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An Empirical Examination of Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Field Instructor Job-Related Stress and Retention

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The purpose of this study was to collect and analyze demographic characteristics and job related difficulties experienced by field instructors in outdoor behavioral healthcare programs which utilized wilderness therapy as well as other treatment modalities. Three state-licensed outdoor behavioral healthcare programs in the United States provided a sample of 129 field instructors who completed the survey. Results confirmed a high turnover rate of instructors and high challenges experienced with non-work related issues, particularly in sustaining romantic personal relationships. Factor analysis identified three constructs related to difficulty levels experienced on the job: a) time and schedule constraint; b) emotional anxiety and stress-related issues; and, c) physical and mental challenges. Results of this study are of value to field instructors and outdoor behavioral healthcare program administrators to better understand the challenges faced by this group of professionals. Recommendations are presented that suggest ways that the physical and mental health of field instructors can be supported.

Keywords: Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare, Wilderness Therapy, Staff Turnover, Burnout, Outdoor Leadership, Job Satisfaction, Staff Training, Staff Development

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Recent research efforts about best practices in outdoor behavioral healthcare (OBH) have primarily focused on definitions, industry characteristics, outcome assessments, standardization and professionalization of the workforce (Burg, 2001; Crisp, 1998; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1993; Davis-Berman, Berman, & Capone, 1994; Itin, 2001; Russell 2001, 2003a, 2003b). These research efforts have been important to better define the industry and understand outcomes expected from treatment. However, few studies have focused specifically on field instructor experiences in their daily work, living and interacting with adolescent clients in treatment. This is a largely misunderstood and under-examined element of OBH, and one that is ostensibly critical given the role instructors play in facilitating the day-to-day living of clients in treatment. Research in this area is especially important given that previous research has shown that the relationships that adolescent clients establish with staff play a critical role in therapeutic outcomes (see Russell & Phillips-Miller, 2002).

Research on treatment processes and outcomes in OBH treatment have made few distinctions between the role and impact of the therapist and the field instructor despite their unique and distinct work functions with clients. The majority of the treatment process is conducted under the supervision of field instructors (Russell & Hendee, 2000). These instructors experience the daily pressure of making split second decisions while working with individuals and in group situations based on experience, judgment, and dialogue with their co-leaders. They routinely spend extended periods of time on expeditions, in remote wilderness areas, in the same conditions as clients, away from their families, friends and spouses, and the comforts of home (Bunce, 1998; Ferguson, 1999). Who are these professionals? Why do they choose this work? What are the challenges of their work? These and other research questions provide the justification for this study of a largely misunderstood aspect of OBH treatment. Furthermore, this study is especially important, given the fact that an estimated 20,000 adolescent clients and their families in the United-States turn to OBH every year for help (Russell, 2003a). Research has shown that organizations employ more field instructors than therapeutic staff, by a ratio of six field instructors to one licensed therapeutic staff, and that field instructors spend significantly more time with clients than therapeutic staff while in treatment (Russell, 2007). Finally, given the recent Government Auditing Organization (GAO) testimony concerning residential treatment programs delivered to the Committee on Education and Labor, House

of Representatives on October 10th, 2007, citing "untrained staff" (p.14) as a key factor in the death of youths enrolled in residential treatment programs, including OBH programs, understanding who these leaders are is critical.

Review of Literature

Different OBH program models described by Russell and Hendee (2000) offer insight into the unusual work and home life situations that field instructors routinely face. For example, base camp and residential expedition program models, where residential therapeutic treatment centers and schools are integrated with wilderness expeditions, potentially offer a more stable work environment. Many staff in these programs work relatively normal routines in a residential setting, supplemented with occasional wilderness expeditions. Contained and continuous-flow expedition programs, which are conducted entirely in remote wilderness environments, require instructors to spend a minimum of consecutive eight days to as much as consecutive four-weeks in the field with students. While doing so, instructors eat similar foods and most times utilize the same minimalist outdoor gear as clients; they live in a variety of summer and winter environments. Field rotations typically consists of an eight-day rotation on expedition with clients followed by six-days out of the field, or "downtime." Another example of a field instructor routine requires 21 continuous days of work on a contained expedition, with a minimum of seven rotations in a calendar year. These schedules require intense physical and emotional investment, and, as such, maintaining relationships with friends and loved ones can be extremely challenging.

