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EXPLORING THE SPACE OF CONVIVIALITY WITH NEWCOMERS AND HOST COMMUNITIES

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the space of conviviality between newcomers and host communities exemplifying the author's way as a researcher to be at the same time an activist in Italy. The author investigates her position as an adult educator and researcher to focus on how the informal process of research on adult education has a 'transformative' effect at the meso (social) level dimension of interaction. Group experience is life experience and food is one of the most powerful connective tools humans have: it stimulates all of the senses, evokes deep memories and connects one with the wider system of interaction and complexity. In this meso-level dimension newcomers and native citizens interconnected their senses through sharing food. The paper includes different languages and styles: autoethnographic field notes of informal conversations between migrants and Italians involved in the research, transcriptions of dialogues and correspondence with research participants and photos taken during the field of research. All texts and images are analyzed to imagine new forms of embodied research in adult education.

KEYWORDS: migrants, conviviality, embodied narratives.

Beyond pure research

Life-histories and auto/biographies can act as an occasion for innovation, for transformative learning, for community and political action in diverse settings (Formenti & West 2018). Telling stories from different perspectives, as Laura Formenti and Linden West (2018) suggest, might also be deeply agentic and political in nature. In this regard stories may go far beyond 'pure research' – or a detached view of academic study in the ivory tower (Denzin & Giardina 2014) – towards creating a new quality of space for social and collective action and change, as well as work at an individual level (Formenti & West 2016a). Thus, narratives in adult education research are concerned with creating the circumstances to produce knowledge through inquiry-laden processes. This article explores, out of my experience as a woman and a researcher, the conditions in which conviviality can initiate conversation and tell stories with migrants and host communities. My research interest in conviviality began in 2019 during an annual conference of the ESREA Life History and Biography Network (LHBN) in Bergen, Norway¹. For over two decades, the LHBN has been an inclusive forum of researchers, including doctoral students, who draw on different epistemological, methodological and disciplinary traditions. One of the presuppositions of the network is about the relationality of learning:

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¹ Conference website: <https://www.hvl.no/en/research/conference/esrea2019/>, 24.06.2021.

As researchers, they encourage people to share their life stories and experiences in order to make better sense of the world in which they live; telling such stories sometimes triggers the urge to go out and change lives. Narrative research is an interactive process. It uses words, images, activities or artefacts to ask people – either individually or collectively within their social groupings – to examine, discuss, portray or otherwise make public their place in the world, their sense of belonging to and identity within the physical and cultural space they inhabit. [...] Prompted by our focus on ‘narratives, discourses, biography’, they analyse their work to find the factors that influence how people view their worlds, the embedded values and practices that underpin the way people think and act (often without even realizing why); in short, the ‘discourses by which they live’ (Høyen & Wright 2020, pp. 1-2).

The concept of discourse is central in the network because a discourse is a web of statements, categories and beliefs, habits and practices in human lives. I have taken part in the Network since 2014 when I was starting my PhD and, over the years, I have learned that to be able to investigate and understand lives, a good enough relational space is needed in the relationship between researchers and participants, as well as within the community of researchers (Formenti & West 2016b). At the Bergen conference, all delegates, including myself, were invited in groups to different local homes (not restaurants!) for dinner and for a sharing of stories. This exciting experience was first of all completely new to me: speaking with local people and researchers from different countries and backgrounds in a convivial space (in a foreign country!) and sharing our uniqueness, not only as researchers, but as humans over a delicious meal cooked with care for ‘us’, a diverse group of strangers. This inspired me to go back to my research field with a new sensibility towards the space of conviviality in adult education.

