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It pays to be nice, but not really nice:
asymmetric reputations from prosociality across 7 countries

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Abstract

Cultures differ in many important ways, but one trait appears to be universally valued: prosociality. For one's reputation, around the world, it pays to be nice to others. However, recent research with American participants finds that evaluations of prosocial actions are asymmetric—relatively selfish actions are evaluated according to the magnitude of selfishness but evaluations of relatively generous actions are less sensitive to magnitude. Extremely generous actions are judged roughly as positively as modestly generous actions, but extremely selfish actions are judged much more negatively than modestly selfish actions (Klein & Epley, 2014). Here we test whether this asymmetry in evaluations of prosociality is culture-specific. Across 7 countries, 1,240 participants evaluated actors giving various amounts of money to a stranger. Along with relatively minor cross-cultural differences in evaluations of generous actions, we find cross-cultural similarities in the asymmetry in evaluations of prosociality. We discuss implications for how reputational inferences can enable the cooperation necessary for successful societies.

Societies reveal their values through the behaviors they praise and punish. Although societies may vary markedly, most appear to highly value one fundamental trait in others: prosociality. Selfless actions are publicly praised around the world, such as Warren Buffet's contractual commitment to donate 99 percent of his wealth to charity and by Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa's lifetime of self-sacrifice for others. In Christianity, generosity is exalted as a spiritual virtue. In Buddhism, generosity is likewise considered one of the two characteristics necessary for enlightenment. Western and Eastern philosophies both consider generosity to be a virtue and a goal for one's moral development, as the writings of both Aristotle and Confucius reveal. In literature, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is as popular in the Western hemisphere as the Chinese children's story *Kong Rong Giving Up Pears* (1778/2011)—a story about a boy sharing his pears with his older siblings—is in the Eastern hemisphere. And in one of the largest cross-cultural studies focusing on gender *differences* in mate preferences ever conducted (Buss, 1989), researchers nevertheless found a striking similarity: the prosocial trait of “kind-understanding” was consistently among the most highly valued traits by both genders in all cultures. For one's reputation in the mind of others, around the world, it pays to be nice.

Recent research, however, suggests that it may not pay markedly more for one's reputation to be *really* nice. That is, whereas increasingly selfish behavior is judged increasingly negatively by others, increasingly selfless behavior—actions that benefit others more than the self—is not judged markedly more positively by others. Instead of a monotonic increase in evaluations across the entire spectrum of prosocial behaviors ranging from completely selfish to completely selfless, there appears to be an asymmetry in evaluations of relatively selfish versus selfless behavior. In one experiment (Klein & Epley, 2014, Experiment 1a), concertgoers judged another person who donated less than the suggested donation amount for the concert to be less warm (e.g., less sincere, good-natured, and caring) than someone who donated the suggested amount, but did *not* judge

a person who gave *more* than the suggested amount any more favorably than the person who gave only the suggested amount. In another experiment (Klein & Epley, 2014, Experiment 4a), participants evaluated a person who kept money for himself from a bag found on the street increasingly more negatively as the person kept an increasingly larger share of the money before turning it into the police. Participants did not, however, judge a person who gave away award money to a charity increasingly more positively as the person gave away an increasingly larger share of the money. Increasing selfishness led to an increasingly negative reputation, but increasing selflessness did not lead to an increasingly positive reputation. In another experiment (Gray, Ward, & Norton, 2014), people indirectly reciprocated either a selfish or equitable action from another person in kind, but did not reciprocate another person's generous action with an equivalent degree of generosity. Instead, they reciprocated a generous action with a merely fair action. Selfishness was repaid in kind measure, but selflessness was not. Additional research similarly finds that actions that go beyond equitable distributions are often not evaluated any more positively than equitable actions (Loewenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989; Vesleý, 2015) These results suggest an important asymmetry in the reputational value of prosocial behavior, such that increasing selfishness leads to an increasingly negative evaluations but increasing selflessness does not lead to an equivalent increase in positive evaluations. It pays to be nice, but not really nice.

