful to consult sites like this when writing grants.

Do the Regulations Fit?

One of the challenges that rural administrators routinely face is that of fitting programs designed with primarily urban populations in mind to rural settings. The regulations and requirements associated with those programs sometimes require actions or support that may not be available in rural areas. Rowley indicates the following about this problem:

As for help, many federal programs offer little at all. In communities where population density is sometimes measured in square miles per person, not the other way around, meeting eligibility requirements can border on the impossible. Serve at least 100 people to get funding? Not where there are only 200 people, period. Cough up \$50,000 in matching contributions to get a grant? How, in a community of 500 dependent on low-wage jobs and surrounded by federal land that pays no property tax? (Rowley, 2003b)

The program of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) that replaced the welfare program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) illustrates some of the problems associated with making programs work in rural areas. Because the TANF program allows states to exercise more choice in the services that will be offered to recipients than AFDC did, it could provide some of the flexibility needed to adapt to the circumstances of rural areas. Many states have also provided increased flexibility to localities, further increasing the likelihood of programs designed to meet local needs. In addressing this, Kaplan (1998) indicates, "There can be positive effects of

devolution for rural areas, such as having the ability to create programs sensitive to rural needs and the involvement of community residents in planning to meet their needs” (p.2).

However, the possible positive effects will not be fully realized so long as certain federal requirements remain. A Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) editorial (Rowley, 2003a) indicates that Bruce Weber, chair of the RUPRI Welfare Reform panel suggests that three changes are needed to ease the application of TANF requirements in rural areas.

1. Recognize that jobs are less plentiful in rural areas and allow greater flexibility in work requirements that takes into account the reduced supply;
2. Modify time limits so that rural recipients have enough time to find jobs, given their access to fewer jobs and support systems;
3. Address the lack of licensed child-care in rural areas. (p. 1)

The basic nature of these changes illustrates the problem rural administrators may face. Even a program intended to be more flexible than the usual social service program sometimes has requirements that are difficult to meet in rural areas. The chances that programs not intended to provide flexibility would not fit well are significant.

The regulations associated with other social service programs may also be difficult to meet in rural areas. State and other publicly funded programs sometimes specify the number of units of service to be provided per staff member or the qualifications of staff or some other factor thought to be associated with effective and efficient service delivery. Some of those requirements may be difficult to meet in the rural office.

The cost per capita of the services provided illustrates the problem that a rural or small-town agency may have in meeting external requirements. The cost per capita for services tends to be higher in rural areas than it is in urban areas because of the lower population density (Friedman, 2003). Transportation costs may also add to the cost per capita. Waltman et al. (1991) suggest that there are several factors that result in higher unit costs. They include: 1) the need to be involved in community activities in the rural environment, thus reducing the time for delivering billable services; 2) the costs of a one-clinician office with much of the overhead expenses for one person that could be distributed among several people in a larger office, and 3) lower client fees because of the local market. When competing for funding, rural agencies may find themselves disadvantaged by the higher unit cost of services and may find that available funding is awarded to more cost efficient agencies. They may also find that existing funding is threatened because the agency is perceived as less efficient.

Pugh (2003) reports that in some areas of the United Kingdom, the added cost of service delivery in rural areas is recognized by providing additional funds. He indicates that the Wiltshire social services department has introduced a “premium” for rural services and provides 3% more funding for such services (p.74). However, he indicates that this is not common. We are unaware of a comparable practice in the United States. The greater costs of service delivery in rural areas usually works to the disadvantage of rural agencies rather than resulting in increased funding.

Conclusion

What, then, makes rural administration special? It isn't the nature of the basic administrative tasks, which tend to be the same regardless of the geographical location of a social service agency. It is the context that makes rural administration special and worth commenting on.

A part of the context is the typical size of the agency found in rural areas and small towns. Most agencies are small. Because of that, there is also limited division of labor and the chief administration often finds that s/he must carry out a range of administrative roles often including providing clinical services at the same time. This can be very challenging because it provides tremendous variety in the work life of the administrator. The variety may be energizing, stimulating and rewarding. It can also be overwhelming as the administrator tries to complete duties for which s/he has little preparation and even less interest.

Another part of the rural context is the challenge of recruiting other employees for the agency. The skills and experience sought may be less available in rural areas than in more urbanized ones. Both the administrator and the staff need to cope with a sense of professional isolation once employed in the rural agency.

For both the administrator and her staff, dual relationships may prove problematic. Such relationships are difficult to avoid. Local community members may view some of the professional actions required by the NASW Code of Ethics as un-neighborly and unfriendly.

Fundraising and the application of federal, state or other guidelines in the local environment may also be challenging. With declining governmental funding of social services, fundraising has become increasingly important in assuring the survival of agencies. The limited population in a rural area and lower income levels may make fundraising even more difficult than it is in an urban area. Guidelines for program administration are often written with urban settings in mind. Applying them while remaining sensitive to local needs and expectations may be challenging.

Given some of the challenges that are found in rural agencies, some may wonder why social workers and other human services professionals would be interested in working in such an agency. The reasons are varied. For some, work in such an agency may be a way to return to home, or to a place very much like home. For others, the quality of life found in a rural area may be the primary appeal. The chance to live in a place that may be physically beautiful, where you can get to know your neighbors, where the crime rate is lower and where you can eat vegetables and meat that you or your neighbors grew can be a part of the attraction.

For others, the needs of local residents and limited services to meet those needs represent a professional challenge. The chance to help build services in places where they may be needed makes the social workers feel like they are making a difference. While the song indicates that if you can make it in New York, New York, you can make it anywhere, the rural administrator knows that your ability to identify resources in a rural area that will meet a client's needs is probably a stronger indication that you can make it anywhere. If you can pull together needed resources in rural America, doing so in a more urbanized area may seem like child's play.

Another motivation may be the chance to be a renaissance person, given the many roles that the rural administrator must play. Wonderful as it may be to be a specialist in one relatively narrow area of practice, many find great satisfaction in being able to carry out a range of duties that may sometimes appears unrelated to each other and that require different skills.

For others, there is the opportunity to build on the strong mutual support networks that exist in many communities. There is the chance to become part of that network and to become accepted and trusted by others in the community. Coordination of services may prove easier to accomplish because such coordination can be achieved through personal relationships.

The growth experienced in many rural areas over the last two decades means that rural administrative practice will continue to be an area of opportunity for the social worker interested in administration. As the NASW policy statement on rural practice indicates, such practice "remains a vibrant and challenging area of practice" (Stoesen, 2002, p.3).

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