



Concept determination of human dignity

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Abstract

This study presents findings from an ontological and contextual determination of the concept of dignity. The study had a caritative and caring science perspective and a hermeneutical design. The aim of this study was to increase caring science knowledge of dignity and to gain a determination of dignity as a concept. Eriksson's model for conceptual determination is made up of five part-studies. The ontological and contextual determination indicates that dignity can be understood as absolute dignity, the spiritual dimension characterized by responsibility, freedom, duty, and service, and relative dignity, characterized by the bodily, external aesthetic dimension and the psychical, inner ethical dimension. Dignity exists in human beings both as absolute and relative dignity.

Keywords

Caring science, concept, hermeneutics, human dignity, methodology

Introduction

This article presents a conceptual determination of human dignity, its ontological and contextual determination. Dignity (the Swedish word *värdighet*) is considered essential for professional nursing practice. Maintenance of patients' dignity is an ethical responsibility of caregivers, and all human beings aspire to lead a dignified life. The word dignity, which is derived from the Latin *dignitas*, meaning worthy, was defined by Haddock in 1996 as "the ability to feel important and valuable in relation to others."¹ Human dignity has been described as the core of caring² and in professional nursing care³ as the ethos in a peri-operative caring culture.⁴ However, in recent years, human dignity has become a more complex concept that encompasses behavior, manner, and even status. There is a philosophical element to dignity related to basic humanity, uniqueness, and individuality.⁵ The concept is frequently used in daily nursing practice and is given a significant role in both Swedish and international healthcare documents.^{6,7} Dignity is not a straightforward and simple concept to understand because it is taken for granted, and there are different interpretations of the concept. A concept that is taken for granted and is often used in many different

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contexts risks losing some of its meaning. It can become an empty word if not given a conceptual determination. The conceptual study is based on a five-component model with the aim to get different descriptions of the concept and was presented as a monograph.⁸ Our understanding of this methodology is formed by using and developing it in caring science at Åbo Academy University in Finland.⁹

Wide ranges of perspectives of dignity have been published by many Scandinavian nursing researchers in nursing journals. Anderberg et al.'s¹⁰ study deals with the concept of dignity in itself and describes older persons' experiences of dignity in nursing homes. Several empirical studies in relation to dignity have been conducted in diverse care settings:¹¹ medical care,^{12,13} psychiatric nursing,¹⁴ and end-of-life care.¹⁵ Bagheri et al.¹⁶ show that dignity for heart failure patients means being treated with respect, being considered as a unique human being, and having forgiveness. Intrapersonal features (inherent characteristics and individual beliefs), interpersonal interactions (staff behavior), and quality of human and environmental resources impacted patient dignity. In a review of dignified care for older person in hospitals, Marks¹⁷ states that "it is imperative that the dignity and respect with which older patients are treated is at the forefront of the minds of all who manage and staff our hospitals."

Aim

The aim of this study was to increase caring science knowledge of dignity (*värdighet*) and to gain a determination of dignity as a concept. By striving for a deeper understanding of what dignity is, the nature, meaning, and scope of dignity are sought. The main question, "What is dignity?" leads to the following subordinate questions: "What does the concept of 'dignity' mean etymologically and semantically?" "What is the nature/essence of dignity?" "How has dignity been described in caring science research in the latter part of the twentieth century?" and "What does dignity mean to older persons?"

Methods

This study is an ontological and contextual conceptual determination of human dignity.⁸ The epistemological interest in caring science is deeply rooted in history and hermeneutics, which implies a linguistic interest in the content and meaning of words and expressions.¹⁸ A concept determination needs both an ontological and a contextual determination in order to bring a deeper understanding of the conceptual meaning and essence.⁹

Ontological determination aims at determining what the unique nature and meaning of dignity is. Contextual determination tries to find the features that dignity assumes when it is related to practice.

