Developing Grounded Theory in Peace and Conflict Research[1]

Demola Akinyoade[2], Ph.D.

Peace and Conflict Studies Unit

Department of Political Science and International Studies

College of Social and Management Sciences

Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

demola.akinyoade@abuad.edu.ng

+234 805 770 2787

[1] 2013

[2] A member of the Grounded Theory Institute, USA

Abstract

There have been repeated calls to build endogenous and alternative theories and analyses forged in the crucible of the epistemological, social-political, cultural, and economic conditions of African realities. Against this background, the chapter discusses the grounded theory research as an appropriate research strategy to fulfill the need for building theories grounded in the African experiences and realities. It encourages African peace and conflict researchers to get on board in building useful theories to explain the onset, dynamics, and resolution of conflict and conditions or strategies for sustainable peace on the continent. It presents grounded theory as a viable research method in peace and conflict research and demystifies theory building as an exclusive right of super-eccentric academics from the northern hemisphere. The chapter will serve as a resource for would-be grounded theory researchers. It distinguishes between theory testing and theory building research approaches in the social sciences. It presents a brief history of grounded theory, its aims and utility, its features and step-by-step application as a strategy for research and data analysis.

Keywords: grounded theory, theory building, coding, memoing, theoretical sampling, constant comparison

Introduction

The whole scientific enterprise that scientists engaged in in their quest to build scientific knowledge about the world can be broadly categorized into two—theory testing and theory building. Theory testing scientific research seeks to verify—confirm or confute the claims of existing scientific theory (ies). Theory building empirical research seeks to develop scientific explanations as to the nature and relationships between concepts. Theory is one of the core things that distinguish scientific knowledge-building endeavors from other endeavors (such as journalism, investigation) that attempt to build knowledge through research. Other important aspects of scientific enterprise are data and the relationship between theory and data in scientific knowledge accumulation. So, theory and empirical data play central roles in scientific research. Peace and Conflict students, scholars and researchers must be well grounded in these basics.

Scientific studies verify (test) or generate (build) theory. Theory-testing or theory verification research tests the scientific propositions of a particular theory(ies) (Punch, 1998). Traditionally, positivist (quantitative) research is theory-testing research with clearly defined theory (ies) prespecified before the empirical work of data collection. Theory building or theory generation research, on the other hand, seeks to end with theory, "…developed systematically from the data we have collected." (Punch, 1998, p. 16) Qualitative research has typically been involved in theory generation. As Punch points out, while both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be used for both verification and generation, however, theory generation research is more likely to use the unstructured fieldwork techniques of qualitative approach. Theory verification research is useful in areas or fields where there are many unverified theories. Theory generation on the other hand is more suitable in areas or fields with scanty theories.

With relatively fewer theories developed in the field, when compared to older social science disciplines such as Political Science, Sociology, Psychology, International Studies, Economics, etc., one can convincingly argue that theory generation is suitable in peace and conflict studies. However, as a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary field, many theories in those other fields are useful in explaining some of the core field definition and distinctive issues of the field. Nevertheless, there have been repeated calls to build more theories to understand and explain contemporary social issues (Punch, 1998), most especially in Peace and Conflict Studies. The need for theory building is pressing in the field of peace and conflict studies, most especially in Africa because of the relatively young status of the field, the complexity and dynamism of its phenomena of interest require new theories to

understand, explain, and predict its realities, which are usually contemporary in nature. In Introduction: Research and Education Fundamental to Peace and Security, King and Sall contend that the field of peace and conflict studies is "…open to a spectrum of conceptualisations, hypotheses, and theories." (King & Sall, 2007, p. 8) They argue further the need for African peace scholars to develop "…endogenous and alternative theories, methodologies, and analyses forged in the crucible of the epistemological, social-political, cultural, and economic conditions of African realities." (University for Peace Africa Programme, 2007, p. 75)

This is the main gap this chapter is responding to. It presents grounded theory (GT) approach as a viable research strategy to generate, develop or build the much needed theory in peace and conflict studies. Starting with a brief discourse on the history of grounded theory, it takes the readers through the philosophy or rationale of the approach, its main features, developing grounded theory, the role of literature in GT, the place of GT in peace and conflict research and the grounded theory analysis. Before concluding, it provides useful information on the Grounded Theory Institute as a platform of grounded theory researcher to help interested readers network and build her capacity in GT.

