

## Narrating an Ex-convict's Story of Becoming an Entrepreneur

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**KEYWORDS** Critical Events Theory. Capabilities Theory. Narrative Inquiry-based Research

**ABSTRACT** Scholars of the critical events construct believe that certain events are "critical" because of their impact and profound effect on whoever experiences such events. This paper explores an ex-convict's personal story of becoming a successful emerging entrepreneur. The conceptual framework for this study is based on the critical events theory, capabilities and adaptive entrepreneurial constructs. A life history narrative inquiry-based approach was employed for conducting this study. Telephonic interviews were conducted, recorded and analysed. Findings revealed that entrepreneurship is an opportunity which provides new and interesting opportunities and challenges for ex-convicts to find community acceptance, financial stability and socialisation to re-start life in their community.

### INTRODUCTION

Researchers in the social sciences have shown a growing interest in using narrative inquiry-based research to advance the diversity agenda globally. In line with this narrative turn, an ex-convict has applied storytelling and (auto) biographical reflection in his life story during and after release to starting a business. By exploring the personal story of an ex-convict becoming an entrepreneur, which was supported by perspective transformation as an emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why entrepreneurs are important for the economy, the study will also explore in-depth the personal views on corporate responsibility within communities and how to support government initiatives in poverty eradication and job creation efforts. The conceptual framework for this study

is based on the critical events theory, capabilities theory and adaptive entrepreneurial construct. A life history narrative inquiry-based approach was employed for conducting this study. Telephonic interviews were conducted, recorded and analysed. Findings are reported and suggestions are formulated for further research.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

This study is foregrounded in three specific constructs, namely Critical Events Theory, Capability Theory and the Adaptive Entrepreneurial Theory. These constructs will be discussed and re-aligned to the purpose of the study. A conceptual framework for this study is constructed (Fig. 1).

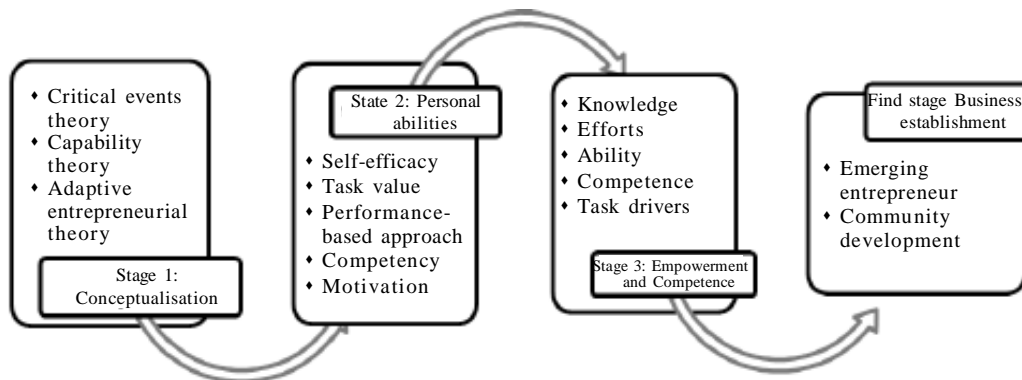


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

### Critical Events Theory

Scholars of the critical events construct believe that certain events are “critical” because of their impact and profound effect on whoever experiences such an event. This brings about radical changes in the person. Critical events as they occur in human experiences throughout life have an impact on adult learning. The significance of critical incidents in people’s lives has been noted (Measor 1985). Moreover, Woods (1993) posits that the critical events construct is:

*Events which are exceptional by virtue of their criticality. This relates not so much to the content (which might be extraordinary), as to the profound effects it has on the people involved (p. 356).*

