

Firefighters Volunteering Beyond Their Duty: An Essential Asset in Rural Communities

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Abstract

Fire departments are essential assets in American rural communities. The current study aims to understand the motivations and the personal, organizational, and communal aspects that drive firefighters (both paid and volunteers) to engage in additional voluntary community work. Their volunteer activity challenges existing theories on motivation to volunteer, since these firefighters already have what most volunteers seek (e.g., recognition and satisfaction). Two focus groups of firefighters were assembled in which volunteer and career firefighters shared their perceptions about their communities and the work they do for them. Qualitative data analysis showed that leadership, attitudinal commitment, a strong sense of affiliation, altruism, and a sense of community all influenced firefighters' perceptions and motivations.

Key words: firefighters, community, volunteer, focus groups, asset-based community development

1.0 Introduction

The massive terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, resulted in an increased public awareness of the heroism and the dedication of firefighters. While attempting to save the lives of those trapped in the World Trade Center's twin towers, 343 firefighters died. Since that time, considerable attention has been drawn to the commitment of firefighters to their jobs (Lee & Olshfski, 2002) and the heroism required while performing tasks (Martens, 2005). Some firefighters also express a commitment to the communities they protect by volunteering beyond their regular duties. Yet, this aspect of their commitment has not been explored.

The 30,300 fire departments in the United States fall into one of three categories: volunteer fire departments, in which all of the firefighters are volunteers; combination fire departments, in which there is a mix of paid and volunteer firefighters; and professional fire departments, in which all the staff are paid.

This study aimed to understand a particular group of volunteers: firefighters (both paid and volunteer) who engage in voluntary community work. Theories on motivation to volunteer indicate that firefighters may already have what most volunteers seek: recognition, satisfaction, a feeling that they are helpful and needed, social status, and social affiliation. Aiming to understand the personal, organizational, and communal aspects that drive firefighters to volunteer, we carried out a preliminary and exploratory study with two focus groups of firefighters.

1.1 Volunteering for the Community

A review of the different definitions of volunteering (Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994; Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Wilson, 2000) reveals four common, salient elements: (1) it is nonobligatory and performed of one's free will; (2) it is not paid for or otherwise compensated; (3) it is an activity for the benefit of others (not family or friends); and (4) it is done either within an organizational context or as a long-term behavior. Volunteering can be initiated individually (whether one joins an organization or volunteers on one's own), or it can be done collectively. Collective volunteering "involves acts of generosity that groups initiate, inspire and oversee" (Eckstein, 2001, p. 829). It is built on group resources and bounded by group norms and networks. Such groups can be members of a church who work together for a cause or employees in an organization who volunteer under the auspices of that organization (Tschirhart, 2005).

Volunteering is often done in the context of one's community (physical, religious, or other), with its standards, norms, resources, and institutions. Moreover, in most cases, voluntary work is aimed to create change within the community (Okun & Michel, 2006; Omoto & Snyder, 2002). By volunteering for the community, people respond to what they perceive as social problems within their community and thus enhance social capital, since civic engagement and volunteering encourages reciprocity and social trust (Putnam, 1995).

Volunteering to help the community can enhance a "psychological sense of community" and be influenced by it (Okun & Michel, 2006; Omoto & Malsch, 2005). Sarason (1974) defined sense of community as the feeling "that one belongs in, and is meaningfully a part of a larger collectivity" (p. 1). The concept includes membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections as its core elements (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Omoto & Snyder, 2002). An enhanced sense of community promotes trust, a feeling of belonging, and confidence that social support is available to anyone in need. It is "cultural capital," which along with human capital (e.g., education and income) and social capital (networks), that predicts volunteering (Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Wilson & Musick, 1998).

1.2 Volunteer Firefighters and Firefighters Volunteering

In the last two decades volunteer firefighters have been studied by several scholars (Perkins, 1989, 1990; Perkins & Metz, 1988; Thompson & Bono, 1993). Some of them dealt with the motivation of individuals to volunteer as firefighters. Thompson and Bono (1993) found that the strongest motivation to volunteer as firefighters was helping the community, followed by a will to make a contribution and to be in control. Other aspects of volunteer firefighters were studied, such as their commitment to their voluntary work (Lee & Olshfski, 2002; Perkins & Metz, 1993).

