

Sense of community: Community resilient responses to oppression and change

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### Abstract

Resilience refers to the positive ways in which people respond to adversity and stressful life events. Much of the research and writing in resilience has focussed on how children respond to adversity. Community resilience, however, represents an extension of this focus. Often oppressed communities are represented as lacking in resilience and competence. Models that characterize group responses to intergroup and intercultural contact often simplify the responses of communities. Drawing on these concepts it is argued that oppressed groups do not always capitulate or assimilate to oppressive systems, but in alternative forums and settings these groups find ways to resist oppression and experience a sense of community. In settings such as church groups, sporting clubs, extended family networks and other organizations groups find ways to protect and propagate what is valued and central for their survival. This has implications for how we interpret and understand the ways in which groups adapt to oppressive and changed contexts and alerts us to the dangers in under-emphasising and overlooking the positive functions of alternative settings.

Key words: Resilience, community resilience, sense of community, oppression, alternative settings.

Much of the research and writing on group responses to oppressive systems have emphasized the negative and pathological outcomes (Bulhan, 1985; Fanon, 1967). Groups are presented as victims of these systems and their responses described as capitulation and assimilation. In this paper it is argued that models which characterize group responses to intergroup contact are often over simplified and deterministic. These models overlook the different ways and alternative forums in which groups survive. It is proposed that the notion of community resilience can add to current understandings of how groups respond to oppressive contexts.

Resilience is described as “the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning or competence ... despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma” (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993, p. 517). It represents successful adaptation to stressful events, oppressive systems, and other challenges of living. In making these adaptations, there is the need to understand the biological, psychological and sociocultural influences (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993, p. 501) which underpin the resilient responses, protective factors, and strengths people are able to draw upon. This call emphasizes the need to consider social settings and person-environment transactions in our understanding of resilience.

Those who adapt well to profound stress have protective attributes. These include such person-centered factors as perceived self-efficacy,

temperament, and setting-centred variables such as warm and caring relationships with caregivers which act as moderators of stressors (Cicchetti & Garnezy, 1993; Cowen, Wyman, Work, & Iker, 1995).

Caplan (1964) referred to stress moderators: the physical, psychosocial, and sociocultural supplies people had at their disposal through cultural development and upbringing. Physical supplies include food and shelter; psychosocial supplies refer to interpersonal relations (e. g., peers, family) that is important for emotional and cognitive development. Sociocultural supplies are “those influences on personality development and functioning which are exerted by the customs and values of the culture and the social structure....This provides him with rewards and external security to supplement his inner strength.” (Caplan, 1964, pp.32-33). Those with adequate supplies are in better positions to deal with adversity.

Much of the resilience research and writing has focussed on the individual, particularly the individual child in trying circumstances. However, an extension of the child-focus is found in the literature on community competence. This notion goes beyond individual-level and variables to reflect a community-level analysis. Cottrell (1976) discussed the concept community competence and theorized that such a community provides opportunities and conditions that enable groups to cope with their problems. Iscoe (1974) described a competent community as one that “utilizes, develops, or otherwise,

obtains resources, including of course the fuller development of the resources of human beings in the community itself” (p. 608). Bishop and Syme (1996) referred to community resilience when discussing communities that are able to tolerate internal conflict and maintain diversity. According to these conceptualisations a competent community is one that can develop effective ways of coping with the challenges of living. Competent communities, like resilient individuals, have the capacity and resourcefulness to cope positively with adversity.

Oppressed and non-dominant communities have often been represented as lacking in competence and not having resilience (Elsass, 1992). They have been described as disorganised, damaged and unable to provide adequate social and psychological resources for their membership to cope with adversity (Rappaport, 1977). In many instances the natural support systems that existed in these communities were removed through oppression. These communities are incapable of providing members with opportunities to be meaningfully engaged in activities and social relations, to feel a sense of belonging and identification, and to meet other psychological needs.

