

The role of educational attitudes and the modelling influence of parents on the development of task-oriented coping strategies among young people in situations of social conflict

Rola postaw wychowawczych i modelującego wpływu rodziców na kształtowanie zadaniowej strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacjach konfliktu społecznego

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to identify family predictors of task-oriented coping strategies among adolescents in situations of social conflict. The study was conducted among 893 adolescents (468 girls and 425 boys) aged 13–15. The Skala Postaw Rodzicielskich [Parental attitudes scale] (SPR) by Plopa, the Kwestionariusz do badania strategii radzenia sobie rodziców w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego [Questionnaire for assessing parents' coping strategies in situations of social conflict] (SRwSK) by Borecka-Biernat, and the Kwestionariusz do badania strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego [Questionnaire for assessing adolescents' coping strategies in situations of social conflict] (KSMK) by Borecka-Biernat were used. Among the family determinants of an adolescent's task-oriented response to emotional tension arising in a conflict situation, the correct parenting attitudes towards the adolescent child and providing the young person with task-oriented models of how parents cope in situations of social conflict have a significant impact. The results of this study provide theoretical guidelines for the development of educational strategies. These strategies could create active individuals who are capable of making efforts to resolve and overcome conflicts and who can deal rationally with problems related to school, peers, and the family home.

Keywords: youth; family; task-oriented coping strategy; social conflict situation

Abstrakt: Celem badań było poszukiwanie rodzinnych predyktorów strategii zadaniowego radzenia sobie dorastającej młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego. Badania przeprowadzono wśród 893 osób (468 dziewcząt i 425 chłopców) w wieku 13–15 lat. Posłużono się Skalą Postaw Rodzicielskich (SPR) Plopy, Kwestionariuszem do badania strategii radzenia sobie rodziców w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego (SRwSK) Boreckiej-Biernat i Kwestionariuszem do badania strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego (KSMK) Boreckiej-Biernat. Wśród rodzinnych uwarunkowań zadaniowego sposobu reagowania adolescenta na napięcie emocjonalne powstające w sytuacji konfliktowej istotny wpływ mają prawidłowe postawy wychowawcze rodziców wobec dorastającego dziecka oraz dostarczanie młodemu człowiekowi wzorów zadaniowego sposobu radzenia sobie rodziców w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego. Rezultaty tych badań stanowią wskazówki teoretyczne w opracowaniu strategii wychowawczych, kreujących jednostkę aktywną, zdolną do podejmowania wysiłków zmierzających do rozwiązania i przewycięzania konfliktów oraz radzącą sobie w sposób racjonalny z problemami dotyczącymi szkoły, kolegów i domu rodzinnego.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież; rodzina; strategia zadaniowego radzenia sobie; sytuacja konfliktu społecznego

Introduction

Socially difficult situations are not unique in human life. On the contrary, these situations accompany people from early childhood. Among difficult social interactions, situations of social conflict can be distinguished, in which a person's aspirations are contradictory or incompatible with those of other people and the fulfilment of their aspirations is threatened (Balawajder 2010, 138). Conflicts can take various forms, ranging from harmless conflicts that can be resolved amicably to antagonistic conflicts that are resolved through the elimination, destruction or subjugation of one of the parties (Cywińska 2004, 178–180; Printz, Foster, Kent et al. 2000, 697–700). Interpersonal conflicts affect people of all ages and from all walks of life. It is impossible to avoid them, if only because they are caused by the interaction of people, each of whom has different individual characteristics, predispositions and skills. During everyday interaction, there are often clashes of views, judgments and aspirations between people who come into contact with each other in specific social situations. Conflicts are therefore a manifestation of the autonomy, identity and individuality of the person. For this reason, it should be accepted that conflicts are a natural phenomenon in human environments.