Eriksson's⁹ model for conceptual determination is made up of five part-studies. The ontological determination is (1) an etymological and semantic determination of the Swedish concept *värdighet* (dignity), which aims to bring out the synonyms of *värdighet* and thus display a semantic field and (2) the analysis of latent content, which serves to find descriptions and examples of dignity in selected philosophical and theological literature used in Scandinavian traditions. Contextual determination uses (3) the Delphi method where seven present-day Scandinavian experts representing various sciences are allowed to describe their conception of the nature of dignity and, through the researcher, carry out a written dialogue on what dignity is; (4) metasynthesis, which provides the composite picture of dignity that is presented in topical caring science research from 1994 to 2000 from the standpoint of both nursing and caring; and (5) dialogues with six older Swedish people about human dignity with the aim of receiving a contextual description of what *värdighet*, dignity, is for them.⁸

The model is dialectical in nature, which means that concepts are developed through an interaction between theory and praxis and has a hermeneutical approach aiming to reveal complex contexts of meaning, to discover the knowledge of dignity, and to open up different dimensions of the concept.⁹ The model with

five steps leads to increased understanding when the hermeneutical moves between part and whole, where every subsidiary study has formed a part of the whole. There is also a movement between preunderstanding and new understanding.¹⁸

The ontological determination

The ontological determination started with an etymological and semantic analysis of the concept of *värdighet* and a determination of the concept's essence as well as the epistemic basic category.⁹ The semantic analysis of dignity (*värdighet*) was carried out by an analysis of 11 Swedish dictionaries published between 1850 and 1991.⁸ Discrimination analysis is where the selected synonyms are analyzed to glean important characteristic features.⁸ The synonyms chosen from the synonym table were the most common but also the synonyms "value" and "vocation, mission in life" were chosen because they were judged as deepening understanding. The semantic field opened doors to the discovery of *värdighet* in Swedish with its many forms of expressions and meanings.

Latent content analysis¹⁹ of common Swedish philosophical and theological literature, with regard to what dignity is and how dignity is described, was used to search for dignity essence descriptions, its bearing values, meanings, and contexts. This unraveled the historical roots of dignity. The theory fragments used come in most part from Jaspers,²⁰ Kierkegaard,²¹ Levinas,²² and Løgstrup.²³

The contextual determination

The contextual determination has given the concept its unique context of meaning, and the interpretation of all texts is based on Gadamer's¹⁸ philosophy. The aim of the contextual determinations was to search for the concept's meaningful context and pragmatic features.⁹

The Delphi method was selected for the determination of sentence context,²⁴ which means that an expert panel was chosen. A panel of seven experts from caring science, philosophy, theology, sociology, and medicine, from Norway, Finland, and Sweden was chosen.

A metasynthesis²⁵ was chosen to synthesize how dignity is expressed in earlier caring science research from a caring perspective and bringing together findings into a transformed whole: an end product that transforms the original results into a new conceptualization. The study included 33 nursing articles from 1994 to 2000. Keywords were "dignity" and "human dignity," and the databases were Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) and MEDLINE. A manual search was also performed.

To determine dignity's pragmatic features, Alpha interviews²⁶ with six older persons between 74 and 90 years were conducted. The interviews were carried out at the participant units. The older persons were temporary guests on a short-term accommodation in Sweden after having been treated for an acute illness at an emergency hospital. They were selected and asked whether they wanted to participate in the study and were informed of the unit nurse. The interviews took place while the guests waited for accommodation that suited their current needs for care after treatment in an acute hospital. The guests, the older person, talked about their experiences of what dignity is and illustrated the cultural dimension of dignity with its source of values.⁸ The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author (M.E.).

Ethical considerations

In this article, we follow the general guidelines for good scientific practice in the humanities, maintaining transparency and stringency.²⁷ The study complied with ethical principles in research in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki,²⁸ which safeguards the anonymity and integrity of the older persons. The voluntary participants were given information throughout the entire research process, and the research ethical

principles were taken into consideration. Permission for participation of the guests in the study was sought and obtained from the local Research Ethics Committee and from the head of healthcare services in the municipality. The six older persons who were asked to participate agreed to be a part of the study.⁸