Needless to say, by presenting a method with an explicit orientation for theory building in this medium, the author believes that any interested reader, irrespective of experience, stage in the academic ladder, gender or even intellectual capacity (as long as she can make sense of this write-up) can build relevant and useful theories to explain certain realities germane to peace and conflict through this method. The time is now for Africans scholars to take upon themselves the responsibilities of putting forward scientifically sound explanations developed systematically from the data they have collected about the epistemological, social-political, cultural, and economic conditions of African realities. Northern scholars, appreciatively, have done more than enough breastfeeding and spoon-feeding us with theories (viable or otherwise) in explaining our realities to themselves and to us. Now is the time for us to provide scientific explanations of our realities ourselves, and the Grounded theory method is a viable method to do just that. There is no better place to begin to champion this cause than in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies.

Grounded Theory

> 'Grounded theory is the systematic generation of a theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method. Grounded theory is not findings, but rather is an

> integrated set of conceptual hypotheses. It is just probability statements about relationship between concepts ' (Glaser, 1998, p. 3)

The first thing to know about GT is that it is not a theory. It is a systematic research method, a strategy. That's the simple but fascinating way Punch (1998) put it. 'Why then is it called grounded theory', you may want to ask. The answer is because it is a research method that aims at ending with theory that is grounded in the data. That is, its purpose is to generate theory that is rooted or 'grounded' in (the analyses of) its data. Hence, its objective is for collecting and analyzing data is to generate theory. Though simply and beautifully described, GT has its peculiar rationale, philosophy, strategy, and techniques to data collection, sampling, literature and analysis of its data. Espousing these is what this section is all about. Once people understand it, they soon realize that grounded theory, like most qualitative research methods, is similar to the natural way we gather knowledge and build explanations (that is, theories) about our world on day-to-day basis. So, in a sense we have all been 'grounded theorists' or qualitative researchers one way or the other without recognizing it. However, the section shows us not only how to recognize it, but how to consciously practice it, especially in our endeavors to build scientific knowledge about the phenomena of interests.

Brief History of Grounded Theory

GT was discovered in the 1960s through a collaborative work in medical sociology by two sociologists—Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. They studied dying in Californian hospitals and developed and used the constant comparative method (later known as grounded theory). They published their first book *Awareness of Dying* (1965), which was a great success. The second book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) was published in response to many methodological questions that followed the *Awareness of Dying.* After this publication, Glaser and Strauss seem to disagree on how to conduct GT. Eleven years later, Glaser published *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978). Nine years after, Strauss published *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987), followed by a joint publication of Strauss and Corbin *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990). In a bid to correct what he saw as misconceptions of GT presented in Strauss and Corbin's book, Glaser published *Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs. Forcing* in 1992. The 1967 to 1992 publications give the basic history of the development of GT and are also the main publications on methodological statements on GT (Punch, 1998). Glaser has published two more publications—*Examples of Grounded: A Reader* and *More Grounded Theory Methodology: A Reader* critiquing Strauss and Corbin's book. Strauss and Corbin wrote a chapter in Denzin and Lincoln *Handbook* (1994) in which they gave and overview of GT methodology and commented on its emerging nature. Strauss died in 1994 and in 1998, Glaser published another book *Doing Grounded*

Theory: Issues and Discussions and dedicated it to Strauss 'in remembrance of the journey we started in 1967' and to the 'the minus-mentorees throughout the world who are doing'. In 1999 Glaser founded a non-profit web-based organization—the Grounded Theory Institute (GTI)—dedicated to his own GT methodology. GTI is an online forum for discussion of GT and publishes a journal—The Grounded Theory Review.

