Life Chances, Choices and Identity: Single Mothers in Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

A qualitative study of classed and gendered identities of single mother university students on welfare is reported. The women's negotiations of these complex identities are germane to their educational and economic success, health and well-being. Habitus is used to explore trajectories and dispositions reflecting the women's life chances and choices.

Résumé

Une étude qualitative d'identités classées et divisées par les sexes de mères seules étudiantes à l'université qui reçoivent des prestations d'assistance sociale est rapportée. Les négotiations des femmes de ces identités complexes sont pertinentes à leur succès scolaire et économique,leur santé et leur bien-être. Habitus a l'habitude d'explorer les trajectories et les dispositions qui reflètent les occasions et les choix dans la vie des femmes.

"I don't walk around thinking I knows what everybody else is thinking, that's for sure - or calling myself rich."
"Now, that part I wasn't joking about." He leaped ahead, planting himself before her like the spine of a black vir. "It's not poor when you chooses the thing."
Her face hardened. "Where I comes from, a cankered spud is a cankered spud, no matter you chooses it or not. Chooses!" She balked. "As if one chooses one's lot."
　　　　(Morrissey 2005, 71)

This interchange in Donna Morrissey's *Sylvanus Now* is between a young 1950s Newfoundland couple, one aspiring to life in the inshore fishery and one longing to escape such a fate. It is indicative of a debate played out in quotidian as well as academic discourse: the debate between fate and free will; chances and choices.

Pierre Bourdieu and feminist appropriations of his work offer a perspective that moves our thinking beyond this dichotomy. This work suggests that autonomy is neither complete nor intrinsic; that it is mediated by the environment and agency is socially produced (Fram 2004). As Bourdieu observed, "aspirations depend in large part on the possibilities objectively available for them to be achieved" (1999, 127). Nonetheless, Bourdieu's theorizing retains space for creativity and improvisation. This paper applies his concept of habitus, particularly its cognitive and motivating structures, to study contextual influences on identity and consequences for the life choices of single mother university students on welfare. I argue that class background significantly shapes identity and that subjective dimensions of classed lives provide a glimpse into the workings and power of class in everyday life.

I highlight the classed aspirations and visions of themselves that marked the educational and social trajectories of the women I interviewed in this study.

Single Mothers, Health, Income and Education

Health has social as well as biological determinants and poverty is profoundly connected to ill-health (Raphael 2003). Indeed, "health increases at each step up the hierarchy in income, education and social status" (Kosny 1999, 8). Gender is another significant determinant of health (Kosny 1999) and the linkage between gender and poverty is well-established.

Canadian society has become increasingly stratified according to income. Inequality has grown more rapidly since 1995 than at any other time recorded (Doherty-Delorme and Shaker 2004). Census data from the year 2000 reveals that Canadian women's average annual pre-tax income from all sources was 62% below that of men, positioning them amongst "the poorest of the poor" (Drover 2004, 2). In Newfoundland and Labrador, where this study took place, a provincial survey found that lack of employment, low-waged jobs and education were women's major concerns (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 1997).

Compared to all other working women, single mothers are more likely to work in the service industry, which may offer less economic security (Amott 1988 in Hertz and Ferguson 1998). Families led by single mothers have the lowest average total incomes of all Canadian families (Drover 2004). In Newfoundland and Labrador, unemployment is near 20% with high school and 5.1% with university graduation (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2005) and single mothers increasingly choose education as a path out of poverty. Eligible single mother university students may receive welfare for approved costs beyond the maximum allowable student loan.

University is becoming viewed as a mass education system, rather than the preserve of the elite. The emphasis upon widening access and outreach to non-traditional "consumers," while desirable, seems to market the fiction that professional and middle-class status is equitably available. The popular discourse of consumer choice obscures "structural influences, [which] by constraining poorer students' range of options, operate to maintain hierarchies of distinction and differentiation" within post-secondary education (Reay *et al.* 2001, 862).

