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Covert gender inequalities in educational trajectories and transitions

Abstract: This article originates from a thesis that is, today, developed by feminist theory, namely that the gender hierarchy in postmodern, post-patriarchal societies is being «renewed» and certainly not abolished. Although there is no doubt that institutional conditions in individual countries, conditions such as access to education, employment and economic autonomy, have a significant impact on the positions of girls and young women, their realization is still in the range of cultural factors such as «gender culture» and «gender arrangements.» Existing gender arrangements can be properly analyzed only if we consider existing power relations, both overt and, especially, covert. We have to take into consideration that gender arrangements in particular societies can seem very balanced although power relations between both genders are, in fact, unsymmetrical. And it seems that this is precisely what is happening in contemporary society. In the article, we will analyze covert mechanism, on the basis of statistical and research data, that have an impact on new gender discrimination throughout the process of childhood and early adult development. We will derive from the thesis that today’s discriminatory gender divisions of educational and occupational roles are based on invisible, «natural» everyday discriminatory practices and on gender-desensitized discourses, which are directed by the power of capital as the central motive of society.

Key words: feminism, growing up, gender roles, educational trajectories, discriminatory practices

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Introduction

The period of youth is a particularly significant period for the socialization of gender roles and the shaping of identities. Gender differences become more visible and obvious due to physical changes and pressures to conform to culturally prescribed gender roles (Arnett 2007, p. 143). At the same time, an entire culture of modernity exerts more socialization pressure than biological changes and is even more important for gender-specific development than is biology. According to the prevailing European theory, a child, as far as he or she was defined on the basis of cultural concepts of gender, was equated with femininity. An example was a small girl, passive, vulnerable and dependent (Burman 1999, p. 235). Within the cultural representation of gender, growing up in modern societies is thus equated with the transition of a child from typically feminine to typical masculine characteristics of performance and self-recognizing.

The presentation of children as passive, dependent and vulnerable has consequently lead to a symbolic »withdrawal of civil rights« and a replacing of these rights with processes for controlling and leading children. This cultural model was also adopted by disciplines dealing with the child development, since they too are the products of controlling and regulatory practices (Rose 1999). Developmental models are typically masculine-centric since they give priority to »masculine« characteristics: independence, invulnerability, activity and competitiveness. It is true that in late modernity, in accordance with the typical neoliberal discourse about choices, the individualization of development and rights, children are already placed into the roles of consumers, who also have the right to choose.

Through the replacement of a discourse that is based on »protection and care« with one based on »participation and understanding,« developmental psychologists have, willingly or unwillingly, joined in the development of a children’s market that treats children as rational consumers capable of autonomous choices and decisions (Gergen & Davis 1997). In such roles, children often appear as a status symbol of their parents. Thus, media discourses, particularly advertising, often refer to children’s rights to full participation in the market. In this neoliberal discourse, it also seems that gender roles for growing up are becoming irrelevant. Liberal
discourse treats all rights as the same and equal and is, in this way, smoothing away relations of power and inequality. In this article, we want to illustrate how old models are pertaining within new discourses of growing up. In particular, gender-specific scenarios are preserved in such a way that they are transferred from overt to covert forms of socialization and educational practices reflected in gender-specific educational trajectories and transitions, particularly in choices of study courses. The problem, however, is that gender differences only become visible, and thus restricting, for young women in the transition from education to employment, when educational trajectories are already defined or concluded.