GT was developed as a method for the study of complex social behavior and was initially presented as a method of analyzing qualitative data. It thus became associated with qualitative research. Although it arose of the quantitative methods in the sense that it was discovered in a bid to bring the statistical analytic methods (e.g. multivariate analysis) into qualitative data analysis. Therefore, Glaser, especially, has argued that it is applicable to quantitative data as well. However, GT is essentially different from positivist theory-testing methodologies in its view of theory. In positivistic research, existing theory are tested for robustness using empirical data. GT, however, does not force data into pre-existing theory or test theory rather it provides researchers with tools to build and generate theory from data. GT has become a general strategy for research found useful in a variety of research contexts including health research, education, and business, which entails studying high impact dependent variables.

Developing Grounded Theory: Key concepts in theory and practice

The crucial idea in developing a grounded theory (from data collected about a phenomenon or phenomena being investigated) is finding a core category, at a high level of abstraction but grounded in the data, which accounts for what is central in the data (Punch, 1998). This is a three-step process, with the first being finding conceptual categories in the data, which is the first level of abstraction. The second is finding relationships between these conceptual categories, which is the second and higher level of abstraction. And the third is conceptualizing and accounting for these relationships at a higher level of abstraction (Punch, 1998). Its goals, therefore, include formulating concepts, developing hypotheses (from these conceptual ideas) and verifying these hypotheses through constantly comparing concepts developed from data. Hence it involves both inductive and deductive thinking processes. Induction and deduction in grounded theory are done through the twin, essentially simultaneous, activities of abstracting and constant comparison. So, abstracting and constant comparing are essential parts of the core activities in GT. Other core activities and tools of GT include theoretical sampling, theoretical sensitivity, theoretical relevance, and theoretical saturation, coding, identifying core variables and saturation. We will now look at how these activities as carried out when conducting a GT research.

There is need to point out at this juncture that the peculiar relationship of data collection and analysis in GT makes it necessary to discuss data collection and data analysis pari passu when

presenting this research method. Hence you will find that many of the processes or steps of GT discussed below are executed concurrently with some others in real life GT research activities.

Theoretical Sampling

One of the unique features of GT is the relationship between data collection and data analyses. In most research methods, qualitative and quantitative alike, data collection is a distinctive stage from data analyses. That is, all relevant data are usually collected before analysis commences. But in GT, data collection and analyses are iterative and continues throughout the lifespan of the research. This means there is a back-and-forth movement between data collection and data analyses. This is the concept of *theoretical sampling*, in which subsequent data collection is guided by theoretical developments that emerge in the data analysis (Punch, 1998). In GT, a researcher, guided by some initial research questions, collects a sample (usually small) of data, codes and analyses them. The next set of data to be collected (what, whom and where) will be guided by the analysis of the previous data collected. This iterative, back-and-forth movement continues until the researcher has sufficient data to describe what is going on in the context or situation under investigation and until the point when *theoretical saturation* is reached, which is a point when new data collected are no longer adding new information to what is already known. However, there is the argument that one can never be certain that the categories are saturated since induction has its limits. For instance, fresh data may come along that refute the existing theory. This brings in the concept of *theoretical completeness* as a twin concept to theoretical saturation. In other words, data collection and analysis continues until the researcher has theoretical explanation for what is happening and its key features. That is, when the theory is able to explain the data fully and satisfactorily.

Hence the key issue in sampling here is not representativeness but rather, of allowing the theory to emerge (Collin, Manion and Morrison, 2011). *Theoretical relevance*, that is, '…how the data contribute to the emerging theory and its categories…' is a critical criterion in the data collection and sampling process. Theoretical relevance requires a skill—*theoretical sensitivity.* That is, being sensitive to the theoretical possibilities that all data carry. Theoretical sensitivity is a major emphasis in GT. It requires the analyst opening her thinking about the phenomena being studied. Theoretical sampling is getting more popular in other qualitative methods today. And as Punch (1998) pointed out, it resembles the normal way human beings do every day, when we encounter a puzzling situation. Hence it models the way we have always learned. Theoretical sampling may necessitate reviews or total change of the initial research questions. The essential thing is that data drive the direction of the research.