Cultural Images and Identities

Economic and political inequalities are commonly disguised as personal deficit, at the cost of great personal injury and pain (Lawler 1999). Judgments based on class, gender and race/ethnicity drive the abundant negative stereotypes concerning single mothers. These are interwoven with cultural images of welfare recipients as permanently dependent and lazy (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Theriault and Leski 2005). "Welfare moms" are vilified with devastating effects upon women's identities and aspirations. Discourses outlining social expectations about who is acceptable or valuable influence our views of others and also how we perceive and constitute ourselves. They structure our identities (Reay 2004b). Awareness of one's positioning by others is fundamental to processes of subjective construction (Skeggs 1997b).

Skeggs argues that "we are produced as subjects through our experiences, that these experiences always involve interpretation and that the ability to interpret depends on the discursive frameworks to which we have access" (1997b, 126-7). Western understandings of the self are framed around the notion of "the possessive individual," that defines a person in relation to her capacity to own property (Skeggs 2004, 6-7). The definition of working-class subjectivities as pathological is one mechanism through which class inequality is maintained.

Class: Positions and Processes

Social class has immense psychological, social and economic consequences for single mothers. Class analysis has nonetheless fallen from favour in academic circles. Traditional social class analysis has rested on a dichotomy drawn between the middle and working classes that obscures the diversity within these categories and overemphasizes distinctions between them. Its understanding of class as a position fails to capture that which feminist postmodernisms bring into focus: the multiplicity and complexity of women's social positionings and the processes through which these positionings occur (Reay 2004b). Some proclaim class an outdated concept, eclipsed by emphases on culture and post-modernisms. This has prompted observations that class analysis has been one of the most undertheorized aspects of feminist scholarship (Lawler 1999; Skeggs 1997a). Yet, class analysis contributes to the pursuit of health and social justice, so we need conceptualizations of class that recognize its complexity as well as the utility of class categories.

While traditional conceptualizations of class as a position miss the complexity of class as a lived experience, "some form of abstract reification can work to bring particular phenomena" into focus (Gillies 2005, 841). Class categories bring useful attention to class-based inequality. The literature commonly defines social class in relation to occupation, education, and ownership/wealth/income (Hertz and Ferguson 1998). Most researchers rely heavily on occupational data to define and measure class (Krahn 2008). Even Bourdieu's 1984 research with its more complex understanding of social class has employed occupation as a classificatory tool.

Habitus: A Lens for Viewing Identity

Bourdieu and Reay assert the interrelationship of material and symbolic worlds and advocate social change. Their work deepens our understandings of identity and how it is classed and gendered. Habitus (Bourdieu 1984; 1990a&b) is utilized to explore women's experiences of identity in relation to education. Habitus is a multi-dimensional concept incorporating individual and collective trajectories, conscious and unconscious elements and embodied and cognitive aspects. Bourdieu argues that the material conditions of existence (i.e., the volume and nature of capital) associated with a social position in a field conditions the inhabitant of that position with a particular understanding of the world such that a habitus or set of co-existing and related yet distinct dispositions is established (1991; Brubaker 1985). It is then expressed in a space of active positions or choices made by agents across diverse domains of practice such as education.

The habitus emerges through early socialization, from the individual's personal history and the collective history of the family and class in which the person has membership (Bourdieu 1990a; DiMaggio 1979; Reay 1995a&b). It is a cumulative product in which past, present and future are intertwined. Bourdieu's term trajectory captures the notion of the degree of stability or change in the volume and composition of one's capital over time. This "quasi-structural treatment of time" emerges primarily from the indicators of cultural and economic capital held by the family of origin (Weininger 2005, 89). Together with the volume and nature of capital held, it constitutes social space. Bourdieu observes that proximity in social space predisposes people to develop similarities in dispositions and tastes (1991). However, he also argues that since no two people's histories are identical, neither are their habitus. Nonetheless, there are classes of experience that are shared: "Because there are classes of experience there are also classes of habitus or the habitus of classes" (Reay 2004a, 434).

Habitus functions as "a system of cognitive and motivating structures" (Bourdieu 1990a, 53) and provides direction as to what is proper or common sense behaviour (Maguire 1997). Through the habitus "one comes to determine what is possible [and

not]...for one's life and develops aspirations... accordingly" (Dumais 2002, 46). In this way, habitus is pivotal to identity construction (Maguire 1997). By its very definition, habitus forces simultaneous attention upon aspects of identity determined by social position and aspects constructed through processes of individual agency.

