

NARRATIVES AND EMOTIONS: REVEALING AND CONCEALING LAUGHTER

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Abstract: My paper deals with laughter as an expression of emotions in stories. I study laughter both as a communicative factor in fieldwork and as a stylistic device in narratives. When is laughter used as an effect in storytelling and what does this laughter mean? Is laughter always an expression of humour and comics? What else can it be an expression of? The stories that I use for analysing laughter are personal experience stories of giving birth. In these stories women use laughter in many ways, both in contact with me as an interviewer, together with me, and as a way of marking the meaning of the story. The women often laugh when they talk about corporeality, pain and difficulties during labour, but also when they perform a self-presentation with elements that “almost” happened during birth. What do they reveal or conceal with laughter in narratives and what can the laughter reveal about the point of their narration?

Key words: emotions, experience, humour, interviews, laughter, meaning-making, oral narratives.

This article deals with laughter as an expression of emotions in narratives. I will begin with an example from my source material, interviews with Swedish-speaking first-time mothers in southwestern Finland, the material compiled by me and used in my doctoral thesis about childbirth narratives (Marander-Eklund 2000) and reused here when analysing emotional expressions. One of my informants, a first-time mother, told about her experience of giving birth and her feelings of pain after arriving at the maternity ward, when she was out walking with her husband:

And I said to Bill [the husband], “I don’t want to. It’s not nice [laughter] that it’s so painful” [laughter]. Bill didn’t understand that he had to comfort me then at the beginning, for he just said “this is just the beginning” [imitates his nervousness] (IF mgt 1994/60).

This example shows how the birth-giver dramatizes the dialogue between herself and her husband, how she laughs when talking about pain, how she talks emphatically, and imitates the way her husband talks. She also cites the words directly in the present tense to further underline the drama.

In my material, the interviews with birth-givers, I found that the women almost always laughed when expressing feelings of pain. This made me interested in laughter as a stylistic means in narratives, as a strategy storytellers use to dramatize a story by means of making it interesting to listen to and to emphasize the meaning of and the point in the story. But can expressions of laughter be understood in other ways? When is laughter used as an effect in storytelling and what does this laughter mean? Is laughter always an expression of humour and comedy? Are you able to say anything about emotions when analysing laughter? Is laughter a way of revealing emotions or a way of concealing them?

The stories that I used for analysing laughter can be defined as personal experience stories about giving birth. These are first-person narratives with non-traditional content and *relating a personal experience* (Stahl 1997: 20). They are a way for the narrator to communicate experience, convey meaning and can be seen as presentations of the self. The method I used was a qualitative in-depth interview with a reflexive approach, as a way to create knowledge in conversation with the interviewee (Klein 1990, Vasenkari 1999). The material for my study of childbirth narratives consists of repeated interviews with 14 Swedish-speaking first-time mothers in southwestern Finland. The women were contacted via Swedish-language counseling offices in Finland and participation in the study was voluntary for the subject group.¹ The interviews were conducted immediately after the birth and a year later. I asked each woman to retell her experience of the birth from what she considered to be the start of labour until the end of it. This verbalisation I define as her childbirth story – an expression of a woman’s experience of having a baby. The two interviews presented for me an opportunity to make comparisons over time (Marander-Eklund 2000, see also Marander-Eklund 2001). The material I used for analysing laughter and the meaning of it is strongly connected to the Finnish context. It is not certain or even likely that women in labour in other contexts would laugh in the same situations as my interviewees. It should be noted that I am analysing the narrated event. Women laugh when telling me about the events, but they definitely did not laugh when they were suffering from the pain or when bearing down. In this article I will present how an emotional expression, in this case laughter, can be studied and give some examples of comical laughter and laughter that are used in non-comical situations (see also Marander-Eklund 2007: 153–168). The examples I will give have been selected in order to emphasise the analysis of the meaning of laughter in the stories. My aim is to show that in narration laughter can be understood in various ways and it also communicates moods other than comedy and humour.