Task-based strategy for coping with social conflict among young people

Adults usually underestimate how many difficult social situations young people have to deal with every day. Adolescence is a difficult but important period in a person's life, filled with crises and conflicts (Brzezińska, Appelt and Ziółkowska 2016, 264–265; Czerwińska-Jasiewicz 2015, 48–49). A characteristic feature of adolescence is the pursuit of autonomy, independence, breaking free from adult control, mainly that of parents, and personal identity (Laird and Marrero 2011, 210–215; Branje 2018, 171–172). Young people gain more freedom and independence in their decisions regarding various areas of behaviour and develop new forms of self-expression, which increases the likelihood of conflicts arising. During adolescence, young people find themselves in several environments: school, school class, youth groups, and family. In their social interactions, conflicts with teachers, arguments with schoolmates and crushes, as well as quarrels with parents and other family members emerge (Ciupińska 2011, 100–118; Garstka 2011, 12; Gurba 2020, 128–130; Polak 2010, 24–30; Riesch, Bush, Nelson et al. 2000, 27; Stańkowski 2009, 65–69). Conflict on these three social levels is an everyday, inevitable and even natural situation for them. For some young people, conflicts with teachers, peers, and parents are an important source of emotional tension and personal threat. In the school environment, young people have to face many challenges posed by the school institution. In their peer environment, they learn to find their place in a mosaic of different personalities. In the family environment, they learn to socialise. Fulfilling the social roles of a student, a friend, and a child involves meeting expectations. When these expectations are unreasonable and difficult to meet or contradictory, young people find themselves in a difficult situation that is a perfect breeding ground for conflict. Strict discipline from school and parents, insufficient independence for young people, and a lack of understanding of their interests lead to arguments, fights, and rebellion.

Conflict cannot be eliminated, but it is possible and even necessary to strive to resolve it as soon as it arises. Therefore, every person needs to learn how to deal with social conflicts. It follows that in the conflict process, it is not so much the occurrence of conflict itself that is important, but rather learning how to resolve conflicts with less harm to oneself, other people and, in addition, with benefit to the cause that divides the opposing parties. This means that it is not the occurrence of a conflict itself, but the way it is dealt with and the resolution of the disputed issue that influences harmonious coexistence with others. The remedial behaviour adopted by a person in a social conflict situation is one of the most important predictors of protection against the

negative effects of everyday life problems (Endler, Speer, Johnson et al. 2000, 249–250). It is therefore worth considering how adolescents deal with conflicts related to relationships at school, with their peers and within the family. Many studies indicate that young people have a rich set of strategies for coping with difficult social situations, including social conflict (Balawajder 2012, 241–243; De Wied, Branje and Meeus 2007, 52–54; Kobus and Reyes 2000, 169–173; Krok 2007, 120–125; Lachowska 2010, 181–183; Miłkowska 2010, 24–29; Pisula and Sikora 2008, 409–414; Talik 2011, 130–135; Trylińska-Tekielska 2007, 21–33; Williams and McGillicuddy-De Lisi 2000, 544–548). These include strategies for constructive coping in situations of social conflict. They include a task-oriented strategy in the form of active intervention in conflict situations, which is aimed at resolving and overcoming the conflict and is assessed as adaptive. Its essence is effective focus on solving the problem. This includes attempts to make changes within one's activities by reaching an agreement with a partner to find a common solution to disputed issues. It is assumed that the goals and needs of the participants in the dispute are taken into account assertively, where nothing is done at the expense of the other side or the expense of one's own goals and interests (Kłusek-Wojciszke 2009, 120–122). Thus, a situation of social conflict is treated as a problem to be solved, requiring the individual to increase their efforts, change the details of their tactics, use their physical and intellectual abilities, and come up with a new idea to achieve the goal of resolving the conflict. The task-oriented strategy is highly effective thanks to the achievement of intended or equivalent goals, despite the conflict situation. A task-oriented solution to a conflict resolves the dispute or minimises the likelihood of its recurrence. Individuals using this type of strategy gain a sense of agency and control, which strengthens their creative activity.

To sum up, conflicts, as an inherent factor of social life, are common and cannot be avoided. They should be treated as a normal part of human life. It seems fair to say that conflicts are inherent in human existence and nature. Conflicts should be resolved because they are conflict-generating. Long-lasting conflicts tend to distort interpersonal relationships and lead to deep wounds. Young people who are creating and realising specific life plans are exposed to conflict situations related to school, peer relationships, and family relationships. When confronted with a dispute at school, in their relationships with their peers or at home, some young people adopt a task-oriented strategy based on independent problem solving. They treat conflict as a challenge, which prompts them to mobilise their resources to overcome obstacles that prevent them from fulfilling their needs. A common feature of task-oriented activities is their effectiveness, as they enable the achievement of prior or equivalent goals despite the difficulties that arise.