Methods

To pursue this line of argument about habitus, identity, life choices and chances, I draw on findings of a multiple case study of undergraduates at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) who were also single mother welfare recipients. Participants meeting these inclusion criteria were recruited in multiple ways. The study, which explored the women's trajectories and dispositions and their negotiation of these complex and competing identities, was advertised through the organization Student Parents at MUN, in the student newspaper and by word of mouth.

This paper reports on a series of from one to three in-depth interviews conducted between 1999 and 2004 with each of eight women. Consultations with academic and student experts supported this time frame, concluding that this period involved no substantive change in the financial and social conditions of single mother welfare recipient students. Consistent with ethics approval, participants are identified by pseudonyms.

Social class is conceptualized as a process and lived experience, encompassing complex dispositions that may vary across fields and interact with other social categories such as gender, to influence everyday life. Class positioning of the women's families of origin is also important for it structures their habitus. To establish class position I employed Reay's "objective markers of position" including parents' educational qualifications and occupational histories and supplemented this with the women's subjective accounts of their families' social and economic standing. Additionally, I explored their grandparents' educational and occupational histories. As with Reay (2002) and Gillies (2005), I employed a distinction

between middle and working classes to describe the women's material and symbolic experiences. However there is a wide range of positionings within broad categorizations of "middle class" and "working class" (Reay 2002, 415).

Since "the habitus, as a system of dispositional 'schemes,' cannot be directly observed, it must be apprehended interpretively" (Weininger 2005, 93). Thus, rather than limiting the content to a direct discussion of "identity," the interviews elicited the women's understandings of themselves by addressing a broad range of issues concerning their histories, present circumstances and aspirations. The data were analyzed qualitatively in a search for themes, several of which are discussed below.

Life Chances and Choices of Participants

Analysis revealed the complexity of gendered and classed identity in a university environment. Here I explore some of the material and symbolic features of membership in collectives defined by class and gender. Single mothers enrolled in post-secondary education while on welfare were found to be a diverse group of women with some commonalities. Their stories were unique, yet grounded in shared conditions of material existence and similarities within shared class backgrounds.

Family Trajectory and Class Background

Employing the objective markers of position, I concluded that four of the women (Pat, Sara, Bev, Deb) came from working-class families while four had more middle-class backgrounds (Sue, Lori, Ann, Ruby). Regarding parents' occupation, for instance, three of the four women whose families I classified as working-class had parents who had been fishers or fish plant workers. The fourth had parents who worked as a cook or "jack of all trades" and a middle manager for a second hand store. Two had parents on welfare. By comparison, the women of middle-class background had between them four parents who were middle managers, one small business owner, two semi-professionals

and one bank teller.

My assessment was generally congruent with the women's tentative self-assessments of their family backgrounds. However, some acknowledged discomfort with the language of class. Three of the participants identified themselves as coming from "lower" or working-class families. Pat said: "...Right from as far back as I can remember, we were always among a working class." Sara described her family background thus: "I'd say pretty low (laughs); not very high income or anything...I guess, working class. I don't really know (laughs)." Bev said "lower, I guess" in reference to her class background. While she avoided reference to any class category, Deb's family's position respecting food and clothing is consistent with working-class life: "we always had new clothes, *but*, it - it was still on the low scale?....But we always had enough food, we always had enough clothes....You know, it was just enough to get by."[1]

Ann was clear in the conviction that she grew up as middle class but even she showed some ambivalence. Lori identified her class background, after some equivocation: "Upper middle class, I guess. No. Middle class." Ruby's account highlighted the subjectivity of such assessments: "I thought we were *upper* middle class...now my older...[sibling] thought we were poor, so it's totally perception." Sue, without using a class category, acknowledged relational aspects of class by noting that in her small community, the family was "seen as...being one of the more, I guess, richer people out there...They're not rich by any means." None of these families categorized as middle class would fall within the established or more privileged segments of the middle classes. However, accepting the imprecision of traditional class categorizations, the women's self-identifications concerning family background seem relatively accurate assessments in relation to objective markers.

Family members' common trajectory and life experiences produce a familial habitus, "the deeply ingrained system of perspectives, experiences and predispositions

family members share" (Reay 1998, 527). The habitus is formed in the context of the individual's early family life and while new experiences can lead to its subsequent modification, the earliest years carry greater weight (Bourdieu 1990a).