The literature does not address firefighters, paid or otherwise, who volunteer for their communities. The fire departments' place in the community allows firefighters to reach out and help beyond dealing with fires. Thompson and Bono (1993) explained that fire departments are ubiquitous institutions, found throughout the nonurban American landscape, that provide essential public goods and are a locus for community organization and identity. Perkins and Metz (1988) argued that fire departments provide powerful sources of community solidarity and identity. In many unincorporated areas in the United States, the public service commission (the relevant taxing authority) is the only local government. Thus, the fire department may also manage some of the local utilities or recreation facilities. In addition, it is common for fire departments to provide emergency medical services. Hence, firefighters often are in positions in which they are able to identify and respond to community and family social and health problems. By virtue of their uniforms, badges, and paramilitary style, firefighters command respect as social control agents, but they lack the coercive, punitive tone that some associate with the police. Firefighters' unambiguous and partisan role results in firefighters' enjoying widespread gratitude, status, and prestige in their communities (Thompson & Bono, 1993). In fact, Patterson and Kim (1991) found that firefighting was the most admired and respected profession in the United States.

Studies (see review by Thompson & Bono, 1993) show that fire departments participate in additional aid to the community, such as fund-raising events and holiday parades, while also making stations available as polling places and public-meeting spaces. All of the above can be considered voluntary work, as none of it is forced on them; they do not get paid for it; it is done to benefit the community; and it occurs on a regular basis. It can be defined as collective volunteering initiated by a group who already belong to an organization, in this case, the fire department.

1.3 Motivation to Volunteer

Motivation to volunteer has been studied broadly (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996; Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Yeung, 2004) and was found to encompass a complex combination of altruistic, egoistic, and social motives that alter over time (Haski-Leventhal & Bar-Gal, 2008). Additionally, motivation to altruism has been studied. Monroe (1996) researched Europeans who risked their lives during World War II to save Jews in their communities. She found that altruists were distinguished from people who chose not to help, in that they held an "altruistic perspective"—they perceived themselves as part of humanity and described their behavior as a reflex or an instinct to help.

Based on these theories, the motivation of firefighters to volunteer is somewhat puzzling, since they seem to already have what other volunteers seek: Firefighters are highly regarded by American society; they have recognition and status; children want to be like them when they grow up; and they are considered American heroes, especially post-September 11, 2001 (Martens, 2005). Their peer group creates a strong social affiliation, which enhances their feeling of belonging and brotherhood. Additionally, some already have a career. And above all, firefighters gain satisfaction derived from a job that involves saving lives and helping people. As such, their voluntary work for the community challenges what we know about the motivation to volunteer.

1.4 Fire Departments and the Strong Communities Initiative

Strong Communities is a comprehensive, community-based initiative operated by the Institute for Families and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University aimed at the prevention of child maltreatment. Supported by the Duke Endowment, Strong Communities seeks to build systems of support for families with young children in the Upstate region of South Carolina.

Strong Communities differs from many community initiatives to enhance the safety and well-being of children in that the principal participants come not from social-service agencies but instead from primary community institutions. Strong Communities is a truly preventative effort, which, unlike many child-abuse prevention initiatives, seeks to reach all parents with young children and to connect them to informal support systems. The communities served are diverse in ethnicity, social class, growth rate, and population density.

Firefighters have been key players in the initiative. More than 128 firefighters representing 13 fire departments have volunteered with Strong Communities. Together, they have contributed more than 16,000 hours of service, with an average retention time of almost 12 months. Given their unique positions as first responders they are often able to identify and respond to community and family social and health problems. Fire departments working with Strong Communities staff have been able to identify resources internally and within their larger community not only to respond to immediate crises but also to develop informal support networks aimed at prevention of future crises. For example, one department recognized that the community lacked activities for teenagers and so started an Explorer post (a specialized Boy Scout troop) for youth to gain experience in public-safety tasks. Other forms of involvement have included organizing neighborhood associations, serving as meeting places, providing training and resources (e.g., bicycle helmets) to area apartment complexes and schools, hosting family fun days and parent-child activities, donating Christmas gifts to local children, helping organize community festivals, serving as spokespersons for the initiative, and hosting neighborhood block parties. Some even have blue-ribbon pins emblazoned with “Strong Communities” on their uniforms as a tangible manifestation of their integration within Strong Communities.