Perspective transformation fills an important gap in adult learning theory by acknowledging the central role played by the function of critical reflectivity. Awareness of why we attach the meanings we do to reality, especially to our roles and relationships – meanings often misconstrued out of the uncritically assimilated half-truths of conventional wisdom and power relationships assumed as fixed – may be the most significant distinguishing characteristic of adult learning. Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. This is evident throughout Pule’s life journey from a poor rural boy to an entrepreneur changing the lives of others in his community. It is the learning process by which an ex-convict comes to recognise his culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for him to take action to overcome poverty and unemployment. In Pule’s case, to make ‘*meaning*’ means to make sense of an experience; he makes an interpretation of it. When he and we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision-making or action, then making ‘*meaning*’ becomes ‘*learning*’. We learn differently when we are learning to perform than when we are learning to understand what is being communicated to us. Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presupposi-

tions on which our beliefs have been built. Learning may be defined as ‘*the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action*’. What we perceive and fail to perceive, and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by habits of expectation that constitute our frame of reference, that is, a set of assumptions that structures the way we interpret our experiences. It is not possible to understand the nature of adult learning or education without taking into account the cardinal role played by these habits in making meaning. Reflection is generally used as a synonym for higher-order mental processes. Boud et al. (1985) refer to reflection as “*a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation*”. By this definition, reflection would include making inferences, generalisations, analogies, discriminations, and evaluations, as well as feeling, remembering and solving problems.

In this study, an ex-convict communicates these critical events through personal stories. These personal stories recount critical events which impacted on the life of the ex-convict as a poor rural boy to his life on the streets and his career as a successful entrepreneur.

### Social Economics Capabilities Theory

Capabilities theory has focused on inequality and poverty. In his earlier writings, Sen (1977) criticised the existing literature on inequality measurement in welfare economics for being too concerned with complete rankings of different social states. Sen argued that we should not assume away complexities or ambiguities, and that we can often make only partial comparisons. The capability approach advocates that we focus on people’s capabilities when making normative evaluations, such as those involved in poverty measurement, cost-benefit analysis, efficiency evaluations, social justice issues, development ethics and inequality analysis. Capabilities are people’s potential functionings and Pule’s gutter manufacturing business provides opportunities for job creation by empowering young people to make a living through a community-based organisation. The difference between a functioning and a capability is similar to the

difference between an achievement and the freedom to achieve something, or between an outcome and an opportunity. All capabilities together correspond to the overall freedom to lead the life that a person has reason to value.

Sen stresses the importance of "reason to value" because we need to scrutinise our motivations for valuing specific lifestyles, and not simply value a certain life without reflecting upon it. Sen has also criticised the inequality literature in welfare economics for being exclusively focused on income (Sen 1993, 1987, 1995). Instead, Sen argues, we should focus on the real freedoms that people have for leading a valuable life, that is, on their capabilities to undertake activities such as reading, working or being politically active, or of enjoying positive states of being, such as being healthy or literate. This line of Sen's work, known as the capability approach, postulates that when making normative evaluations, the focus should be on what people are able to be and to do, and not on what they can consume, or their incomes. This is evident in Pule's life journey to survive and to succeed. In this paper the researcher wants to ask how the capabilities approach can be used to study one core and overarching capability of an ex-convict of becoming a successful entrepreneur.

### **Adaptive Entrepreneurial Theory**

In this paper, an ex-convict's life story of becoming an entrepreneur is told. Kuratko and Hodgetts (1995) believe that examining why people start businesses, and how they differ from those who do not, may be useful in understanding the motivation that entrepreneurs exhibit during start-ups and whether the behaviour is sustained over time. The ex-convict was driven by circumstances of uncontrollable factors of poverty and a disadvantaged background. The decision to behave entrepreneurially is the result of interaction of several factors, and in this case it is an ex-convict trying very hard to change his "old" life style and become a "good" person. Veciana (1999) states that there is empirical support for the fact that the need for independence, need for achievement and being 'marginalised' are dominant motivators for entrepreneurs as well for the ex-convict. In a detailed review of literature, Vijaya and Kamalanabhan (1998) found that a number of motivational characteristics have

