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# The Other Side of the Desk: Former Welfare Recipients Who Now Work for "The System."

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*Within the framework of identity theory, twenty female former welfare recipients who are currently human service workers discussed how their past experiences affected current service provision and their views of the welfare system. Semi-structured interviews were used, and data were coded and analyzed using the multistage process designed by McCracken (1988) for long interviews. Respondents discussed how their experiences made them more empathetic towards their clients and gave them insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the past and present welfare systems. Results show support for identity theory by showing how past identities affect present ones.*

The welfare system has existed in many forms since the 1930s, when the federal government began giving assistance to unemployed citizens until they could be re-employed. The latest change in the welfare system occurred with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which eliminated the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, replacing it with block grants to states with federally approved programs for temporary assistance. These programs, called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), give assistance on a short-term basis to low-income families with at least one minor child. They have the purpose of providing

families with temporary assistance to end welfare dependency, reducing the amount of unwed pregnancy, and encouraging two-parent families (Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2000).

In order to receive federal funds, the state-sponsored TANF programs must include mandatory activities involving work-, education-, and job-related skills. Participants in the TANF program may receive technical school training, on-the-job training, job placement assistance, day care, housing, and Medicaid assistance. When they are employed, they may continue to receive day care, housing and Medicaid assistance for up to an additional two years, until they are able to qualify for employment-related benefits.

Participation in AFDC reached a high of 14,142,710 cases in 1993, with 5.5% of the American population receiving some form of welfare benefits. With the institution of TANF, welfare roles, which had already begun to fall, began shrinking faster, and by September 1999, the national total of welfare recipients dropped to 6,603,607 (2.4% of the national population) (Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2000).

Each state receiving block grant funds has set the length of time that assistance is to be offered, with the stipulation that it be under five years. In the state in which this research was carried out, there is a lifetime assistance limit of three years, with 20% of the welfare population potentially eligible for extensions beyond the 3-year period. These extensions would be granted in cases of extreme hardship and for women transitioning from domestic violence situations.

### *The Purpose of this Research*

It is not uncommon to find human service workers working for the system who were once recipients of welfare. In this research, the term "the system" refers to the entire system of assistance to low-income and welfare recipients, not just agencies administering welfare programs. This research examines the transition from welfare recipient to human service worker in light of respondents' identity changes. The research questions were:

- how do respondents' past experiences and identities as welfare recipients affect their service delivery to current recipients?

- in comparing the old welfare system with the new one, which would respondents say is better in meeting the needs of recipients and why?
- what changes would respondents like to see in the current welfare system?

Identity consists of cognitive self-schema related to roles individuals have in their lives. Identity theory describes how, through interactions with others, individuals receive cues to appropriate role-related behavior, and over time, the roles develop meanings (Burke, 1980). Individuals have many roles and multiple identities that influence each other (McCall, 1987), and form salience hierarchies (Stryker, 1968; McCall and Simmons, 1966). Within the structure of society, groups also negotiate their own identities, with individuals bringing to the groups their personal identities and meanings and also developing ones together (Stets & Burke, 1996).

Identity theory has been used to examine how individuals' role-related identities affect their ability to cope with the stresses of life. Role identity is related to motivation and commitment in the pursuit of personal and social goals. It is also related to higher self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-consistency and self-regulation (Stets & Burke, 2000), while difficulties with role identity are related to depression and distress (Burke & Stets, 1999). The types of role-related identities individuals have can affect stress levels. Studies have shown that persons with socially disadvantaged roles are more vulnerable to stress (Thoits, 1995), have lower self-esteem and self-efficacy (Tsushima & Burke, 1999), less sense of control over events in their lives, and higher anxiety and depression (Thoits, 1991) than their counterparts with socially advantaged roles.