I am going to share autoethnographic reflections (Ellis & Bochner 2016) about my way of being an activist in a larger research project involving newcomers, native citizens, social workers and researchers (Formenti & Luraschi 2020). Briefly the research was a qualitative participatory study on the integration of asylum seekers and refugees hosted in the Province of Lecco, Northern Italy. According to Amnesty International Italy, in Northern Italy, where I live and work as a researcher and adult educator, migrants and social actors contributing to their integration have been targeted in hate-fueled discourses (Report *Barometro dell’Odio* 2019). The aim of my research project, entitled ‘Unexpected Subjects²’, was to explore the experience, narratives, and discourses of the place and space of refugees and asylum seekers, using an embodied narrative methodology not only to ‘gather data’ about their experience, but to generate something new, enhancing a dialogue with natives and generating a deeper understanding, for everybody, of their human experience. This research was essentially aimed at ‘making a difference’, opening possibilities and imagining new forms of educational and social intervention to foster the inclusion of new migrants in the local community. If we

² Prof. Laura Formenti is the supervisor of the project ‘Unexpected Subject’.

want to know anything about migrants, we must talk and share a space of dialogue, which is problematic and not guaranteed (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore 2018). Literature on adult education demonstrates that being accepted, seen, talked to, considered, respected and recognized, are fundamental experiences for any newcomer to find their place (Wildemeersch 2017) – literally and symbolically – in the new society (Morrice, Shan & Sprung 2017). Integration is not only about finding a job or speaking the language, or the outcome of an individual effort of adaptation: it is a relational process towards harmonic coexistence (Formenti & Luraschi 2020).

Between activism and research: a disorienting dilemma for an early activist researcher

‘Unexpected Subjects’ was part of a national program for studying the potential role of ‘Migration and Migrants in Italy’ and exploring places and practices of coexistence in the construction of new forms of social interaction (Formenti & Luraschi 2020). The program was funded by a private organization called ‘Fondazione Alsos’³ from the beginning of October 2018 to the end of March 2020. During these 18 months I had the possibility to collaborate with 14 Italian researchers among whom were sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, a philosopher and myself, the only pedagogue. In this period, we developed 14 different independent projects through collaborative work; we had time for discussions and opportunities for formal face-to-face meetings every two months at the headquarters of Fondazione Alsos, as well as constant informal contact via a WhatsApp chat called ‘Fellow Alsos’. During this time, we became aware that in our country the attitude towards immigration is traditionally ambiguous about the impact of the foreigners’ presence (Colucci 2018) and, in recent years, ‘nativist’ resentment is palpable in our daily lives (Luraschi, Massena & Pitzalis 2019). This awareness motivates us to examine the complexity of co-existence as a concrete process that happens in material spaces and as an informal one that generates unexpected and original possibilities of co-existence, through reciprocal relationships and spaces of resistance (Formenti & Luraschi 2020). The question as to what constitutes activist research has been an issue for researchers, especially for feminists, for over a decade and there is now a considerable literature addressing the topic (Maynard & Purvis 1994). The word ‘activism’ attracted me, as it seemed to give a name to the actions and ways of positioning that I had been working with for a while, in the struggle to connect my own life, experiences, feelings, body, values and imagination with my work, to make research more meaningful (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro 2020).

³ Fondazione Alsos: <https://www.fondazionealsos.org/en/competition>, 24.06.2021.

On an October afternoon, after some months, I returned from Bergen to Italy with a new sensibility for the space of conviviality in adult education. A fellow sociologist shared in our WhatsApp group an article written by one of her friends (Portelli 2019) where the author reflects on his way of doing research and shares his struggle to fill the gap between activism and research in his experience as a researcher in Italy. The following two extracts are ones that I feel best reflect the Italian experience and that I would like to reproduce here in order to express what I perceive as a dilemma with no solution yet:

What we write turns out to be inaccessible for the ‘common people’. The university grants us a wage for some years and lets us study our own topics, almost without limiting our activism. But university life does not only fill our time, as other jobs do, it also has some consequences. Books and articles that we write in academia are inaccessible to the audience. We learn to write for journals which are only read by those who write in them.

[...]

How can we share our thoughts with the civil movements we come from? Except in very rare cases, the higher you move in your career, the less you manage to do research and keep in touch with the rest of the world. This is clear when we look at our acquaintances at university, at the spiral of self-exploitation and precariousness which forces them to write articles that no one will read and learn a language not for communicating, but for legitimating themselves, if not for financing their universities. They often write articles that will remain in the hands of big publishing houses, and they don’t even have the liberty of sharing them. All these intellectual energies fuel the publishing associations and empty the networks of friendship and solidarity. They should return to the movements that they belong to, which are instead sucked up in activism and urgency, where it is often hard to develop complex, long term analysis (Portelli 2019, my translation).

