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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Reflecting on a phenomenological study of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to present and reflect on a phenomenological research process used to elucidate the nature of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth unstructured interviews and field notes capturing subjective experiences were employed to elucidate the experiences of 18 top chefs from the UK, Spain, France, Austria and Germany with regards to creativity and innovation.

Findings – The findings are twofold: first, an empirical sample finding is presented in order to contextualize the type of findings obtained; second, key methodological findings are presented explaining the process of elucidating the nature of creativity and innovation through iterative learning from the descriptions of the interviewees and the subjective experiences gathered.

Research limitations/implications – The underlying phenomenological study is limited to male haute cuisine chefs in five European countries. Future research is planned including female and male chefs from other countries in order to learn whether similar empirical findings can be obtained.

Practical implications – The paper presents a research process for elucidating cognitive and nebulous phenomena such as creativity and innovation to make them accessible to managers, researchers, students and policy makers.

Originality/value – The findings explain the process of elucidating the nature of creativity and innovation through iterative learning from the descriptions of the interviewees and the subjective experiences gathered. Further conceptual and methodological development emerges from investigating interviewees representative of the notion of the extraordinary.

Keywords Phenomenology, Interviews, Chefs, Creativity, Innovation, Research methods, Cooking, Creative thinking, Western Europe

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report and reflect on a phenomenological research process elucidating the nature of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine. Unstructured in-depth interviews and field notes capturing the subjective experiences of the interviewer were employed to elucidate the experiences of 18 top chefs from the UK, Spain, France, Austria and Germany. We argue that our approach helps avoiding some of the difficulties associated with more traditional approaches and sheds light on

phenomena that otherwise may remain under-explored. In management and business research there is a tendency of applying micro-perspectives when studying creativity and innovation, which has deprived understanding of the phenomenology of creativity and innovation. The reason for this tendency may well be that both phenomena are cognitive and nebulous concepts and therefore are difficult to access by more traditional and dominant research approaches. Phenomenology is not such a dominant approach in management and business research, but it has a long-standing tradition in psychology aiming for elucidation of complex cognitive and nebulous phenomena that may not be accessible by more objective and quantitative research approaches.

The context of haute cuisine was chosen for three reasons. First, haute cuisine is one of a few sectors where expert judgement about creative and innovative performance is formalized and publicly available through institutions like Michelin's Guide Rouge or the Gault Millau restaurant guide. Second, haute cuisine restaurants have attracted little systematic research (Lane, 2010). And third, the interviewer has professional experience as chef in the haute cuisine sector, which facilitated elucidation of the interviewees' experiences and contributes to an understanding of the nature of creativity and innovation in the context of haute cuisine.

Furthermore, the interviewees were chosen, because they can be defined as being representative of "the extraordinary", a notion derived from recognized studies by Maslow (1970, 1971), Gardner (1993), Csíkszentmihályi (1997) and Nakamura *et al.* (2009). These authors define the extraordinary as an individual who is self-actualizing and able to destroy or fundamentally alter existing structures within a domain or create a new domain. In order to alter existing domain structures or create a new domain, creativity and innovation is required and therefore the underlying study focused only on extraordinary chefs. There is, however, a degree of subjectivity involved in selecting who counts as extraordinary and thus the interviewees had to be listed in Michelin's Guide Rouge and/or the Gault Millau guide, because these two restaurant guides are considered to be the two formal authorities for identifying chefs at the apex of culinary practice and creativity.

1. Philosophical framing

The philosophical underpinnings of the underlying study are derived from the ideas of Edmund Husserl's philosophical phenomenology. Phenomenology is not only the study of what people experience but also the study of the ways in which these experiences can be understood and how these experiences develop a worldview. This means that phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research approach.

