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*In the United States, research on conceptions of the transition to adulthood has been on mostly white samples. The study examined here presents data that include African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans.*

## Conceptions of the Transition to Adulthood Among Emerging Adults in American Ethnic Groups

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What does it mean to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood? This intriguing question has been addressed in numerous studies of young Americans. Consistently, the studies report that young Americans view the transition to adulthood as marked mainly by individualistic character qualities such as accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001; Crockett, 2000; Greene, Wheatley, and Aldava, 1992; Scheer and Palkovitz, 1994). Becoming an adult means learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person. A secondary consideration is developing greater consideration for others and avoiding behavior that might harm them (Arnett, 1998). In contrast, most young Americans regard specific events traditionally viewed as marking the transition to adulthood, such as finishing education, beginning full-time work, and marriage, as irrelevant to the attainment of adult status.

All of the studies conducted in the United States thus far have involved predominantly white samples. How might conceptions of the transition to adulthood be different for young Americans in minority cultures? The goal of the study examined here was to investigate this question.

The participants in the study were drawn from the three major American ethnic minority groups: African Americans, Latinos, and Asian

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Americans. White Americans were also included, for comparison. All participants were emerging adults, aged eighteen to twenty-nine. This age period was chosen because there is evidence that for most Americans, it is during these years that they believe they make the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2001). The criteria for the transition to adulthood used in this study were based on the anthropological, sociological, and psychological literatures and on previous studies (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001).

The central hypothesis of the study was that emerging adults in American ethnic minority groups would be less likely than whites to support individualistic criteria for adulthood and more likely to support more collectivistic criteria. A variety of studies have shown that the values of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans tend to be less individualistic and more collectivistic than the values of white Americans (Fulgini, Tseng, and Lam, 1999; Phinney, Ong, and Madden, 2000; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1996). Perhaps, then, young people in minority cultures would be most likely to favor criteria for adulthood that reflect obligations and duties toward others. Specifically, it was hypothesized that emerging adults in ethnic minority groups would be more likely than whites to support criteria for adulthood related to interdependence (rather than independence), complying with social norms (by avoiding socially prohibited behavior), completing socially recognized role transitions (such as marriage), and the capacity for fulfilling family roles (such as providing financially for a family).

Another question that has been explored in previous studies of conceptions of the transition to adulthood concerns when young people believe they have reached adulthood. In studies involving mostly white samples, the majority of emerging adults have responded to the question, "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" by answering neither yes nor no but "in some respects yes, in some respects no" (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998). It is only in their late twenties and early thirties that a majority of persons state that they feel they have reached adulthood (Arnett, 2001). For emerging adults in ethnic minority groups, it could be expected that they may have a subjective sense of reaching adulthood earlier than for white Americans. This would be a consequence of higher collectivism, specifically of having greater responsibilities within their families of origin.

## Method

**Participants.** The participants were 109 white Americans, 122 African Americans, 96 Latinos, and 247 Asian Americans, all aged eighteen to twenty-nine and living in the San Francisco metropolitan area. Background characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 5.1. Over half the Asian Americans were in school full time, compared to 21 to 29 percent in the other three groups. Perhaps because they were more likely to be in school full time, Asian Americans were less likely to be employed full time

(41 percent) than participants in the other groups (54 to 75 percent). Latinos had obtained the least education of any of the groups. Fifty-four percent of Latinos had obtained at least some college education, compared to 74 percent of African Americans, 87 percent of Asian Americans, and 94 percent of whites. Similarly, the fathers of Latino participants were the least educated, and the fathers of Asian Americans and whites were the most educated, with African Americans in between. Thirty percent of Latinos were married, compared to 6 to 16 percent of participants in the other three groups. About one-third of Latinos and African Americans had at least one child, compared to just 4 percent of Asian Americans and whites. Fifty percent of Asian Americans had been born in the United States, compared to 69 percent of Latinos, 84 percent of whites, and 93 percent of African Americans.