The cultural yardstick used to evaluate the efficacy and functionality of adaptations made to social contexts by minority communities have been based on the standards of one group. Bulhan (1985) and Rappaport (1977) noted that evaluations of what constitutes positive adaptation and coping and what

reflects maladaptation, have been based on the cultural values and norms of the [white] middle-class. Oppressed groups are not typically evaluated on their own terms. This has resulted in labelling minority group adaptations that varied from this standard as 'deviant' (Bulhan, 1985), contributing to the ignorance and misinterpretation of the coping systems developed by those communities (Mays, 1987; Rappaport, 1977; 1994; Seidman, 1991), resulting in differences being interpreted as evil or bad.

Some communities have resisted the systematic attempts of assimilation and identity removal and have provided social, cultural, and psychological resources for community members in alternative ways (Elsass, 1992; Mays, 1987; O'Neil, 1994; Sonn & Fisher, 1996). For example, Elsass argued for the notion of an "ecological psyche", a world view that sees 'self' defined in relation to contexts, which has been at the core of the survival of many indigenous communities in Latin America. He also argued that these groups resisted oppression by creating counter identities, or by separating themselves, or being forcefully separated, from dominant groups and creating their own stories -- stories that aid in the adaptation to contexts. In a different context, Mays (1986) said that the church structure in the USA facilitated the survival of the black community by providing a substitute society. From this work it is proposed that alternative forms of community are central to community survival and resilience.

### Primary Community and the Impact of Oppression

In view of increasing levels of alienation, disenfranchisement, and experiences of isolation, many have started to investigate sense of community (SOC) and natural support systems as potential solutions. The importance of building and strengthening positive relationships, structures, and networks in communities has been highlighted (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Newbrough, 1995; Sarason, 1974, 1993). The importance of community membership, as an essential source of wellbeing, has been proposed as an antidote to alienation and, psychosocial and behavioral disorder.

People are members of multiple communities (Gergen, 1985; Heller, 1991; Newbrough, 1995; Rappaport, 1993; Sarason, 1974) and, consequently, derive a sense of community from different sources. However, a person is typically centered in a primary community. The primary community is the one that provides the values, norms, stories, myths, and a sense of historical continuity (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Smith, 1991). Cox (1989) stated that primary community membership plays a central role in socialization and psychological development. The primary community is the one that provides us with core social roles and identities. To some extent, ethnic and racial groups represent primary communities, because they are the ones that provide cultural knowledge and systems of meaning.

Much research have focussed on investigating the negative

consequences that result from the loss of primary communities and identities because of sociopolitical and cultural forces and processes such as colonization or oppression. The literature on psychology of oppression has explored the impacts of dominant cultures on non-dominant ones. It has been argued that the removal of core cultural identities and cultural depreciation through oppressive practices negatively impacts on groups and can result in self-hatred, the internalization of negative group identities, and low self-esteem (Bartky, 1990; Fanon, 1967; Freire, 1972; Jones, 1991, Rappaport, 1977, in press, Sarason, 1974). Fanon (1967) wrote of the 'corrosive and stifling' effects of colonial oppression and referred to the outcomes as the psychic alienation. Psychic alienation is psychological oppression (Bartky, 1990). Authors such as Bulhan (1985; 1990) and Elsass (1991) have stated that oppressive social systems can lead to deculturization and cultural estrangement (Fanon, 1967). Oppression interferes with the reproduction of tradition (the lifeworld), and this disruption threatens healthy development of self and community (Bartky, 1990; Fanon, 1967, Sloan, 1996).

James Jones (1991) noted that some responses to dominant and nondominant situations are characterized by self-hate, and the aspiration to, and evaluation of, self in terms of an ideal that is representative of the dominant group. That is, there was an internalization of the stories told about them by the dominating group. Rappaport (in press) discussed the impact of

dominant cultural narratives on people. Dominant narratives are those dealing with specific subcultures held by the powerful people in the culture. He said that these narratives can be negative and have negative implications for a person's identity or esteem. People internalize the negative images projected on to them from outside, they become their own oppressors. This is echoed in Biko's (1988) statement that the first step in the liberation process of black people:

...is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity; to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. (p. 43)

Although immigration and intercultural contact have not traditionally been interpreted or understood as involving oppression, some of the outcomes and responses do suggest adaptations to systematic efforts to remove cultural identities. Immigration, and eventual settlement, involves intercultural contact and the processes of acculturation and assimilation (Berry, 1984, 1992; Taft, 1985; Tajfel, 1981). This means interacting with a dominant cultural group that can lead to the removal and loss of cultural symbols, stories, and relations that have been central to their wellbeing. It implies challenges to systems of meaning and patterns of interaction that have been taken for granted.