**Individualization of growing up and gender differences**

The individualization of a person's life choices is one of the key notions which have been, in the last two decades, developed by social scientists in order to explain changes in the upbringings of new generations of young people. It attempts to capture new methods and institutions for the socialization of individuals. It is neither a unilaterally positive notion, which »opens the possibilities« of autonomy and emancipation nor a unilaterally negative notion, which would, for example, encompass processes of isolation, privatization and narcissistic pathologies. It encompasses precisely the ambivalence of social and psychological processes and structures that are produced by the new phase of modernization. Individualization means a reversal from the domination of pre-defined classes, genders and cultural identities to increasingly personal life plans. Paradoxically, precisely widening state apparatuses, particularly educational, social, counselling and health institutions demands individual life choice management. People must individually choose and lead their lives through these institutions. Ulrich Beck calls this »institutional individualization« (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Institutions of modern societies address individuals rather than groups and, in doing so, arouse the belief that every individual has to take care of his or her own life. Individualization is, therefore, also a shifting of social demands, responsibility, monitoring and regulation to individuals. Yet, this does not mean that individuals are emancipated from the external control of social limitations. Individualized persons are still, or even increasingly, dependent on educational and social institutions; legal regulations; health, psychological and pedagogical advice; the labour market and trends offered by the media and advertising industries. Individualization, thus, does not necessarily mean an increase in individual choices and decisions but, rather, changed methods of social control. Individualization is, therefore, a contradictory social process, which carries a possibility for either a liberation from traditional ligatures and dependence or a new, possibly worse dependence on invisible market demands (labour, knowledge, identities) in which individuals should prove themselves to be capable players.

Social institutions are increasingly organized around the assumption of competent people who are able to decide individually and to cope with complex social conditions as well as who manage to avoid the negative consequences of
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their decisions. Behind the appearance of autonomous life choices often lies the brutal reality of old social divisions and power relations. These divisions and power relations enable some people to shape their life choices into interesting biographic careers and provide others with only limited possibilities or no choices at all, despite their efforts. There is a big difference between a life biography generated as a consequence of conscious choices that contribute to the self-shaping of an individual and a life biography that is mostly a result of, more or less, bad compromises among wishes and possibilities of their realization. It is here that we see the covert differences among opportunities and limitations that are a consequence also of gender differences, which often define the meaning as well as the content of our choices and, thus, their consequences.

The characteristics of young women change with passing historical periods; social contexts; racial, ethnical and class affiliations and gender practices. Cultural factors, particularly gender culture, gender order and gender arrangements, have the most significant influence on the positions of girls and women. Gender culture encompasses prevailing conceptions about what are desired, »right« relations in the division of work and roles between genders in a given society. Gender order encompasses relatively stable structures of gender relations and relations among various social institutions related to social structures – for example, the division of social power and emotional or physical relations between the genders. Gender arrangement encompasses the social framework that is produced by gender culture and gender order (Pfau-Effinger 1998). Key components of gender arrangements are the roles of social actors and their negotiations concerning the binding content of gender culture and gender structures.

To be exact, in societies, relatively durable cultural traditions and social structures exist that seemingly represent a unifying power in that respective society. They influence relations, interactions and the cultural climate. Moreover, in every society, there are a number of dominant cultural values and conceptions that affect social connectedness. Certainly, there are also alternative cultural value systems, which can more or less challenge an existing system of values. Cultural changes are dependent on how actors confront the contradictions and the alternative system of values. Models of gender culture relate to the division of work between the »male« and »female« fields of work, to the social evaluation of male and female fields of work, to a definition of childhood in relation to adulthood and to relations of power and dependency between men and women and between childhood and adulthood.

Gender arrangements differ primarily according to which values and cultural ideals define the gender division of work; for example, the main fields of work for men and women, the social evaluations of these fields and the dependency between women and men are derived from this; intergenerational relations, for example social construction of childhood, motherhood and fatherhood. A key characteristic of gender arrangement is the role of social actors, particularly their negotiations and struggles within the framework of gender culture and gender order. Here, we have to take into consideration the relations of power (power balance), tensions and contradictions in the process of reproduction and the transformations of gender.
arrangements. These conceptions are institutionalized as norms and, therefore, remain relatively constant, representing the main reference point for the everyday behaviour of individuals and their activity in social institutions. Existing gender arrangements can be properly analyzed only if we consider power relations, social tensions and contradictions, processes of reproduction and transformations in different social relations. Here, it must be considered that gender arrangement in some societies is balanced even though the power relations between genders are asymmetrical. And it seems that precisely this is happening in contemporary society.