These results reflect more than ceiling effects (whereby people want to evaluate selflessness more positively than fairness but are artificially limited by a bounded measurement scale) because similar results are obtained in unbounded measures, such as estimations of a person's annual charitable donations. Rather, these results reflect relative insensitivity to magnitude when evaluating generous actions but high sensitivity to magnitude when evaluating selfish actions. When prosocial actions were judged in comparison to each other rather than in isolation, the asymmetry in evaluations disappeared and increasingly generous actors were evaluated increasingly favorably

(Klein & Epley, 2014, Experiments 4b and 5). These results suggest that people *can* appreciate increasing generosity in others when different levels of generosity are explicitly compared against each other, but that judgments of prosocial actions in isolation *do not* elicit these spontaneous comparisons and therefore do not reflect this appreciation. These results seem to reflect a basic pattern of human judgment in which evaluations are sensitive to magnitude, or scope, when they elicit comparisons to similar alternatives but are insensitive to scope when they do not (Hsee & Zhang, 2010). A selfish action, according to evidence from Klein & Epley (2014), enables a person to think of more or less selfish counterfactuals and thereby keep a given selfish action in perspective. A selfless action, in contrast, does not seem to elicit the same kind of comparative thinking, rendering evaluations of selfless actions less sensitive to the magnitude of selflessness.

Here we do not investigate further the underlying mechanism guiding this asymmetry, but instead report experiments conducted in 7 countries that test the robustness of this asymmetric pattern of reputational inferences across varying economic and social conditions. Understanding the cross-cultural robustness of this pattern matters because evaluations of prosociality may be critical for encouraging cooperation between unrelated individuals within societies. A willingness to help others even without the possibility of direct reciprocity is critical for creating the levels of trust and cooperation necessary for sustaining complex modern societies and markets (Barclay, 2004; Bowles & Gintis, 2003; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Hamilton, 1964; Trivers, 1971). Today's large and relatively impersonal societies make the close-knit bonds that draw together small communities difficult to form (e.g., Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Henrich et al., 2010; Uskul, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2008).

In lieu of direct reciprocity, the reputational benefits that come from prosocial actions are thought to create a motivation to behave prosocially, because of a universal desire to gain social approval (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; DeWall &

Baumeister, 2006; Twenge et al., 2007; Willer et al., 2010; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). However, the connection between prosocial behavior and reputational benefits is currently thought to be fairly straightforward—if a person helps others, then his or her reputation will benefit commensurably. In contrast, if people across cultures fail to differentiate between small and large prosocial actions, such a result would add important complexity to existing research.

Understanding how social systems could motivate prosocial behavior requires comparing evaluations of prosociality across cultures. Existing findings on evaluations of prosocial actions were obtained from exclusively American samples, raising concerns that broad conclusions about human prosociality cannot be drawn due to the idiosyncratic nature of North American cultures (Heine, Henrich, & Norenzayan, 2010; Nisbett et al., 2001). If prosocial actions are evaluated differently across cultures, then culture-specific mechanisms, such as values or norms, may underlie the reputational consequences of prosociality. If, however, prosocial actions are evaluated similarly across cultures, then relatively basic and universal mechanisms, such as relative scope insensitivity, would seem to be guiding reputational inferences.

Existing research on prosociality across cultures does not offer a clear prediction about reputational inferences because it typically focuses on variance in prosocial behavior rather than in inferences from that behavior. For example, a recent study examined how people rewarded or punished others' prosocial behavior in a repeated public goods game (Herrmann, Thöni, & Gächter, 2008). Whereas participants in all cultures paid a personal price to punish another person's selfishness, participants in some cultures also paid a personal price to punish—instead of reward—another person's extremely generous behavior. This suggests that some cultures may not value or admire prosocial behavior, and may instead disdain generosity. This possibility implies cultural variability in reputational inferences from prosociality. In some cultures it may actually hurt one's reputation to be really nice. However, punishing extreme prosociality does not

necessarily indicate negative inferences about prosocial actors. In Hermann et al. (2008), punishing another person's generosity could also reflect a strategic attempt to counter social pressure to contribute to the public pool. More generally, prosocial behavior can stem from many different mechanisms, ranging from admiration of another person to strategic attempts to exploit or manipulate others in specific situations (Spence, 1973; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997). Understanding the reputational consequences of prosocial behavior requires measuring the reputational costs and benefits that emerge in evaluations of others' prosocial behavior across the entire spectrum of outcomes, from completely selfish to completely selfless.