Like individuals, cultures and societies have clear ideas about the types of roles that are desirable and should be supported and the types of roles that are undesirable and should be discouraged (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Receiving welfare benefits is a stigmatized behavior in American society, and the longer women are unemployed, the stronger the negative psychological effects become. Over time, social isolation, the lack of a work-related identity, and the failure to receive any external validation

of their self-worth corrode their global self-esteem (Elliott, 1996). The weight of the stigma attached to welfare is so strong that most recipients do not feel a kinship with other women who are receiving assistance. Unlike most group identities that bond people together (Burke, 1980; Benjamin & Stewart, 1989), this is one from which its members are trying to escape. Even as common members of a group, therefore, most welfare recipients don't have a group identity that would enable them to collectively challenge the threats to their individual identities. As women are able to leave the welfare system, they take with them the experiences of once having been welfare recipients. Although these experiences are significant, the aftereffects of this stigmatized group identity have not been studied, particularly how they affect current human service workers who are former welfare recipients.

## Methods

### *Respondents*

Because this was an exploratory study, qualitative methods were used in data collection and analysis. Respondents were interviewed in natural settings to explore in depth their past experiences, the meaning attached to them, and how they thought these meanings affected them in the present. The criteria for study included women who were employees of human service agencies and who currently work with welfare recipients. These agencies provide employment-, child and family-, and disability-related services. The mixture of respondents from different agencies gives a varied picture of human service provision, and all respondents were providing direct service to current recipients. Because this study was designed to examine the effects of past welfare receipt on current service provision, all the women in the study had at one time been recipients of welfare assistance themselves. The respondents' time of welfare receipt varied widely, with six women having received assistance for less than a year and one having received it for 14 years ( $X = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 4.07$ ). There were no exclusion criteria regarding the length of time that had elapsed since receipt of assistance, and this resulted with a wide range (from less than 6 months to 26 years) of time elapsed since receiving assistance. Seven women had been "off welfare" for less

than a year, and five women had been self-sufficient for over 20 years ( $X = 9.68$ ,  $SD = 9.55$ ).

There were twenty women in the sample, ranging in age from 26 to 63. The average age was 41.5, with the majority of the women in their forties. They were all full-time employees, with the majority (85%) working forty hours a week and three respondents stating that they worked over forty hours a week. The respondents had hourly incomes ranging from slightly over \$7.00 an hour to nearly \$18.00 an hour ( $X = \$12.13$ ,  $SD = \$3.10$ ). The majority of the sample were European-American (85%), with 10% African-American and 5% Latina. While this sample appears homogeneous, it reflects the racial and ethnic makeup of the state from which the sample was taken. Respondents varied in their marital status; eleven were divorced, three single, five married, and one separated. They had from one to five children each ( $X = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ), with five respondents having a single preschool child and one having two preschool children.

### *Sample Recruitment*

Initial contact was made at a welfare office with a human services worker who was a former welfare recipient. She stated that she knew others who were working at that office who also would meet the study criteria. From this beginning, respondents were recruited using a snowball technique. Women who had been interviewed referred other former welfare recipients who were now working for human service agencies. The women were recruited from urban and semi-urban areas in a western state over a period of three months.

Interviews lasted approximately 1 1/4 hours each, ranging from 45 minutes to two hours. Interviews were held in the private offices of the respondents or, if they preferred, in meeting rooms at their places of employment. Each respondent was interviewed once and, at the end of the interview, was asked if she knew other former welfare recipients who would be interviewed. If she knew someone, she was asked to contact that person and ask if she would consent to be interviewed. Potential respondents who agreed to be interviewed were then contacted by the researcher. Only one potential respondent preferred not to be interviewed.

*Data Collection*

All respondents were interviewed individually by the first author, using semi-structured questionnaires. The questions covered the topics of respondents' employment and welfare histories, the barriers they overcame in making the transition from welfare to employment, the effects of past welfare receipt on their present service delivery, comparisons of the former and present welfare systems, and their desired changes to the welfare system. Short demographic questionnaires were given to respondents regarding their ages, marital status, ages of their children and their hourly income. The interviews were audio tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

*Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed in a five-stage process described by McCracken (1988). The first stage consisted of the material being read twice by the researchers. The first reading was for general understanding of content and the second was for identification of themes related to the respondents' experiences with welfare and the topics mentioned above. In the second stage, preliminary categories of observations, or codes, were formed.