Coding

Having collected sample data as guided by initial research questions, a researcher go about analysing the data in order for the analysis to inform the next phase of data collection. This brings us

to the next activity in GT research—coding. One needs to know what the generic terms 'code' and 'coding' mean. Codes are names, tags, or labels. Coding is therefore the process of putting names, tags or labels against pieces of data. (Punch, 1998) The data may be individual words, phrases, a whole sentence or more, a part of a picture, and so on. Most of us have coded text without knowing. Highlighting part of a text and tagging it with a label to represent what we consider the central idea is a form of coding. Coding serves as index for the data. The first labels also permit a more advanced coding at the latter stage of the analyses. Hence coding is both the first part of the analysis and part of getting the data ready for subsequent analysis. Coding in qualitative research is different from coding as used in quantitative analysis. In the latter data analysts codes data from questionnaire into symbols amenable to statistical operations/manipulations.

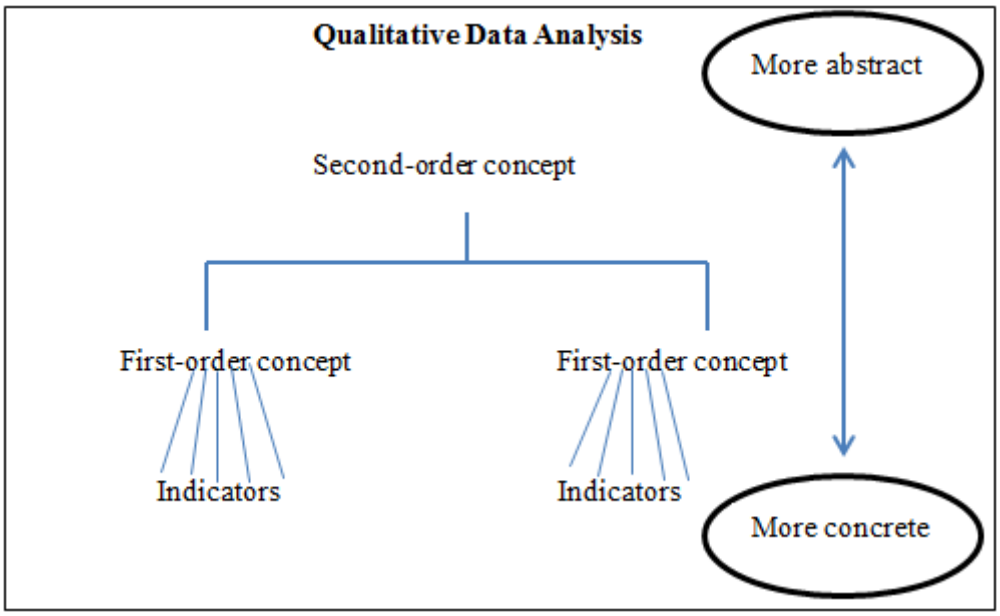
Following the three-stage process of developing grounded theory identified above, there are three general types of codes in GT. These are *substantive*, *theoretical* and *core* codes. Substantive codes are the initial conceptual categories generated from the empirical data. However, they are at a higher abstract level than the data. Theoretical codes connect or show the relationship among the categories identified. They bring the substantive codes together and interconnect them using propositions or hypotheses about the data, which will be integrated in the third stage. The core code is the higher-order conceptualisation of theoretical codes which account for these relationships and thus form the basis for theory building. (Punch, 1998). From these three codes come the three coding activities in GT. They are *open coding* which finds the substantive codes; *axial coding or theoretical coding*, which uses theoretical codes to connect the main substantive codes; and *selective coding* which isolates and elaborate the higher-order core category (Punch, 1998). Consequently, in coding in GT, the first, second and their objectives are to identify the substantive codes in the data, the theoretical and the core codes respectively. This corresponds with the first, second and third levels of analysis respectively with increasing levels of abstraction. Coding is thus a central issue in GT. However, these coding are likely to overlap and done simultaneously, rather than as separate sequential activities.