been recognised in entrepreneurs. These include the values placed on innovativeness, independence, outstanding performance and respect for work. According to Shapero (1975) and Foelster (2000), those entrepreneurs create jobs. The authors posit that many people entertain the idea of forming their own business, but it is difficult for them to enter into the process for many reasons, not the least of which is the inertia of their ongoing lives. Each individual tends to be held in place by a variety of forces: job, family needs, debts, obligations and the routine of everyday life. Yu (1998) conducted a study of businesses in Hong Kong. The findings revealed that businesses are forced, because of a changing globalised economy, to adapt by investing in technology in order to survive. Through this firms are forced to invest innovative strategies and more on market research to achieve economic growth. It takes a significant shift in forces to enable the individual to make a major shift in his/her position in socioeconomic space. Thurik and Wennekers (2004) contend that displacement plays a large role in the initiation of most companies. Whereas many people may become displaced, only a relatively small percentage of them react to displacement by forming a company.

After explaining the conceptual framework of this study, the researcher now discusses the methodological tools for conducting this study.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Recent research studies in entrepreneurship have shown a growing interest in using the life history approach as a research design. This study employed a qualitative research method: a life history approach to explore the personal story of an ex-convict turned entrepreneur. This was undertaken in order to gain a richer and deeper understanding of views on becoming a successful entrepreneur (Bathmaker and Harnett 2010; Miles and Huberman 1984). The researcher therefore utilises narratives, because they help me understand patterns in the stories of an ex-convict's experiences during his initial incarceration and when starting a business. Telephonic interviews were designed to elicit the ex-convict's story and the meanings, values and emotions which he attaches to his personal stories. Linde (1993) termed these stories culturally defined landmarks of people's lives which are repeated over time and across occasions. The narratives

the ex-convict entrepreneur tells are 'primary evaluative points of departure,' moral evaluations about the speaker-in-person. Moreover, Mishler (1999) states that the stories people tell about their lives are identity performances. The researcher believe that the way the ex-convict entrepreneur expresses, displays and makes claims about who he is in these stories is significant, as well as how he told them. The life history of the ex-convict entrepreneur is an identity claim, showcasing who he is, what he thinks and what he can do. Another important element of life histories is that no-one stands alone. Over time, personal stories become landmark events related to stories of life experiences. The researcher met this person accidentally on a flight when he was on his way to the same conference that the researcher was attending; it was organised by Business South Africa (BSA) for emerging entrepreneurs. We shared contact details after the conference. Two months after we met, the researcher contacted him and he told the researcher how he began to become a successful entrepreneur. The researcher was really interested in his personal story. The researcher decided beforehand to use pseudonyms for this study. The researcher officially confirmed a date for a telephonic interview with a person named Pule. Before the researcher could begin with the study, consent was obtained from Pule. The researcher explained the purpose of the study. Further, the researcher then explained the purpose of confidentiality to the interviewee. An open-ended life history interview was conducted with Pule (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Sørreide 2006). The interview was conducted in a place where he felt comfortable. The interview sessions lasted for thirty minutes. The first interview session covered early childhood experiences to schooling experiences. Secondly, life on the street to prison was covered. Further, emerging entrepreneur to community builder was highlighted for the purpose of conducting these interview sessions. The interview was first transcribed in detail and saved as an original version. To make the ex-convict entrepreneur's narratives more visible and readable, the transcribed interviews were then rewritten as condensed and coherent stories. To ensure that there were no major changes to the content of the narratives, the data was compared with the original transcript and the tapes from the interview. Data analysis was both inductive and deductive in nature. This paper

narrates an ex-convict's personal story in becoming an emerging entrepreneur.

The ex-convict entrepreneur's narrative was then organised thematically

### **Narrating Personal Stories of an Ex-convict Entrepreneur**

#### *Schooling Experiences*

Pule is the second of six children of a farm worker in the Alice district of the former Transkei, in the Eastern Cape. Because of unemployment, his father came to Johannesburg to look for work at one of the mines. His parents are originally from a small rural village in the Matieleng district of the Greater Mthatha region. Pule's mother tongue is IsiXhosa, one of the official languages in South Africa. He grew up sharing a two bedroomed rural house with the extended family, which included his beloved grandparents. Pule mentioned this about his parents:

*What I most appreciated about my parents, they taught me that I must believe, show respect to the elderly. They taught me that this is part of the values according to the Xhosas' traditions. It was very nice during the school holidays to play street soccer. I like the mountains surrounding our village. I knew rural life very well. All the people in our village knew each other. We were very happy as a closed family. I missed my father because he left us to work on the mines in the Gauteng.*

He attended the only primary school in his rural village, which was a church school run by the nuns of the local Methodist church. The first impression he got from his class teacher was that she was a quite a good, friendly teacher. He really enjoyed her reading of farm stories and the sums he had to do in his new books. Later he attended secondary school in the nearby Alice Township. They travelled by foot for thirty-five kilometres daily and there was no money for a taxi or bus. Later he was forced to leave school after standard eight because his parents could not afford to keep him at school.

He still remembers one teacher, Mr Mbengwa, from his secondary school years. This teacher believed, supported and cared for him as if he were his own father. This is what he said of his Business Economics teacher:

*Mr Mbengwa always encouraged me and showed me that I could be a successful busi-*

*nessman because of my enthusiasm and my ability to succeed in Business Economics. He always told my fellow classmates that I could make it as a businessman because I worked very hard and showed a lot of potential and was very motivated to succeed in life. He was like a father to me.*

In the following theme, Pule told his sad story from a street child to imprisonment because of poverty that forced him to commit crime to make a living.

### ***Street Life and Imprisonment***

Beazley (2000a) studies how children living on the streets have managed to respond geographically to their social and spatial oppression. According to the author, these children are overromanticised by the press and charity groups as pitiful victims abandoned by their families and unable to look after themselves. As a result of these stereotypes, street children are often 'cleaned up' from the streets, and face the very real threat of arrest, imprisonment and in some extreme cases torture and extermination (Beazley 2002). As Massey (1998) tells us in respect of the spatial construction of youth cultures, 'the construction of spatiality can be an important element in building a social identity'. For street children, the spaces they have carved out for themselves in the city of Yogyakarta – bus stops, public toilets, traffic intersections, railway stations, pavements, parks, markets and spaces under bridges – have become territories in which identities are constructed and where alternative communities have formed (Beazley 2000b). After arriving in Johannesburg at the age of eighteen, he found it hard to find work. Later he met a miner who told him that his father had died nearly two months ago. He decided to stay in Soweto to make a living and by doing so to support his mother and the other five siblings. Nobody wanted to give him work, so he started his life on the streets of Johannesburg. This what he said about life on the streets:

*Life on the streets is very hard and dangerous. I met up with Johannes, leader of the twenty six notorious gang. He was fearless and even the police were scared about him. He was our kingpin. His word was always final. On those streets I learned to steal, begged, do house-breaking and later armed robbery. Sometimes*

*Johannes beat other boys who do not obey his instructions. Johannes later realised my intelligence on how I negotiated with other gangsters. On one particular Saturday night, we made a calculus error and we were arrested for armed robbery.*

Pule was very sad and even in his eyes you could see his regret for what he has been done to himself and his family. Pule said prison life was even harder, tougher and he also learned other marketable skills in prison. He alluded to his prison life:

*I was sentenced for robbery with aggravating circumstances. I was sentenced for 14 years in prison. Life in the prison was not child play. I was first placed with juveniles and later with hard criminals. I shared a cell with an old man who was also in prison for armed robbery and house-breaking. The prison is a very hard and a cruel place. My first two years of my sentence was really bad. Gangs operate in some parts of the prison. I learned how gangs sometimes negotiate territory for goods. It was all supply and demand, they who have and those who have nothing. The strongest always takes the best, meaning rule over territory. I realised that I must served my sentence. I exchanged my freedom for doing crime.*

The ex-convict said that he learned also new skills, especially in the technology section in the prison. They produced baking pans on machines in the prison. Pule learned a new trade as a machinist. They supplied all the other prisons around South Africa with baking and cake pans. He was later promoted as section head of the baking and cake pans unit at the central prison.