Task-oriented strategy for coping with social conflict among young people – family implications

Children learn to cope with various difficulties in life during their development in specific educational conditions. When the family is concerned, these conditions are largely determined by educational attitudes (Tyszkowa 1986, 52). The system of parenting attitudes between parents and children has a very significant impact on their social development, becoming a prototype for social coexistence and solving difficult social situations. The literature on the subject provides evidence that constructive (task-oriented) forms of responding to difficult social situations in adolescents, which are intended to ensure the achievement of a goal despite strong emotional tension, are a consequence of positive parental attitudes (Borecka-Biernat 2006, 136–137; Cywińska 1998, 15; Januszewska 2001, 332–334; Węglowska-Rzepa 2010, 246–247; Wolfrand, Hempel and Miles 2003, 528–530). These can be summarised as follows:

- accepting children as they are, with their appearance, disposition, and cognitive abilities. Positive feelings such as kindness, trust, and sympathy dominate the relationship between parents and children. Parents take an interest in their child's progress at school, their plans and ambitions, and allow them to participate in decision-making and take their abilities into account when assigning tasks. They do not isolate them from their peers. They allow them to take responsibility for their actions and show that they expect mature behaviour. In the event of inappropriate behaviour, they use reason and persuasion. In these educational conditions, the child feels safe, has a positive attitude towards people, is not afraid of difficulties and can cope effectively with a wide variety of difficult situations;
- cooperation with the children in various household chores or entertainment. This leads to an exchange of views and discussion with parents. The children discuss various everyday matters with their parents, express their opinions, which contributes to the making of specific decisions. As a result, they become trusting towards their parents, capable of cooperation and making independent commitments, and turn to them for advice and help in difficult situations;
- giving children reasonable freedom, within limits appropriate to their age. The scope of this freedom increases with the child's age and mental maturity. Parents create opportunities for children to satisfy their need for activity and independence. Children decide on their affairs within the framework of accepted moral and social norms. Under such conditions, children develop creativity, originality, a desire to overcome obstacles and an ability to adapt easily to different situations;

- recognition of the children's rights related to their developmental needs and granting them the right to autonomy. Parents respect their individuality. They offer suggestions to their children without imposing anything on them or forcing them to do anything. Such behaviour on the part of parents encourages children to be active.

These are parenting attitudes defined by Maria Ziemska (2009, 54–65) as correct, which enable the development of habits in adolescents to respond to situations of social conflict by actively seeking a solution to difficulties. Positive emotional relationships in the family environment, filled with warmth and acceptance, parents showing interest in their children's problems, supporting them in making important decisions, while at the same time leaving them space for their initiative and activity, as well as praising them and using persuasion, while avoiding punishment, equip adolescents with constructive strategies that serve to resolve conflicts and regulate unpleasant emotions.

In shaping a specific habit of behaviour towards difficulties, it is not only important what creates the conditions for gaining experience in action and its proper organisation, but also the patterns of how to respond to difficulties. The family is an environment that creates natural conditions conducive to learning how to respond to difficult situations. Through its systematic and long-term influence on the child, and as the first place where the child socialises, the family has a huge role in passing on patterns of social behaviour. Children learn a lot of social behaviour and ways of solving problems by copying their parents. Parents are usually the first important role models for children in learning through observation (Bandura, 2007, 37–40). When performing a task together with a parent, a child learns to cope with difficulties by observing how the parent does it. The daily interpersonal interactions of adult family members provide children with their first model of social coexistence. The parents' behaviour towards each other in various situations, especially during conflicts, is closely observed and then modelled by the child. By observing their parents, children learn how to resolve conflicts. It is worth adding that the behavioural patterns that parents provide to their children, due to their primacy and the duration of their influence, have the strongest impact on their consciousness and behaviour.