Past research on wilderness expedition programs has offered some insight on the potential challenges of working as a field instructor in OBH (Bunce, 1998; Gass, 1993; Thompson, 1984). Gass highlighted the lifestyle investment required by this kind of work and suggested that the intense professional investment of working in the field can negatively affect interpersonal relationships. In considering related research in non-therapeutic wilderness education settings, the issue of burnout was discussed as early as 1979, where workload, client interaction and interference with personal life were all cited as causes behind staff exhaustion (Dawson, 1979). Further research about the challenges of working as an outdoor leader also raised concerns about the realities of the job, including challenges balancing relationships and work (Birmingham, 1989; Edwards & Gray, 1998), long work hours (Allin, 2004), insufficient wages (Barnes, 1997), responsibility for others' safety (Thomas, 2001), and poor administration (Barnes, 2001; Birmingham, 1989).

Challenges experienced while working in OBH are reasoned to be similar to work-related stress noted above, but with the added challenge of working with therapeutic clients. Thompson (1984) suggests that therapeutic clients generally demand more and give less, making this profession more challenging for field instructors. For programs, this may result in higher rates of turnover among field staff, additional costs in training new instructors, challenges in developing inexperienced younger instructors, and a need for increased supervision of new employees (Tibbitts, 2006).

Bunce (1998) listed the effects of work-related stress on field instructors in one of the only articles identified in the literature focusing on the topic of wilderness therapist and field instructor job-related stress. She found that professionals working in field-based settings had feelings of incompletion concerning their client's weekly goals. She also reported the experience of impermanent work relationships with colleagues since instructors often rotate in and out of the field. Further, Bunce reported a range of feelings and behaviors that together reflect classic symptoms of what is referred to as "vicarious trauma" (McCann & Pearlman, 1990) and parallel those described by Rosenbloom, Pratt and Pearlman (1995) in their studies of vicarious trauma. Bunce reported that individual working with resistant and troubled adolescent populations exhibited: a) tendencies to mimic maladaptive behaviors of clients while on expedition, b) difficulties developing and maintaining relationships outside of work, c) a feeling of being out of control, d) lack of self-confidence, and e) concerns for their personal safety (1998).

The purpose of this study was to empirically examine challenges experienced by wilderness therapy field instructors. The following research questions guided the study: What are the socio-demographics of field instructors, namely age, marital status and educational backgrounds? What are the most difficult job-related and personal challenges reported by field instructors? And, what are the most rewarding benefits of working as a field instructor? Demographic differences identified in the sample of field instructors were used as independent variables to explore the variance in field instructor responses to these questions.

Methods

Participants

Study participants were recruited from three OBH programs in the United States. All programs were identified as a continuous-flow expedition model, whereby field instructors worked a schedule of eight-days on and six-days off. Programs were reasoned to implement a similar wilderness therapy curriculum and treatment, which included leading wilderness

expeditions with adolescents in remote wilderness areas. Programs were licensed by state agencies in which they operated and had licensed therapists that implemented individual treatment plans for clients. Clients of these programs were both males and females between the ages of 13 and 17 years old, with emotional and behavioral problems not severe enough to require hospitalization. Typical responsibilities of selected field instructors included, but were not limited to, providing direct care to students, teaching wilderness living skills, and facilitating psycho-educational groups. Student to staff ratios were three to one.

Procedures

A survey was developed to collect data to answer the research questions guiding the study. The survey was based on data collected by Bunce (1998) on challenges experienced by field instructors. Three broad areas guided the development of the instrument: a) challenges experienced inside the work setting, b) challenges experienced outside the work setting, and c) general personal benefits of field instructing. A pilot-test was conducted on a group of 10 college student outdoor leaders who were timed on survey completion and asked to provide written comments on aspects of the questionnaire which were unclear to them. Following this feedback the content and format of the questionnaire was modified to facilitate better understanding. The survey included 50 items and responses were based on a Likert scale where 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often, 3 =always and 4 = does not apply.