**Procedure.** Research assistants approached potential participants in public places and asked if they would be willing to fill out a brief questionnaire on the transition to adulthood. Over 90 percent of the persons approached agreed to participate. The questionnaire took about fifteen minutes to complete.

**Measures.** Participants indicated their conceptions of the transition to adulthood on a questionnaire used in several previous studies (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001). There were thirty-nine items on the questionnaire, and participants were asked to “indicate whether you think the following must be achieved before a person can be considered to be an adult.” They could

**Table 5.1. Background Information on Study Participants**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>White</i>
Male	58	60	50	50
Female	42	40	50	50
Age	24.1	23.1	23.7	24.1
Currently in school full time	21	29	55	21
Currently employed part time	17	28	33	15
Currently employed full time	66	54	41	75
<i>Highest level of education completed</i>				
High school diploma or less	26	46	13	6
Some college	38	28	30	19
College degree or more	36	27	57	75
<i>Father's education</i>				
High school degree or less	39	69	30	21
Some college	25	16	9	10
College degree or more	36	15	61	69
Married	16	30	10	6
Children (at least one)	36	32	4	4
Born in United States	93	69	50	84

*Note:* All numbers in the table are percentages, except for age, which is the group mean.

then indicate yes or no for each item. All items are shown in Table 5.2. The items were originally based on the literature in anthropology, sociology, and psychology (see Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998) and on pilot studies. The questionnaire was designed to include a wide range of possible criteria for the transition to adulthood. Items were distributed in a random order on the questionnaire.

Participants were also asked on the questionnaire, "Do you think that you have reached adulthood?" Response options were "yes," "no," and "in some respects yes, in some respects no." In addition, a variety of questions concerning background information were included.

## Results

The frequencies for the items on the questionnaire will be presented first, organized into subscales. This will be followed by analyses comparing the ethnic groups on the subscales, and then by analyses comparing the ethnic groups on their views of whether they had reached adulthood.

**Frequencies.** The first step in data analysis was to organize the items by subscales, based on conceptual and theoretical criteria taken mostly from the literature described already (see Arnett, 1998, 2001). The subscales included Independence, Interdependence, Role Transitions, Norm Compliance, Biological Transitions, Chronological Transitions, and Family Capacities.

Organization of the subscales was guided by theoretical criteria rather than by a quantitative statistical approach such as factor analysis. A theory-based approach was preferable because many of the items on the scale were drawn from specific literatures. Specifically, the items of the Family Capacities subscale were all drawn from the anthropological literature, which has identified gender-specific criteria used in many traditional cultures as criteria for the transition to adulthood (Gilmore, 1990). Similarly, the items on the Role Transitions subscale were drawn from the sociological literature, which has long used a series of specific role transitions as the defining criteria for the transition to adulthood (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999; Hogan and Astone, 1986). The items on the Independence subscale have been discussed in previous studies as forming a distinctly American middle-class conception of the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998). The internal reliabilities of the subscales were Biological Transitions (.76), Chronological Transitions (.67), Family Capacities (.88), Independence (.42), Interdependence (.64), Norm Compliance (.83), and Role Transitions (.73).

The frequencies for the items in the subscales are shown in Table 5.2. The percentages of participants endorsing the various items as criteria for adulthood varied widely. One notable pattern in the frequencies is the consistency of support across ethnic groups for the importance of several of the items in the Independence subscale. Of the thirty-nine items on the