Influence of educational trajectory to gender arrangements of growing up

It is characteristic of late modernity that reigning discourses and social forces, which surround and shape upbringing and gender, allow for definitions of various kinds of gender-denoted patterns of growing up. Although there is no doubt that institutional conditions, such as access to education, employment and economic independence, in individual countries significantly influence the position of girls and young women, their realization, however, is limited by the constraints of the state and its policies. The positions and social opportunities for girls reflect internal insufficiency of systems in which the educational system is the most important. On the one hand, the availability of schools for both genders gives girls opportunities to be educated in various courses and offers them a variety of working qualifications and independent professional careers. But, on the other hand, the roles which are prescribed to them by culture through media and particularly by the economic sphere, limit their perspectives (Ule 2008). Girls can exceed these limits only with great efforts and risks.

Likewise, at first glance, it seems that girls have gained much more from the »new neoliberal economy« than boys. It seems that they are better at exploiting offers for increasingly higher educational levels. More and more, girls are completing progressively higher educational levels. They are better than boys on all levels of education. According to the gender structure of pupils in high school programmes, we could assume that the education of girls is of higher quality, since gender differences in various high school programmes in Slovenia, from those less demanding to general gymnasium programmes, is clearly in favour of girls.
In 2009, 57.8% of all girls enrolled in tertiary education programmes in Slovenia. Figure 2 below demonstrates how the number of those enrolled in tertiary programmes has increased in the last decade and also that this increase in substantially bigger for girls than it is for boys.
The latest data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia regarding the gender structure of graduates indicate that among graduates on the tertiary level of education, there are significantly more girls than boys. In 2008, 63% were girls and only 37% were boys from the total population of graduates in college and university programmes in Slovenia. However, it is also interesting that this trend does not also continue into the doctoral level of studies. In the same year, 1.8% of girls and 3.3% of boys obtained doctoral degrees.

Figure 3: Proportion of graduates on the tertiary level, by type of programme and sex, Slovenia, 2008 (source: Statistical Office, Republic of Slovenia)

In the eighties, the situation regarding the education of girls started to change dramatically in favour of girls. Nevertheless, research shows that patterns of maturity are still strongly defined by gender stereotypes. Even if a great many girls entered into higher levels of education, they still remained in typical «women» studies, while men trained for entry into new, prestigious professions, for example the field of new technologies. This is confirmed by statistical indicators regarding the educational trajectories of girls and boys in Slovenia and in Europe. Analysis of involvement in specific programmes of studies on the tertiary level shows a picture that is not exactly favourable to girls. Girls are dominating in educational, humanistic, social sciences, health and social programmes, while boys are dominating in science and technical fields. Due to the importance of science, technical and computer knowledge in new technology industries, the data concerning the proportions of boys and girls that are educated for these professions are, of course, more favourable to boys, especially if we consider opportunities for successful professional careers for graduates.
Also, data from Eurostat shows that in almost all countries, boys prevail in traditionally male studies. Fields of studies that boys and girls «choose» are not linked to the talents or abilities of girls and boys. As research from PISA 2006 shows (which was carried out in the framework of OECD), girls are better than boys by an average of 8 points in knowledge of science. At the same time, girls represent only a minor proportion of the population, only 4.8%, that has finished an education in the fields of mathematics, science or computer science. Also, the European average is very low. Only 11.8% of girls are in science and mathematics, although their knowledge of science is better than that of boys in quite a few EU countries. In addition to Slovenia, this is also the case in Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania (Šribar & Ule 2008). A completely different picture from the perspective of gender shows a review of education in the social sciences, economics and art academies. Here, as in almost all EU countries, girls prevail.

It is clear that the abilities and talents of girls are not expressed adequately in their study and professional choices. The gap between talents and choices is simply too big to be adequately attributed to endogenous factors or random external factors. There is evidence for unbalanced gender attribution or a prescribing of roles; dominant study choices precisely correspond to prevailing conceptions about what kinds of education and professions are suitable for women. Certainly, there are also related prejudices regarding alleged male education directions and professions.