A total of 200 surveys were mailed in November 2005 to three OBH programs that agreed to participate in the study. The total number of surveys sent to programs was based on previous phone conversations with field directors and their estimate of the number of field instructors employed at the time of this study. Two programs were located in Utah, and one in Georgia. For two of the programs the instrument was distributed to field-staff during one of their weekly staff meetings. The survey was distributed to field-staff of the third program via the program's internal mail system. Respondents placed their completed surveys into sealed envelopes to ensure confidentiality which were then mailed in bulk to one of the researchers. A follow-up postcard was sent to the participants in December 2005 following suggestions by Dillman (2000). All questionnaires included in the analysis were received before February 2006. A total of 133 surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 67%. Possible reasons for un-returned surveys were that a number of field instructors were absent for time-off during the distribution of surveys or may have been working in the field. Among returned questionnaires, four were rejected for not meeting the criteria of a work schedule of eight days-on and six days-off. A total of 129 returned questionnaires were retained for statistical analyses.

Data Analysis

The 50 statements in the questionnaire were divided into three categories for analytic purposes based on the research questions guiding the study: a) challenges experienced inside the work setting, b) challenges experienced outside the work setting, and c) general personal benefits of field instructing (see Table 1). An iterative principal axis factor analysis with a varimax rotation was also conducted to determine the underlying structure of the survey instrument independent of this classification (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006). The factor solution was determined using the scree plot method to try to limit the probability of over-or under–estimation (Cattell, 1966) which is reasoned to occur using the Kaiser criterion for Eigen values of greater than one (Kaiser, 1960). It was decided that a factor load of .300 was appropriate to include items for each extracted factor, meaning that it would account for at least 30% of the variance for that factor.

Three factors were identified based on this decision rule. Dual loading scores were also eliminated from the final factors as suggested by Norman and Streiner (2000). The final factor solution comprised a total of 31 items grouped into three factors: a) time and schedule constraints (TIME) b) emotional anxiety and stress-related issues (ANXIETY) and c) physical and mental challenges (CHALLENGE). Based on previous findings about outdoor leaders (Birmingham, 1989; Thomas, 2001) and field instructors (Bunce, 1998), these factors were reasoned to be themes influencing challenging experiences by field instructors and were compared to the independent variables of gender, marital status, previous relationship rupture, pet ownership, education and degree titles using analysis of variance to examine differences in the sample across these factors.

Results

Field Instructor Characteristics

Respondents were reasonably balanced in terms of gender, with 55.6% being male (n = 71) and 44.4% female (n = 58); the majority were 30 years old or younger (85%). Over 90% were White (non-Hispanic) and 74% had completed at least a Bachelors degree (see Table 2). Most instructors were single at the time of the study. The range of overall length of time working as a field instructor was between one and 48 months; 45% of participants had been a field instructor for less than five months while 12.5% had worked for their program between 24 and 48 months (see Table 3). The average time participants worked in their position as wilderness instructors was 11.85 months, while the mode was 7 months. A total of 21 instructors (16.3%) had previously worked for another OBH program and seven (5.4%) had been in a position other than field instructor at some point during their career.

Table 1
Statements From the Field Instructor Survey

Difficulties Inside the Work Setting	Difficulties Outside the Work Setting
Work schedule	Feeling disconnected from home
Exhaustion after a work rotation	Spouse or partner affected by my work
Sleep deprivation	Limited time off between rotations
Lack of time-off	Lack of understanding from spouse or partner
Lack of privacy	Having to defend working in wilderness therapy
Feelings of anxiety	Lack of relationship with extended family
Lack of emotional safety	Negative impact on children
Feelings of loneliness	Limited time to explore other areas of interest
Insufficient pay	Difficulties in dealing with home obligations
Negative impact on mental health	Having to re-adapt to life outside of work
Unsafe physical environment	Missing out on time with friends and family
Pressure to perform	Insufficient salary to meet financial needs
Being the sole female or male in a group	Negative effect in intimate relationship
Impermanent relationships with students	Lack of friendship stability
Boredom from repeated trips	Struggle in creating relationships with others not associated with your work
Overwhelming work responsibilities	
Impact on physical health	
Lack of self-confidence	
Difficulty with the change of diet	
Lack of hygiene in food preparation	
Lack of personal closure after a work rotation	
Compromises made for work	
Copying student's maladaptive behaviors	
Traveling distance to go to work	
Feeling uncertain or being out of control	
Lack of outlet to share intense experiences	
Lack of personal cleanliness	
Impermanent relationships with co-workers	
Anxiety about healthy detachment vs withdrawing from students	