Open coding involves 'breaking open' or deconstructing the data into manageable chunks. (This is why it is called open coding) The point is to understand the phenomenon by opening the theoretical possibilities in the data. It aims at generating abstract conceptual categories more abstract than the data they describe. These can then be used later as building blocks for the theory. It involves exploring the data and breaking it into units to code for meanings, feelings, actions, events and so on (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). This leads to creation of new codes and categories and subcategories where necessary. It is not about bringing concepts to the data and no a priori coding scheme is used in open coding. Axial coding (or Glaser's theoretical coding) attempts to link together the categories and codes that were created during open coding. In other words, the theoretical possibilities and categories broken apart by open coding are put together again or interrelated by

putting axis (that is, link) through the data, howbeit in conceptually different ways. Axial coding involves exploring codes and examining their interrelationships. Selective coding involves deliberately selecting a core code and making explicit its relationship with other codes in those parts of data. Once selected, the core category becomes the centerpiece of the grounded theory. Selective coding includes writing a 'story' that builds on the propositions or integrates categories produced by axial coding. The aim of selective coding is integrating and pulling together the developing analysis. The core category being the central focus around which all other concepts, ideas and categories are integrated.

Abstracting

The inductive process of GT is seen in the way its theory emerges from its data through moving from one level of abstraction to the other. Abstracting (as in most other qualitative analysis) essentially means that some concepts are at higher level of abstraction than other. Punch (1998) gives a useful conceptual framework to depict levels of abstraction in data analysis. This is adapted in Figure 1 below. At the lowest level of abstraction are the indicators, which are at the most concrete, descriptive level. As the label goes, indicators indicate, that is, they show the presence of something. For instance, hostile remarks made by someone can be considered indicators of the concept of aggression in a particular research on aggression. A researcher working on such study may include some other indicators of aggression in order to understand aggression in the given context.



Adapted from Punch, 1998

Hence indicators are what qualitative researchers collect in the field in form of data. In abstracting, we infer a concept from an indicator in the data. That is we are going upwards from a piece of empirical data to a more abstract concept (Punch, 1998). A concept has many indicators and the indicators are

interchangeable with each other for the purpose of inferring the concept. However, rather than have prespecified concepts and indicators, in GT, emerging indicators from the data lead to the development of concept.

Constant Comparison

Comparison is a central intellectual activity in qualittive analysis. It is at the heart of GT analysis as it assisst in theory generation. In fact the co-founders of GT described grounded theory analysis as the 'constant comparative method'. Comapring is essential in abstracting and coding. At the first level of coding, through comparing different indicators in the data, the analyst come up with more abstract concepts behind the data. Similarly, at the second stage, it is by comparing categories that we are able to link them. Thus comparison helps in raising the level of abstraction. According to Glaser, constant comparison is the process 'by which the properties and categories across the data are compared continuously until no more variation occurs' (1996 cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 600), that is, until saturation is reached. Theoretical saturation is the aim of constant comparison. It involves using negative, discrepant and disconfirming cases to assist the categories and emergent theory to fit all data by comparing new data with existing data and categories in order for the categories to achieve a perfect fit with the data.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 105-13 cit. in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 600), constant comparison involves four stages. These are comparing incidents and data that are applicable to each category; integrating these categories and their properties; bounding the theory; and setting out the theory. At the first stage, incidents are coded and compared with former incidents in the same and different groups and with other data in the same category. This involves two processes—unitizing and categorizing. Unitizing involves breaking the narratives into the smallest pieces of information or meaningful text, for example, words, phrases, paragraphs. Categorizing involves bringing together related the unitized text into the same category, devising rules to describe the properties of the categories, and checking for internal consistency within the unitized text within the categories. The second stage is a stage of memoing and further coding, where units being compared change from incidents with incidents to incidents with properties of the category that emerged from previous comparison of incidents. The third stage is a stage of delimitation. The delimitation occurs at the levels of theory and the categories. Major modifications reduce because underlying uniformities and properties are discovered. Theoretical saturation takes place at this stage. The final stage is the stage of writing theory. It occurs when the researcher, having gathered and generated coded data, memos, and a theory, write the theory in full.

To aid reflexivity and accompany constant comparison, the co-founders of GT recommend that memoing should be done simultaneously with constant comparison.