Lived experience, life-world and intentionality

Finlay (2009) stresses that essential to all phenomenological research is a rich description of lived experience, which can be understood through the concept of the life-world being the context of experiences. A person's lived experience of a phenomenon is only understandable in the context of this person's life-world, because in this world individual perception and experience are altered by others, who also bring a wider range of perspectives through their opinions and experiences (Husserl, 1936). Husserl stressed that a person must engage in a dialogue with the world in order to grasp the subjective dimensions of experiences, which are vital to come as close to the experience as possible (see Laverty, 2003). Smith (2007) adds to this that these

subjective dimensions can only be accessed through introspection (i.e. self-observation) and therefore can only be described in subjective terms. Then, in order to grasp lived experiences they have to be contextualised within the life-world. This notion is called intentionality, which Husserl inherited from his mentor Franz Brentano, who explained it as "reference to a content, the directedness toward an object or the immanent object quality" (cited in Spiegelberg, 1971, p. 39).

Bracketing pre-understandings
Being a chef interviewing other chefs means by definition that one cannot refrain from pre-understandings and therefore one must try to bracket these pre-understandings. The process of bracketing is often misunderstood as the need to be unbiased and objective, but instead it is a process that can be seen as a "dialectic movement between bracketing preunderstandings and exploiting them reflexively as a source of insight" (Finlay, 2009, p. 13). This effect can be explained by the phenomenological concept of *qualia*, which is the subjective component of people's experiences (see, e.g. Jackson, 1982). Qualia cannot be transferred to others, only experienced subjectively. However, if two people (e.g. two chefs) have experienced qualia of the "same" phenomenon, they can talk about these qualia. So, being an interviewee with a chef background enabled the discussion of the qualia of culinary creativity and innovation, immensely enriching the data of the study.

Investigating the extraordinary
As aforementioned, the interviewees were chosen, because they can be described as being representative of "the extraordinary" as defined in recognized studies by Maslow (1970, 1971), Gardner (1993), Csíkszentmihályi (1997) and Nakamura *et al.* (2009). The authors have discussed elsewhere several reasons for investigating the extraordinary (see Dörfler and Stierand, 2009). The main reason, though, is that the extraordinary seems to be more representative of the phenomenon (e.g. creativity and innovation) than of the sample or population (e.g. chefs). Hence, the underlying study is based on the premise that there are extraordinary chefs and examining those helps to generate a better understanding of the cognitive and nebulous phenomena of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine, because these chefs are representative of the creativity and innovation in haute cuisine. This means that creativity and innovation in themselves are "extraordinary phenomena", because they are the result of "extraordinary actions". Essentially, this premise follows a logic outlined by Maslow (Maslow, 1971, p. 7):

> If we want to know how fast a human being can run, then it is no use to average out the speed of a "good sample" of the population; it is far better to collect Olympic gold medal winners and see how well they can do.

Investigating extraordinary people has the effect that the knowledge that can be gained from the direct and descriptive research findings is likely to be of a more transferrable quality and therefore easier to use for building theory, which numerous authors claim is as vital for qualitative as it is for quantitative research (e.g. Campbell and Stanley, 1966, Gibbert, 2006).

Description and interpretation
One of the most widely used phenomenological methods is that of Giorgi (e.g. 1985, 1994), who in the 1970s developed his conception of descriptive phenomenology in the

field of psychology by building on Husserl's ideas. Giorgi aims at the conscious essences of phenomena and their essential structures and his method is said to be particularly suitable for analyzing text such as transcribed interviews. However, one beneficial yet complicating factor of the underlying study is that the interviewer has professional experience as chef in the haute cuisine sector, which facilitated elucidation of the interviewees' experiences, but required rigorous reflection. Hence, the philosophical stance of this research is interpretivist using both description and interpretation (see Tsoukas, 1989) and thus can be seen as an extension of Giorgi's original method. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology was chosen over other phenomenological variants, because the research question of the underlying study is 'What is the lived experience of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine?' and Giorgi's approach is suitable for these types of research questions. Table I provides a comparison between some of the key phenomenological variants (see Finlay, 2008).