2.0 Methods

We aimed to study the unexplored phenomenon of firefighters’ volunteering for their communities above and beyond their duty as firefighters (which in itself is often voluntary). Since it was an exploratory study, a qualitative method was used. The volunteering studied is a collective style of volunteering, done and enhanced by the group. Therefore, we wanted to interview the firefighters as a group and let the participants freely initiate a discussion, as well as to respond to our questions and to each other. Focus groups can lead participants to choose their own words and phrasings and decide what issues are important to them within the framework of the research question, which provides a source of valuable information (Fitzpatrick & Boulton, 1994; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). People are encouraged to talk to one another, exchange anecdotes and comment on each other’s experiences and points of view (Krueger, 1994). This method capitalizes on communication between participants and group dynamics to generate data. It maximizes the expression of perspectives not imposed by the researcher and

allows the researcher to develop classifications afterward (Fitzpatrick & Boulton, 1994; Krueger, 1994).

Of the two fire departments selected, one was a combination fire department (in which professionals and volunteers work together) and the other consisted of all volunteers. It was of particular importance to have the two kinds of fire departments and to study the differences between them, if any. Additionally, these departments were chosen because of their level of involvement in the Strong Communities initiative. Six firefighters from each department participated in the study; all were Caucasian. Each group of six firefighters composed a focus group. All participants at the combination department and all but one in the volunteer department were male. This is in accordance with findings from other studies, showing that almost all firefighters are male (between 96% and 98%) and Caucasian (96%) (Perkins, 1989, 1990). Both focus groups were held at the respective stations, which Perkins and Metz (1988) suggested as the best option for primarily all-male social, clublike interaction. Each focus group lasted approximately 1 hour.

Our qualitative methods consisted of identifying the fire departments to be utilized and recruiting participants. We posted signs in each fire department with a full description of the study and asked firefighters to participate. Each focus group session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and consisted of semistructured interviews. The participants were asked about their motivations in joining the fire department; their perceptions about their work, group, and organization; the commitment to their work; their knowledge and perceptions of the local community; and their involvement with Strong Communities. Transcription of the 2 discussions yielded 28 pages of text, which were analyzed according to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); main themes emerged, shedding light on the voluntary practices of firefighters. To assure the validity of the themes, we analyzed the data separately and later compared and combined the themes. We then compared themes between the focus groups. The results were shown to staff and volunteers in the Strong Communities initiative, and their input was also taken into account.

3.0 Findings

The data analysis showed that volunteering for the community by firefighters was enhanced by several factors: (a) transformational leadership, (b) organizational commitment, (c) group affiliation, and (d) sense of community. These factors helped shape firefighters' perceptions and motivations to volunteer. In addition, whether the department consisted of all volunteer or a combination of paid and volunteer staff influenced how they perceived their role in the community.

3.1 Transformational Leadership: Following the Chief

The fire department chief has a pivotal role within the fire department. Not only is the chief in charge of the organization, with influence on its culture and climate, he or she is responsible for cooperation and decision making in times of danger.

In the combined fire department, firefighters spoke highly of their chief and claimed that although hierarchy was clear, there was still a sense of camaraderie. One firefighter explained that in a family-like organization, the chief was "like a father figure." The fire department chiefs saw the Strong Communities initiative as

an opportunity for their departments to get more involved in their communities. It seems that the chiefs' perceptions, values, and beliefs, together with their strong leadership skills, encouraged the firefighters to play an active role in the Strong Communities initiative.

Indeed, the chief's role in setting the example and the way in which the department is devoted to go beyond its regular duties for the community cannot be underestimated. If the leader is devoted and committed to the community, the others will follow. If the chief is not, although individual firefighters can still volunteer in the community, engagement of the whole department will be more difficult.

3.2 Organizational Commitment: "Our Way of Life"

Firefighters show a very high commitment to the job, which is most of all manifested by their willingness to die to save others. Lee and Olshfski (2002) studied the commitment of firefighters and showed that firefighters had high attitudinal commitment (identification with the goals and values of the job and motivation to exert extra effort). Although firefighters' highest commitment was to their job, they also reported high commitment to the superior, work group, and organization.