Benefits
Living in the wilderness
Break from daily home pressures and concerns
Personal growth
Clarification of personal values
No technology (television, computer) or media (newspaper)

Table 2
Time in Wilderness Therapy as a Field Instructor

	n	%
Length in months		
1–5	58	45
6–11	30	23
11–24	29	23
24–48	12	9

Note. $n = 129$.

When examining the relationship between gender and length of time working in the field, males had worked an average of six months longer than females ($t = -3.859$, $p < .001$). The relationship between age and length of time working as a field instructor was also statistically significant, suggesting that older field instructors had significantly longer job tenures than younger instructors. However, a small number of instructors were older than their peers and showed a noticeably shorter length of time employed as field instructors, perhaps suggesting a recent career move.

Results examining the highest educational degree completed showed that 69% ($n = 89$) had a Bachelors degree and two reported more than one academic degree. The most common degree was related to adventure programming and recreation or behavioral and social sciences ($n = 58$, 45 %). It was also found that the median time that study participants traveled to and from work was four hours (two hours one-way). Over half (57%) of the participants traveled a minimum of one hour and 45 minutes before and after a work rotation.

When considering relationships outside the work setting, 48% of field instructors were single and 38% indicated they were in a romantic relationship; only 9% were married. Among respondents who reported being in a romantic relationship or being married, 31% said that their spouse or partner worked in OBH and 46% said their spouse or partner worked in a related profession. Field instructors were also asked if they believed that their work had contributed to a prior "break-up" of a relationship. Almost a quarter of instructors who had experienced a break-up ($n = 28$, 22%) reported that their work had contributed to that break-up while a third ($n = 42$, 33%) said that it did not. A small percentage ($n = 7$, 5%) said they did not know.

Difficulties Experienced In and Out of the Work Setting

When asked to describe the degree to which they have experienced a variety of challenges in their work settings, instructors indicated that

Table 3
Sample of Field Instructors Demographic Characteristics

	n	%
Gender		
Males	71	55.6
Female	58	44.4
Age		
< 25	55	43
26–30	54	42
31–35	8	6
36–40	2	1
41–49	5	4
Did not respond	5	4
Marital Status		
Single (never married)	62	48
Single (divorced)	5	4
Married	12	9
In relationship	49	38
Did not respond	1	1
Ethnicity		
Black or African American	1	1
Hispanic or Mexican American	4	3
White (Non-Hispanic)	118	91
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	1
Some other ethnic or racial background	4	3
Did not respond	1	1
Highest Level of Education*		
Did not graduate high school	1	1
High-school graduate	2	1
Some college but no degree	24	18
Associate degree	7	5
Bachelor's degree	89	69
Master's degree	7	5
Other	1	1

Note. *Totals more than 129 due to reporting of multiple degrees by some instructors.

insufficient pay (33%), pressure to perform (36%), and compromises made for work (33%) were "always" or "often" a difficulty. The amount of pressure to perform consisted of, but was not limited to meeting deadlines, showing improvement in clients' therapeutic goals, and program expectations for professional improvement. Compromises made for work included physical (e.g., remote area, diet, physical labor, etc.) and emotional challenges (e.g., client behavior, lack of outside communication, etc.). A quarter of instructors "always" or "often" experienced feelings of anxiety (27%) in the work setting. Notably, a large proportion of instructors (73%) were "sometimes" affected by their work schedule and perceived their work responsibilities as "overwhelming" (65%). Also, three-quarters (74%) indicated they were "never" affected by the lack of hygiene in food preparation and believed they "never" copied their students' maladaptive behaviors (71%).

Results from challenges experienced outside of the work setting were more pronounced than challenges experienced inside of the work setting. In this regard, 55% of the respondents indicated that they "always" or "often" felt disconnected from home, and 51% reported feeling as if they were missing out on time with friends and family. Another 38% thought that their salary was "always" or "often" insufficient to meet financial needs. At the same level, 36% struggled to create relationships with others not associated with work when they were outside their work setting.