### Responses to intercultural contact and oppression

Oppressive social structures can have many impacts on individual and group development and functioning. The interactions between dominant and subordinate groups in different sociopolitical contexts influence the ways in which individuals and groups adapt to these contexts (Smith, 1991). These adaptive patterns are, in turn, reflected in terms of ethnic identification, group boundary formation, quality of life, and wellbeing.

Many (e. g., Berry, 1986, 1992, 1994, 1997; Bochner, 1982; Tajfel, 1981) have proposed models that characterize individual and group adaptations to intergroup and intercultural contact. Those developed by Berry (1994, 1997) and Tajfel (1981) captures what is proposed in these models. Berry and Tajfel have proposed models (Table 1). Berry presented a model with four outcomes to intergroup contact: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. These are characterized by shifts in attitudes and behavior toward one's own and other communities. Assimilation and integration are the predominant modes of adaptation. Assimilation, according to Berry, takes place when individuals or groups denounce or shed their culture of origin and take on the dominant culture. In some cases assimilation can be the policy of the dominant group and, thus, enforced. Integration, Berry notes, implies a reaction or resistance to change which involves maintaining and developing one's original

culture while moving to participate as an integral part of the larger society. In other words, models integration is synonymous to biculturalism, meaning that people are firmly rooted both in their culture of origin and the new culture.

Tajfel's (1981) model also represents responses to a minority status and intergroup contact. His responses are diverse and range from accepting a status of inferiority to challenging the status quo in order to change the system.

Among his patterns of rejection of a minority status is assimilation, which he distinguishes at a number of levels. Full assimilation implies a loss of most or all of the characteristics that define one as a minority and one is fully accepted by the dominant group. Partial assimilation means that negative connotations associated with minority group membership are maintained and one is not fully accepted by majority. He also suggests that passing, an illegitimate form of assimilation, from a minority group to the dominant group may, over time, dilute the boundaries of the minority group. This entails the rejection or hiding of an original culture, and the acceptance of, and identification with, the new culture. The final category is accommodation, or social competition, which he defines as:

...the minorities' attempts to retain their own identity and separateness while at the same time becoming more like the majority in their opportunities of achieving goals and marks of respect which are generally valued by society at large (Tajfel,

1981; p. 335).

Table 1

Models of Responses to Intercultural Contact

Author	Response	Characteristics
Berry (1984)	Assimilation	denounce or sheds culture of origin, moves into dominant culture
	Integration	maintains culture of origin, participates in dominant culture
	Separatism	maintains original culture, minimal contact with dominant culture
	Marginalization	little interest in culture of origin or dominant culture
Tajfel (1981)	Assimilation	rejection of minority status
	Full	denounce culture of origin is accepted by dominant group
	Partial	negative connotations associated with minority status maintained not fully accepted
	Passing	rejection or hiding of original culture acceptance of new culture
	Accommodation	retains identity and competes in terms of aspects valued by dominant group
	Internalization	internalize status of inferiority

Bulhan (1985) and Watts (1994a) have emphasized the importance of understanding the role of sociopolitical processes in oppression and have proposed models that explain individual and group adaptations to prolonged oppression (Table 2). The oppression models are flexible and reflect movement back and forth between phases over time. In Bulhan's model, in particular, people can revert to earlier phases, while in Watts' model people move from a phase of acritical acceptance of a reality to a full commitment to a phase of social change.