Similar relationships were revealed in research prepared for a UNESCO report in 1994 concerning the education of girls and women in Europe (UNESCO 1994). This report highlights some hypotheses as to why there is such a large disparity in the representation of girls and boys for studying science, engineering and math on the one hand and humanities, social sciences and other studies on the other hand. Also, expectations in one’s environment and other covert social expectations about traditional gender roles can affect education choices. These expectations limit the diversity of study and professional desires and possibilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fields of education</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fields of education – TOTAL</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
<td>42,2%</td>
<td>57,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>7,4%</td>
<td>18,6%</td>
<td>81,4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and humanities</td>
<td>8,3%</td>
<td>31,0%</td>
<td>69,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social sciences, business and law</td>
<td>37,5%</td>
<td>32,5%</td>
<td>67,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science, mathematics and computer science</td>
<td>6,7%</td>
<td>60,8%</td>
<td>39,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, production and manufacturing technologies and construction</td>
<td>18,9%</td>
<td>74,6%</td>
<td>25,4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and veterinary</td>
<td>3,2%</td>
<td>43,8%</td>
<td>56,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and social work</td>
<td>8,7%</td>
<td>23,0%</td>
<td>77,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>9,3%</td>
<td>47,8%</td>
<td>52,2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1: Students of tertiary education by fields of education and sex, 2009 (source: Statistical Office, Republic of Slovenia)
that otherwise exist among the population of girls. Girls can also choose directions of study that are contrary to their desires because they are not able to counteract stereotyped expectations of parents regarding their future professional roles as well as their own internalized gender stereotypes (ibidem, p. 15). In addition to expectations and demands about »women« studies and professions, there are also similarly strong, contrasting gender stereotypes about »male« studies and professions, which have a powerful influence in restoring a gender-unbalanced choice of studies and professions, directing mostly boys and not girls to science and engineering. Such gender-unbalanced »guidance« can be further strengthened by hidden curriculums, which are reflected in stereotypical teaching content, choices of cases, teaching methods and the general climate in classrooms.

These data point out something more, namely a kind of pseudo-interest from society, educational institutions, counselling services and parents in the education of girls. Already, research from the 70s warned about this problem, specifically that girls have more open access to higher level education but not to appropriate higher level professions. Judging from these data, girls can expect a considerably lower rate of career success. Wellendorf assumes that girls do not shape their study and professional choices so much according to their personal preferences and talents as do boys. Girls are expected to be diligent and not successful (Wellendorf 1979). Studies have also shown that girls, already at the period of familial socialization, accept extrinsic motivations for learning, diligently fulfil school obligations and, more than boys, are directed to formally meet school obligations. But since they do not develop a genuine interest in learning content, they become tired of school, and therefore, their aspirations and pleasures are not bound to education (Ule 1986).

Prolonging education is, therefore, not necessarily an emancipatory factor of maturity for young girls. It could even lead to the regression and infantilization of young girls. These kinds of regression are promoted and strengthened by the contemporary consumption and entertainment industries. The market and market appeals address girls with symbols and metaphors that renew stereotypical conceptions about typical female roles and, thus, deepen gender differences that operate to the detriment of women. The attribution of »inadequacy« in the sense of girls’ incompetence is also reflected in everyday language, since it is quite common to speak about a »girl« or »little girl« even when grown-up women are being addressed. This is even supposed to be a compliment, which demonstrates the power of a described construction of femininity lacking in the world of »adulthood.« »Proper« girls – as Johnsons (1993, p. 6) notes in her research about discourses of girlishness – should be heterosexual, innocent, subjected, attentive to their looks, family oriented, professionally disinterested and obliging. It seems as if girls and women must run a »faster pace only to stay at the same place.«

At the same time, it is obvious that the economy does not need as many university-educated people as are produced by the educational system. This mismatch between the development of contemporary economies and the declining opportunities for university education is deprivileging many young people, particularly girls, and causes them to lose faith in the idea that a good education is a prerequisite
for success in life. This situation is, of course, further reducing girls’ readiness for a transition into traditionally male study choices. This does not necessarily mean that men’s choices are more reflective of or more autonomous and adapted to male talents and professional desires. Choices of both men and women are adapted to the structures of education, which are formed under the influence of contemporary economic conditions, labour markets and cultural-ideological conceptions about »male« and »female« vocations and careers, the difference being that male choices are more propulsive in the labour market.