Overview

Previous research suggested an asymmetry in the people's evaluations of another person's prosocial behavior (Klein & Epley, 2014). In one experiment (Klein & Epley, 2014, Exp. 3), participants evaluated a person who was given \$6 in an experiment and was offered the opportunity to give some of it to another participant, with no possibility for reciprocity. Here we use a similar procedure to test the robustness of this asymmetry in reputational inferences across 7 different countries that vary widely in economic and social variables, and that have also been studied in prior research on prosociality across cultures (Hermann et al., 2008).

Although a person's reputation may vary along many different dimensions, existing research suggests that a person's reputation typically varies only along two fundamental dimensions: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Peeters, 1995; Willis & Todorov, 2006; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). Warmth is related to other-oriented outcomes (e.g., friendliness, trustworthiness, morality), whereas competence is more closely related to self-oriented outcomes (e.g., intelligence, talent, skill). Because prosocial actions are more relevant to one's treatment of others than for one's competence, we predicted that warmth judgments are more likely to be affected by one's

prosociality, consistent with previous research (Klein & Epley, 2014). Nevertheless, measuring perceived competence enabled us to test whether people view giving without the possibility of being paid back as a sign of incompetence.

Method

Participants. We sought to capture cross-cultural variability on several social and economic dimensions. Our selection of 7 countries captures variability in social capital, economic prosperity, democracy and laws, and cultural value dimensions (see Table 1). We also selected our cultures to capture variability in the tendency to reward or high degrees of prosociality as found in a previous study (Herrmann et al., 2008).

Procedure. The experiments were conducted between May 2013 and September 2014. All materials in non-English speaking countries were translated and back-translated to ensure semantic accuracy. Austrian participants were recruited through a student email list at the University of Salzburg. Chinese participants were recruited through the online panel company Sojump. Danish participants were recruited through a student email list at Aarhus University. Russian participants were recruited in a classroom at Novosibirsk State University ($n = 73$) and through a psychology students' email list ($n = 122$) at Novosibirsk State University and Novosibirsk State Technical University. Turkish participants were recruited in a law course at Dogus University. British participants were recruited through a departmental participant pool at the University of Kent. American participants were recruited via Amazon.com's M-Turk online panel. American and Chinese participants, as well as Russian participants recruited through the students' email list were paid nominal amounts. All other participants received course credit in exchange for participating.

The procedure was identical across all of the experiments. Participants read about two men who came to a research institution to participate in a study in which one of them was given a small amount of money and decided how much of it to give to another man (as in

a “dictator game,” following Experiment 3 by Klein & Epley, 2014). We used locally common names for the actor and referred to the receiver as “the other person” (see Table 3 for procedural details). Participants read the two men had never met each other prior to the experiment. Participants then read that the giver was free to decide on any amount to give, from nothing to the entire endowment. The endowment itself was denominated in the local currency. To minimize confounds related to the available endowment, we equated its purchasing power across cultures to that of 6 American dollars.

We manipulated the amount the giver decided to give to be either 0, 1/6 of the endowment, 2/6, 3/6, 4/6, 5/6, or the entire endowment. These manipulations were fully between-subjects. Behaving equitably by splitting the allocation benefits the self as much as it benefits the other. Giving less than half benefits the self more than the other person, and so is by definition relatively selfish. Giving more than half of a finite endowment benefits the other person more than the self, and so is by definition relatively selfless. Participants then evaluated the giver on traits related to warmth (sincere, warm, good-natured, caring, tolerant) and competence (competent, confident, independent, intelligent, competitive; Fiske et al., 2002; Klein & Epley, 2014). All ratings were made on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Our sample sizes appear in Table 4, and are as follows: Austria, $n = 214$; China, $n = 215$; Denmark, $n = 181$; Russia, $n = 195$; Turkey, $n = 148$; U.K., $n = 123$; U.S.A., $n = 164$. Variation in sample sizes was due to the ease or difficulty with which samples could be collected in each country. Actual sample sizes were determined based on time and funding constraints—we simply collected as many data points as possible under these constraints.