For the development of task-oriented forms of responding to difficulties, patterns of appropriate coping mechanisms are of great importance, i.e., perseverance in overcoming difficulties and enduring emotional tension. Children in situations that prevent them from achieving their goals behave as they have previously learned to behave from their parents in similar situations. If children have previously observed task-oriented responses, their actions in problematic

situations will generally be similar. When confronted with difficulties, they prefer, among constructive strategies, to reanalyse the situation and repeat their efforts to solve the task on their own. The social activity of parents and their lack of inhibitions in social interaction situations help to shape appropriate habits in children for responding to difficult situations (Barani, Szmigielska 2012, 87–92; Borecka-Biernat 2006, 156–157; Liberska 2002, 50–52; Rostowska 1997, 393–396).

In summary, the family is an environment where social learning occurs, teaching how to respond to difficult situations that pose a threat to the fulfilment of aspirations or the achievement of goals through modelling. Here, the behaviour exhibited by a significant person, mainly a parent, is more easily absorbed by the adolescent child observing them, especially when the model is competent (or perceived as such) in the area of activity, has a system of reinforcement, and the effects of the model's actions are approved within the family. As can be seen, the task-oriented strategy for coping with social conflict is a learned form of behaviour resulting from observation and frequent contact with people who exhibit such behaviour, i.e., as a result of the influence of role models, most often parents.

Research problem

Empirical research focused on family determinants of task-oriented coping strategies in situations of social conflict, with particular attention to parenting attitudes and parental coping strategies in situations of social conflict. The research aimed to answer the following question:

1. What set of family variables is associated with the fact that task-oriented strategies are used more frequently by young people in situations of social conflict?

This research question allows us to formulate the following hypothesis, which will be verified by analysing the results of the empirical research:

H.1. The task-oriented coping strategy of young people in conflict situations is related to the perception of parental attitudes as correct and co-occurs with the task-oriented coping strategy of parents (one or both) presented in social conflict situations.

It is worth noting here that most of the research on the strategies used by young people in coping with difficult social situations, including social conflicts, was conducted over ten years ago, and therefore the research conducted allows for supplementing and updating knowledge in this area.

Research method

The research participants and the research procedure

A group of 468 girls and 425 boys aged 13–15 were surveyed. A total of 893 people participated in the study. The respondents were students of public schools from Wrocław and the surrounding area. Schools were selected at random, but not all of the schools selected agreed to participate in the study, so in several cases, schools that were not selected but were willing to cooperate were approached. The study was conducted mostly during the form periods. The study was group-based, and participation was voluntary. The students signed with pseudonyms or initials. Before starting the study, participants who had obtained parental consent to participate were given detailed instructions on how to proceed. The study was conducted following the principles of psychological research.

The basic criterion for selecting the students was their age. The influence of age on the selection of strategies for coping with social conflict was analysed in the 13–15 age group (adolescence). Adolescence is a period of instability in the behaviour of teenagers, a period of conflict with their environment, themselves, and often accompanied by a feeling of misunderstanding. Many biological, psychological, mental and motivational changes take place in social attitudes, which often cause young people to have many problems in adapting their behaviour to new situations, tasks and social roles (Czerwińska-Jasiewicz, 2015). Young people aged 13–15 seem to be a good group to study in order to learn about task-oriented strategies for coping with situations of strong emotional tension, such as social conflict.

Research tools

The following methods were used in the study:

- *Skala Postaw Rodzicielskich* [Parental attitudes scale] (SPR) (Plopa 2015, 339–361) is used to examine parenting attitudes as perceived by children. It consists of 75 statements in versions for mothers and fathers. Respondents rate each statement, choosing one of four possible answers: “true,” “rather true,” “difficult to say,” “rather untrue,” and “untrue,” assigning them 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 points respectively. The questionnaire consists of 5 scales, each containing 15 statements. These are: *Acceptance-Rejection Attitude*, *Autonomy Attitude*, *Protective Attitude*, *Demanding Attitude*,

and *Inconsistent Attitude*. The SPR questionnaire is a standardised tool. The reliability coefficients range from 0.81 to 0.92 for the “My mother” version and from 0.79 to 0.91 for the “My father” version. The high theoretical validity of this tool was confirmed on the basis of the internal structure of the test and the method of testing intergroup differences, as well as criterion validity.