### ***Parole Changed for Entrepreneurship***

*One day, our prison section head advice me to apply for parole because of my good behavioural record in prison. I did applied several times but was very unfortunately for parole. Only after serving for ten years, my parole was approved. On parole it was even harder to get a job. I still remembered the parole as an unwanted tag hanging around my neck. I applied to several businesses for work but they always asked for your employment record.*

If they saw your prison record you are doomed. Pule said that life after parole started very badly for him. He said:

*I was unemployed for four months. I really want to get a decent job to make a living. I met Jeremiah, who was worker at a nearby bedding manufacturing company. He told me that the owner of another factory is looking for temporary workers. The following morning I went to this factory to ask for a temporary job. If I could only get a cleaning job to keep me busy. I was employed as a temporary cleaner. One day the owner called me to his office. I was really worried what he will say about my cleaning. I was surprised because he offered me a permanent job. After two years at this company, I was promoted to head the cutting section of clothing department unit in the factory. The owner was very happy about the production in our section. In the next year he promoted me to sectional head of the factory. After six years, the owner of the factory called us and informed us that he is retiring and will close the factory. The following year, the owner closed the factory. At our last farewell gathering, I realised that I will be again being unemployed. I asked the owner that I am really interested in starting my own business. I asked him whether he will hire his building to me to start my own business. At that moment he said because I was a trusted worker he will gladly give me this opportunity.*

After two weeks he and the owner signed the hiring contract. He said he took the gamble and it did pay off. He started the business by sheer chance and luck. He referred to the business:

*This was my great break in life. You only get once a break ... This is how I get out of the gutter. I earned my own money ... financial stability.*

He mentioned that he was really happy for this once in a life time opportunity. He saw a gap in the market and filled it. In 1999, he started a gutter manufacturing business. The production was very slow. Twenty gutters a week and within three months he doubled his output. Now Pule's Gutters has a yearly turnover of more than R5 million.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Community Engagement**

Business has come under increasing pressure to be seen to engage in activities which are described as corporate social responsibility

(CSR). Researchers are now also recognising the importance of business ethics and social responsibility as they apply to small firms (Jenkins 2004a; Spence 1999; Spence and Rutherford 2000; Spence and Schmidpeter 2003; Spence et al. 2003). While many such activities come under legal compliance, such as environmental legislation, business is encouraged to go beyond this and assume roles previously occupied by the public sector, such as supporting education and becoming involved in the governance of communities (Curran et al. 2000). Pule said that he believes that business must get involved in community engagement. The point he wants to make is that business is undertaken not only for money but to serve the community. I said that corporate responsibility is very important for building partnerships with the community. He said he is proudly a businessman and a community builder:

*I would say that we have a responsibility to all our stakeholders, which includes our employees, our customers, our suppliers, our lenders and so on and also the local community. I served my sentence; it's my time to give back to my community. My community accepted me back. I started the initiative Build a Better Youth (BABY) community project and giving back to my community. I am doing my bit to youngsters engaged in criminal activities to mend their ways. I even help some of them to start their own small businesses and to fit gutters. All I want to do is to empower young people to have their own businesses.*

### **DISCUSSION**

In this paper, the researcher explores the personal story of an ex-convict who became a successful businessman. Woods (1993) argues that perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. Pule refers during the interview how he still remembered the imprisonment as "an unwanted tag" which haunted him, long after his incarceration of his jail conviction. He sees this as a "discriminative barrier" although he has been regretted his mistake