**Table 5.2. Percentage of Participants Agreeing That a Criterion Must Be Achieved for the Transition to Adulthood**

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>White</i>
<i>Independence</i>				
Establish equal relationship with parents	77	79	78	70
Financially independent from parents	72	79	75	71
No longer living in parents' household	55	56	49	52
Not deeply tied to parents emotionally	31	30	21	16
Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions	89	85	93	91
Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences	80	72	82	82
<i>Interdependence</i>				
Committed to long-term love relationship	28	39	33	14
Make life-long commitments to others	42	46	52	37
Learn always to have good control over your emotions	69	77	68	51
Become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others	75	75	80	73
<i>Role Transitions</i>				
Finish education	23	24	32	14
Married	14	32	13	5
Have at least one child	16	32	10	5
Become employed full-time	43	50	35	19
Settle into a long-term career	24	40	32	14
Purchase house	17	28	18	7
<i>Norm Compliance</i>				
Avoid becoming drunk	46	51	39	19
Avoid illegal drugs	50	57	48	21
Avoid drunk driving	62	64	72	60
Avoid committing petty crimes like vandalism and shoplifting	66	60	75	61
Have no more than one sexual partner	25	45	34	17
Drive safely and close to speed limit	42	53	44	35
Avoid use of profanity/vulgar language	33	39	35	22
Use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child	63	65	65	56
<i>Biological Transitions</i>				
Grow to full height	34	40	29	24
If a woman, become biologically capable of bearing children	26	47	33	34
If a man, become biologically capable of fathering children	31	53	37	27
Have had sexual intercourse	25	35	20	14
<i>Chronological Transitions</i>				
Have obtained driver's license and can drive an automobile	29	43	28	17
Reached age eighteen	41	52	35	34
Reached age twenty-one	43	47	40	30

**Table 5.2. (continued)**

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>White</i>
<i>Family Capacities</i>				
If a woman, become capable of supporting a family financially	62	65	49	30
If a man, become capable of supporting a family financially	71	72	57	29
If a woman, become capable of caring for children	66	72	56	41
If a man, become capable of caring for children	72	79	58	42
If a woman, become capable of running a household	73	72	65	59
If a man, become capable of running a household	81	74	64	59
If a woman, become capable of keeping a family physically safe	64	72	63	51
If a man, become capable of keeping a family physically safe	66	74	65	48

*Note:* The questionnaire asked participants, "Indicate whether you think each of the following must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult." They could then indicate yes for "necessary for adulthood" or no for "not necessary for adulthood."

questionnaire, only five were endorsed by 70 percent or more of the participants in all four ethnic groups, and four of these five items were on the Independence subscale: "Establish equal relationship with parents," "Financially independent from parents," "Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions," and "Decide on personal beliefs and values." The other item endorsed by at least 70 percent in all four ethnic groups was an item on the Interdependence subscale: "Become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others."

Another notable feature of the frequencies was the relatively low support for the items on the Role Transitions subscale. Only 14 to 32 percent of participants in the ethnic groups endorsed "Finish education" as a criterion for adulthood, only 5 to 32 percent for "Married," and only 5 to 32 percent for "Have at least one child."

**Subscale Comparisons.** To compare the ethnic groups on the subscales of criteria for the transition to adulthood, ANCOVAs were conducted with ethnic group as the independent variable and the summary ratings for the subscales as the dependent variables. Simple contrasts were included with the ANCOVAs, comparing each of the ethnic groups to whites. This approach was taken because previous studies on conceptions of the transition to adulthood have taken place on mostly white samples, and the hypotheses for this study concerned the ways that emerging adults in ethnic minority groups may differ from whites in their conceptions of the transition to adulthood.

Table 5.3 shows the results of the ANCOVAs with six covariates: age; gender; number of generations family has been in the United States; father's educational attainment, representing family socioeconomic status (SES)

**Table 5.3. Ethnic Group and Subscale Comparisons with Covariates**

Subscale	F	Contrasts ( <i>t</i> -tests)		
		Whites versus African Americans	Whites versus Latinos	Whites versus Asian Americans
Independence	NS	NS	NS	NS
Interdependence	4.05***	NS	NS	2.05*
Role Transitions	4.76***	1.94†	3.93***	3.03**
Norm Compliance	4.86***	2.13*	NS	2.32*
Biological Transitions	3.61**	NS	1.97†	NS
Chronological Transitions	2.80*	NS	1.96†	NS
Family Capacities	2.13*	3.56***	2.58*	1.81†

Note: NS = not significant. The second column shows the main effects *F* values from the ANCOVAs. The last three columns are *t*-values from ANCOVA contrasts. The covariates used in the analyses were age; gender; number of generations family had been in the United States (0, 1, 2, and 3 or more); father’s educational attainment (high school or less, some college, and college degree or more); currently married (yes or no); and parenthood status (yes or no).