Table 2

Models of Responses to Oppression

Author	Response	Characteristics
Bulhan (1985)	Capitulation	absorbed into dominant culture and rejection of original culture, identification with aggressor as defense
	Revitalization	rejection of dominant cultures, reactive romantic attachment to original culture
	Radicalization	commitment towards social change
Watts (1994a)	Acritical	internalized feelings of inferiority and powerlessness
	Adaptive	attempts to maintain positive sense of self through <i>accommodationist</i> strategies or <i>antisocial</i> means to gain from what they perceive to be an immutable system

Pre-critical	developing doubts about adaptation
Critical	develop understanding of forces maintaining oppression
Liberation	involvement in social action

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In both the oppression and the intercultural contact models, the patterns of adaptation are manifested at the individual and group levels and are reflected in terms of strength of identity, culture, group boundary formation, and other psychosocial variables (e. g., self esteem, wellbeing) (Berry, 1984, 1986; Bulhan, 1985; Smith, 1991; Tajfel, 1981). The models suggest that individuals and groups respond to intercultural contact in different ways; some group members lose their cultural identities and take on that of the dominant group, others resist and take pride in their own cultural heritage, while others oscillate between these extremes.

These models, however, have been developed on specific groups and have limitations. Both the oppression and intercultural contact models are deterministic and oversimplified, thus, failing to acknowledge that some communities develop ways of protecting core cultural symbols, stories, myths, images, and other aspects central to their community and cultural identities. On a surface level, communities show signs of capitulation and assimilation, while at a deeper, internal, level they manage to protect core community narratives and identities. That is, they acquire the skills, competencies, and behaviors that

are functional in the dominant group context; thus, they become bicultural or they pass and external indicators suggest the loss of primary community identity. To an outside observer, this might be indicative of loss or compromise of cultural identities. However, this does not necessarily mean the complete loss of their primary community and cultural identities (Birman, 1994; La Fromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Trickett, 1996).

Groups can protect their primary community identities in alternative settings in which they construct group boundaries and experience a sense of community. Under different circumstances, the primary community identities can be drawn upon as coping sources or sociocultural supplies (Caplan, 1974) in changing contexts, and it may be reconstructed and revitalised over time. The alternative forums and covert systems that communities develop to express valued cultural identities provide the foundations for community resilience.

### Community Resilience

There is no denying that oppression, the imposition of cultural systems, and other negative social forces can adversely affect individuals and groups, often leading to many pathological outcomes. However, this may not always be the case. Groups may develop processes and mechanisms that ensure the survival of valued cultural identities and the positive development of group members.

Mays (1986) argued that adaptation strategies developed by oppressed

communities have often been misinterpreted, overlooked, and misunderstood. Based on her observations of African-American experiences, she argued that during periods of slavery individuals often overtly conformed to, and fulfilled, their roles as slaves. As a way of adapting, these people would “display stereotypic behaviors of incompetence, laziness, and other negative attributes” (Mays, 1986, p. 586) which were consistent with external images. However, not everyone internalized these negative images. Fulfilling the behavioral roles required of a slave can serve as a form of resistance to oppression when there are alternative forums in which people can reclaim valued identities.

Mays (1986) stated that these groups managed to find alternative ways of expressing themselves and developing and protecting their self-image, esteem, and identity. She argued that Black slaves were able to conceive of themselves in different ways than did the slave master, through religion. In religious settings, people managed to reconstruct and develop positive conceptions of self. Through mediums such as language and music, Blacks could express their individualism and develop a positive sense of self. Thus, these groups gave the appearance of assimilation while, in alternative forums and settings, they managed to maintain and develop a sense of community -- central to their survival.

Bulhan (1985) and Potts (1993) discussed the important role liberation movements and spirituality has played in enhancing the consciousness of

oppressed groups. These organizations and community leaders ( e. g., Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, Alan Boesak) provide people with alternative ways of responding to oppression and also raise awareness among those in subordinate positions equipping them to deal with and challenge oppressive realities. Potts (1993) stated that “in addition to providing a framework for spiritual experience through religious practice, the Black church, since slavery, has been the major institution for social fellowship, political discourse, and cultural expression” (p. 2). Sonn and Fisher (1996) reported that in South Africa church and leaders such as Alan Boesak and Desmond Tutu played an important role in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa.

Keil (1966) referred to this essence of community as ‘soul’, something that stems out of the struggle for survival that forges solidarity and cohesion among group members. These alternative settings provided the contexts in which people could have positive experiences of belonging and develop a positive sense of identity; they moderated the impact of oppression. The contexts allowed for people to hold onto and reconstruct the sociocultural supplies that were threatened by oppressive practices.