The firefighters who participated in the focus groups showed a high commitment on all four levels described above. However, we found that the organizational commitment was stronger among the professional firefighters. Their commitment to the chief was already discussed, but they also spoke with affection of their workplace (the station) and their working group. They described a unique organizational culture and climate, where the people came first. For the professional firefighters, the fire department is one of the most important places in their lives: "This place means the world to me"; "This is not my job; this is a way of life"; and "It is what we call 'the place to be' " are some of the phrases they used that described their level of organizational commitment. Firefighters said they often came to the station to help out even when it was not their shift. Their commitment finds expression in their attendance at trainings during their free time and in helping their peers and their communities both on and off duty.

3.3 A Strong Sense of Affiliation: Firefighters' Brotherhood

One unique factor about firefighters is the amount of time spent with colleagues, thus creating a brotherhood whereby the fire department serves as a second family. Indeed, the most common theme expressed by the firefighters in the focus groups was that of brotherhood and family. They experience dangerous situations together and depend on each other. Additionally, they need each other's emotional and tangible support to survive in their work. They also spend time together outside the station and help each other through life's difficulties. One firefighter said it was "like having a big family of 10 brothers." One of the career firefighters described his feeling of brotherhood as follows:

"We're here 24 hours a day every third day. This is our family. A lot of people don't understand that. You have to get along with your family.... Just like you, I love my family. This is my family here, this is what really intrigues me about this place ... It's not only the love we have for each

other; it's knowing that in a split second we could be in a situation where you have to depend on your family members to save your life. You have to have that trust. We have that here."

This is what creates a feeling of brotherhood among firefighters. As one career firefighter explained: "I know you've heard of brotherhood; brotherhood is exactly what it means. We're just like brothers here. When you come here and have had a bad day, these guys will pick you up." And a volunteer firefighter from another station agreed: "We're a great big family. That's what it boils down to.... He's like a brother. I wouldn't mind asking him anything I would ask my own brother."

Thus, when the chief in the professional fire department introduced the slogan "our family helping your family," it made sense to the firefighters there. "The big chief is the one who came up with that. It's pretty cool. The best motto for this place," one of them explained. The firefighters have taken their team attitude and spirit of brotherhood and expanded it to include the larger community.

3.4 Psychological Sense of Community

Both the career and volunteer firefighters who participated in the study expressed a strong sense of community. They felt part of the community, and they cared for its well-being. Many of them live in the communities they serve and want to see them grow and flourish. The fact that at any time they may be asked to risk their lives for the people in their community makes them see those individuals within their community in a different light. This may in part be why firefighters are unusually able to translate their own sense of community into community building. Conversely, their absence or withdrawal undermines communities both directly (greater danger; presence of burned-out buildings; elevation of insurance rates) and indirectly (loss of their identification with the community).

One firefighter described his feeling as sitting on top of a mountain, looking down on the valley, realizing how much work needs to be done. Firefighters expressed an awareness of their surroundings, both in terms of who lives in them and of what problems challenge the community. In one fire department the men were concerned about children with nothing to do and nowhere to go, and in the other, they were worried about lack of police protection in the area. One career firefighter portrayed their leading role in the community: "We are in a position where we have to set an example. People watch what we do. It's kind of like smiling; it's an addictive thing. If you do a good thing and people see it, then they'll follow."

It was clear that the volunteer firefighters who were living in the community, and who volunteered to serve their fellow community members, had an even stronger sense of community and a strong feeling of necessity. One such firefighter described the gratitude he receives in serving in a small community as follows:

"Without volunteer firemen in our community, we would not have a fire service. That was the main thing that got me started in the first place. When I first began this I didn't realize that once you go out and help people, the feeling you get when you do help. You meet these people later down the road, and they thank you, and they remember you. That's pretty

much the reason I'm still a firefighter.... I feel good when I go to bed at night knowing that I ... may have helped somebody.”