2. Research process
Interviewee identification and selection
As aforementioned, interviewees were identified based on their mentioning in the Michelin and/or the Gault Millau guides, because these two restaurant guides are

Variant	Typical research question	Aim
Descriptive	What is the lived experience of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine?	To identify the essential or general structures underlying the phenomena of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine
Heuristic	What is my experience of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine?	To produce a composite description and creative synthesis of the experience of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine
Lifeworld	What is the lifeworld of one who is engaged with creativity and innovation in haute cuisine?	To focus on existential themes such as the person's sense of self-identity and embodied relations with others when experiencing creativity and innovation in haute cuisine
IPA	What is the individual experience of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine?	To capture individual variations between co-researchers. Thematic analysis would involve some explicit interpretation on the part of both co-researcher and researcher
Critical narrative	What story or stories does a person tell of their experience of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine?	To produce a narrative (perhaps from just one person) and to show how the narrative was co-created in the research context
Relational	What is it like to be a creator and innovator in haute cuisine?	To focus on the co-researchers' self-identity and "creative adjustment"

Source: Based on Finlay (2008)

Table I.
Comparison of phenomenological variants

considered to be the two formal authorities for identifying chefs at the apex of culinary practice and creativity. The interviewees were then selected based on a number of other data sources: interviewer's personal experience as chef in the haute cuisine sector, articles from the trade press, websites of chefs, cookery books, and an interview with the German Chef Harald Wohlfahrt (www.traube-tonbach.de; 3* Michelin). This range of data facilitated the identification and justification of chefs who have experience with the phenomena under investigation and would be useful for the purpose of the research.

The interview with Chef Wohlfahrt offered rich insight, but also helped to encourage other chefs to participate, because he signed a letter of support. Originally written in German, this letter was then translated into French and English and sent via email first to chefs he had personally recommended. Because of Wohlfahrt's strong reputation in the sector, the responses were mainly positive. After these positive answers, additional emails were sent out now also listing the names of the new participants, which again encouraged more chefs to participate.

In total 35 chefs from the UK, France, Spain, Austria and Germany were contacted of which nine did not reply, seven refused, and 19 agreed to participate. One chef, unfortunately, had to cancel the interview appointment because of TV commitments. This meant that at the end a total of 18 chefs was interviewed comprising two chefs from the UK, four chefs from France, three chefs from Spain, two chefs from Austria and seven chefs from Germany. This selection does not suggest any professional or personal preferences, but is merely the result of a convenience sampling strategy. Table II lists all participating chefs, names of their restaurants and locations.

Data collection
The data collection part of the research process (see Table III) has been conducted through unstructured interviews (Van Enk, 2009, p. 2) and relied only on some pre-planned topics, because the aim was to achieve at an emergent dialogue that could help elucidate and better understand the interviewees' experiences with the phenomena (see Kwortnik, 2003, Melissen and Stierand, 2010). This interviewing style was possible due to the interviewer's previous chef experience, which eased the building of trust and in-depth conversations between professionals. With hindsight this style would not have been so rewarding without this previous experience, which became particularly apparent when discussing complex situations, because of the natural use of metaphors, specialist terms of the profession, and examples from practice.

However, this previous experience required the interviewer to rigorously self-reflect after each interview. This process of self-reflection was maintained by critical debates within the research team and by actively practising the process of bracketing through listening and looking at the interviews as openly as possible (see Giorgi, 1994). These two practises helped distinguishing between those parts of the pre-understanding that might blur and those parts that help developing a deeper insight and understanding of the interviewees' accounts (see Finlay, 2009).

Data analysis
The interviews were first analyzed using Giorgi's (1994, 1985) descriptive phenomenological approach. Later, a second layer of analysis was applied offering a

Chef	Michelin/Gault Millau ranking (at time of research)	Restaurant
UK		
Fergus Henderson	1*/–	St John's, London
Raymond Blanc	2*/–	Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Great Milton
France		
Jean-Georges Klein	3*/18	L'Arnsbourg, Baerenthal
Michel Troisgros	3*/19	Maison Troisgros, Roanne
Michel Bras	3*/19	Bras, Laguiole
Sébastien Bras	3*/19	Bras, Laguiole
Spain		
Andoni Luis Aduriz	2*/–	Mugaritz, Errenteria
Joan Roca	2*/–	El Celler de Can Roca, Girona
Ferran Adrià	3*/–	El Bulli, Roses
Austria		
Heinz Reitbauer	2*/19	Steirereck, Vienna
Roland Trettl	1*/18	Ikarus im Hangar-7, Salzburg
Germany		
Harald Wohlfahrt	3*/19	Schwarzwaldstube, Baiersbronn
Dieter Müller	3*/19	Dieter Müller, Bergish Gladbach
Nils Henkel	3*/19	Dieter Müller (now Gourmetrestaurant Lerbach), Bergish Gladbach
Heinz Winkler	3*/19	Venezianisches Restaurant, Aschau
Hans Haas	2*/18	Tantris, Munich
Joachim Wissler	3*/19	Vendôme, Bergisch Gladbach
Juan Amador	3*/17	Amador, Langen