Portelli is a sociologist, so he speaks from a sociological perspective and describes, from his biographical point of view, the following two levels of observation:

- macro-level (social context): academia in Italy seems to practice a (neo)liberal approach to the creation of knowledge where researchers must be highly productive at the expense of their activism and social engagement;
- micro-level (individual as context): researchers are struggling in academia because ‘production’ changes from a social system to a state of being of an individual, so it becomes a matter of ‘individual responsibility’ where there is no time for being an activist.

Portelli’s analysis is shareable with precarious researchers in Italy. Certainly, I perceive my position as an early researcher to be highly precarious and I feel the entanglement of the macro and micro levels as a dilemma. I know, too, that my perception is in alignment with the feeling of my group of colleagues. We are in a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow 1991). Dilemmas usually occur when people have experiences that do not fit their expectations or make sense to them and they cannot resolve the situations without some change in their views of the world. Starting to move from my habitual point of view where I feel my precarity as a vulnerability which is not sustainable, I found

a way through the dilemma of doing research or being an activist. In fact, I realized that Portelli's analysis doesn't consider the meso-level which means the relational and communicational spaces where real people meet, develop, transform their actions, ideas and perspectives within an ongoing dynamic context – in other words, in this analysis conviviality finds no consideration. We are not separated individuals and the inter-active context is still alive, even when we do not pay any attention to that context. Today, research-as-activism seems to require a combination of experience, relationships, and writing about, – and maybe studying – subjects that deserve our attention. From my different point of view, I think it is possible to fill the gap between activism and research, so I chose to follow the invitation of the Life History and Biography Network, that I described above, to explore the space of conviviality. In my view, a difference is not made by the publications which permit us to share our thoughts with society, but more importantly by the way in which we expose ourselves in the relationship with the participants in our research. I recognize myself in the idea of feminism according to which the sensitive body is a place of knowledge and what is personal is also political (Hanisch 1970). In this view of things, it's not conceivable, nor desirable, to divide body, mind and research from the engagement of activism (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro 2019).

Conviviality as contact through food

Being an activist means engaging myself in forms of conviviality, which can include the role of food-sharing practiced in informal spaces with newcomers and host communities. The literature on adult education (Guo 2010; Webb et al. 2016) explores the danger that migrants learn to adapt and reposition themselves only in response to the employment market in host communities. In particular Sue Webb (2015), framing her analysis with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, draws attention to how social networks and learning communities are integral to how migrants manage themselves in order to become accepted by others and accepted into the workforce. Webb's work identifies the important role of learning communities, which enables opportunities for two-way intercultural learning and where relationships are more equal and voluntary in comparison to learning communities in the workplace, where a hierarchy of the value of experiences/skills from different cultural contexts is established and where migrants are often expected to relinquish previous identities and practices. In my study, different participants – asylum seekers and refugees, native citizens, researchers, and social workers – were involved as insiders of experience in a dynamic and dialogic learning community where conviviality happens unpredictably and spontaneously. In fact, conviviality, Ivan Illich argued, involves 'autonomous and creative intercourse

among people, and the intercourse of people with their environment,' Illich continued: 'I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value' (Illich 1973, p. 24). During this year and a half of research, I've been invited more than once, mostly by newcomers living in host communities, to take part in convivial moments of the sharing of food and drink. On these occasions, food was the element that created the chance for contact among us. Food can be much more than what we eat; it is a relationship, a mediator of one's culture and a gesture of care. Food is a living, active substance, which makes us exist together with others. Italy has one of the richest culinary traditions in the world, with deep roots in embodied narratives (Montanari 2004). To be part of an informal learning community is a life experience. Food is one of the most powerful connective tools we have: it stimulates all of our senses, evokes deep memories and connects us within wider systems of interaction and complexity.

The stories I chose for the following section are drawn from the second phase of 'Unexpected Subjects'. This phase represents the first experience with sensobiographic walks (Järviluoma 2021) in Italy involving new migrants and natives (Formenti & Luraschi 2021). The participants were:

- 6 refugees from Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Somalia and Pakistan, living in Lecco at the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (average age – 27).
- 6 young Italians, 2 with migratory background, members of a youth cultural association, (average age – 22).