HOW TO ANALYSE EMOTIONS IN NARRATION?

'Emotion' has been defined as a particular psychological state of feeling, such as fear, anger, joy, and sorrow. By emotions we mean a distinct feeling or quality of consciousness that reflects the personal significance of an emotion-arousing event. Another close word is 'feeling', by which we mean the perception of events within the body ('Emotion' 2005, see also Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2003). Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren (2004) write about cultural perspectives on emotions and note that the concept of emotion is difficult to define and state that it is almost pointless to map emotions. Instead, we should try to look at them as something relational. Frykman and Löfgren found that emotions are ambiguous, corporeal, and interpersonal, that they give a sense of presence and are of varying intensity. Senni Timonen has shown in her dissertation the difference between talking about emotions (emotion talk) or with emotion (emotional discourse) (Timonen 2004: 309). In my case I will examine the latter kind of talk.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Sara Ahmed believes that rather than to ask what emotions are, a researcher ought to observe what emotions do. According to her, the central focus should be on how emotions are produced. She believes that we must study how emotions circulate between bodies, how they "stick" as well as move. Ahmed says that we have no feelings for an object but rather that the feelings are made in the encounter with the object. She criticises models according to which emotions are seen as psychological states and sees them as social and cultural practices. Emotions exist outside rather than inside a person and they move from the outside in. She recommends that we study how emotional words circulate between bodies and generate effect (Ahmed 2004: 1–12, see also Kronqvist 2007: 33–34). Laughter can be seen as one way of putting emotions into circulation and having effect on the listener, in this case the interviewer.

Laughter in social life is connected to ambivalence that makes us laugh at something that we experience as both macabre and revolting. Laughter can be both hostile and excluding, and friendly and including (Knuuttila 1996: 37ff). Ulf Palmenfelt reflects on why we laugh and points out that it is a question of the degradation of the body or of lost dignity. Here we can draw parallels to the grotesque laughter culture described by Bakhtin (1968). We also laugh at exaggerations, the breaking of conventional rules and projections. Laughter² can be interpreted as a defence of something or as a way of coping with difficulties (Palmenfelt 1996: 12ff). Laughter can be understood in many ways and does not always function as a reaction to humour. Examples of laughter in non-humorous situations are one getting tickled, having been taken by surprise, becoming embarrassed, hysterical or winning a competition (Knuuttila 1992:

93ff). Laughter can also be seen as a way of expressing moods of anxiety, scorn, ignorance, and apology (Olsson *et al.* 2003: 137). Laughter, thus, stands for different phenomena in narration. It communicates emotions both in a concealing and a revealing way.

Narrators can underline the standpoint in the narrative in many ways, such as direct comments, embedding of evaluation, style of telling, metaphors, strong adjectives and facial expression and gestures (Siikala 1990: 92). One way of studying the standpoint in narration is by analysing the use of humour, irony and paralinguistic devices such as chuckles, laughter, pauses, or changes of tempo (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996: 158ff). Laughter is thus *one* stylistic device to mark a standpoint in narration. Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj has pointed out that laughter or chuckling occupies a dual role in narrating. It can be interpreted as a comment on or as a marker in the narrative. Laughter can also underline certain elements in the narrative or the comic climax (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996: 158ff). The method I used for analysing laughter in the narratives is a close listening of the interviews. When analysing laughter it is always difficult to recognise non-verbal communication and to understand the emotions and the meaning they convey. As Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj says, *the expressions of emotions are as difficult to understand as emotions themselves* (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2003: 330). Sometimes the link between emotions and the expression of them is obvious, sometimes the link is not that clear (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2003: 330). My interpretation should be seen as an effort to understand the expressions of emotions in the oral narratives of birth-givers. In narration, laughter is a part of meaning-making, communicating something of importance or concealing something that we want to hide. Laughter is thus connected to humour and comedy, but laughter is also to be found in narration which is neither humorous nor comical.