†*p* < .10

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .01

\*\*\**p* < .001

background; currently married (yes or no); and parenthood status (yes or no). Emerging adults in all three ethnic groups were found to be no different from whites on the Independence subscale. However, emerging adults in all three ethnic groups were found to be more likely than whites to favor transition criteria related to Role Transitions and Family Capacities, and African Americans and Asian Americans were more likely than whites to support the criteria on the Norm Compliance subscale. Also, Asian Americans were higher than whites on the Interdependence subscale, and Latinos were more likely than whites to favor criteria related to Biological Transitions and Chronological Transitions.

There were few significant results involving the covariates. However, emerging adults with relatively low family SES background (as measured by father’s educational attainment) were higher on the Interdependence [ $t(1,474) = 2.12, p < .05$ ], Norm Compliance [ $t(1,507) = 2.34, p < .05$ ], and Family Capacities [ $t(1,381) = 2.41, p < .05$ ] subscales. Also, persons whose families had been in the United States relatively fewer generations were higher on the Role Transitions [ $t(1,520) = 3.43, p < .01$ ] and Norm Compliance [ $t(1,507) = 3.47, p < .01$ ] subscales. Parents were higher than nonparents on the Role Transitions [ $t(1,520) = 2.71, p < .01$ ] subscale.

**Views on Subjective Transition to Adulthood.** Participants were asked to judge whether they believed they had reached adulthood. In response to the question, “Do you think that you have reached adulthood?” a majority of African Americans (59 percent) and nearly half of Latinos (48 percent) responded yes. A smaller proportion of whites (36 percent) and Asian Americans (38 percent) responded yes. A majority of

whites (60 percent) and Asian Americans (54 percent) responded “in some respects yes, in some respects no.” Less than half of African Americans (34 percent) and Latinos (44 percent) gave this response. Relatively few persons in each group answered no: 7 percent African Americans, 8 percent Latinos, 9 percent Asian Americans, and 4 percent whites.

The groups were compared on their subjective evaluations of their adulthood status using the same analysis strategy that had been used for the subscales of transition criteria. ANCOVAs were conducted with ethnic group as the independent variable and their response to the question about whether they had reached adulthood (1 = no, 2 = yes and no, 3 = yes) as the dependent variable. Age, gender, number of generations the family has been in the United States, father’s education, marital status, and parenthood status were included as covariates, as in the previous analyses. Simple contrasts compared each ethnic minority group to whites.

Despite the differences in frequencies of responses, once the covariates were added to the analysis, there were no significant differences between the ethnic groups in their evaluations of their adulthood status. In the results for the covariates, participants who were older [ $t(1,531) = 6.18, p < .001$ ], came from relatively low-SES families [ $t(1,531) = 2.13, p < .05$ ], and had become parents [ $t(1,531) = 2.80, p < .01$ ] were more likely to feel they had reached adulthood. Thus, the higher frequency of African Americans and Latinos in stating they had reached adulthood can be explained by the fact that emerging adults in those two groups were from relatively low-SES families and were more likely than whites and Asian Americans to have become parents.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine how young people who are members of American ethnic minority groups view the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The results showed that conceptions of the transition to adulthood among emerging adults in ethnic minority groups are in some ways similar to the conceptions held by whites, but with some intriguing differences.

The most striking similarity across the different groups was in the prominence of the criteria reflecting independence, particularly, “Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions,” “Decide on personal beliefs and values,” “Financially independent from parents,” and “Establish equal relationship with parents.” In all three ethnic minority groups as well as among whites, at least 70 percent of emerging adults viewed these criteria as necessary achievements in order for a person to be considered an adult. There appears to be a consensus among emerging adults across ethnic groups that becoming independent from parents and learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person is an immutable requirement for adult status.