**Gender differences in the transitions from education to employment**

Employment statistics are showing similar trends. For many girls, their prolonged education is more a reflection of lesser opportunities in the labour market than of more opportunities in education. Moreover, in general, many young people after graduation make a transition into jobs that are well below their education levels. It is significant that here, again, the most affected by this are lower classes, ethnic minorities and women. Among the equally qualified, those who get employment suitable to their education to a great extent depend upon family background, class position and gender. »[A university] degree is a ticket, which allows entry to the path to success, but is certainly not a ticket for success« (Côté 1994, p. 40). For those who cannot get even this ticket, these credentials are a cruel game. The harsh reality is that many young people (girls) have to face this disillusion of their life plans.

While it is true that the percentage of employed women in the European community is growing steadily, more women than men are employed in unstable forms of employment – for a limited period and/or in low-paid service positions, what some economists call the »other labour market.« In addition, women have less-certain professional careers and more rarely get better-paid jobs than men. This is especially dangerous for girls in times of social crisis. When education becomes too heavy a burden for families, aspirations for the education of girls are lowered first. When the employment market is shrinking, women have more problems with employment. This is confirmed by research data and by the research of student youth in Slovenia that was carried out on a sample of 3008 students from every university in Slovenia.

A comparison between the genders shows that female students expect significantly more problems with employment than do male students. Answers to the question, »What worries you for the future?« show more concern by females in all situations. In particular, they are more worried that they will be unemployed (Ule, Tivadar, Kurdija & Rajšp 2008).
Although, in principle, young women have an open path to professional careers, they are less likely to achieve prestigious employment positions, even in highly feminized occupations. It will be more difficult for them than for men to acquire employment appropriate to their education. It is no wonder, then, that they limit their employment desires to job security. According to the abovementioned survey, most desirable jobs for female students are positions with the state. According to their beliefs, these positions provide secure social positions and safe professional identities to women. Although the choice of women’s occupations reflects a gender model for vocational decision making, employment is not less important to women and unemployment is no less worrisome for them.

**Feminist criticism of covert forms of gender discrimination**

Already, feminist movements in 1970s and 80s pointed to the fact, that in times of great development of contemporary technologies and modern democracy, one of the oldest problems for mankind remains unsolved – the problem of unbalanced gender relations. Feminist movements and their various theoretical streams of thought have undoubtedly affected the debates, within the political programmes of European and American democracies, concerning the equality of women. With
their theoretical and practical activity, they have disturbed long-standing and unproblematic political and scientific views of the period regarding the social relations between the genders. Feminist studies as an academic, institutional product of the development of feminist movements has developed key theoretical innovations in the social sciences – feminist perspectives for understanding and explaining social phenomena and paradoxes.

The feminist perspective puts the lives, activities and interests of women – privacy, family, body – at the centre of its attention. The goal of this study in perspective is to illustrate the relevance of gender division as the basis for the social organization of inequality (Papić 1989). The main resistance against an affirmation of the feminist perspective has come from representatives of established science and their resistance to an emancipatory discourse. The main argument against the feminist perspective was that it is unscientifically-politically colored and that feminist studies do not have a discursive, but more an intuitive, character. Nevertheless, this emancipatory discourse has slowly become a component part of the social sciences. Feminist analyses have successfully demonstrated not only the difference between natural (sex) and cultural »sex« (gender) but also that the difference between nature and culture itself is a social construction. It is also questionable as to whether there is only a »gender difference« or if there is also a principle of social organization that governs power relations between the genders. Feminist theory argues that behind »gender differences« lies a covert social process of identifications and distinctions rather than a relatively fixed set of distinctive attributes. This process of identifications and distinctions is culturally and socially contingent. Uncovering this, feminists have deconstructed the notion of woman (and man) as a unified social category. Masculinity and femininity, therefore, are not core identities; instead, people »do gender« and, in this way, temporarily and properly classify themselves into social structures (Cole, Zucker & Duncan 2001).