Individual Trajectories

Within the women's educational and social trajectories distinct patterns emerged that imbricate class and gender. A central component of middle-class subjectivity entails the pursuit of university credentials and a professional career (Lucey 2001). Students from established middle-class backgrounds whose family history includes university study have reserves of familial expertise to support them. Their educational trajectories typically have "a coherent story to tell about university choice;...an easily discernible plot despite episodic uncertainty and stressful periods" (Reay 2003, 55). However, these women's narratives were more complicated.

There were differences in the two groups, based upon social class background. Three students of middle-class background entered university directly out of high school, but left before becoming pregnant. All three were in their second or third try at university; certainly not the typical trajectory of middle-class students. The fourth applied after becoming a single mother on welfare. They ranged in age from 25 to 38 and had their first child at an average age of 23. Two had recently left welfare. By contrast, no working-class students attended university directly after high school. All became single mothers beforehand and three were on welfare before enrolling. All were on their first attempt at university. They ranged in age from 22 to 32 and had their first child at an average age of 19. They were all currently in receipt of welfare and one had grown up on it.

Participants' educational and social trajectories were patterned by and varied according to class. However, all were first generation university students and women from middle-class backgrounds were not from more privileged sections of the middle class. Their educational trajectories showed

markedly more disjuncture and less predictability than those of the middle-class students Reay studied. Their trajectories were probably more similar to the experiences of their counterparts from working-class backgrounds than to upper middle-class educational experiences. While there are classed distinctions in the trajectories of women in this study, the middle-class women's experiences illustrate the complexity of positionings within a class category.

Familial Dispositions Toward Education

Social class determines the degree of cultural capital transmitted within families. Cultural capital refers to "linguistic and cultural competence" and familiarity with culture, as defined by the dominant classes (Bourdieu 1973, 80 in Dumais 2002, 44). Low income families have less familiarity with the dominant culture and are less able to transmit cultural capital to their children. The education system has implicit expectations of cultural capital, but fails to provide the means to acquire it. This reinforces differences in acquisition of cultural capital and hinders social mobility for the working classes. Access to academic success and its benefits are largely mediated by class (Dumais 2002). A family's propensity to invest in and promote children's educational achievement derives from the extent to which education is the source of the family's capital and social position and the likelihood of these investments proving successful (Bourdieu 2000).

The women's familial habitus influences their expectations and choices concerning education. In the working-class families there was a significant silence about education. Deb commented that she had never enquired about her grandparents' education. Education did not factor in how Deb's family viewed and talked about themselves. There was little indication that Pat's family saw education as relevant. Her account was strikingly silent with regard to any reactions by her mother (with whom she had a close relationship) to her decisions to drop out of high school or attend university.

In Bev's and Sara's cases, the situation was more severe than a "mere" silence about education. They both seemed aware of a wide disjuncture between their family lives and the world of education. Bev said: "like growing up...I couldn't have an intellectual conversation with anybody...I would go to my teachers and talk to them." She reported that in high school only the two smartest girls, who came from families with "a lot" more money than hers, applied to university. Bev, although she was on the honour roll four times, never felt that she was in that league. She attributed this to "the way I grew up in my family...my family wasn't smart...." Moreover, Bev's mother actively discouraged her from attending university. Sara also was made painfully aware of the distance between her family and life at school. She told a story from childhood about how at home a container of soup was labeled "sope" and that she was embarrassed when she argued with her teacher that this was the correct spelling. She said her family was known in the community as being "dumb." Bev and Sara both carried in their habitus a sense of belonging with those who are not smart, rather than at university.

By contrast, the students who came from arguably middle-class backgrounds recounted evidence of some family investment in post-secondary education. Sue's family stressed the need for post-secondary education. One of Lori's parents dreamed of her future as a professional. In Ruby's family, reading and learning were emphasized as important and enjoyable and there was some family financial support for her earliest tries at university. Ann's parents had saved a "nest-egg" for her post-secondary education. In general, these women's habitus showed greater confidence that they belonged in university. Early in students' academic careers families may shape, encourage or limit aspirations and choices, affecting their ability to see education as a significant part of their identities.

Choices: Evaluations of the Fit Between Self and University or College

The women's choices about post-secondary education emerged from complex, lengthy processes.