I invited Italians into the project after field observation in the first phase of the research, to fill the gap of interaction between refugees and same-age natives (Formenti & Luraschi 2020). The method is very simple: I created six pairs made up of refugees and native to walk together in a place of choice called the 'place of the heart'. Natives led the first walk, telling their story of past and present sensations in the place; the refugee and myself as researcher listened, commented and asked questions (Formenti & Luraschi 2021). In the second sensobiographic walk, the newcomer chose his place of the heart and became the teller. According to the walking methodology, walking and thinking with others is a celebration of the 'unpredictability of opening ourselves to possibility' (Springgay & Truman 2017, p. 1) and sounds, smells and other sensuous perceptions were the core of both conversations. During these experiences of research-action, conviviality happened unpredictably and spontaneously as a gesture of sharing food between the young newcomers and the natives and it represents the potential of informal education among adults (Formenti & Luraschi 2021). Following Wildemeersch (2017), I use the word 'newcomers' to indicate 'migrants' in order to bypass normative categorisations and generalisations, and to suggest a feature of experience, i.e. action in relation to a (new) environment (Formenti & Luraschi 2020).

1. *The scent of coffee: unexpected breakfast with Moussa and Giulia*

Moussa and Giulia are two young participants in the sensobiographic walks. Moussa is a 29 year-old refugee from Morocco and Giulia is a 20 year-old student of law who works part-time at a pizzeria to pay for her university studies. We met for the first time together last summer at 10 in the morning. From my field notes:

With Giulia I ring the doorbell to the flat of the Reception System Network located in Brianza where Moussa is living and we realize he thought we were meeting in the afternoon. Judging from his voice, he has just woken up. Without hesitating, Moussa insists on inviting us upstairs for breakfast. He opens the door in boxer shorts and a coloured t-shirt and, as if we were family, welcomes us into the kitchen. Here he brews some spicy, Moroccan style coffee for us. Giulia says she doesn't like coffee, but Moussa won't listen and tells her to try it (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Moussa preparing Moroccan coffee
Source: Photograph taken by the author.

In Morocco as in Italy, coffee has a long tradition and when you are a guest, you must enjoy the coffee prepared by your host. Italians invented the 'espresso' prepared in coffee houses in the first half of the 20th century, and by now it has become almost an icon of the country itself (Morris 2008), but coffee is still made at home when someone comes to see you. This cultural habit evokes our common roots: Italians and Moroccans are Mediterranean people and we have in common the value of

commensality – the pleasure of eating together, characteristic of the Mediterranean diet – recognized as the intangible cultural heritage of Spain, Greece, Italy and Morocco in 2013 by UNESCO (Phull et al. 2015). Luckily for Giulia who doesn't like Italian coffee, the taste of Moroccan spiced coffee is really very different to a traditional Italian coffee because it is a fragrant blend of dark coffee and warm spices.

This example illuminates the unpredictable opportunities that participatory research can offer, where a misunderstanding can become a moment of connection between participants that initially seem so different. Before starting their sensobiographic walks together, Moussa and Giulia communicate by artefact and cultural gestures. This way of communication is spontaneous, unconscious and happens through their bodies. After a few days, Giulia wrote an email to me. This is a reflexive, beautiful passage, where she makes explicit connections between her perceptions and feelings to Moussa's daily life experience:

Because of the little misunderstanding as to the time of our meeting with Moussa, I found myself catapulted into his daily life. Welcoming a stranger in your own house, inviting her to sit at your table while you start your day is something very intimate. I was afraid I would not be at ease, and instead I immediately felt in sync with Moussa and his environment. I never felt uncomfortable and the conversation came very naturally, despite Moussa's occasional difficulty in expressing complex ideas in Italian (Giulia, my translation).

Research offers a chance for the unexpected creation of spaces for improvisation where the participants, through the mediation of food, can share a moment of conviviality where sharing your daily routine creates an environment of intimacy and mutual harmony (Cottino & Luraschi 2021). The analyses of my field data show the learning potential of sensobiographic walks and their capacity to create unprecedented relationships and conversations, fuelling a sense of friendship, familiarity and curiosity, far beyond the rhetoric of agency and empowerment that seem to narrow down adult education to compensate vulnerability (Formenti & Luraschi 2021).