Despite this consensus, the conception of the transition to adulthood held by emerging adults in American ethnic minority groups differed in important ways from the conception held by white emerging adults. The differences were especially notable and consistent on three subscales of criteria for adulthood: Family Capacities, Norm Compliance, and Role Transitions. On these subscales, all three ethnic minority groups were more likely than whites to view the criteria on the subscales as important for adult status, even when several covariates were included in the analysis.

The Family Capacities scale contained a variety of gender-specific items pertaining to capacities such as supporting a family financially, keeping a family physically safe, and caring for children. These items were taken from the anthropological literature, where it has been reported that traditional cultures often define the capacities for adulthood in gender-specific ways, with men expected to provide and protect and women expected to care for children and run a household (Arnett, 1998; Gilmore, 1990; Schlegel and Barry, 1991). For this study, it was expected that young people in ethnic minority groups would be more likely to support such gender-specific criteria for adulthood as a consequence of having more collectivistic values and also more traditional views about gender roles than whites do (Marin and Marin, 1991; Sung, 1985; Taylor, 1998).

Results showed that young people in ethnic minority groups were more likely than whites to view the criteria on the Family Capacities subscale as necessary for adulthood. However, support for these criteria in ethnic minority groups was not gender specific. For example, 57 percent of Asian Americans and over 70 percent of African Americans and Latinos indicated that a man should "become capable of supporting a family financially" in order to be considered an adult, compared to just 29 percent of whites. Similarly, 49 percent of Asian Americans and over 60 percent of African Americans and Latinos indicated that a woman should "become capable of supporting a family financially" in order to be considered an adult, compared to only 30 percent of whites. Thus, support for Family Capacities criteria by emerging adults in American ethnic minority groups appears to be based on values that esteem family obligations rather than on traditional views of gender roles (Hatchett and Jackson, 1993; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1996; Sung, 1985).

The Norm Compliance subscale contained items that pertained to complying with social norms such as avoiding becoming drunk and driving safely and close to the speed limit. It was hypothesized that emerging adults in ethnic minority groups would be more likely than whites to favor these items as criteria for adulthood, as a reflection of collectivistic values emphasizing consideration for others. Results showed that emerging adults in ethnic minority groups were significantly more likely than whites to favor the criteria on the Norm Compliance subscale, as expected.

However, a closer look at the pattern of results for the items on this subscale reveals an interesting trend. The difference between whites and

ethnic minority groups on the subscale appears to be due to whites' being less likely than members of ethnic minority groups to support items that involve behavior that does not directly harm others. For example, only 19 percent of whites supported "avoid becoming drunk" as a criterion for adulthood, compared to 46 percent African Americans, 51 percent Latinos, and 39 percent Asian Americans. In contrast, for the item "avoid drunk driving," which may involve direct harm to others, 60 percent of whites supported this as a criterion for adulthood, similar to the responses of young people in the other groups (62 to 72 percent). Thus, the greater endorsement by emerging adults in ethnic minority groups for the items on the Norm Compliance subscale appears to be due to greater concern for the opinion of others rather than greater concern with avoiding direct harm to others.

The Role Transitions subscale contained items drawn from the sociological literature pertaining to transitions such as "married," "finish education," and "become employed full time." It was hypothesized that emerging adults in ethnic minority groups would be more likely than whites to value Role Transitions as criteria for adulthood, for reasons such as higher emphasis on family obligations (thus, higher importance placed on marriage and parenthood), earlier completion of education (thus, higher importance on "finish education"), and more precarious employment prospects (thus, higher importance on "become employed full-time") (Pollard and O'Hare, 1999). The results supported this hypothesis. For example, the proportion of emerging adults supporting "become employed full time" was 43 percent for African Americans, 50 percent for Latinos, and 35 percent for Asian Americans but only 19 percent for whites. Still, it should be noted that Role Transitions ranked relatively low as criteria for adulthood across all groups. Even in ethnic minority groups, the items on the Role Transitions subscale were supported by a considerably lower proportion of emerging adults than most of the items on the Independence, Family Capacities, or Norm Compliance subscales.