Findings and reflections

The ontological determination of dignity

The ontological determination started with an etymological and semantic analysis of the concept *värdighet* dignity.⁸ Swedish dictionaries have dignity synonyms translated to English as noble (*ädel*), rank (*rang*), being (*väsende*), condition (*skick*), manner (*sätt, maner*), behavior (*uppträdande*), vocation, mission in life (*kall*), position (*ämbete*), becoming (*passande*), decent (*anständiga*), composure (*fattning*), dignity (*dignitet*), poise (*pondus*), and pride (*stolthet*).²⁹ The discrimination paradigm turns out to be the strongest bond between dignity and rank. One of the interesting things in caring science is the bond between dignity, position, and vocation—mission in life.⁸ Observe that through “serve” as a synonym to both “position” and “vocation—mission in life,” there is a clear relationship to one of caring science’s basic assumptions: “Human dignity means to hold a human position, to serve with love and existing for the sake of others.”² In an English dictionary, dignity is described as exaltation, face, grandeur, honor, importance, majesty, nobility, rank, and status. Dignity of people means that they are valuable and worthy of respect. The interpretation of and search for the meaningful elements in the semantic field led to the establishment of the dimensions with subordinate categories and qualities:

Absolute dignity as a given position: This originates from an idea of creation through which human beings have been given the obligation of serving their fellow-men and a unique position among created beings. Conspicuous categories are obligation, calling, position, and value with their subordinate qualities.

An inner ethical stance confers awareness of one’s own and others’ dignity: In this dimension, the categories of pride, nobility, dignity, position, rank, and status come to the fore. These are influenced and formed by the culture and the tradition in which the individual human being exists.

External dignity, aesthetic conducts that exhibit dignity in action: This external dimension contains synonyms such as respect, grandiosity, authority, and composure with their associated qualities, whose aesthetic form manifests itself as beautiful action, which varies depending on the context.

The latent content analysis. The analysis of latent content indicated that the present-day humanistic conception of human being has its root in a common European and Scandinavian culture background based on humanistic values.^{20,30} The social traditions of value are considered important from the standpoint of a human being’s faith in his or her dignity.²¹ Responsibility stretches beyond what human beings do and is something originally ethical, which becomes tangible when one sees the other’s face.²² Responsibility is mutual but asymmetrical and cannot be demanded from the other nor can it be disclaimed/renounced.²³ A limitless responsibility implies that somebody deprives the individual human being of his or her responsibility. Human responsibility even stretches out toward future generations and humanity as a whole.²³ Human beings cannot renounce their freedom, and it is on freedom that their unconditioned actions are based. Freedom implies both external and inner freedom; inner freedom provides freedom of choice with regard to one’s situation. External freedom is limited by external circumstances and can be restricted or disappear for different reasons.³⁰ The following assumptions about human dignity are rooted in European humanistic traditions:

- Creation gave human beings a freedom and a responsibility that involves an indestructible holiness and human value.
- Responsibility, a dimension of dignity, is understood as something ethical in origin and arises when people see the other's face. Responsibility is mutual but also asymmetrical and cannot be claimed by the other.
- The human being cannot escape his/ her freedom as his/ her unconditional actions assume.
- Freedom is both an outer and an inner freedom. The inner freedom means that humans always have a choice regarding how they relate to a situation.
- Duty is both an internal and an external duty. The internal duty is something that is a responsibility of the human being, while the outer duty is understood as an obligation.

The contextual determination of dignity

The experts who participated in the Delphi study pointed out that dignity can not only be used with reference to human beings as something that has been granted to them but also as something changeable. Dignity as something constant and given comprises all that belongs to human beings as human beings, with a central value that constitutes absolute human value. The changeable form of dignity confers importance and significance on actions and phenomena in its environment, which serve as symbols of human dignity. When someone incautiously handles these symbols, then this may be interpreted as a threat or as a violation of dignity. The absolute value of human beings is constant and can neither be called into question nor be taken away from them. To be a human being with dignity evinces freedom and responsibility. Absolute dignity represents the element without which dignity cannot exist. Besides being constant, dignity is also something relative and changeable with an inner and an external side, which is experienced in relation to someone, or something. The changeableness is a process in which dignity can be destroyed but also re-established. The changeable inner dignity implies an experienced feeling of dignity with its roots in the source of values that are affected by culture and society. The changeable external dignity is formed by events, actions, and characteristics, which are symbols of the values dignity represents. The significance of the outward characteristics acquired with regard to dignity can vary, from being of great importance to being of no importance at all.