in life. His earlier mistakes in life haunted him when he applies for a job without success to several companies. It is the learning process by which an ex-convict comes to recognise his culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them, and takes action to overcome poverty and unemployment and the "parole tag". Sen's (1996) capability theory has focused on inequality and poverty. During the interview Pule mentioned a specific teacher during his high school years who believed in his ability to succeed in any business because he was a hard worker and showed a lot of potential to succeed in life. Because of poverty he was forced to commit crime to make a living. Pule said that in order to break away from the mindset of a criminal "you only get once a lucky break, and he was fortunate to get out of the gutter", and he is now a proud gutter manufacturer. Capabilities are people's potential functionings and in Pule's gutter manufacturing business he provides opportunities for job creation by empowering young people to make a living through a community-based organisation. The difference between a functioning and a capability is similar to the difference between an achievement and the freedom to achieve something, or between an outcome and an opportunity. All capabilities together correspond to the overall freedom to lead the life that a person has reason to value. This is more evident throughout Pule's personal story journey from a poor, disadvantaged background in becoming a successful businessman in his community. He believed that business has a social justice obligation to get involved in community engagement and to empower young people. Pule's view is that corporate responsibility is very important for building partnerships with the community. Pule saw after serving his sentence that the only way out of unemployment, poverty and crime is to start a small business and create jobs. Stel et al. (2005) are of the opinion that entrepreneurs also help the economy by creating wealth and national growth. Pule pays his dues as a law abiding citizen and employer because the gutter business has a yearly taxable turnover of more than R5 million. Pule sees his business's role as what McMillan and Woodruff (2002) called "coals to spark economic engine" in transition economies, that is, as drivers for economic growth and development. He said: *I even help some of them to start their own small businesses ... I want to empower young people.*

Moreover, Hodgetts (1995), as well as Audretsch and Keilbach (2004), posit that examining why people start businesses and how they differ from those who do not may be useful in understanding the motivation that entrepreneurs exhibit during start-ups and whether the behaviour is sustained over time. The most important reasons why entrepreneurs help the economy include the creation of new jobs, innovation, development and research. Schumpeter (1934) wrote *The Theory of Economic Development*, emphasising the role of the entrepreneur as the prime cause of economic development. Other research studies the role of small firms in the emergence of new technologies, and describes how the innovating entrepreneur challenges incumbent firms by introducing new inventions that make current technologies and products obsolete. Influences such as technological change, market rivalry and the evolution of the capitalist engine of growth impacted on firms' globally (Carree and Thurik 2003; Shane 2000; Peretto 1998; Rothwell 1984).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

From this study emerge the experiences related in the narratives of an ex-convict, and especially why and how he gets out of the "gutter" in his life; this serves as an example for correctional services and for communities at large. We can take heart in the story of this person who was determined to change for the better. By exploring the personal story of an ex-convict who became an entrepreneur which was supported by perspective transformation as an emancipatory process, we become critically aware of how and why entrepreneurs are important for the economy. Findings further revealed that entrepreneurship is an opportunity which provides new and interesting opportunities and challenges for ex-convicts to find community acceptance, financial stability and socialisation, enabling them to re-start life in the community. Critical events as they occur in human experiences throughout life, as in this case of an ex-convict, have an impact on adult learning. Pule experienced the difference between a functioning and a capability, which is similar to the difference between an achievement (to start your own business) and the freedom to achieve something (get rid of the criminal tag), or between an outcome and an opportunity. He believes in his ability and potential to succeed in any business be-

cause he is highly motivated, competent and knowledgeable in doing business. Emanating from his personal views, we see that corporate responsibility is very important for building collective partnerships with the communities and supporting national imperatives (government initiatives) to eradicate poverty and enhance job creation efforts for the country.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is obvious that this is an exploratory study and not a completed research project. There is much work to be done on furthering the critical events theory and the capability theory to explore issues relating to gender inequality, funding for entrepreneurs, qualifications, competence and social class. On the empirical side further research is needed to collect carefully micro-data on all these variables. On the theoretical side, more specific research is need to understand the gendered nature of preference formation, culture, social class and the constraints on choice of business by entrepreneurs, in particular women entrepreneurs. Once we have a deeper analytical understanding of these phenomena, we can ask how we should deal with them in a normative framework.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is indebted to the critical reviewers for constructive feedback. The author acknowledged the financial contributions made by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (NRF) for Grant funding Ref No: TK2008043000005. Acknowledgement is given to the ex-convict as an entrepreneur who voluntarily participated in this research study. Lastly, the quality of language revision work done by Unisa language editing unit is acknowledged. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the NRF or the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies in the College of Education.

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