Construction of Identities

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Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you will be able to

- describe the search for identity
- outline Erikson views on identity construction
- explain identity and identification
- discuss multiple identifies with reference to national character

23.1 Introduction

Identity is a quest, a vision and internalisation of an attitude. This attitude provides us images of self and of others. It is with this standardised mode of perception that we relate to others. Identity in other words refers to generalisations that one evolves about 'self' and 'others'. It is about distinctions and similarities. The term is complex and is often interpreted differently in varied contexts. Some may also argue that its usage in sociological and anthropological texts is ambiguous. The term came into popular sociological usage in early fifty's. The *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968) listed two separate articles on *Identity* titled 'Identity, psychosocial', and 'Identification political'. This becomes significant due to the fact that the *Encyclopedia of the social sciences* published in 1930 carried no mention of the term Identity.

Erik.H.Erikson (1959), who happened to be a 'psychoanalytic theorist' introduced the term identity and also focused on inherent ambiguities of the term identity? Erikson's contributions in this regard will be discussed in the later part of the lesson but first we will make an attempt to locate the origin of the term and its meaning in social science writings.

Identity is rooted in the Latin word *idem*. This is in common use in the English language since the sixteenth century. Philip Gleason (1983) draws our attention to the technical and philosophical use of the term *Identity*:

Identity has a technical meaning in algebra and logic and has been associated with the perennial mind body problem in philosophy since the time of John Locke (cf. Sollors, 1996)

The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness-in social science writings this definition of identity is commonly not adopted because of its focus on inseparable, impregnable homogeneity. It is the second definition quoted as follows that is germane to our understanding of identity and it states:

The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality.

23.2 The Search for Identity

Personal Identity in psychology refers to the condition or fact of remaining the same person throughout the various phases of existence; continuity of the personality.

Social historians trace the meaning of identity in Oxford dictionary to Locke's essay *Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*(1739). The evolutionary theory in early anthropological writings talked about *psychic unity of mankind* thereby denying notions of individuality and identity. 'The unity of the self' was also the preponderant perception in Christianity. Locke questioned the perception, when he argued that:

A man's identityconsists in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organised body'.

Langbaum has written a treatise documenting how writers and poets of the ilk of D.H. Lawrence and William Wordsworth took up the challenge posed by Locke to the notion of 'unity of the self'. The review also documents the seriousness with which questions of identity in relation to personality and sense of individuality were taken up by the intellectual leadership of different eras.

Immigration was identified as one of the important factors in strengthening configurations of identity. Identity in a personalised sense referring to a sense of alienation, uprooted ness, loneliness, loss of belongingness etc. It was a metaphorical manifestation of how and the way an individual feels separated from his kin group and immediate neighborhood in which he had his primary socialisation. There were little or no hints of sociological categorisation in terms of loss of identity or construction or reconstruction of identity in terms of belonging to a particular group or community. The uprooted by Oscar Handlin (1951) is regarded as a major work that used identity or identification in 'an unselfconscious manner as part of the ordinary vocabulary of common discourse' (Gleason, 1983). In contrast Will Herberg's Protestant -Catholic Jew (1955) placed identity and identification as key to locating oneself in a social context—in this case religion as the marker. Herberg said religion had become the most important tool for 'locating oneself in society' and thereby answering the most 'aching question' of 'identity': 'who am I'.

Herberg's work acquires strategic significance for later analysis of identity in sociological literature as it argues that ethnic identities of 'an immigrant-

derived population had transformed themselves into religious identification with organised Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism through the working of Hansen's Law that argued that what the son wants to forget, the grandson wants to remember'. This may be said to be the beginning of what has come to be called as 'the search for identity' in anthropological and sociological literature.

Let us draw some works that appeared in the fifty's and used *identity* with relative ease as compared to many writers in the seventy's and late eighty's who were particularly troubled by complexities of the term and its varied use in different contexts to evoke loyalties that went beyond the personal domain of identifying self in different religious, linguistic or ethnic categories. Take for example W.L.Morton's *The Canadian Identity* (1965) which regarded the construct of identity as unproblematic. But soon it was recognised in social science writings that 'identity becomes a problem for the individual in a fast changing society'. We must remember that context for majority of these writings was United States of America that was being portrayed as the 'Melting Pot' within which numerous markers of identity assumed by people before migrating were supposedly melted away and reconfigured to acquire a new nationality camouflaged as 'American identity'. By 1970s with onset of Vietnam War the myth of an encompassing American identity was broken.