In the third stage, the preliminary codes were reexamined to identify patterns in the data and connections among codes. The fourth stage consisted of examining the patterns and connections to determine preliminary themes contained in the interviews. The researchers looked for similarities and differences among comments that could highlight patterns in experience among the respondents. For example, the experiences of women who had been self-sufficient for a number of years were compared with those who were only recently self-sufficient. During this process, the researchers reviewed each other's analyses and interpretations of the data, and any changes were approved by both researchers.

The last stage of the analysis was the determination of themes by the synthesis of data from the preliminary themes, the patterns and relationships among codes, and the memos made by the researchers. Distinct similarities were found concerning the effects of past welfare receipt on current service provision, their desired changes in the welfare system, and the comparisons of the old system with the new one.

Data were coded and analyzed using QSR\*NUDIST (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1995), a computer software program that was created for the analysis of qualitative data. All transcripts were entered into the program, reread, and manually categorized into codes. Coding was reviewed by both researchers to determine the appropriateness of the categorization to the codes and to make the coding more sensitive to the information contained in the transcripts. A coding tree was formed to show the relationships among the codes, and the tree was modified as the relationships became more refined.

## Findings

### *Welfare History and Current Service Provision*

#### *Having a welfare history is an asset*

All twenty women saw their past histories of receiving welfare as an asset that helped them in understanding and giving service to present clients. They stated that as a result of their experiences, they were more empathic towards clients and the difficulties they had in overcoming their barriers. Nineteen of the twenty women stated that under appropriate circumstances, they would tell clients that they themselves had once received assistance. One respondent described how her experiences gave her understanding of clients and their difficulties. She stated that she had empathy for the struggles of her clients because she had gone through them herself.

You know, without knowing, what it's like to go a week hungry. Or what it's like to try to find a place to live with children in the car. Or what it's like to get from the laundromat or the grocery store without a car, and with two kids on your hip. What it's like to be in a marriage, a solid marriage, and all of a sudden, it's gone. And this person you trusted all your life is not only gone, but not caring about how you financially survive.

Another way that past welfare receipt was an asset was in understanding the system and how it works. Respondents formed networks of workers who were also past recipients of public assistance. These networks gave them emotional support and insight into ways that they could work within the system to aid



their clients. For example, they would call and talk to each other in order to share information they learned about available resources.

*Their views of current recipients are mainly positive*

There were several comments by respondents concerning the difficulties of working with current recipients. While there were two who stated they sometimes felt frustration when it seemed that clients were not doing enough to help themselves, most respondents were more concerned about avoiding too much attachment to clients. Respondents discussed the need for good personal boundaries. Several said it was easy to become emotionally overinvolved with clients, especially when the challenges they were dealing with were similar to the ones that the respondents themselves dealt with. They also discussed their desires to give the best service possible to clients at the office so they could go home at night without worrying about their clients or taking work-related stresses out on their families.

*I find fulfillment in my employment*

Fourteen of the respondents stated that if they could design an ideal job, they would keep the same job or have one closely related to it, such as counseling. Most said they enjoyed helping people and found their work to be personally meaningful. They saw their experience as vital and their role as empowering other women to get off the system. This empowerment came in two forms: a) being a clearinghouse for community and public assistance resources and b) encouraging their clients to improve their self-esteem and self-confidence. One respondent compared getting off the system to getting in a closed house. She described her strategy as:

If I want to get in the house badly enough, and I can't get in the front door, I can get in the back. If I can't get in the back, I'm going to try to climb in a window. Or tunnel up through the basement. Or come down the chimney . . . You're not going to want [to get in the house] unless you believe that you can. So I try to build people up as much as possible so that they look at themselves in a little different way.

However, as much as they found their employment to be meaningful, many respondents would like to modify their employment. Most desired larger salaries. Respondents stated that it would be easier for them to help others if they did not need to worry about their own families' financial welfare. Another issue

mentioned by several respondents was a desire for flexible hours so they could more easily balance the needs of their children with the needs of their employment. Respondents who were single mothers had difficulties getting children to the doctors' offices and taking care of children's needs when they were bound to inflexible work schedules. One respondent also expressed a wish for on-site day care so she could have access to her children more easily. Of the five women who did not want to retain their present employment as their ideal employment, three expressed a wish to be able to work at home so they could be with their children more.