To the generation of young women who have independently entered into life in the past two decades, those after the feminist movements, many of the achievements of these movements seem self-evident. Many believe that in recent decades, there has been a major step forward in opportunities for girls and young women. Women have become economically independent; they can make choices about their careers, about their ways of life, about giving birth. All these freedoms were almost unimaginable half a century ago. Some even believe that the end of feminism has come, since women have achieved almost all the goals for which the feminist movements of the 70s and 80s fought. That is why social changes, prompted by the feminist movements, for contemporary generations of young women often are not the concern which shape women’s identities. But these opportunities and freedoms are much too fragile and too sensitive to changes in social relations, as we have tried to demonstrate in this discussion. Therefore, we still must pay attention to various forms of pressure, bias and discrimination in the development of girls and young women.

Experience from latter decades show that the equalization of opportunities does not lead to a reduction in inequalities based on gender. Neoliberal societies
are focused mostly on the governance of capital, finances and properties and not on the processes of reproduction. That is why processes of socialization, upbringing and policies of equal opportunity are neglected in public and political programmes or transferred onto the shoulders of individuals. Capital is globalizing, while its cost are localizing. A neoliberal economy thus removes many of the protections that have defended vulnerable groups against exploitation, among them women (Obando 2008). The consequences are that women today are, more than men, exposed to risks in life paths and transitions. New neoliberal models are thought to advocate equality between genders in public and private spheres but are, in fact, continuing covert discrimination, since the main goal of these policies is profit.

Conclusion

A characteristic of late modernity has been that ruling discourses and social forces surround and shape upbringing and gender, defining various kinds of gender-marked patterns of growing up. Girls’ upbringings, in particular, are still characterized with ongoing implicit negotiations about gender inequalities. The return of the concept of a child as a little adult in the neoliberal model of contemporary society (referenced in the introduction) is particularly problematic for the upbringing of girls. The market addresses them especially by referring to their needs and offering them acceptance, acknowledgement and self-confidence. Thus, already children/girls come to believe that social acceptance can be bought. At the same time, this demonstrates the pseudo-interest of society in the achievements and ambitions of girls and young women.

Contemporary consumer society places pressures on women in a different, much more covert and sophisticated way. Young women today are not socialized into a gender role with the help of the traditional discourses of giving birth, family and household. Today, they are socialized with the help of pressures regarding physical appearance, body shape, fashion trends and demands. Feminist authors note that contemporary societies have »robbed girls of their voice and position them as very vulnerable and psychologically burdened new Ophelias« (Pipher 1994, p. 9). Physical attractiveness, which is dictated by the market and media, is becoming an important part of the female gender role. C. Wallace (1991) calls this the gender intensification hypothesis. Other studies have confirmed this hypothesis (Galambos 2004). It is true that contemporary consumer-oriented individualism cultivates a real cult of physical appearance and attractiveness that supports narcissistic forms of self. These trends affect, in equal measure, both genders but in different directions. Narcissism by men is generally seen as an expression of a desire for domination over others and the elevation of one’s own ego, while narcissism by women is interpreted as search for recognition and emotional support (Wardetzki 2006). Given these readings of narcissism, it is much easier for men than for women to assert themselves with their education, knowledge and professional abilities. Women’s narcissism is rooted in a contemporary consumer individualism primarily linked to body image, which is placed on display.
We can conclude that the »new power« of girls is apparent and that new, more covert pressures over girls and young women are strengthening while old, sexist forms of limiting and subjection are being maintained. Young women today are trapped in a situation in which the formal barriers of equality have been removed, but many, much more subtle, covert barriers, in the form of sexist attitudes and ideologies of gender roles, exist. At the same time, it seems that mere personal choice and individual ability determines the faith of individual women in these conditions. Gender differences in educational trajectories, which we have highlighted in this text, show that these choices are not actually free and individualised but that today, a hidden educational curriculum influences women’s educational transitions and choices of vocational directions, establishing limitations that are sharpened on the tertiary level of studies. This may also be the reason why particularly women, due to this apparent opportunity for individual choice, do not recognize the discriminatory mechanism and do not have a need for organized activities and activism.

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