As is evident from the brief historical overview, the journey of constructing identity has a long and established pathway. It is an altogether a different matter as to how it was conceptualised in different decades of social experiences by individuals for self and for locating themselves in social spaces where they interacted with others.

Box 23.1: Construction of Identity

In one sense, the term refers to qualities of sameness, in that persons may associate themselves or be associated by others, with groups or categories on the basis of some salient common feature, e.g. 'ethnic identity'. The term may also be applied to groups, categories, segments and institutions of all kinds, as well as to individual persons; thus families, communities, classes and nations are frequently said to have identities.

I am deliberately not elaboration on the concept if ethnic identity per se in this lesson as that is the subject matter of the lesson to follow. It will be suffice to say following Jenkins that 'ethnic identity, although every bit (and only) a social and cultural construction, should be conceptualised as a basis or first-order dimension of human experience' (Jenkins, 1998:75). We construct and reconstruct our 'ethnic identities' on the turf of our experiences that may differ from situation to situation. In this lesson our focus will remain on theoretical insights into identity construction (Byron, 2002).

23.3 Erikson's Contributions to Identity Construction

Erikson was trained in the discipline of psychology. He primarily worked as a clinical psychoanalyst with children. He lived in USA and his experiences as a European refugee and polices of Adolf Hitler and Second World War deeply influenced his writings. It was in the context of fallout of World War II that Erikson started constructing notions of identity. His early writings mostly published in the decade between fifty's and sixty's remained largely confined to intellectual community. It was in 1963 that his book *Childhood*

and Society was reprinted and that brought him immense popularity and acceptance among the general reader. His most significant contribution was his study of Mahatma Gandhi that won him both a Pulitzer Prize and a National book award. In 1973 he was selected to deliver prestigious Jefferson Lectures in Humanities that established him as an opinion leader and as Gleason says 'his ideas became something of a cultural phenomenon' (1983).

According to Erikson Identity is located *in the core of the individual and also in the core of his communal culture.* He elaborates this notion in the context of developing American identity and writes:

The process of American identity formation seems to support an individual's ego identity as long as he can preserve a certain element of deliberate tentativeness of autonomous choice. The individual must be able to convince himself that the next step is up to him and that no matter where he is staying or going he always has the choice of leaving or turning in the opposite direction if he chooses to do so. In this country the migrant does not want to be told to move on, nor the sedentary man to stay where he is: for the life style (and the family history) of each contains the opposite element as a potential alternative which he wishes to consider his most private and individual decision (1963:285-286).

Construction of social identities that border the domain of political remained pivotal to Erikson's writings though his primary focus was on personality formation during adolescence that essentially monitored future perception of identity by the individual. In his opinion:

Adolescence is the age of the final establishment of a dominant positive ego identity. It is then that a future within reach becomes part of the conscious life plan. It is then that the question arises whether or not the future was anticipated in earlier expectations. (lbid) ¹

Reflection and Action 23.1

To what extent is identity formed in the adolescent years? What are its social components? Discuss and write down in your notebook.

Erikson's construction of identity draws inspiration from Freudian perceptions. In his article on 'American identity' he quotes Anna Freud at length and argues:

—in terms of the individual ego, which appears to be invaded by a newly mobilized and vastly augmented id as though from a hostile inner world, an inner outer world. Our interest is directed toward the quantity and quality of support to the adolescent ego, thus set upon, may expect from the outer world; and toward the question of whether ego defenses as well as identity fragments developed in earlier stages receive the necessary additional sustenance. What the regressing and growing, rebelling and maturing youths are now primarily concerned with is who and what they are in the eyes of a wider circle of significant people as compared with what they themselves have come to feel they are; and how to connect dreams, idiosyncrasies, roles, and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational and sexual prototypes of the day (ibid.250).