### *Comparing the Old System with the New One*

#### *Comparisons Influenced by Personal Experience*

Most women evaluated the old welfare system (AFDC, pre 1995) and the new (TANF) system based on their experiences not only as workers but also as former recipients. Their analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of both systems was influenced by whether they had positive experiences in these systems. Respondents who had caring workers during their receipt of benefits were more likely to rate the old system as better. They discussed positive factors in the old system, such as the unlimited time to collect benefits and the many programs that were available. However, if their caseworkers were unreceptive and they were not told about available programs or encouraged to take advantage of them, they saw the old system as being inferior to the new system.

Familial experiences also affected their views of the system. One respondent, who both received welfare herself under the new system and had grown up in a family that received welfare under the old system, stated that she wished there had been a benefit time limit in the old system. She implied that perhaps her mother would not have received as much welfare during her childhood with the time limits in place.

*The old system was better.* Eight of the women commented that the old system had advantages over the new one. They discussed the heavy caseloads (70–80 cases) that workers presently carry and the concerns they now have that they can't give the personal attention their clients need. They also stated that current time

limits make it impossible for clients to obtain college degrees while receiving benefits. Under the old system, women who needed to support their children could receive assistance until they graduated from college and obtained employment. Today, clients are pushed through the system, and funds for four-year college are no longer available. This hinders clients from getting employment that will enable them to permanently exit a state of poverty. The reduction of funds for job-related training is another concern respondents have. They see the decrease in money for training in life management skills as a shortsighted measure that hurts single mothers who need help in learning how to balance their many work- and family-related responsibilities.

*The new system is better.* Most respondents, however saw the new system as an improvement over the old. They saw the old system as depersonalizing and "punitive," and described the lack of privacy and dignity that they endured.

I used to joke and say that I appreciate the help they give me with all my heart, but I felt like I was being funded by the KGB. It seemed like there was no privacy, and I felt like I was assumed to be a moocher, or some kind of a criminal all the time.

Another weakness of the old system was that personal assets and resources were limited. While it was done with the intention of making employment more desirable, the result was that recipients often found themselves living perennially on the edge of crisis.

I had been married to an emotionally and physically abusive man . . . I had no income, no job skills, and no way to pay the rent or the bills that he had left me with . . . In the old system, you could not have assets over \$1000.00, and the truck that I got out of the divorce was over the asset limit. So I was forced to trade the truck in on a car that was under the asset limit, which broke down on me an average of three times a week.

Weaknesses of the old system included the lack of information concerning available training and opportunities and the implied expectation that recipients would not be interested in becoming self-sufficient. Also, the lack of transitional day care and medical benefits for newly employed women hindered self-sufficiency.

Even with the time that was allotted, it was a fight, constantly—the constant turnover in case workers, the amount of time that you had to spend redoing papers, bringing back two and three copies of the same paper, duplication of services. Not a lot of support, not a lot of information about what resources were available. What is much more positive now is that employment counselors are expected to do a lot more. When I was on welfare, you were simply warehoused and unless you were a problem, you were kind of forgotten about.

*Some Changes Have Mixed Results*

Some procedural changes, such as conducting client interviews over the phone from a central location, were seen as having mixed negative and positive effects by the respondents. On the one hand, they were seen as beneficial because they were less stressful. Workers were able to take the time to assist in solving problems one at a time. Other workers felt that the over-the-phone contact was more impersonal and expressed the desire to meet with clients face to face.

The changes in food assistance (Food Stamps changed to a debit card system) and day care also were viewed with mixed results. Considering the effects of the system as well as their own personal experiences, respondents noted the greater freedom for clients with debit cards and cash for day care, but also noted that there was a greater potential for problems to arise. They expressed concern that there was no longer any state checking of the quality of day care facilities.

Some problems come with the combining of agencies for “one-stop shopping.” Under the TANF program, agencies such as employment services, job retraining agencies, and welfare services that previously were in different locations and under different management were combined administratively and put at the same location. This was done in an effort to streamline and improve client service. Although the coordination of resources was seen as useful in improving cooperation among agencies, it also highlighted their differing service philosophies.