Assumptions of human dignity from the Delphi study resulted in two dimensions, namely, *the given and the evolving dignity*: given dignity includes human dignity as a human being and the freedom given to human being by creation and evolving dignity is understood as an inner and an outer dignity, formed and shaped by culture and society. Changing dignity is shaped by the values that human beings bear and includes the morals and the standards and values that the culture prescribes. Human beings show their changing dignity in actions and external attributes. Dignity can be destroyed and restored.

The metasynthesis of dignity. The metasynthesis exhibits two different but still connected pictures of dignity. One picture describes dignity as absolute and ethical, where dignity emerges as the caring ethos,³¹ an ethical principle,³² and an ethical core category,³³ but also as an ethical ideal.³⁴ Dignity has a sanctity that is connected to the human position.^{35,36} Dignity is something lasting and inviolable,³⁷ an absolute dignity,³³ and contains the holy and absolute human value conferred by creation.³⁷ It is a human obligation with values such as freedom and responsibility, which go back to humanism, and is inherent in all human beings.³⁶ Dignity is built on values seen as inner, true, inviolable, and necessary qualities, which must fit into a context in order for dignity to be experienced.³⁸ The experience of dignity, such as a feeling of value, presupposes that there is someone who recognizes these values and shows respect for the human beings.³⁹ Dignity is described as something sacred and profane, ancient and newfangled, absolute and changeable, and measurable and immeasurable. Other researchers describe dignity as a social phenomenon, which is created and

shaped by culture and society^{40,41} as well as external qualities.³⁸ Culture, education, and society form dignity, which through position and characteristics is made measurable in relation to someone or something.^{39,41}

The contextual determination of dignity, which emerges from conversations with six older persons, shows that dignity is found in three different realities and dimensions:⁸ the concrete external relative dignity with the body as a bearer of dignity and the human being's freedom to take responsibility and to act. The interior relative dignity is one's own perceived reality, where credibility, duty, and responsibility strengthen human dignity, while distrust gives a sense of violated dignity. Fellowship strengthens the older person's desire for responsibility, value as a human being, and for independence, while dependency can become a source of guilt, which in turn violates their dignity. Dignity is reflected in the actual reality as absolute dignity. In reality, the essential and absolute dignity is to be inviolable and to experience value, freedom, responsibility, duty, and service. The values are not always directly visible, but their appearance is influenced by the prevailing culture. Examples of values experienced by the older person are pride, respect, honor, and independence. When values are carelessly handled or in contexts where a value can no longer be attained, violation of dignity is experienced. For a re-establishment to take place, the context must be changed or another value must be allowed to stand out. Older persons experience situations when important values such as "managing by oneself" can no longer be realized. The importance of being clean and fresh, having well-kept clothes, and having a clean home is now a value that somebody else may have to help with. The freedom of accepting the situation that occurs and letting the value of "being worthy of this help" moves toward the top of the value hierarchy and makes re-establishing the experience of dignity possible. The responsibility for those nearest to him or her, which had previously been fulfilled by concrete assistance, cannot any longer be shown in this way. Serving rather than acting must now be realized simply by existing. Human vulnerability becomes obvious when central, significant values can no longer be reached and concrete solutions to preserve one's dignity do not seem to be available. Such a borderline situation can reveal the contradictions of life. Here, the older person will be alone in his or her decision, and the borderline situation can become the space where the metamorphosis of the value hierarchy takes place through the older persons' reaching the Archimedean point where the re-establishment of dignity finds its inception. The internal ranking of existing values is permitted to be changed. Previously, dominating values will have to yield to make room for values that can be reached/attained. In the light of the borderline situation, life can get a new meaning, and dignity can be experienced as assumptions. The following are assumptions that arose from dialogues with six older persons:⁸

- Dignity reveals itself for older persons by the human position, a title, and a vocation where the touch of the staff becomes a clear quality through which the service takes shape.
- Dignity for older persons is to have a value as a human being, being seen, listened to, taken seriously, believed in, to be treated with respect and reverence together with the concrete other, the caregiver's constant presence, and being responsible for one's neighbor.
- Dignity contains unassailable sacred values of responsibility, freedom, duty, service, and responsibility of living up to the standards, rules, and expectations of self, others, and society. The older person sees it as his or her duty to be a decent human being, a single duty incumbent on him or her but also an external duty, an obligation.
- For the older person, dignity takes an ethical stance, knowing what is right, fair, and honest and ethical conduct means to be neat, behaving appropriately, and with restraint.