As you read through Erikson's original text you will come to terms with

intricacies of construction of identity as an individual and as an individual located in social context among individuals. Gleason developing this frame of reference for the construction of identity reasons that 'identity involves an interaction between the interior development of the individual personality, understood in terms derived from the Freudian id-ego-superego model, and the growth of a sense of selfhood that arises from participating in society, internalising its cultural norms, acquiring different statuses, and playing different roles' (1983: 465).

Erikson (1959) elaborated upon this notion of personal identity stating:

Personal identity was located deep in the unconscious as a durable and persistent sense of sameness of the self, whatever happens, however traumatic or dramatic the passage from one phase of life to another, the non pathological individual does not normally consider himself to have become someone else.

Largely drawing inspiration from the Freudian school as stated earlier Erikson believed that identity was located in the deep psychic structure of the individual. Our past experiences, our inhibitions and silent protests coupled with the kind of socialisation processes one has been subjected to, the adult constructs individual structures of identity accordingly. There is no denying that these structures mould themselves in correspondence with external social milieu. But inherent to it is an 'accrued confidence' in the 'inner sameness and continuity' of one's own being.

23.4 Identity and Identification

It is important at this stage to examine a closely related notion of identification. The term identification is in common use in different contexts. It was formally used in psychology by Sigmund Freud to explain a process by which a child relates and assimilate to itself external persons and objects. The concept was used as the key tool in psychoanalytical explanations of socialisation processes. For nearly two decades in the forty's and fifty's the concept of identification remained confined to psychoanalytical understandings. In 1954 Gordon W.Allport extended the notion of identification to explore ethnicity in his popular work The Nature of Prejudice.

Box 23.2: Concept of Identification

One of the areas where identification may most easily take place is that of social values and attitudes. Sometimes a child who confronts a social issue for the first time will ask his parent what attitude he should hold. Thus he may say, 'Daddy, what are we? Are we Jews or gentiles; Protestants or Catholics; Republicans or Democrats?' When told what 'we' are, the child is fully satisfied. From then on, he will accept his membership and the ready made attitudes that with it (Allport, 1954: 293-294).

Contemporary social scientists recognise limitations of such assertions as we all know that individuals do not necessarily accept membership of 'ethnic groups' in this matter of fact manner that 'dad said it' and 'I believe in it'. In the later part of this lesson we will be discussing various modalities that intercept social and psychological domains of individuals to provide them markers for identification and identity assertions. However, it is important to assert here that in the history of evolution of construction of identity

and identity theories, Allport's contributions paved the way for relating notions of identity to popular sociological theories of role and reference group propounded by Ralph Linton and Merton respectively. Foote (1951) felt that Linton's role theory lacked 'a satisfactory account of motivation' and thus it will be better if theories of identification are mooted as explanations for 'motivation in social interactions'. Foote distinguished his use of the term identification from that of Freud. Foote defined Identification as: appropriation of and commitment to a particular identity or series of identities' on the part of an individual. Identification proceeds by naming and it meant individual to whom that name was given accepted and committed himself to that identity. In other words he accepts assignment to a category given to him on the basis of family, lineage, kinship religion, work activity or other attributes.

Identification thus construed provides for appropriation of these identities. It promotes ascription to identified categories and evolves a sense of 'selfhood'. A process of self-discovery and self-actualization is initiated-a process that is voluntary and not enforced by society. It is a different matter that as individuals grows they 'combine and modify identities by conscious choice more effectively then was possible for a child or a young person' (ibid, 466).

J. Milton Yinger examines identification as a consequence of process of assimilation. He argues that 'individuals from separate groups may come to think of themselves as belonging to the same society-a new society, blended from their societies of origin'. The context for Identification theorists as stated earlier remained United States of America. Numerous groups that migrated to US in the last two hundred years have gone through various phases of identification. Sometimes these groups surrendered to the dominant 'white culture' on others they asserted their traditional ethnic identities refusing to identify with the dominant culture.