I think one of the biggest mistakes they made when they combined these two agencies and almost all of the higher senior management are . . . people who have no concept of what it’s like to carry a caseload of people with multiple barriers, who have been beat up,

kicked around, abused, starved—that have to have somebody help them through all that.

However, many respondents see these problems as temporary and expect them to be worked out within several years. Those who have been in the system for a number of years see new programs coming and going and the service philosophies swinging from helping the clients overcome barriers to getting them off welfare, then swinging back again. They see the system as constantly changing and adjusting in an effort to meet both the needs of the clients, who have long-term barriers, and the state bureaucracy, which wants quick results.

### *Desired Changes in the Welfare System*

#### *More education*

Funds for higher education have been sharply curtailed under the new welfare system. With a lifetime limit on public assistance of three years, clients are channeled into technical training or other short-term education. Respondents saw this change as shortsighted, and their main desire for change in the system was a return to the support of higher education. They believed that to be the only permanent way for a woman to support her family on one income. Some also expressed concern that too much money was being spent for unnecessary layers of middle management, overpriced office furniture and too many retreats—money that could be better spent on programs that assisted clients.

Another concern that many of the respondents had was that the changes in the system did not appear to be carefully considered. Workers were changed and teams shuffled every few months. Respondents reported that new programs had been implemented and discarded almost before it was possible to see if they were working. Several stated that they wished someone had consulted the front line workers before instituting new procedures and programs, because some changes actually hindered the delivery of services.

When the worker changes every six weeks, how can that client get astonishing customer service from a new worker every time they come to the office? When it takes so long to develop a rapport with that person, so that person can confide in you and say, "This is what my real problem is." And then, between the two of you, you can

come up with a solution to overcome those barriers. They don't ever find out what the barriers are before they're switching caseloads again.

### *One Size Doesn't Fit All*

The final concern that many respondents had was the time limits. They were worried that the system was treating all clients as though they had the same barriers and needed the same amount of time and services to become self-sufficient. They were fearful that the "one size fits all" system fails to meet the personalized needs of the clients. They also had apprehension about the what they called the "bubble people," those whose cases were reaching the three year limits and were on the edge of closing. One respondent stated that she is trying so hard to help them to become self-sufficient and help those that still need more time to get their benefits extended that she does not have time to assist her other clients. It is as if she is constantly working in a crisis mode and getting further and further behind.

The administration [feels] like we should get them off as fast as they come on. They're just going to be back if we don't solve the problems now. They're just going to be back.

### *Summary*

These findings demonstrate that the challenges of providing service to clients in the human services are considerable. These workers juggle the demands of their caseloads while trying to reach out to their clients, learn new programs and policies, and satisfy the demands of higher administration. They use past experiences to assist them in being understanding, resourceful, and empathic in the service they provide. Yet the stresses of their jobs clearly take a toll on them. This toll is reflected in the amount of employee turnover in the public assistance centers, which, according to one respondent, reached as high as 60% in the two years since the system changed its focus (anonymous, personal communication, 1999).

### *Discussion*

Just as Stets and Burke (1996) noted that individuals bring to a group not only their own identities, images, and personal meanings, but also the ones that they develop, these women

brought their own past identities as mothers and welfare recipients to their work and also developed new identities as caseworkers in the process. They spoke of the importance of having good caseworkers and expressed the desire to be the best service providers they could be. Depending on their past experiences, they either patterned themselves after helpful workers they had or developed new caseworker identities that were different from the uncaring workers with whom they had dealt.

Respondents' identities also affected their choices of occupations. They stated that they considered working for the state government, not only for the good benefits involved (in line with their identities as mother providing for their children), but also in terms of helping others who were in the same places they were (in line with their identities as successful negotiators of the welfare system).

Being hired by the state added strength to their identities as ones who survived the system and "know the way out." The identity of welfare recipient had come to influence the new role of human service provider and had caused it to be redefined. This increased the desire of human service workers to treat their clients as valued human beings and to counteract the stigma that they understood from their own welfare experience. It also contributed to their concerns about high caseloads and lack of continuity of caseworkers for some clients.