Overall, the results could be interpreted as reflecting the bicultural identity possessed by most adolescents and emerging adults in American ethnic minority groups (Phinney, 1990; Phinney and Devich-Navarro, 1997). In some ways, the ethnic emerging adults in this study appear to embrace the individualism of the American majority culture, as reflected in widespread endorsement of criteria for adulthood such as "accept responsibility for your actions" and "decide on personal beliefs and values." At the same time, however, they are more likely than whites to embrace criteria related to Family Capacities, Norm Compliance, and Role Transitions, which appear to reflect cultural values of family obligations and consideration for others.

With regard to their subjective transition to adulthood, fewer than 10 percent of the persons in the white group or any of the three ethnic minority groups answered no in response to the question, "Do you feel that you

have reached adulthood?" However, fewer than half of whites or Asian Americans answered yes to this question. The most common response was "in some respects yes, in some respects no" for both whites (60 percent) and Asian Americans (54 percent). African Americans and Latinos were notably different in their responses to this question, with 59 percent of African Americans responding "yes" and only 34 percent responding "in some respects yes, in some respects no," and for Latinos 48 percent responding "yes" and 44 percent responding "yes and no."

The reason that the ambiguous "yes and no" response was so common among whites and Asian Americans is apparent from the criteria most likely to be considered important in marking the transition to adulthood. Most of the top criteria for the transition to adulthood are gradual, intangible character qualities: "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions," "decide on personal beliefs and values," "become less self-oriented." These are not events but processes that take place over an extended period of time. Consequently, it is understandable that many emerging adults would feel that they are in the course of these processes but have not yet completed them—on the way to adulthood but not there yet. It is only after age thirty that a clear majority of people believe they have fully reached adulthood (Arnett, 2001).

Why is the pattern different for African Americans and Latinos? Analyses indicated that the difference can be explained by the relatively low family SES of these two groups and their greater likelihood of becoming parents in their twenties. Growing up in a relatively low-SES family may mean having more family responsibilities in childhood and adolescence than whites do (Fulgini, Tseng, and Lam, 1999; Phinney, 2000), which may contribute to an earlier sense of having reached adulthood. The significance of parenthood for reaching adulthood has been shown in previous studies (Arnett, 1998). Although reaching parenthood is rarely regarded as a necessary requirement for being considered an adult, young people who have become parents often state that for them personally, becoming a parent vaulted them suddenly and irrevocably into adulthood. For African American and Latino emerging adults, then, many of them feel that they have reached adulthood at an earlier age than most whites or Asian Americans do, not because of cultural differences per se but because they more frequently experience a low-SES family background and a relatively early entry into parenthood.

## Conclusion

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is not simply biological but also social and cultural. Consequently, cultures may differ in the criteria they consider to be most important in marking the transition to adulthood. In most of American society, there is no rite or event that signifies unambiguously that a young person has attained adult status. As the results of

this study show, chronological markers such as turning age eighteen or twenty-one and transition events such as marriage or finishing education do not hold connotations of reaching adult status for most young people, either among whites or among African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. However, there does appear to be a widespread American consensus on what constitutes the transition to adulthood. High proportions of young Americans, across ethnic groups, agree that the transition to adulthood is defined mainly by individualistic transitions, balanced by criteria that reflect concern for others.

Although this view of the transition to adulthood applies across ethnic groups, there are differences as well between whites and African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Most notably, young people in these ethnic minority groups are more likely to favor criteria for adulthood that reflect obligations to others. In the balance between individualistic criteria and other-oriented criteria for adulthood, the balance appears to be slightly more toward other-oriented criteria among young people in ethnic minority groups than among whites. Young people in ethnic minority groups appear to have a bicultural conception of the transition to adulthood, combining the individualistic transitions of the majority culture with a greater emphasis on obligations toward others drawn from the values of their ethnic minority cultures.

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