Theoretically speaking Yinger reasons that shifts in identification are not really related to individual mindset but determined by cultural processes. These 'shifts may be one-sided, with members of group A identifying with society B, or members of group B identifying with society A'. All these three identification processes may go on simultaneously encouraging people to identify 'themselves simply as Americans', as Hispanics, Africans or Asian Americans. It is also equally true that throughout American history, some people have gone about identifying themselves as Indians, opting to live in traditional village settings and also accepting to become the village chief. Yinger concludes that 'identification is sometimes the major causal influence in the ethnic order; at other times it is more neatly dependent on the levels of integration, acculturation, and amalgamation'. (1997:137-139) It is important to note here that self-identification and identification by others is not necessarily correspondent to each other. Individuals or groups may ascribe themselves to certain nationalities or regions but are not necessarily accepted by others to be so. Ethnic conflicts in the North -East or displaced populations in Kashmir can constitute examples that may fit into this model. Yinger makes a very important point here, when he says that 'group solidarity among members of a group may block identification even with an open society' (ibid: 140).

23.5 Identity in Sociological Theory

Erikson's intellectual dominance in developing notions of identity has often paled contribution and importance of sociological theories in formulating constructs of social identity. Linton's contributions to the theory of status and role put forward in his important work The Study of Man (1936) came close to analysing notions of identity. Role theory developed by Linton showed how individuals performed roles in correspondence with statuses that they occupy. In doing so he demonstrated that individuals identified themselves in specified role positions. The role theory focused on the interactive nature of identity. People asserted their identities in response to specific situations where there were designated roles accompanying defined statuses that were perceived both by the actors and people in their surroundings. It was this perception that was critiqued by Foote and later modified by introducing elements of motivation paving way for constructing notions of identity that were closer to its vernacular meaning then to Erikson's notion of personal identity.

Reflection and Action 23.2

Relate and compare reference group theory to the personal identity theory.

Also at the same time Robert Merton developed one of the classic sociological theories called Reference group theory. The reference group was first brought in academic usage in 1942 and once again was popularly used by social psychologists. It was in 1950 that Robert Merton along with Alice S.Kitt introduced the term in sociological writings in an essay titled 'Contributions to the theory of Reference group Behaviour'. The concept was critical to the understanding of formation of identity as it highlighted the way a person's 'attitudes, values and sense of identity' was shaped by 'alignment with, or rejection of, 'reference groups' that had significance for the individual, either positively or negatively' (Gleason, 1983). The concept of reference group was further refined by Merton (1968) in his classic sociological text, Social Theory and Social Structure. Merton's primary concern was with examining Social Structures. He did not directly write much on identity or identification but emphasised on the need to place these concepts in the context of reference group theory as the reference group was instrumental in determining the core content of these constructs.

Box 23.3: Self and Identity

Identity acquired center space in sociological literature with the rise of theoretical perspectives referred to as Symbolic interactionists. The school that came into prominence in the forty's tried to understand as to how 'social interaction mediated through shared symbolic systems, shaped the self consciousness of the individual' (Merton, 1968: 467). The protagonists of this school Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert mead did not use the term identity; instead spoke of 'the self'. 'The self' remained popular in sociological writings to connote what we have been discussing as 'identity' in this lessons till early sixty's. Erving Goffman (1963) was responsible in substituting 'the self' by 'Identity' in popular sociological writings. Goffman's work Stigma: Notes on the Management of spoiled Identity followed by Berger's Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Approach, the term identity became virtually a permanent fixture in unfolding intricacies of 'role theory and reference group theory, dramaturgical sociology, and the phenomenological approach'.

Sociological perception of Identity is an artifact of interaction between the individual and society-it is essentially a matter of being designated by a certain name, accepting that designation, internalizing the role requirement accompanying it, and behaving according to those perceptions (Gleason, 1983). As is apparent from this view of identity, identity in social settings accompanies a sense of responsibility combined with commitment or loyalty and perceived role requirements. It is formatted in social interactions and manifests itself in social situations. Sociologists would argue that 'identities are socially bestowed' and 'must also be socially sustained, and fairly steadily so' (cf. Gleason, 1983).