Construct validity. To assess construct validity, we conducted principal components analyses on the 10 traits we measured in every culture, using Oblimin rotation (see Table 2). In all cultures we created the warmth composite by averaging the 5 traditionally used traits (sincere, warm, good-natured, caring, tolerant) and the competence composite by

averaging the other 5 traits (competent, confident, independent, intelligent, competitive). As Table 2 shows, the warmth and competence composites generally produced high reliabilities, with one exception.¹

¹ Because the trait 'competitive' loaded highly negatively onto the warmth dimension, we also conducted the same analyses shown in Tables 4 and 5 after reverse-scoring and incorporating 'competitive' into the warmth composite. This does not meaningfully alter any of the results.

Results

Warmth Evaluations. We first tested whether prosociality affects reputations across the entire spectrum of possible actions. For each culture, we conducted two sets of linear regressions—one with the amounts of money given predicting warmth evaluations, and the other with the amount of money given predicting competence evaluations.

As Table 4 indicates, across all cultures, giving more leads to a more favorable reputation of warmth. This result suggests that prosociality has consistent reputational benefits. However, these reputational benefits were largely asymmetric. We tested this asymmetry using three different analyses of our data, all of which yield similar conclusions.

In the simplest test of this asymmetry in reputational inferences, we compared evaluations of giving half of the endowment (3/6) against the most selfish (0/6) and most selfless (6/6) actions (giving none versus giving all). As shown in Table 5, participants in all countries judged the most selfish person more negatively than the fair person; only in one of the countries (China) was the most selfless person judged more favorably than a merely equitable person. In 5 out of 7 countries, no statistically reliable differences emerged in evaluations of the fair person and the most selfless person, and in one (Turkey) giving the entire amount was judged more *negatively* than giving half. We will return to the latter observation in the discussion.

In another test of this asymmetry, we conducted 3 separate linear regressions for each culture: First, a regression with all giving amounts predicting warmth; second, a regression with only selfish actions (giving 3/6 to 2/6 to 1/6 to none of the endowment) predicting warmth; and third, a regression with only generous actions (giving 3/6 to 4/6 to 5/6 to all of the endowment) predicting warmth. Table 4 presents the results. In all 7 countries, increasingly more selfish actions led to significantly more negative warmth evaluations. In contrast, increasingly more selfless actions did not lead to significantly more positive evaluations of warmth in 5 of the 7 countries. Even in the 2 out of 7

cultures in which increasing generosity led to significantly more positive evaluations, sensitivity to gradations in selfish actions was higher than sensitivity to gradations in generous actions. In the U.S., increasing generosity was evaluated more positively ($\beta = .24, t = 2.33, p = .022$), but still not as much as increasing selfishness was evaluated more negatively ($\beta = -.71, t = 14.95, p < .0001$), $z = 4.33, p < .0001$. In China, the difference the sensitivity to increasingly generous actions was also almost significantly lower than the sensitivity increasingly selfish actions, $z = 1.76, p = .078$.

A final set of analyses sought to better understand the role of culture in evaluations of prosociality. We therefore tested whether culture interacts with the magnitude of prosocial actions. An ANOVA of warmth evaluations on all amounts given and culture revealed a main effect for amount given, $F(6, 1191) = 187.78, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .070$, a main effect for culture, $F(6, 1191) = 18.06, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .015$, qualified by an interaction, $F(36, 1191) = 3.41, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .093$.

To further understand this interaction, we conducted analyses for selfish and generous actions separately. For generous actions (giving 3/6 – 6/6 of the endowment), an ANOVA of warmth evaluations revealed no main effect of amount given, $F(3, 691) = .46, p = .71$, a main effect of culture, $F(6, 691) = 25.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .090$, and an interaction, $F(18, 691) = 2.03, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .050$. These results indicate some cultural variation in evaluations of generous actions. As Table 4 shows, cultural variation in sensitivity to generous actions emerged from ambiguity about whether generosity increases or decreases warmth evaluations. Chinese and American participants, for example, were most likely to view greater generosity more favorably (regression β s = .36 and .24, respectively), whereas Turkish participants viewed greater generosity more negatively (regression $\beta = -.22$). Participants in other cultures were not sensitive to magnitude in generous actions, as none of the other relevant regression β s were statistically significant.