> The decision to get a post-secondary education does not happen suddenly at the end of high school. It comes from accumulated thought and experience and from each year's successes and failures in academic work, which shape aspirations and motivation. Opportunities for higher education can be lost very early.
> (de Broucker 2005, 29)

Of the women from working-class backgrounds, three reported ambivalent or poor relationships to school. Sara hated her high school years and Pat quit school. Deb had a baby before she finished high school, and said: "I had no plans for anything...I wanted to quit so bad, I hated school." Further education seems to have been the furthest thing from her mind. In contrast, for Bev, high school was a positive experience. Nonetheless, the leap in imagination from where their lives were at that time to consider attending university was just too great. In comparison, three of the women with middle-class background reported no significant difficulties in high school and made a seamless transition to university.

Despite the different places in their trajectories where this occurred, all of the women eventually developed post-secondary aspirations. A central component of these aspirations involved the choice between diploma programs at college and degree programs at university. The women displayed a range of attitudes and interest levels with respect to college. Three from working-class backgrounds either actively considered, applied to, or attended college. The fourth was strongly encouraged to do so by her parent.

The working-class women's habitus upon leaving high school was such that they never considered university as a possibility.

Bev said:

> I had thought about going to college, but MUN always seemed out of my reach in a way. I don't know, I just never thought about it...Uh, I never had anyone going to university...I always thought that MUN was for the most intelligent people....I was smart going to school, "A's" and "B's"....But I thought I had to be smarter.

However, along with this doubt, Bev's habitus incorporated her successes in school and a women's pre-employment training program. Until near completion of this program Bev said she "still didn't think about university. I was thinking...I might go to college or look for a job." But, she said her instructor told her: "you *can* do anything you wanna do." Bev commented: "and I thought about it and I said 'yeah I can; I can do it'."

Sara thought that some family members doubted whether she belonged in university. She said: "Sometimes I feel...oh God, I suppose they're probably right...But then it kind of drives me. Like, hm, I'll show them....Like I know I can do this. ...I don't care what anyone else says, I'm doing this for me and I try to focus ...[on that]."

Deb's habitus also displayed changing attitudes as she incorporated middle-class values regarding education. While she had no post-secondary aspirations in high school, she developed a preference for the status of a degree. She said: "I'll get a degree out of it instead of just a diploma....which I think is better...it makes me more proud to be able to be in university." She reported that "being a university student... makes me feel really good about myself. And but still being on social services... I even put myself down a bit....so just going to university makes it seem a *whole* lot better....And I'm not as ashamed to let people know I'm on it." Deb noted how people assume that welfare recipients are "lazy and they don't want to...do anything. Which by me going to university completely contradicts it." Her resistance to the cultural images of welfare recipients

expresses Deb's agency within a situation marked by constraints.

Of the women from middle-class backgrounds, only Ann applied to college, and that was during periods of forced withdrawal from university. Ann and Lori rejected college because a degree better fit with how they saw themselves. Ann said she was interviewed for college a few times, but never enrolled: "at the last minute I would always feel...dissatisfied...I wanted a university degree." Ann noted that: "I had believed...that community colleges...were like sookie courses. Like if you couldn't get into MUN, this is where you went." Of her educational choice, Lori said: "I really didn't even think about it. I just kind of said, 'well, I'll go to university'...I think it was almost expected of me....I kinda always said 'well yeah, that's where I'll be'." Ruby and Sue reportedly rejected college based on their projections of lower income with a college diploma than a university degree. The idea of attending college was less congruent with the habitus of the women from middle-class backgrounds than it was for the women of working-class backgrounds.

Disjuncture, Agency and Structure in the Habitus

Structural constraint and individual agency together frame the inherently double-sided nature of reality (Brubaker 1985). The disjuncture and even contradictions in the dispositions of the habitus possibly produced by movement across diverse social fields can both initiate change and provide evidence that change has occurred (McLeod 2005), allowing conceptual space for agency and a more nuanced and dynamic account of gendered and classed identities.