The new understanding of the concept human dignity

From the movement between the five part-studies results, a new understanding of the concept of dignity (Figure 1) is revealed. The model is an abstraction of human dignity. The equilateral triangle is a symbol

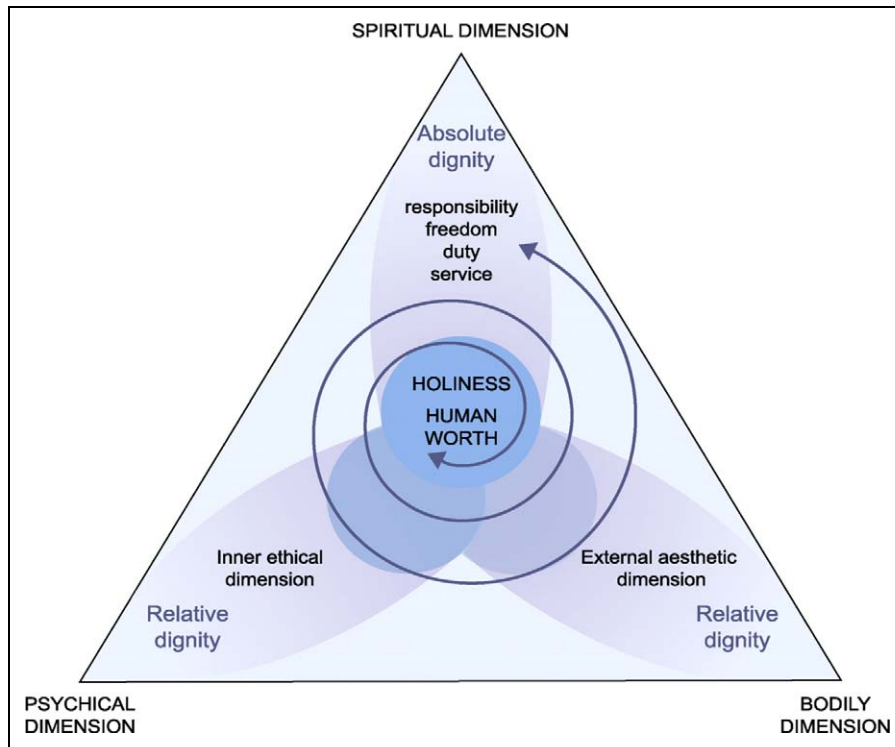


Figure 1. The concept model of dignity.

of the human being with the dimensions body, soul, and spirit.² The upper wing is absolute dignity with its substance responsibility, freedom, duty, and service. The innermost chamber is the core of dignity, which consists of values such as holiness and human worth. The other two wings are symbols of relative dignity, one for the inner ethical, psychical dimension, and one for the bodily, external aesthetic dimension. The spiral shows the movement that takes place among all the values in order for dignity to be preserved. Absolute dignity is the ontological determination, and relative dignity is the contextual determination (Figure 1). Absolute dignity has been granted to human beings by creation, while relative dignity is formed by culture and society with all the norms and rules that the culture involves.⁸

The ontological and contextual determination indicates that dignity can be understood as absolute dignity, the spiritual dimension characterized by responsibility, freedom, duty, and service, and relative dignity characterized by the bodily, external aesthetic dimension and the psychical, inner ethical dimension. Dignity exists in human beings both as absolute and relative dignity. The ontological and contextual determination indicates that the absolute dignity of human beings is their holiness, the human worth with a divine spark of indestructibility, immense responsibility, and an inner freedom to relate themselves to their situation. Being implies being a person in a brotherhood of mutuality, love, and service. Absolute dignity is hidden in the spiritual dimension and originates in qualities conferred at creation, involving the holiness of human beings, their absolute human worth, and the freedom granted to human beings, which implies responsibility and a duty to serve one's fellow-men. The synonyms in the semantic field such as obligation, vocation, mission in life, position, and value emerge through the description of absolute dignity provided. The essence of dignity cannot be violated, and it is always present, but circumstances, contextual factors. There is only one dignity that by changing its form to include other values finds expression in different

contexts as relative, changeable dignity. The shape of holiness and human dignity emerges in daily human life through specific values formed by the prevailing culture. The inner ethical dignity is found in the spiritual dimension of the human entity and gives expression to the experience of dignity. The values in the semantic field of dignity, which belong here, are pride, respect, nobility, dignity, position, and rank. Values from the empirical study, which are to be found in this dimension of dignity, are, among others, honesty, justice, independence, communion, credibility, and esteem. The external aesthetic dignity belongs in the bodily dimension of the human entity. The values of the semantic field are made up of respect, grandiosity, authority, and composure. Values, which are prominent in the empirical study are, for example, properness, suitability, self-command, composure, and orderliness.