For selfish actions (giving 0 – 3/6 of the endowment), an ANOVA of warmth evaluations revealed a main effect of amount given, $F(3, 677) = 175.36, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .053$ a main effect of culture, $F(6, 677) = 6.06, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .025$, and an interaction, $F(18, 677) = 2.35, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .059$. These results indicate some cultural variation in evaluations of selfish actions. As Table 4 shows, in some cultures the sensitivity to gradations in selfish actions was higher than in others. American participants, for example, were the most sensitive to gradations in selfish actions (regression $\beta = .71$), whereas Austrian participants were least sensitive (regression $\beta = .53$). However, unlike generous actions whose impact on evaluations was ambiguous, participants in all cultures viewed lower giving in selfish actions more negatively. Overall, these results indicate that cultural differences were observed both in evaluations of selfish actions and generous actions, but the impact of these cultural differences on evaluations differed between selfish and generous actions. Whereas greater selfishness always reduced evaluations, greater generosity either increased, reduced, or did not affect evaluations. We return to this topic in the General Discussion.

Overall, these results demonstrate a high degree of similarity in the asymmetry between relatively selfish and generous actions. Participants' evaluations of others' prosocial actions were consistently more sensitive to gradations in selfish than in generous actions. These results hold across cultures that differ markedly on other dimensions between these seven countries. People, among different cultures, are generally more sensitive to gradations of selfish behavior than to gradations of selfless behavior. This consistent pattern was also moderated somewhat by differences across the cultures we studied. We speculate on the meaning of these differences amidst the broader similarity we observed in the General Discussion.

Competence Evaluations. The reputational consequences of prosocial behavior were less clear-cut when examined in terms of competence evaluations (see Table 4). The composite measure of competence was consistently less reliable than the composite

measure of warmth across cultures, but we retain the composite because in most cultures scale reliabilities were acceptable ($\alpha > .70$; see Table 2 for details) and to maintain continuity with both the existing empirical literature and across our samples.

In 5 cultures (Austria, Denmark, Russia, Turkey, U.K.), greater giving led to significantly lower evaluations of competence across the range of possible outcomes. This result may have occurred because in our experiments there was no possibility of reciprocity, which is one of the rationales for generous giving. Participants may therefore have perceived greater giving as naïve, unwise, or that the person simply misunderstood the nature of the situation. In the U.S., greater giving had no statistically reliable relationship to evaluations of competence. Finally, in China greater giving led to more favorable competence evaluations. Examining selfish actions and generous actions separately eliminates most of the statistically reliable relationships between giving and competence (see Table 4). In particular, generous actions (giving more than half of the endowment) did not affect competence evaluations, suggesting that participants did not associate extreme generosity with incompetence.

Overall, giving more does not appear to increase evaluations of competence. If anything, it tends to decrease competence evaluations in this particular context.

General discussion

Successful societies require cooperation between unrelated individuals in order to function effectively. Such prosocial behavior is encouraged, at least in part, by the reputational benefits an individual receives from being kind towards others and from the reputational costs one incurs when being unkind towards others. Those who behave prosocially earn reputations that encourage future trust and cooperation from others. Those who behave antisocially earn reputations that create distrust and avoidance. While we cannot generalize our findings to cultures and subcultures not tested here, we provide evidence for an asymmetry in these reputational costs and benefits that emerges across 7

cultures. Whereas increasingly selfish actions were judged increasingly negatively in all cultures we surveyed, increasingly selfless actions—giving progressively more to others than to the self—were not judged increasingly positively. In terms of one’s reputation, it pays to be nice, but pays no more to be really nice. These findings, while not drawing conclusions about any specific culture, were nevertheless comparable across cultures that vary on a wide range of social and economic dimensions. Moreover, prosocial actions also do not earn reputational benefits in terms of competence evaluations—in Russia, in fact, generosity led to decreased evaluations of competence.