While the goal of this study was to examine difficulties experienced by wilderness therapy field instructors, certain benefits were also assessed. A vast majority (92%) reported personal growth as a benefit of the job, while "making a difference for students" and "living in the wilderness" was "always" or "often" a benefit for 82% of respondents.

Field Instructor Characteristics and Challenging Factors

Factors analysis classified the survey items into three factors: a) time and schedule constraints (TIME); b) emotional anxiety and stress-related issues (ANXIETY); and c) physical and mental challenges (CHALLENGE). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to explore differences across demographic variables in each of these three factors. Specific demographic variables examined included age, gender, educational level, degree title, time worked in field, marital status, relationship rupture, pet ownership and commuting time.

Results showed that no significant differences ($p < .05$) were found across age, educational level, or degree title for any of these three factors. Significant differences were found for gender, pet ownership, marital status, and relationship challenges. When examining gender, a significant difference was found for the ANXIETY factor ($F_{1, 95} = 11.820$, $p < .001$), showing that females had higher anxiety levels associated with their job than did males. Pet ownership was examined because several studies

Table 4
Perceptions of Challenges Experienced by Field Instructors

Difficulties experienced within the work setting	Indicated Often or Always (%)
Pressure to perform	36
Compromises made for work	33
Insufficient pay	33
Feelings of anxiety	27
Exhaustion after a work rotation	20
Difficulty with the change of diet	20
Unsafe physical environment	0
Copying students' maladaptive behaviors	1
Negative impact on mental health	2
Lack of hygiene in food preparation	2

Difficulties experienced outside the work setting	Indicated Often or Always (%)
Feeling disconnected from home	55
Missing out on time with friends and family	51
Insufficient salary to meet financial needs	38
Struggle in creating relationships with others not associated with your work	37
Spouse or partner affected by my work	35
Limited time to explore other areas of interest	30
Negative effect in intimate relationship	30
Lack of friendship stability	27
Having to re-adapt to life outside of work	26
Lack of relationship with extended family	26

Benefits experienced by field instructors	Indicated Often or Always (%)
Personal growth	92
Living in the wilderness	85
Making a difference for students	82

Note. $n = 129$.

suggest mental, psychological, and emotional benefits of pet ownership, especially if their pets were allowed into the field (Beck & Meyers, 1996). When examining pet ownership, a significant difference was also found for ANXIETY ($F_{2, 95} = 7.870$, $p < .01$) suggesting that pet owners had lower levels of anxiety in their work than did non-pet owners. Finally, field instructors who were married or were in a relationship were more challenged with time and schedule constraints associated with their job than did single individuals ($F_{3,100} = 8.575$, $p < .001$).

Personal Comments from Field Instructors

Field instructors were also given a space on the questionnaire to include personal comments about their experience as field instructors. Participants mentioned challenges related to creating or keeping healthy personal relationships with partners, spouses and friends. One participant made the following comment about trying to meet people: "I find it extremely hard to even meet people outside of work, especially romantic prospects or even friendships." Other challenges cited by participants were: pay disparities between field instructors and therapists; personality conflicts between instructors; high turnover rate and burnout; difficulty staying fresh and enthusiastic; and troubles in connecting with younger co-workers.

Discussion

This study was successful in developing some of the first empirical information on OBH field instructors, including demographics and difficulties associated with the job. Most demographic information was consistent with past studies conducted in related fields, especially outdoor and adventure education. This includes the noted lack of gender, racial and ethnic diversity found in previous studies of outdoor leaders in the adventure education and therapy profession (Allin, 2000; Humberstone, 1996; James, 1995). For example, Warren and Loeffler (2000) surveyed several outdoor education programs and reported a sample that was 91% white (non-Hispanic), similar to the results shown in this study (greater than 90% white). However, a surprising result of this study was that 45% of field instructors were female, which is consistent with Loeffler (1996), who found that 45% of full-time instructors in outdoor education programs were also female.