These three identities of mother, past welfare recipient, and human service worker arranged themselves in a salience hierarchy according to the importance they had in the value system of the person (McCall and Simmons, 1966). The respondents individually wrestled with the task of placing them in their personal hierarchies, with some giving more salience to the welfare experience than others. For example, some struggled more than others with identifying with their clients and taking the problems they heard at work home with them. They worried more about maintaining boundaries and not taking on again the role of the welfare recipient. Additionally, their preferred work changes reflected the great salience of the mother identity for many of the respondents.

As group members form a group identity in relation to other groups within the social structure (Burke, 1980), so within the

group of human service providers, identities were negotiated according to the role commonalities with others in the group and in relation to counter-roles outside the group. Respondents brought to the group of human service providers their past identities, images, and personal meanings (Stets & Burke, 1996) and began to form networks of providers who had been past recipients of public assistance. These networks gave them emotional support and additional resources of knowledge concerning ways to work within the system to aid their clients.

Two general implications regarding the transition to self-sufficiency came from this study. First, findings highlight the importance of good human service workers. Respondents reported that workers who were impersonal hindered clients' efforts to become self-sufficient, whereas caring workers were influential in assisting them to leave welfare. However, current policies of changing worker caseloads every few months have hindered worker-client rapport. This rapport is important to caseworkers for building clients' self-esteem and personalizing services to their unique challenges, both key components in client self-sufficiency.

Second, there is justifiable concern that lack of opportunity to pursue a college education will prevent welfare recipients from obtaining employment that pays well enough to lift them from the rolls of the working poor. Findings from a recent national study of persons who left the welfare system and were currently employed reported that their median hourly wage was \$6.61, comparable to those identified as working poor (Loprest, 1999).

The strength of welfare reform includes helping recipients obtain training and employment, with housing, day care, and transportation support. However, there are still weaknesses and issues left unresolved from the old system. The frequent shifting of caseloads and the loss of funding for college education leave the question of long-term self-sufficiency in doubt. Whether welfare recipients will remain on the economic margins of society is yet to be determined.

#### *Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research*

The purpose of qualitative research such as this is to describe as many aspects of a topic as possible. Our discovery of common



elements in the caseworker experience from interviews with multiple human service workers lends credibility to the findings. We acknowledge, however, that the study's design, sample size and composition necessitates caution when interpreting its results. Future research using a larger sample more diverse in race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geographic location is suggested for several reasons. Because perceptions of the effects of welfare receipt are likely to vary with race and ethnicity, it is important to replicate this study among other cultural groups. Additionally, most study participants reflect the geographic area from which the sample was drawn. Also, despite researcher attempts to reach a broad spectrum of human service workers who had received public assistance, the results of this study would tend to reflect those who felt comfortable enough to be interviewed about their past experiences, limiting inclusion of additional and potentially divergent views about the effects of past welfare receipt on current human service provision.

Also, the particulars of the current public assistance program are a function of state decisions, and that system is in continual flux. Therefore, some of the worker's concerns may be addressed by future changes. Additional research is needed to see if changes to the public assistance program will alleviate workers' concerns and increase its ability to meet the personalized needs of its clients.

Lastly, this research focuses more on the effects of identity change rather than the process of identity change in respondents. These data do not address how the process of identity change comes about, and why different women had different identities related to their experiences. Future research into the process of identity change is needed to explain how individuals transition from one identity to another as they exit the welfare system.

### Conclusion

This study contributes to knowledge of identity change. It also enhances understanding of the process and experience of successfully negotiating the welfare system. As changes are being made in the system to enable more women to become self-sufficient, the viewpoints of women currently working in the system give

valuable insight into issues, both personal and systemic, that hinder client self-sufficiency.

The importance of these findings is matched by the increased understanding of how past identities can influence present ones. They suggest that a firsthand understanding of the experience of receiving welfare can help to make a human service provider who is more empathetic and understanding of clients' needs, who can better understand the resources and opportunities available in the system, and who can work more closely with clients in overcoming the barriers they have in becoming self-sufficient.

It has been said that identity must be negotiated by individuals striking two bargains: one with the world and the other with the self (McCall, 1987). These women exemplify that process as they blend their past and present identities, their values of helping other recipients, and their desire to maintain their place in the bureaucratic world of human services.

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