23.6 Multiple Identities

All contemporary theories of identity acknowledge that an individual endows himself with multiple identities. Some of these identities can be mutually exclusive and also competitive. Others may be compatible, allowing one to build on other- resulting in the formation of complex constructions of identity. Yinger explains this complex creation of identity formation saying:

Although some identities clash-if one grows in strength the others become less salient-others are nested into a compatible structure of identities. The smaller, more intimate identities are surrounded by larger and more impersonal ones. Think of the family, the community, the ethnic group, and society as concentric circles of identity. At any given time, any one can be the most salient, preferences varying, alternating sometimes on a calendrical rhythm (at culturally regulated intervals) and sometimes on a critical rhythm (the timing being determined by an event, perhaps a crisis, the occurrence of which cannot be determine) (1997:144).

Mehta (1989) made similar assertions in a paper titled 'Dilemma of Identity assertion in a pluralistic society: A case study of Indian polity' whereby a case was made for examining 'core' and 'peripheral identities' while discussing multiple identities experienced by people belonging to diverse communities in India. She argued:

Various religious, cultural and linguistic diversities occupying the Indian subcontinent are not crowds but specified communities to which every member subscribed with a sense of belonging. They have their respective histories and many other intra-community commonalities—the sense of belonging which keeps the members of these communities together irrespective of their geographical placements is termed as 'core identity'. However, members of these communities may not assert or even express these inherent associations ordinarily. It is only under situations of stress and on threat to their ethnic identity that they may express themselves (ibid: 265).

Sociological theory would conceptualise these processes of identification within the general purview of processes of assimilation. Yinger (1997) following Stein and Hill (1977), Sandra Wallman (1986) interalia expresses similar opinion—'individuals from separate groups may come to think of themselves as belonging to the same society—a new society, blended from their societies of origin'. Accompanying this construction is fact of 'identification by others which is as important as 'identification of the self within a group' if not more. Cultural anthropology for years has distinguished processes of integration from those of assimilation, amalgamation and acculturation.

Integration may not always mean acceptance of one group by the other. A politically or numerically dominant group may not assimilate a minority or a smaller group within its fold. At the same time a smaller group may be over anxious to be accommodated and may assert larger group identity, rather than acknowledging its ethnic roots. It is rightly argued that each person having multiple identities may express 'dominant identity' either because of the expectations of others, or as a 'matter of personal choice' or is forced by 'circumstances of the moment'.

In a general sense one may concur with Yinger (1997) that:

Identities can be inherited, chosen, assigned or merely inferred from some bit of evidence. If one strengthens the definition of identification to make it more than simply a label or category, one can with Royce, think of it as a validated place in an ethnic group. It is not merely ascription. Some ethnic identities have to be achieved, and they have to be maintained by behavior, by ethnic 'signaling'. "Adequate performance in an identity is much more rigorously judged within a group than it is by outsiders. For the latter, a few tokens of identity are usually sufficient.".......That more commonly, or certainly more visibly, coerced ethnic identity is produced largely by outsiders. Opportunities denied, stereotypes, and legal and political definitions restrict one's ethnic options.

Nisbet also supports these contentions stating:

Throughout recorded history there is a high correlation between alienation of individual loyalties from dominant political institutions and the rise of new forms of community-ethnic, religious, and others- which are at once renunciations of and challenges to these political institutions.

23.7 National Character and Identity Studies

In the post-world war II era construction of identity moved from the domain of personal to constructing national identity as territories were being redefined and new nationalities being created across the world. Semblance of construction of these identities required that national character was defined and ensured as a moral value to make citizens conform to restructured boundaries with a sense of renewed passion and commitment. Large-scale migrations also required realignments. Social scientists attempted to evolve models that inculcated a sense of belonging among citizens prompting them to acquire national characters considered imperative for laying the foundations of nationalism. National character studies carried out by anthropologists like Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict in the forty's acquired immense sociological significance, as it was in the background of these studies that Erikson made his concept of identity popular.

Box 23.4: Eriksons Conceptualisation of Identity

Functioning American......bases his final ego-identity on some tentative combination of dynamic polarities such as migratory and sedentary, individualistic and standardised, competitive and cooperative, pious and free thinking, etc' (Erikson, 1963). *Erikson goes on to talk about the 'subliminal panic' that accompanied large scale testing of 'American identity' in the war. 'Historical change', he said* has reached a coercive universality and a global acceleration, which is experienced as a threat to the emerging

American identity. (Cf. Gibbson, 1983). Erikson expanded his ideas of in a chapter titled 'reflections on the American identity' in which he almost equated notions of American character with American identity. He wrote what was true of national characters is true of national identities and that it would be better to use the term identity instead of national character.