Living in a rural area, they know many of the families around them, and this makes them feel as if they are serving their families and friends, not strangers. One volunteer firefighter admitted to knowing half the people in the community, although he described a change over time:

“I was asked to be a fireman because they needed firemen. And being part of the community, I figured if they don't have people, we've got a problem.... Used to be, everybody knew everybody and it was about doing for your friends. Now it's just doing it for the community. We don't know half the people in our community.”

3.5 Altruistic Perceptions: “It's in Our Blood”

Some study participants also illustrated the altruistic perspective, saying they could not act differently. This is part of what made them become firefighters and risk their lives for others, and this is part of what makes them go beyond their work-related duties and help the community further:

“It's just instinct. I think it's just in your blood. Once you become a fireman, you're always a fireman. Ninety-five percent of people in the fire service are like that, period.”(Career firefighter)

Another firefighter from the same department explained that it was part of who they are and what they do:

“Just like a stockbroker who's going to hit the deal of a century, he's going to do everything he can to get that. We as firemen, we strive to give hundred-plus percent in what we do—whether it's to save a life or stop a fire or help someone through childbirth or help someone who is dying—we give hundred-plus percent in everything we do. That is in our blood. It's our nature ... not everyone is as giving as firemen. We are very giving people. Being selfish to say it, we've got the biggest hearts of anyone you'll ever meet in your lives. We have to accept the fact that we'll go beyond whatever it may be to even put our lives on the line for somebody we don't even know. Some people appreciate it and some people won't even give you a second thought. It's who we are. It's what we do.”

3.6 Volunteer and Career Firefighters Working Together

In the combined fire department we studied there were 10 paid firefighters and 20 to 30 volunteers doing the same work, undergoing the same training, and

taking the same risks. In the volunteer fire department there were about 30 to 40 volunteers, 1 paid firefighter, and a chief. Several career firefighters indicated that they had become paid firefighters after years of serving as volunteers. It was no surprise, therefore, to see the career firefighters' appreciation toward the volunteers:

“They’re treated just like they work here. They’re held to the same standards we are. This place couldn’t run without them. If we decided tomorrow that we’re not using volunteers anymore, we’d have to close the doors.” (Career firefighter)

It is possible that the volunteer firefighters inspired the career firefighters to further volunteer for the local community, or that trying to avoid guilt led them to do so.

4.0 Discussion

Why do firefighters volunteer above and beyond volunteering as firefighters? They seem to already have the recognition and the satisfaction, so why go the extra mile to further help the community they are already protecting? According to the firefighters from South Carolina who were part of the Strong Communities initiative and participated in this preliminary study, the answer to these questions is complex. The most important aspect seems to be their high commitment to the leader (the chief), their workplace (the fire department), and to their work group (feeling of brotherhood; Lee & Olshfski, 2002). This high level of commitment is enhanced by firefighters' life-threatening job and the long time spent with colleagues; this commitment leads firefighters to exert additional effort for their community.

This strong commitment was already mentioned in the literature. Lee and Olshfski (2002) studied the commitment of firefighters and showed that they had high attitudinal commitment (identification with the goals and values of the job and exertion of extra effort). Although firefighters' highest commitment was to their job, they also reported high commitment to the superior, work group, and organization. In a survey of volunteer firefighters, Perkins and Metz (1988) found that of firefighters who also attended church, 67% indicated that their role as a firefighter was of equal or greater importance to them as their role as a church member. “We can wonder if there is something almost ‘sacred’ about the volunteer fire departments, because it may function similarly to the church for some members,” the authors noted (p. 119). This exploratory study shows how this commitment can be used for enhancing volunteering and creating an important community asset.

The firefighters in this study expressed a strong attitudinal commitment to the chief, the leader. Studies show that the leadership style and behavior of the chief could be related to teamwork effectiveness and satisfaction among firefighters in a department (Bartolo & Furlonger, 2000; Useem, Cook, & Sutton, 2005). With what seems to be a transformational leadership style (defined by Barling, Weber, and Kelloway [1996] as a charismatic leader who provides a vision and a sense of mission, stimulates employees, and shows consideration for their well-being), the chief in the combination fire department influenced his

firefighters' attitudes and behavior, and they completely followed his ideas and initiative to work for the community.