2. Asad's apple: an unexpected gift for Matteo

If conviviality as contact through food happened with Moussa and Giulia before our walking, it will happen with other participants during the walking together. This is the case with Asad, a 37 year-old man from Pakistan, who has been living in Lecco for 4 years and who is a refugee for religious reasons, and Matteo, a 20 year-old civil servant in a library, living in Brianza since his birth. For our first walk, Matteo brings us to his special place on the hills in Brianza. Asad communicates with Matteo using a lot of gestures, to make up for his Italian which still needs improvement. About this walk, I wrote in my notes:

As we get to the top of the hill and I am breathless from the walk and the summer heat, Asad asks Matteo to find a place to sit down for a bit. Matteo decides therefore to change his route in order to satisfy our friend's request and leads us to the town park, where we sit at a table not far from a drinking fountain. Here, Asad takes out two apples from his backpack, washes them at the fountain and offers them to us to take a bite. Matteo is astonished by the unexpected gift and after a long silence he thanks Asad (Figure 2).

Later Matteo, in a WhatsApp message, describes his surprise at Asad's gesture saying:

I must admit, I was very surprised by the fact that he cared enough to bring us a snack for the walk (something which I honestly hadn't thought of). Asad looked pleased and at ease, and he partly conveyed this feeling to me, thus making it easier for both of us to open up in our conversation (Matteo, my translation).

As Matteo says, before our break sitting at the table, I noticed that Matteo didn't speak a lot because he was embarrassed to walk with two strangers and, at the same time, Asad used non-verbal communication to tell his stories. During the time we



Figure 2. Asad and Matteo taking a bite
Source: Photograph taken by the author.

were sitting at the table together, we created an affective and emotional space in which Matteo was able to become more familiar with Asad, so Asad felt free to tell him some episodes from his life in Islamabad and in Italy. In this period, he was looking for a job as a kitchen assistant and was trying to improve his still poor Italian, with the desire, in the future, to live in Lecco with his family. Also, in this case, as with the breakfast with Moussa and Giulia, conviviality facilitated the dialogue: they spoke

with silence and with gestures, while walking and talking are characterized by an interactive process of movements and rest.

The participants in embodied narrative research are communicating ‘talking bodies’, deploying the ‘interactional qualities and language of the body’ (Coffey 1999, p. 270). My notes embrace ‘the theoretical standpoint which understands language and linguistic work in biography research as rooted in bodily learning, bodily perception and interaction’ (Evans 2014, p. 85). According to Springgay and Thuman *walking-with* is a form of solidarity, unlearning, and critical engagement with situated knowledges (2017, p. 11). Movements and rest are central concepts in walking as in narrative research because their combinations create the sound of footsteps and the rhythm of language. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write:

Movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible; it is by nature imperceptible. Perception can grasp movements only as a displacement of a moving body or the development of a form. Movements, becoming, in other words, pure relation of speed and slowness, pure effects, and below and above the threshold of perception (p. 280).

Matteo led us to a table where Asad could offer his gift for him. It is a form of imperceptible communication, where their bodies react and move in relation to other decisional movements. The term decisional is complicated due to our common usage of the term, but in embodied research, decisional movement is unconscious, intuitive and non-neurotypical movement (Manning 2016). In adult education, we need different ways to conceive and understand participation because, as I discussed earlier, we are immersed in particular neoliberal accounts of discourse where participation is denotative of conscious choice and volitional movements. For example, when we think of inclusion as the freedom to choose to participate, participation then becomes the human power to act (Springgay & Truman 2017, p. 76). Being an activist researcher sensible to the rule of conviviality means, in this experience with Asad and Matteo,

to be aware that participation ‘is never reducible to the intentional act of individual human actors. Participation takes place through relational assemblages of bodies, materials, concepts, and affect: participation in these terms is always a co-fabrication, a co-production that involves more than individual human participants’ (McCormack 2014, p. 188). This episode shows how an encounter happens through relational combinations and how conviviality, manifested through non-verbal communication, is part of our being. I wish here to insist on the importance of engaging with concrete aspects of everyday life; I focused on food sharing and walking together, and the role these play in telling stories.