The women with habitus and lives marked by social constraints experienced agency subjectively - at times feeling that they were self-determining and autonomous beings. Beyond this, they were able to take actions to effect changes in their lives....and in some cases, in the lives of others (Pollack 2000). For instance, Bev said she was "very terrified" of attending university but noted that she has changed, though some fears remain:

> I can walk around and hold my head up. I was like sloppy, and having my head down, and not wanting anybody to look at me, and not looking at anybody....And I don't know what it is but being here at Memorial University have [*sic*] made me more outspoken. Like um, I can ... go up to somebody and talk to them, something that I would never do....I still don't speak in class...And like I'll probably die if a teacher picked on me.

Her developing agency in this new setting is evident in the following: "yesterday I wrote my...prof and I told her...I needed more time [for my assignment], my...[child] was sick all weekend,...and I asked her....well I didn't ask her, I just told her that I'm going to take an extra day to work on it." Similarly, Sara recognized that encouragement and validation of her abilities gave her "hope," so when her academic advisor and instructor proved unapproachable, she was resourceful in finding alternate sources of support, notably her French and writing tutors. "And they're so supportive... And I feel good then, knowing that...hey, you know, I'm - you know, I'm not that bad. I can do this" (laughs).

Lori's habitus offered a more complex illustration of agency and structure intertwined. She believed that university students should speak out: "You don't go to university and *shut-up*" she said. This agentic sense of herself was put to the test when it collided with her identity as a former welfare recipient. Lori observed: "I'm not proud of it...I wouldn't go around and say 'Hi; I used to be a welfare mom...'" She relayed an interchange in class with a student who drew connections between "welfare mothers...poor straggly children...crappy apartments and...alcohol." She reports having challenged his perpetuation of such cultural images: "I was on welfare once....I'm poor...I have a nice house. I have a clean house. I have a good kid...[who is] clean...I've never drank. What are you going to say about me? Am I lower

class too or am I something else?" Reflecting on this event, she said: "I've never really intimidated anybody to the same degree as I did...[then] (laughs). That was a *fine* piece of work...And I'm quite proud!" Her gendered and classed notions about the inappropriateness of intimidating behaviour were interwoven with her sense of agency and pride in having stood up for welfare mothers.

Habitus, Aspirations, Choices and Chances

Cultural images of welfare mothers are one-sided and neglect their diversity. Those who choose education as a route out of poverty are a diverse group among welfare mothers. This paper highlights differing educational trajectories, dispositions and identities of women from contrasting class backgrounds. Habitus illuminates the ways in which the women have over time both adjusted their aspirations and choices to their capacity to satisfy these (Bourdieu 2000) and endeavoured to push the boundaries of these constraints. A dynamic tension between self-doubt and confidence, structure and agency is evident in the women's habitus.

There is debate as to how well Bourdieu's and Reay's use of habitus to reconcile structure and agency has theorized social change (McLeod 2005). Relatedly, there is tension between my recognition of entrenched class-based inequalities and my desire to show class as a fluid process where agency operates. The value of using the categories of middle and working class to highlight class distinctions and inequalities comes with the risk of understating the diversity within such categories and the fluidity of class. This paper brings into critical tension through habitus the working- and middle-class women's life chances and choices. As they negotiate competing identities, the women's agency is expressed within a context of structural constraints. I have endeavoured to illustrate how the women's thoughts and aspirations concerning education are fluid and are both agentic and determined by their classed habitus. These tensions emphasize the complexity of the interplay between structure and agency in experiences of social class. As McLeod suggests, with such tensions "the issue is less one of choosing either side of the binary, than of...attempting to theorize both change *and* [italics in original] continuity." It is this "pressing political and analytical challenge" with which this paper engages (McLeod 2005, 24).

This paper challenges popular discourse of consumerism and choice, particularly evident in the field of education. Such discourse privileges one side of the binary between chance and choice, obfuscating myriad ways that choices are linked to life chances and social class. Post-secondary education is not a panacea for the poverty faced by these single mothers. They pursue post-secondary credentials at immense financial and emotional cost. They endure competing and conflictual identities of welfare recipient, single mother and student. They live under stressful conditions, accumulate heavy student loan debt and their degree is no guarantee of a well-paying job. While they have exercised agency and choice, class mobility may still prove elusive for some, even with a degree. That these women persevere despite the barriers to their educational and economic success, health and well-being, is testament to their commitment to their goals and to their resilience and courage.

Endnote

1. Words in italics indicate emphasis by the participant.

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