more interpretive account of what was learned about the nature of culinary creativity and innovation from analyzing the interviewees' accounts. The reason for adding a second layer of analysis started intuitively, because it seemed that the interview data and the subjective experiences gathered during the field trip could offer a much richer and broader understanding of the nature of creativity and innovation. This richer and broader understanding can be called the meta-level of the findings, which may be defined as a pattern laying beyond the descriptive findings, or as the essence, structure, loosely coupled associations, or specific implications of the descriptive findings.

By using this rather unusual two-layer analysis it became clear that the ongoing debate about whether a phenomenological study should be descriptive or more interpretive should change into a debate about how the analysis can be made more transparent so that others can recover how the findings emerged and why they form a convincing story. Following this train of thought, the first layer of analysis was descriptive and was particularly important for the classification of meaning units from the raw interview data and the generation of themes. In turn, these first-layer themes themselves form a framework that was used as a starting point for the second layer of analysis that was interpretative explaining what was learned about the nature of culinary creativity and innovation from analyzing the interviewees' accounts. The entire research process is summarized in Table III.

|	Interviewee identification and selection	Data collection	Data analysis
Research methods employed	Identification based on mentoring in Michelin/ Gault Millau Selection using purposive and convenience sampling based on: • Interviewer's chef background • Trade press articles, chefs' websites, cookery books, etc. • Interview with chef Harald Wohlfahrt (→ signed letter of support)	Unstructured in-depth interviews and research notes capturing the subjective experience of the interviewer Only some pre-planned topics Aim was to achieve an emergent dialogue Interviewer's chef background helped to create trust and enhanced understanding Interviewer's chef background required enhanced need for self-reflection and bracketing of pre-understandings	Transcription of digitally recorded interviews First layer of analysis using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach to identify meaning units and themes in each interview followed by an identification of general themes considering all interviews together Second layer of analysis was the interviewer's interpretation of what he learned about the nature of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine from analyzing the interviewees' accounts and from taking the subjective experiences (captured in the research notes) into consideration

Table III.
Summary of the research process

3. A sample finding: the concept of harmony

In this section only the sample finding of "harmony" is presented to provide better contextual understanding for the remainder of the paper. As aforementioned, the first layer of analysis was descriptive and was particularly important for the classification of meaning units from the raw interview data and the generation of themes. Figure 1 shows those themes that relate to the concept of harmony as described by the chefs.

Most of the chefs talked about harmony but in a variety of ways using metaphoric descriptions often with reference to the arts. We gathered the chefs' descriptions about harmony and organized them in themes as illustrated in Figure 1. However, there was unavoidably a certain degree of subjectivity involved because the descriptions emerged from the interaction between interviewer and interviewee and the themes were organized first by the interviewer and then discussed with the research team. Hence, we used the notion of bracketing described above as good as possible.

These first-layer themes, in turn, were used as a starting point for the second layer of analysis that was interpretative in nature. The reason why this second layer of analysis was interpretative can be understood by looking at the terms highlighted in bold in Figure 1. These terms became "search terms" when we re-visited the literature we used before, and when we reviewed new literature aiming to better understand the essence of the concept of harmony.