This study also reveals that a majority of field instructors are single and below the age of 30. Interestingly, one-third of instructors who were in a romantic relationship or married had a spouse or partner working in wilderness therapy and almost half had a romantic relationship or spouse in a related profession. This finding may suggest that having a partner in a similar profession may help sustain field instructors' challenging work situation.

Tenure and Turnover Rates

It is difficult to compare the tenure of field instructors in this study because little research has been conducted on similar populations. In addition, the unique job related challenges experienced by field instructors make it difficult to compare to the more traditional therapeutic or human service fields, such as counseling or nursing. Almost half (45%) of field instructors surveyed had been in their position for less than five months, suggesting a high turnover rate that most likely has several embedded costs for program administrators and consumers. A likely area for further research would be to more critically examine field instructor turnover rates across a variety of programs and models, and to examine the costs to programs from the obvious investment in training resources. It is costly to train new instructors every few months, especially given the demands and complexity of the job. It is also likely that the quality of care provided to clients and families could be compromised by instructors who have little experience in the field.

Perceptions of Difficulty Levels

Overall, field instructors were more affected by difficulties outside of the work setting, especially how their work affects relationships with friends, partners and family. These findings support Gass' (1993) assertions that a study focusing on personal relationships for all types of outdoor educators may be warranted. It is unclear whether field instructors choose to be single or are consequently single because of the characteristics of their work. When field instructors do return from long extended stays in backcountry environments, they are then challenged in managing their days off with other obligations, including finding time to tend to personal matters and maintaining intimate relationships. During days off, a large portion of time is often spent physically and mentally recuperating from previous field experiences, which leaves little time for meaningful interactions with other people. All of these factors affect how field instructors maintain friendships and develop romantic relationships, and could play a significant role in job retention. This also could be an area for further research.

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations are presented to address the issue of staff turnover and burnout. First, programs may want to focus on reviewing time spent by instructors in the field in relation to time needed to maintain a healthy living situation out of the field. Offering varying schedules, periodic and extensive time out of the field, and a diversification of work-related tasks could alleviate some of this pressure. Second, programs could focus on ameliorating some of the anxiety experienced by field instructors as a result of the identified pressures experienced in and out of the work setting. This could include

regular feedback sessions from peers and mentors, counseling support for instructors that can address emotional issues of loneliness or lack of self-confidence, or other stress-reducing programs. These organized sessions could be easily implemented and would demonstrate a program's commitment to support their staff (Figley, 1995). This may already be occurring with some programs and could be the focus of further research on identifying current and best practices for continued and on-going field instructor support.

Third, the results of this study showed some relationship between "difficulty factors" and certain demographics of field instructors. This information could be used in hiring practices, training initiatives, and on-going training and support by programs. For example, OBH programs could inform future instructors of the challenges and factors to consider when applying for this profession. Recruiting field instructors can be a daunting task when turnover rates are consistently high. Balancing the need to fill staff rosters with the need to be honest with potential employees is a significant challenge for programs. How to best accomplish this is beyond the scope of this paper, but one which could also be the focus of future research. Programs with established relationships with institutions of higher learning should communicate the types of skills and experiences they are looking for in an employee, while also being realistic about the job demands and expectations. Academic programs in adventure and outdoor education and other related fields could be more informed of the job demands, thus helping students make appropriate career choices upon graduation. This increased communication could help to alleviate new field instructors becoming demoralized by a career choice that may have been captivating prior to their employment. Finally, the finding that pet owners and non-pet owners experienced different levels of challenges while on the job, may suggests that programs could think about simple changes in policy concerning dogs in the field. In support of this finding, programs who do not already do so could allow field instructors to bring their dogs in the field and may think about incorporating components of animal therapy in their treatment approach. There might be therapeutic benefits in having dogs in the field which both instructors and students could take advantage of.

This study portrays only a small representative sample of OBH field instructors. A need exists to study additional programs and different program models to better understand the lived experience of field instructors in and out of the field. In this regard, future research could be strengthened through increased cooperation and discussions with OBH program administrators. In doing so, they may benefit from learning more about the experiences of an important and critical aspect of the industry, which to this point have been missing from previous research on program theory,

practice and outcome. The therapeutic field is premised on helping others and should do the same for its field instructors, which could in turn improve the overall quality of care in an intervention that has shown promising results for youth and families in need.

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