National character studies were brought in the sociological discourse with the publication of Mead's And Keep your Powder Dry (1942) and Ruth Benedict's study of Japanese society The Chrysanthemum and the sword (1946). The focus in these studies was to explore how cultures influence individuals and their personalities and impact formation of their national characters. A concept that in modern day sociological analysis is often addressed in terms of ethnicity studies as has been pointed out in the first lesson on 'Conceptualizing ethnicity'. It is important to note here that Erikson developed his ideas on 'ego identity' and 'group identity' while following 'war time national character studies'. Even though the concept of 'identity' was inspired by national character studies, its popularity surpassed 'character studies. 'National character' studies are now invariably referred in a historical sense whereas 'identity' studies are being reinterpreted in almost all branches of social sciences. Identity construction is as much central to the disciplines of political science, History, Psychology, Anthropology as it is in the discipline of sociology. One tends to agree with Gleason's observations with regard to popularity of identity construction studies, when he says:

Identity promised to elucidate a new kind of conceptual linkage between the two elements of the problem, since it was used in reference to, and dealt with the relationship of, the individual personality and the ensemble of social and cultural features that gave different groups their distinctive character. (cf. Sollors, 1996).

Once linkages between construction of 'personal identity' and 'social identity' were firmly established, social scientists started looking at problems that individuals confronted in keeping congruence between the two in situations, where these two constructions of identity came in conflict with each other.

23.8 Conclusion

Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first scholars to draw attention of the academic community to the possibilities of individuals shrinking their worldview and enclosing their spaces to confine themselves 'in the solitude of his own heart' labeling this phenomenon as 'individualism'. Tocqueville analysed this problem while addressing issues emerging out of American conceptions of democracy and did not use the term 'identity' or 'identity crisis'.

Questions relating to identity acquired critical dimensions in the post world war period due to crumbling of citadel of colonialism and reconstruction of national boundaries. Vagaries of war resulted in mass exodus and people moved to different geographical zones seeking survival and sustenance for the self and their families. In-migration made local inhabitants circumspect and may individuals started realigning themselves on the basis of their religious, linguistic and racial identities. This resulted in enclosures in which in-group and out-groups were clearly defined and boundaries both psychological and social were deliberately created and reinforced through oral histories.

A peculiar situation emerged in what is often described as 'nation building process'. New nations along with established democracies like USA were promoting what was described earlier as 'national character studies'. This model expected people to conform to prescribed principles of liberty, equality and fraternity laying foundations for what is often described in sociological literature as 'mass societies'. 'Assimilation' was believed to be the natural norm for all those who moved from outside into the domains of their new habitats. National integration and national solidarities emanating from geographical concepts of nation state were the key issues on which political mandate was generated. In this process pursuits for seeking 'self' or 'individual identity' were either confined to the personalized domain of the individual or philosophy. Social identity operated under the assumed assumption of 'identification' with the larger social milieu that was represented by a 'mass society'. It is argued in sociological literature that the threat of mass society becoming 'totalitarian' and subsequently domineering to the extent of producing 'authoritarian personalities' susceptible to 'fascism' was first perceived by refugee intellectuals, many of whom had migrated from Germany. Described as Frankfurt school, it was related to two influential publications namely Riesman's The Lonely Crowd and Handlin's The Uprooted. These two works were rooted in a theoretical approach called Dialectical Method. Dialectic refers to a process of realising contradictions and reconciling those contradictions in a more realistic frame of reference. People who move from their homelands to other countries often experience a sense of loss that they try to come to terms with, through this process of idealist Hegelian philosophy.

It is important to reassert that 'identity' is a 'higher order concept' - a general organising referent which includes a number of subsidiary facets that include social identity, ego-identity, personal identity as other additional components (Dashefsky, 1976). Identity is all about what is common and what is specific. When interpreted in these dimensions it becomes the critical factor in establishing boundaries. How these boundaries are constructed and legitimized will be discussed in the next lesson.

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