From this second literature review we learned that harmony is typically mentioned in the field of music or architectural aesthetics and is often associated with beauty because "the beautiful is that which pleases universally without a concept" (Immanuel
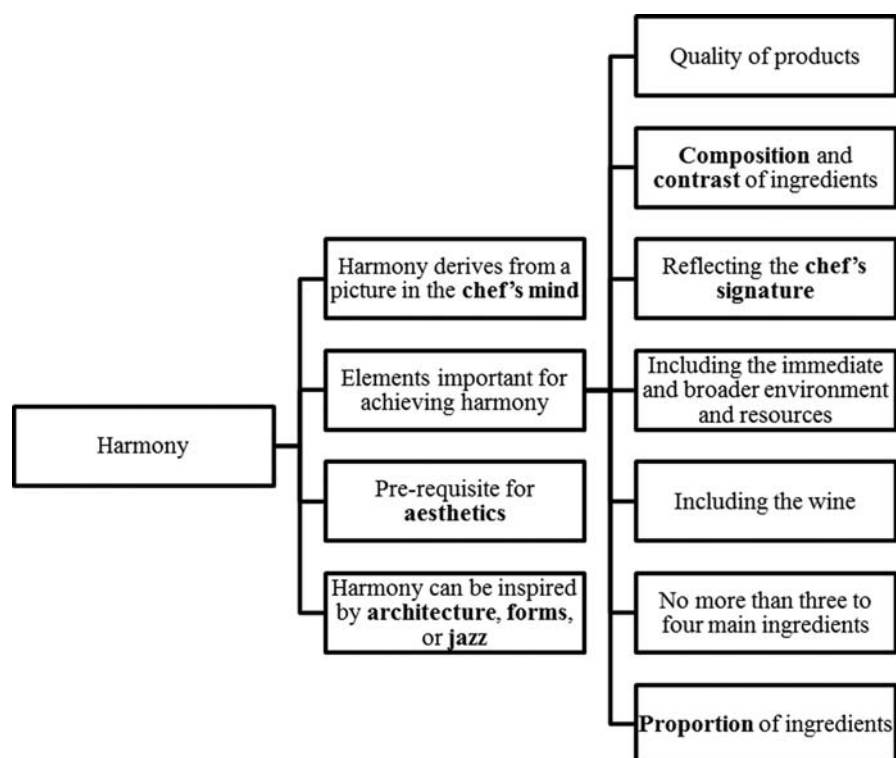
Kant cited in Naini *et al.*, 2006, p. 277). Furthermore, the concept of proportion emerged as essential feature of harmony in the literature on art. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, stated that proportion is the ratio between the individual parts and the whole (Naini *et al.*, 2006). The proportion of the so-called golden ratio can be found, for instance, in the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci and Piet Mondrian, in the Notre Dame Cathedral and in the Sagrada Familia. Also composers like Béla Bartók and Frédéric Chopin have evidently used the power of the golden ratio by setting the climax of their compositions accordingly (Gross and Miller, 1997). The reason we have found in the literature for using the golden ration is that it "allows the minor element to occupy a portion of the whole that makes it maximally striking" without making any of the parts excessive (Berlyne, 1971, p. 232). This idiographic explanation is very much in line with the descriptive findings about the need for a harmonious composition and contrast of ingredients in a dish in terms of aesthetics, smell, taste, and even between the dish and the whole ambient of the restaurant in which it is served, including the weather outside, the music, etc.

4. Discussion and concluding reflections
While we refer in our paper to a study elucidating the nature of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine, it is interesting to ask whether the research process presented here may also be useful for studying creativity and innovation in other

contexts and for studying other cognitive and nebulous phenomena. Thus it is important to define what "type of findings" can be achieved by following such a research process. Unlike dominant, more structured, and often quantitative approaches, the epistemological outcomes of a phenomenological study cannot be presented following the positivist ideal of objectivity, reliability and validity. It is, however, possible to reveal the trustworthiness of phenomenological findings. Wolcott (1996, p. 136), for example, says that while his work is not guided by validity, he is in search of critical themes and aims to write credible interpretations, which reflect his learning and understanding.

In our study we applied a two-layer analysis starting with an idiographic description of the interviewees' accounts and then progressing towards an idiographic explanation that emerged through the researchers' iterative learning from both the interviewees' accounts and the subjective experiences gathered. It is merely impossible to visualise such a cognitive and nebulous learning process, but maybe the following example of a research note (see Figure 2) including the subjective experiences of the interviewer and an example of a drawing negotiating meaning during one of the interviews can help to at least imagine how the data for the underlying study was gathered and analysed.