- *Kwestionariusz do badania strategii radzenia sobie rodziców w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego* [Questionnaire for assessing parents’ coping strategies in situations of social conflict] (SRwSK) (Borecka-Biernat, 2013, 223–243) consists of two versions: “My mother” and “My father.” It is designed to examine parents’ coping strategies in situations of social conflict, with these behaviours being perceived by their adolescent children. The tool contains descriptions of 16 situations of social conflict in the “My mother” version and the same number of descriptions in the “My father” version. For each situation, four behaviours are given, expressing how parents cope with social conflict as perceived by their child – the first refers to aggressive coping (A), the second to avoidant coping (U), the third to submissive coping (UI), and the fourth to task-oriented coping in social conflict situations (Z). The results are obtained for each scale separately by summing up the behaviours selected in 16 situations belonging to a given scale. For the needs of our research, we used the Scale (“Z”) of task-oriented coping of the mother/father in a social conflict situation. The questionnaire in the “My mother” and “My father” versions is characterised by good reliability (Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency coefficient is approximately or above 0.70) and concurrent validity.
- *Kwestionariusz do badania strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego* [Questionnaire for assessing adolescents’ coping strategies in situations of social conflict] (KSMK) (Borecka-Biernat, 2012, 86–107) is designed to assess the strategies used by adolescents to cope with social conflict. It consists of descriptions of 33 social conflict situations. For each situation, four behaviours expressing coping with a social conflict situation are given – the first refers to aggressive coping (“A”), the second to avoidant coping (“U”), the third to submissive coping (“UI”), and the fourth to task-oriented (constructive) coping in a social conflict situation (“Z”). The results are obtained for each scale separately by summing up the behaviours marked in the 33 situations belonging to a given scale. For our research, we used the Scale (“Z”) of task-oriented coping of young people in social conflict situations. The questionnaire is characterised by good reliability (Cronbach’s internal consistency coefficient α is approximately or above 0.70) and concurrent validity.

Results

To determine which set of family variables predicts the level of task-oriented coping strategies in social conflict among adolescents, it was decided to use hierarchical regression with the backwards elimination method (criterion: probability of F-removal ≥ 0.100). The method involves introducing all potential predictors into the model and then successively removing irrelevant variables, followed by recalculating the model until the final form is obtained (Bedyńska and Książek 2012, 49–55). It allows the magnitude and direction of the influence of individual independent variables on the dependent variable to be determined. The dependent variable was taken as the results on the task scale of young people's coping in situations of social conflict ("Z"). The results on the five scales of the SPR questionnaire in the "My mother" and "My father" versions were treated as a set of independent variables (acceptance-rejection attitude, autonomy attitude, protective attitude, demanding attitude, and inconsistent attitude) and the task-based coping scale in situations of social conflict ("Z") from the SRwSK questionnaire in the "My mother" and "My father" versions. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Stepwise regression for the Task Scale score ("Z") of the KSMK concerning the SPR and SRwSK scales in the "My Mother" and "My Father" versions: results for the total group (N=893).*

Participants	Variable	Beta	B	B Standard error	t	p<
Total	A demanding mother's attitude	-.11	-.06	.02	-3.74	<.001
	The father's attitude of autonomy	.09	.05	.02	3.00	.003
	"Z-score" of the mother	.35	.69	.06	10.86	<.001
	"Z-score" of the father	.09	.20	.07	2.83	.005
	constant term		9.20	1.34	6.89	<.001
Coefficient of multiple correlation: $R=.47$ Coefficient of multiple determination: $R^2=.22$ Significance of the equation: $F(4,888)=62.31$; $p<.001$ The standard error of the estimate: 5.73						

Source: Author's own study.