Memoing

'Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about substantive codes and their theoretically coded relationships as they emerge during coding, collecting and analyzing data and during memoing.' (Glaser, 1998, p. 177) Memoing is the writing down of ideas that occur to the researcher during the process of constant comparison and data analysis. A memo is the write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they occur to the analyst while coding (and memoing). It involves writing '…ideas, notes, comments, notes on surprising matters, themes or metaphors, reminders, hunches, draft hypotheses, references to literature, diagrams, questions, draft theories, methodological points, personal points, suggestions for further enquiry, etc…' (Lempert, 2007, p. 245.; Flick, 2009, p. 434 cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 600) Memos can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages. It expresses the analyst momentary ideas elaborated using certain concepts. Memos could be as varied as the analyst imagination permits. They may be about any part of the data. According to Punch (1998), memos may be '…substantive, theoretical, methodological, or even personal.' The first two suggest deeper concepts than coding. They Memos are useful throughout the stages of the analysis and even may constitute useful part of the report writing later. Coding and memoing are essential parts of the style of all qualitative data analysis.

Elaborating

As a concept has many indicators, so also, a category has many properties. Elaborating a category is to specify and compare its additional properties by finding additional indicators of the concept until we reach saturation. Elaborating also means developing and examining its variation systematically by specifying, comparing and developing its properties (Punch, 1998).

Grounded Theory Researchers

GT is unique in the sense that it sets aside all preconceived ideas and allows the data themselves to give rise to the theory. This demands certain abilities from the GT researchers. Glaser (1996) suggests ability to tolerate uncertainty (no preconceived theory), confusion, setbacks (when new data disconfirm emergent theory), to avoid premature formulation of the theory, but through patiently doing constant comparison allow the emergence of the final theory. There is need for openness to the emergent and not forcing data to fit theory by all means. A researcher forces when he lacks the ability to handle confusion and feeling stupid in his study, he argues. GT demands hard work and faithfulness to the rigor of the process. These are summarized as follows:

- Tolerance and openness to data and what is emerging;
- Tolerance of confusion and regression (feeling stupid when the theory does not become immediately obvious);

- Resistance to premature formulation of theory;
- Ability to pay close attention to data;
- Willingness to engage in the process of theory generation rather than theory testing; it is an experiential methodology;
- Ability to work with emergent categories rather than preconceived or received categories.

  (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 599)

Evaluating the Grounded Theory

The grounded theory of whatever is being theorized must emerge from the data in an unforced manner and explain the data fully and satisfactorily, that is, account for all the data. There are several criteria against which we can evaluate the adequacy or otherwise of the grounded theory. Those suggested in GT literature include originality, resonance (the data, the phenomenon, the participants' experiences and views), usefulness (for different people and groups, for identifying generic processes, for further research, for advancing the field), workability (practicality and explanatory power), fit with the data, relevance (to the situation, to groups, to researchers, to the field) and modifiability (in light of additional data) (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 237) suggest four key ones. These are:

- The closeness of the *fit* between the theory and the data;
- How readily *understandable* the theory is by the lay persons working in the field, that is, that it makes sense to them;
- The ability of the theory to be *general* to a 'multitude of diverse daily situations within the substantive area, not just to a specific types of situation';
- The theory must enable partial control to be exercised over the process and the structures of day-to-day situations that evolve over time, such that the researcher who is using the theory can have sufficient control of such situations to render it worthwhile to apply the theory to these.

  (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 601)

Criticisms of Grounded Theory

Conclusion

With explicit orientation and procedure for theory generation, grounded theory is a viable tool for filling the need for theory-building in Peace and Conflict Research, especially in Africa. It is a complete and rigorous research strategy to develop explanatory theory grounded in the data. It was discovered by Glaser and Strauss in the sixties. Developing grounded theory about phenomena under

investigation involves some tools, activities and guiding processes. Central activities in GT are abstracting and constant comparison. Others include theoretical sampling, theoretical sensitivity, theoretical relevance, theoretical saturation, theoretical completeness, coding, memoing, and elaborating. There are criteria for evaluating the adequacy of a grounded theory in theorizing about its phenomena. These are originality, resonance, usefulness, workability, fit with the data, relevance and modifiability. These and similar ones show GT as a rigorous research strategy. GT has been criticized for presuming that it is not informed by other theories whereas data are laden with theories.

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