Freire (1970, 1972, 1994) wrote about various ways in which people respond to cultural deprivation and oppression. At the center of Freire’s work was the notion of critical consciousness or ‘conscientization’ as an antithesis to oppression. In his writing education and literacy was promoted as vehicles

for cultural action and emancipation from oppression in different settings.

Through conscientization people develop a greater awareness of their sociocultural realities and are able to critically engage in socio-cultural analysis, and cultural redevelopment and transformation.

#### Colored South Africans and Anglo-Indians

Both the Anglo-Indian and colored South African communities are of mixed ethnic and racial origin. Through the oppressive systems in their respective countries, these communities were excluded from dominant group membership and subjugated to a status in-between the oppressed and the oppressor. In fact, they were excluded from their primary community, the one they saw themselves as most like -- the Europeans. The Anglo-Indian community in India presented a buffer "between the British rulers and the Indian ruled, uncomfortably sandwiched between the disapproval of the rulers and the distrust of the ruled." (Bose, 1979, p. 9). The colored South African community filled a similar role.

Both communities aspired to be part of the larger European community, it was the community they saw themselves as most like socially and culturally. Over time, they assimilated. For the colored South Africans, Apartheid removed from them the shared cultural heritage and imposed a racial label that implied the group had a separate racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and should have a different life path. In a sense, the community was denied a shared

community narrative (Rappaport, 1995) and was forced to create new ones based on an imposed racial identity. The Anglo-Indian community was also excluded and denied membership of the group they saw themselves to be most like (Gist & Wright, 1973). Both these communities responded to their status in different ways, although some responses were negative, the resilient and resourceful ways in which these groups have responded have been overlooked. Some of the responses suggested that these groups adapted to their circumstances by displacing experiences of community to alternative forums and settings.

Sonn and Fisher (1996) investigated sense of community among colored South Africans. They reported that sense of community operated at two levels for that group. One level represented the externally constructed label of the community, 'colored'; the other represented the internal construction of community in alternative settings and mediating structures (such as schools, church groups, family networks, and sporting organisations). Mediating structures (Berger & Luckman, 1967) and activity settings (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; O'Donnell, Tharp, & Wilson, 1993) that existed within the colored community provided opportunities for people to experience security, stability, and belongingness. In these settings, people could experience psychological relatedness and continuity (Smith, 1991).

The mediating structures and alternative settings gave people

opportunities to reformulate and reconstruct devalued and denied social and cultural identities. These settings fulfilled similar functions to those that the church fulfilled for the Black community in the USA (Keil, 1966; Mays, 1986). Members could reconstruct devalued cultural markers and labels, and colored people could feel valued as human beings. Thus, although apartheid denied them a shared cultural heritage and imposed a cultural identity on the group, they managed to protect and propagate the foundations of the cultural identity they valued in these settings.

Gist and Wright (1973) reported similar responses among the Anglo-Indian community. According to them, “the Anglo-Indian community managed to build and develop organisations in which they could experience community” (p. 15). Thus, although they were rejected and relegated to an in-between status, people managed to form positive attachments and experience community in alternative forums. Colquhoun (1996) investigated the factors that influence the adaptation of Anglo-Indian immigrants to Australia. He highlighted that sporting associations, such as hockey clubs, and church groups provided contexts in which people could experience belongingness. These forums were at the centre of group survival. They provided the contexts in which group members could negotiate and come to common understandings about the meanings of being Anglo-Indian. These settings also facilitated the development of skills and competencies to deal with the other groups within

the social system. This is in line with Mays' (1986) argument that groups can find other outlets in which they survive and prosper, develop skills to cope with the outside world, reconstruct group identities, and experience community. Therefore, oppressed groups do not always capitulate or assimilate, and passing does not always imply internalization. In some cases, they may pass to, or borrow the status of the dominant group (Wolf, 1987), but this does not mean that they forsake their identities. Rather, assimilation or passing may be a surface level response conducive to harmonious intergroup contact, while at the same time it masks deeper level responses.