The determinants of a task-oriented strategy as a way of coping with social conflict among young people are: a demanding attitude of the mother ($\beta=-.11$; $p<.001$), an attitude of autonomy of the father ($\beta=.09$; $p=.003$), and a task-oriented coping strategy of the mother ($\beta=.35$; $p<.001$) and father ($\beta=.09$; $p=.005$)

in a situation of social conflict. The other independent variables included in the study proved to be insignificant determinants of the task strategy used by young people in situations of social conflict. The multiple correlation coefficient is $R=.47$, indicating that the linear relationship between the task-oriented coping strategy of adolescents in situations of social conflict and the combined influence of the above-mentioned variables is moderate. The multiple determination coefficient $R^2=.22$ indicates that 22% of the variance of the dependent variable “task strategy” in the group of young people was explained by the influence of the adopted set of independent variables [$F(4.888)=62.31$; $p<.001$]. The Beta values indicate that the lower the level of the desired attitude of the demanding mother and the higher the level of the father’s autonomy attitude and the higher the level of the task-oriented coping strategy of the mother and father in a social conflict situation, the higher the level of the task-oriented coping strategy of young people in a social conflict situation.

In view of the statistical verification, it can be concluded that the results obtained allowed for positive verification of the validity of the research hypothesis H.1.

Discussion

An analysis of the research results revealed that conditions conducive to the development of a task-oriented strategy for coping with social conflict among young people include support from the father in making important decisions, as well as autonomy and space for initiative and activity. The father sees his adolescent child as a separate person with a life and needs of the child’s own. By avoiding excessive interference, fathers encourage their adolescent children to develop independence and take responsibility for their activities, learn a task-oriented approach to difficulties, and express approval for their attempts to solve their problems in situations of conflict. The less protective a father is and the more he allows his adolescent children to confront various life situations, both positive and negative, the more confident they become and the more constructive their actions are in difficult social situations. There is no doubt that in situations important to teenage children, the father intervenes. On the one hand, they are encouraged to be independent and show initiative, but on the other hand, by taking advantage of their freedom, they know that, if necessary or in case of real danger, they can count on their father’s help. As can be seen, the recognition of an adolescent child’s rights by a parent equips them with a task-oriented strategy that is effective in overcoming social conflict (Bhattacharyya and Pradhan 2015, 189–190; Januszewska 2001, 332–334; Klink, Byars-Winston and Bakken 2008, 578–579; McCarthy, Lambert and Seraphine 2004, 118–121; Wolfrand, Hempel

and Miles 2003, 528–530). A father who can satisfy an adolescent child's need for independence makes them more resistant to potential and real threats and enables them to develop habits of responding to situations of social conflict in the form of actively seeking a way out of situations of divergent aspirations. In general, it can be said that by creating a supportive environment while respecting independence, a father provides a sense of security that seems to foster a task-oriented strategy for young people in situations of social conflict.

The research also reveals that the task-oriented strategy adopted by young people is significantly influenced by the behaviour observed in their mother and father: focus on the problem during times of conflict, active problem solving and persistence in attempting to resolve the problem. It turned out that the task-oriented coping strategy of the mother and father during a conflict situation is important for the intensification of the task-oriented coping strategy of young people. The task-oriented strategy of young people is therefore influenced by their mother and father. The similarity of coping strategies in social conflict situations between parents and their adolescent children indicates that young people acquire task-oriented coping strategies through social learning by observing and modelling their mother and father. The data presented above indicate that parents' task-oriented responses to conflict are of great importance for the development of task-oriented forms of response to social conflict in young people. When faced with situations that hinder the pursuit of their goals, young people behave as they have previously learned to do from their parents in similar situations. If young people have previously observed task-oriented responses, their reactions to problems will most often be similar (Borecka-Biernat 2006, 291–292; Liberska 2002, 52–53; Rostowska 1997, 396–398). The results presented suggest that the task-oriented way in which young people cope with social conflict is socially determined, and one of its sources is the influence of parents (models) who also use a task-oriented strategy to deal with social conflict.

In conclusion, the conducted research revealed that among the family conditions influencing the task-oriented response of adolescents to emotional tension arising in conflict situations, the correct educational attitudes of parents towards their adolescent children and providing young people with examples of task-oriented coping strategies used by their parents in social conflict situations have a significant impact. It cannot be ruled out that the results of this study provide theoretical guidelines for the development of educational strategies that create active individuals capable of making efforts to resolve and overcome conflicts and deal rationally with problems related to school, peers, and the family home. In the course of a young person's upbringing, efforts should be made to develop the ability to reach a common position in a dispute. This is an important educational goal, necessary to build a generation of people in the school, peer, and family environment who are willing to cooperate rather than conflict.

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