I present fragments of fieldnotes, pictures and transcriptions, and I suggest that this embodied approach to the narratives can open new possibilities for researchers on migration, and for people concerned with adult education, thus enabling a better recognition of the interconnections between bodies and beyond words in the learning process.

Food sharing with Samakè and Chiara

Another crucial dimension of this method inspired by adult education theories, is the emergence of (hints of) transformation in the migrant’s experience, from being ‘the passive, needing and vulnerable subject’ – which is the dominant discourse in educators’ so called ‘inclusive’ programs (Però 2007) – to acting as an expert, an active and unexpected ‘guide’ or ‘agent’ (Formenti & Luraschi 2021). As an adult educator and researcher, my role in the sensobiographic walk is to create a good enough learning space (Winnicott 1971); if the participants build up an atmosphere of friendship (Tillmann-Healy 2003), as I showed above, something new will happen (Formenti & Luraschi 2020). This is also the story of the encounter of Chiara, a 22 year-old student with a BA in Philosophy and Samakè. Samakè is a 27 year-old young man from Mali who, during his sensorial-biographical walks with her, tells us that his experience as guest of the host community is about to end, and for the first time after 4 years in Italy, he is looking for a flat to share with a friend of his from Guinea, whom he met at an institution years ago. As we walk on a sunny afternoon, Samakè makes us promise to come over for dinner as soon as he is done moving, so he can cook for us. From my field notes:

Samakè guided Chiara into the woods close to a reception centre; here, he remembered a difficult approach to food on his arrival in Italy five years ago:

‘I was afraid of eating pasta. I didn’t know Italian food and wanted to cook Tcheké (fish with platano)’. Later, he invited me and Chiara for dinner at his home:

‘I ask you to dinner to taste Riz au gras (rice with vegetables), Naboulou (meat with nuts), Tcheké.

Samakè told his stories in relation to food and his struggling to enter into contact with Italian food because the Italian reception center didn't give him the possibility to cook his dishes for himself. I want to stress this point because this is one example of the institutional discrimination that newcomers have to endure (Luraschi 2020). The importance of conviviality emerged indirectly with his invitation to a dinner and this then took place four months later, and we ate at his home. Here, Samakè cooked Tcheké for us.

I wrote in my notes:

Chiara and I know his friend Moussa and, while we tasted the different dishes of Malian cuisine, we listen to a number of stories of labour exploitation. Moussa picked tomatoes in Southern Italy for a few months: he slept in a shed and worked more than 10 hours a day for very little money. Now his work situation has become much better, he is a stock man in a warehouse supermarket, but he still has to work a lot of overtime which does not get paid as such.

Conviviality allows for the surfacing of social topics that engage me first of all as a citizen: the fight against labour exploitation and for the right to organize. Carlo Petrini, the leader of Slow Food – a movement that advocates and undertakes programs of 'sensory education' (see Pink 2009, p. 56) in Italy – proposes that 'Reappropriating the senses is the first step towards imagining a different system capable of respecting humans as a worker of the land, as a producer, as a consumer of food and resources, and as a political and moral entity' and 'to reappropriate one's senses is to reappropriate one's own life' (2007, p. 99).

Reflective Conclusions

Exploring the space of conviviality with newcomers and host communities is my way as a researcher to be at the same time an activist. In conclusion, I suggest that sensory participation is a form of reflection through which the researcher engages with her/his own sensory experiences produced through research encounters and how these may assist her/him in understanding those of others (Formenti & Luraschi 2021). In particular, I stressed the meso-level dimension where newcomers and native citizens



Figure 3. A Malian dish cooked by Samakè

Source: Photograph taken by the author.

interconnected their senses through sharing food. In this way, the process of research provides space for dialogue and connectivity in diversity. Such spaces can help the researcher and adult educator to create a context for unprecedented encounters and conversations, fuelling a sense of friendship, familiarity, curiosity, to deal with the common challenges (Formenti & Luraschi 2020; 2021) caused by differences in language, customs, and norms which are potentially compounded by the specific manifestations of racism in each given situation.

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