#### Alternative settings as resources for resistance and community resilience

We draw on previous research (Sonn, 1996; Sonn & Fisher, 1996) to illustrate the role of alternative forums in responding to oppression and change. Sonn used interviews derived from the PSOC framework to investigate the foundations of the colored South African community. He found that alternative settings served as moderators of oppressive systems. These settings and mediating structures allowed people to see themselves in terms other than those set and imposed by the dominant group, that is, rather than take on the imposed colored identity and culture, people could hold onto the cultural heritage they valued.

Sonn and Fisher (1996) reported that many colored South Africans felt that they had a western culture, but the dominant group tried to deny this. In

social settings people could hold onto the cultural heritage they valued -- it was the source of their sociocultural supplies (Caplan, 1974). The settings buffered the stereotypes and efforts of the dominant group to remove the group's cultural heritage, and provided people with other ways of positively construing themselves. The following quotations are illustrative of people's efforts to resist the imposition of a cultural heritage and holding onto what they valued. "Whites wanted to deny that the features of our group were also the features of the white group" and "Superiority was based on skin colour... (but) coloreds saw themselves as equal to the white group because they could speak both English and Afrikaans perfectly, or most of them could anyway". Another said: "We were colored because we had to be colored".

Externally it would have appeared that people had assimilated or capitulated (Bulhan, 1985), but internally, in alternative settings, people could protect and express the cultural identities the dominant group wanted to suppress. Thus, outwardly people had seemingly taken on the imposed cultural pathway, while at a deeper level, within the community, this was not necessarily the case. In social settings people had the opportunity to engage in, and propagate, cultural practices and values and develop new ones.

Participants specifically emphasised the role of church and other primary groups (e. g., extended family) in moderating the impacts of cultural suppression and the creation of images and stories. For example a participant

said that: "It [a youth group] nullified the negative images projected by the white [political] majority. There was a feeling of I'm here and belonging -- I was part of something." The belongingness was reflected in what participants referred to as a shared bond, a kind of "brotherhood" or a "sense of togetherness" with other coloreds and a pervading 'spirit' of "closeness, a sort of comraderie". The interdependence, positive attachments, and togetherness were influenced by what people had in common, Apartheid oppression. This was echoed by a participant who suggested that Apartheid and the oppression "contributed to feelings of being a group". Others suggested that in the colored community "you grow up with certain groups of people -- you experience a feeling of togetherness as far as you belong to the colored group". A participant suggested:

You look for people that you know have gone through the same thing before. It is only natural, I think, that you feel more attracted to that group of people -- because there is a lot of things that they can identify with that you can too....,

The forced separation and time spent together allowed people to hold onto the experiences they valued and allowed for the joint construction of meanings of what it meant to be a colored person.

Consistent with McMillan (1996), these quotations highlight the role of perceived similarity of experiences as an integrative force in community. They

also highlight the role of a shared emotional connection, which is predicated on shared history and the sharing of positively valued experiences and stories, in developing a sense of community. This is not to say that the community was homogeneous. On the contrary, the community was quite diverse, but these shared experiences, the meaning of those experiences, and understandings of reality contributed to a sense of solidarity and connectedness. This overarching solidarity and connectedness is captured in what Wiesenfeld (1996) refers to as 'macrobelongings'. That is, "...members share a meaning which they attribute to the world because they share the experience of events occurring in a common space and time." (p. 342)

### Conclusions

Resilience represents successful adaptations to adversity, stressful events and oppressive systems. Much of the research on resilience have focused on children. However, an extension of this focus is found in the literature on community competence. It was argued that much research have presented oppressed groups as lacking in community competence and resilience. This may not always be the case. Communities may give the appearance of capitulation or assimilation while in different forums there are different responses to oppression. Groups can hold onto the sociocultural supplies which provide them with systems of meaning. These supplies are protected and propagated in alternative forms and settings and are at the centre

of community resilience and survival. Church groups, extended family networks, and sporting associations are examples of settings that provide opportunities for awareness raising, sense of community, belonging, and new ways of viewing ones community and position in a system. It is important that we expand our understanding of the ways and settings in which groups have resisted oppressive systems and evaluate those responses on the terms of those groups. This understanding should, as Potts (1993) suggested, include joining communities in their struggles against oppression.

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