These results replicate and extend previous findings among American participants (Klein & Epley, 2014). This replication therefore addresses concerns about unjustifiably broad conclusions that could otherwise be drawn from experiments using samples from only a single culture (Henrich et al., 2010). This replication also addresses recent concerns about the reproducibility of findings in psychological science (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011), offering 7 additional exact replications of previously published results.

Despite overarching similarities across cultures in the asymmetry between evaluations of selfish and generous actions, potentially interesting differences did emerge in the role of culture in these results. Participants in some cultures were more sensitive to gradations of selfish and generous actions than in others. Understanding why this is the case and how cultural differences in evaluations are related to cultural differences in prosocial behavior (e.g., Henrich et al., 2010) is a productive avenue for future research. For now, we tentatively raise the possibility that evaluations of prosocial actions might be related to anti-social punishment—decisions to punish extremely prosocial others (Herrmann et al., 2008). Figure 2 plots anti-social punishment as reported by Herrmann et al. (2008) along with our participants’ sensitivity to selfish and generous actions (taken from our Table 4). Across cultures, anti-social punishment correlates negatively—but not significantly—with sensitivity to gradations in evaluations of selfish and generous

actions. This negative correlation could point to an interesting connection between judgment of others' prosocial actions and behavior towards prosocial others. Our ability to test this possibility is limited because our data contain only 7 cultures, too small a number to establish meaningful conclusions. Future research can measure both evaluations and punishment decisions to definitively test whether the two are causally related.

Notwithstanding these relatively small cultural differences, the overarching cross-cultural similarities may imply that the psychological mechanisms underlying asymmetric evaluations of prosocial actions may also be relatively similar across cultures. These mechanisms may therefore be basic cognitive or affective processes that are relatively independent of culturally conditioned input. Two potential mechanisms have been documented in American samples and are potential candidates for future investigation. The first is that people are insensitive to magnitude when evaluating generous actions because selfish actions are more common and therefore can be more easily evaluated than generous actions (Klein & Epley, 2014). Existing research finds that familiarity with a stimulus enables people to notice finer gradations of this stimulus (Hsee & Zhang, 2010; Moredwedge et al., 2009). The same psychological process can apply in evaluations of prosocial actions. The second potential mechanism is the asymmetric affective consequences of prosocial and selfish actions—generous actions may not increase positive affect as much as selfish actions of the same magnitude increase negative affect (Gray, Ward, & Norton, 2014).² Future research is needed to test whether these mechanisms explain the asymmetric pattern of evaluations of prosocial actions across cultures.

² Another possibility is that people may believe that the motivation of generous actors are more ambiguous than those of selfish actors, perhaps because generous actions are seen as non-normative (Miller, 1999). To our knowledge, no direct evidence for this mechanism currently exists, but it remains a theoretical possibility.

More broadly, the nature of the reputational inferences we uncover can have important implications for understanding how reputational inferences may motivate prosocial behavior. The reputational inferences we have documented suggest strong reputational incentives for modestly prosocial and cooperative behavior because such behavior provides the maximum reputational benefit to the actor without incurring the personal cost of an extremely selfless action. Regardless of the precise psychological cause of an asymmetry in evaluations of prosociality, the functional outcome may be to create social incentives that promote cooperative behavior. Existing research emphasizes the punishment of non-cooperators as a necessary mechanism for cooperation (e.g. Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). However, the cooperative behavior necessary for sustaining complex modern societies may also result from the lack of incentives for very generous prosocial actions, which in turn incentivizes actors to engage in modestly nice actions. Reputational inferences could nudge societies composed of unrelated individuals into being modestly nice, enabling the cooperation necessary for successful societies, without having to overcome the challenge of motivating people to be really nice. From an individual's perspective, behaving in modestly prosocial ways—but not necessarily extremely prosocial ways—appears to be the most personally beneficial course of action. It pays for one's reputation to be nice, apparently around the globe, but it does not consistently pay more to be really nice.

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