On the left-hand side is an example of a research note following the template of Schatzman and Strauss (1973, pp. 95-107). The observational and conceptual notes, in particular, were helpful in re-experiencing the interview and provided little pieces of evidence supporting first the process of descriptive analysis and later the interpretive explanation. The right-hand side is a typical example of an attempt to derive meaning at the descriptive level. Based on this kind of meaning negotiation the meta-levels of
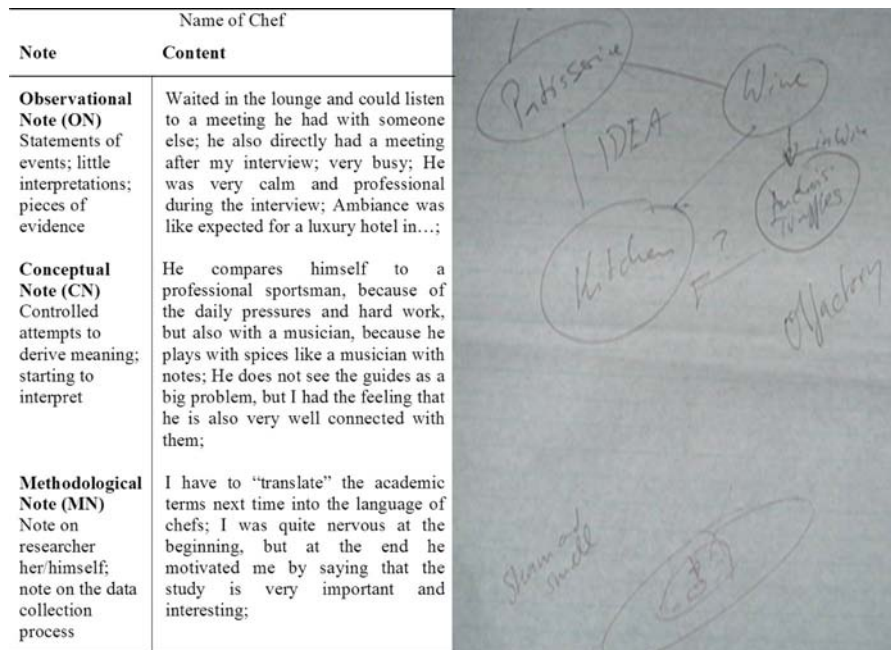
Figure 2.
Research note example and elucidating meaning during interview

the findings were easier to derive, because the interviewees naturally revealed more of their lived experience and life-world through this negotiating with another chef. This makes it at least plausible that the research process on hand may also be useful for studying other cognitive and nebulous phenomena.

Hence, a phenomenological study can offer alternative criteria than reliability or validity: It can offer an "Aha!" moment when presenting the essence of a phenomenon and when both researcher and reader have a sense of being "gripped by the phenomenon understood" in the way it is presented (Crotty, 1996, p. 169). This is also confirmed by Hayllar and Griffin (2005) by saying that this very moment resembles Buytendijk's "phenomenological nod", which Van Manen (1990, p. 27) describes as the moment when we can nod to a description, because it is "collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience."

As we hope we have demonstrated, a research approach like ours does not have to be less rigorous than the more widely accepted ones. In fact, our underlying intention is to challenge both the research and practice communities to critically re-think their entrenched fear of such approaches, because they are often considered as soft, non-transparent, beyond comprehension, against scientific conventions, or just not handy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Lipshitz *et al.*, 2001; Moore *et al.*, 2011).

There are, however, a number of limitations to the underlying study that need to be addressed. The study is limited to male haute cuisine chefs in five European countries, but future research is planned including female and male chefs from other countries in order to learn whether similar empirical findings can be obtained. There are also plans to continue this research in other contexts, such as scientific knowledge, music, painting, etc to investigate whether the findings can really be transferred to other contexts. Thus, this paper is also an invitation for other researchers to test and comment on the research approach presented here and to discuss their experiences whether their investigations are in the same or any other context and whether they are studying the same or any other cognitive and nebulous phenomena.

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