Relative dignity is experienced by the person when he or she is in a given context and experiences a harmony between his or her own ability. When ability and knowledge change, this harmony can be reached through reconciliation with a change in the internal order of the values in the value hierarchy. These relative values, which all in one way or another give expression to the core of absolute dignity, can in different ways be subjected to violation leading to the experience of loss of dignity.

Conclusion

On the basis of the results of the research, the understanding of human dignity can be summed up in the following theses: dignity is a concept that is only applicable to human beings and implies being whole as a human being, as an entity of body, soul, and spirit. Dignity is based on a source of values and is expressed as absolute dignity and relative dignity. The values of absolute dignity are holiness, human worth, freedom responsibility, duty, and serving one's fellow-men. These are values that are absolute and thus infinite and impossible to renounce. Relative dignity is a reflection of absolute dignity, but its source of values is influenced by culture, and its values are hierarchical. Among these values, there is a flexibility aimed at preserving the experience of dignity. The way of expressing one's dignity is changeable and influenced by culture.

Reflections on the evidence of the result for clinical practice

The human effort to re-establish dignity, to always strive for a sense of human value, takes place by allowing an unattainable value to be replaced by an attainable value closer to the essence and serving as a symbol of human value. The aesthetic value that cannot be attained through action will have to be replaced by a value on the level of ethics, which represents the experience of dignity. Ultimately, the human worth and holiness, which is always present in human beings and which cannot be violated or dispensed with, can appear. Through this metamorphosis of the value hierarchy of dignity, human beings will come ever closer to and achieve better understanding of the core of their dignity. They will get in touch with their holiness, their absolute human worth, and their divineness. Through the knowledge, which the previous research¹⁰⁻¹⁷ brings to nursing care, the caregiver's awareness of dignity can be increased. The results of the present research, above all of the movements that take place in the value hierarchy of dignity as well as the traces of the innermost core, create the possibility of conjuring up ideas that serve as a mental structure. This mental structure can be converted into a form of nursing care, which comprises respect for human dignity. Understanding of the movement that takes place in the hierarchy of values can inspire a change in the caregiver's way of meeting the patient in different caring contexts. Understanding the patient's behavior depends on knowledge of the different meanings of values. The meaning and implications of the older person's changing attitudes to what is important are made clear. Helping the person to persevere with important values becomes possible when there is knowledge of the importance of arranging the environment in such a way that characteristics of central values can be recognized. There can also be an endeavor to see to it that

the context in which the patient is placed corresponds to the knowledge and the capacity of the patient. The metamorphosis of the value hierarchy, which takes place when fundamental values cannot be attained, is part of the drama of suffering, in which the patient needs a co-actor. The knowledge of what it means for the patient to be taken notice of contains an understanding of the fact that the core absolute dignity always leaves traces, which are given form in relative dignity. The traces may be faint and hard to interpret, but they always exist. However difficult the situation may be for the patient, it is a challenge for good caring to learn to discover and respect these traces of absolute dignity. Knowledge of what dignity is makes it possible even linguistically to argue for good, beautiful, and true caring. A conceptual understanding is necessary in the search for knowledge, if we want to preserve our original identity and to find ways to penetrate into the core of caring. It is especially necessary in an age where external factors increasingly want to determine the focus of caring sciences research and development.

The limitations of this study can be related to the complexity of the word dignity. It has been questioned whether concept determination is a successful way to achieve a deeper and more coherent collegial understanding of concepts in the caring context.⁴² This is a relevant critique, especially when it comes to combined concepts such as dignity. However, even though the concept may be considered ambiguous, the caregivers have to relate to this concept in their daily work.

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