Their commitment was also to their peers, and their impressive teamwork was also translated into helping the community on a broader scale. A unique aspect about the career of firefighting is the amount of time that firefighters spend with colleagues, thus creating a brotherhood and a type of second family within the fire department (Regehr, Dimitropoulos, Bright, George, & Henderson, 2005). In a study that examined commitment and attitudes among firefighters, 75% responded that half or more of their close friends were fellow firefighters (Perkins & Metz, 1988). When the group decided to join the Strong Communities initiative, some positive peer pressure encouraged all to join.

In addition to that, firefighters expressed a strong "psychological sense of community": They cared for the local people whom they served. As Lee and Olshfski (2002) put it, "They do good because it is their job" (p. 109). Their unique position enhanced their awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the community, and their roles as protectors of their community made them strive to make it better. They have described their will to reach out and to help as an instinct, something in their blood and part of their nature. They have expressed what Monroe (1996) defined as an "altruistic perspective."

A psychological sense of community encourages people to volunteer but is also enhanced by volunteering (Omoto & Malsch, 2005). This was also the case with the firefighters. Their strong sense of community is what made some of them join the fire department, whether as a volunteer or as a career firefighter. But serving the community as firefighters enhanced further that feeling of community. Thus a progressive interaction occurs: By the nature of their work, they get involved and learn more about individual and communal needs, and they want to be part of fulfilling those needs. Their special place in the community, as protectors but not enforcers, results in a positive public image. With that image comes expectations, and as they explained, with expectations comes responsibility.

Differences were found between career firefighters and volunteer firefighters. The organizational commitment of the paid firefighters was stronger (as it was manifested in their positive attitudes toward their department and a strong willingness to engage in further efforts for the organization) as well as their commitment to their chief. Additionally, the fact that fire departments may combine paid and volunteer workers could make the paid firefighters feel guilt and want to do more for their community. Perhaps it is their close relationship with people who do almost the same job that they do without getting paid that makes the paid firefighter want to volunteer as well for the community. As paid firefighters add the same "input" into their work (although for many more hours) as the volunteers and yet gain a higher "output" (pay), they may feel guilt, which is overcome by working more for their community (see Adams' Equity Theory, 1963).

4.1 Fire Departments as Community Assets

The findings of this exploratory study show that fire departments can be great assets to their communities. The ability of the Strong Communities initiative to harness these assets to promote community development and cohesion is an example of practical implementation of asset-based community development (ABCD). ABCD draws attention to social assets: the gifts and talents of

individuals and the social relationships that fuel local associations and informal networks (Mathie & Cunningham, 2002). A key component of ABCD involves mapping the capabilities of individuals, organizations, and local institutions. Community practitioners should be aware of the potential within fire departments to serve the community and include them in their maps. One of the primary obstacles for asset-based community developers is to continually build and rebuild the associations between and among residents, organizations, and institutions (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The Strong Communities initiative has been able to work with the fire department to facilitate and maintain such connections, using the fire department's standing in the community to promote trust and positive interactions and building off of the firefighters' desires to serve the community as best they can.

5.0 Further Suggested Study

This preliminary study shows that volunteering for the community by firefighters cannot be explained by the current models of motivation to volunteer—altruistic, egoistic, or social. Collective volunteering such as this needs a further explanation. The way the commitment of the firefighters was transmitted to the community, the importance of the fire department leader, and perception and position in the community are all new aspects of motivation to volunteer yet to be explored. Commitment to volunteer has been thoroughly studied (Cnaan & Cascio, 1999; Haski-Leventhal & Bar-Gal, 2006), but not the way in which commitment to one's role, organization, or leader becomes a commitment to volunteering for the community.

The focus-group findings may be further studied through a national survey on the voluntary efforts of firefighters in their communities. The ideas and perceptions here portrayed could be translated into a quantitative survey, and it would be interesting to compare our findings to involvement of various fire departments throughout the United States. Learning more about the community work of fire departments will help us to better understand their role as a community asset and how to involve them in community building, particularly in rural areas.

Another interesting aspect would be to further explore the differences between volunteer and career firefighters, in regard to their work for the community and their psychological sense of community. Since the size of the community and the urban characteristics of the community influence the style of the fire department, this variable, too, should be studied.

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