BIRTH-GIVERS AND LAUGHTER

Laughter or chuckling can be found in the birth-givers' narration to varying degrees. They all laugh, but not with the same ease. Some women accompany their whole story with laughter. When you look at the context in which the women laugh, it is obvious that it is done when something appears comical or difficult. The laughter puts emotions into circulation and "sticks" to the listener, generating different effects. Further more, there is laughter which must be interpreted in relation to the woman's experience in question. Sometimes the laughter is connected to the interview situation as a way of communicating understanding between the interviewer and interviewee (see also Marander-Eklund 2002).

COMICAL LAUGHTER

Laughter is mostly connected with humour and comics. Therefore I will give an example of comical laughter although it is not an expression of emotions in the same way as my other examples. Here one of my informants, Hagar, tells about the departure to the hospital in a taxi when she was already in a great hurry:

And then, it was at six o'clock or something when I said to Henry [the husband] then it felt as if the baby could be born, I almost got such a reflex of bearing down that... [LME: mm] so I said no, "Now we have to go, it's coming now [laughter]". And I was saying all the time, "NOW, NOW, we're in a hurry". And, well, and then we left, actually a quarter past. It went that way that Henry jumped into his clothes in a hurry and it wasn't at all a question of taking sandwiches with you, as they tell you in all the books [laughter] [LME: mm]. Er... so we called a taxi, and I had an intense contraction in the taxi... hung on the, there in the back seat, and hung on... you know, the back of the front seat. And the taxi driver drove [both laughing] and he was all tense and didn't say a word [laughter]. And Henry massaged my back, and it was hard for him, because, I almost sat on his arms [laughter] and he tried the best he could [laughter]. (IF mgt 1995/77)

The story begins with a temporal orientation, and consists of a complication (the baby is almost born at home) and a resolution (to leave for the hospital in a great hurry) and an evaluation (cf. Labov 1972). The theme deals with events that "almost" go wrong, where the comical moment lies at the "almost". It is a comedy of situations, with the right things in the wrong places. To give birth to a child in hospital is right, but in a taxi it is wrong. Most people, including the birther, have heard humorous anecdotes on the theme of "to the hospital on two wheels in a taxi" or "almost giving birth in the loo" – there is an existing narrative model for this kind of stories. Hagar's laughter put emotions into movement and it "stuck" to me and I responded to her laughter and we giggled together. The laughter is a reaction to a "good story". Although humour is here in the centre, her laughter also indicates a point in her story – she did not want to leave for the maternity ward until she was certain that the baby was on its way because she had been sent home from the hospital already twice with the explanation that she had arrived there too early. This experience was traumatic for her and the laughter can be interpreted as ambiguous.

The comical laughter is used in the context of the anecdote-like narratives, but also in connection to themes that appear comical but are not recounted in a distinct narrative form. Examples of this are one informant, Barbara, telling

how she thought her newborn baby smelled of fish and how he did number two on her stomach. Florence told how difficult it had been for her to move with her big stomach and Emily how difficult it had been to get up from the waterbed. Hagar laughingly told how she had leaned on a radiator during a contraction. Inga told how she got help while dressing herself afterwards as if she had been a baby. Emily laughingly told that she could not see anything during the birth because she did not have her glasses on.

LAUGHTER OF JOY AND TENDERNESS

The women I interviewed expressed their sense of achievement in having given birth to a healthy child with pride. They experienced it as an accomplishment. This achievement is expressed by different moods that convey emotions like joy and tenderness. In their narratives some women describe a warm, familiar feeling after the baby was born. One of them recounted this feeling and laughed when she was telling about her newborn son:

And then I just kept looking at John... my son, who lay on my stomach. And then I thought yes, now you're here, and all this is for you [with tenderness] [--] Then she [the midwife] left me or all three of us [--] He was now lying under the blanket, John, and we lay there and looked at him and chatted [laughter] like you do (IF mgt 1994/60).

Here laughter is an expression of joy and tenderness. It can also be interpreted as a way to conceal the happiness she and her husband felt. In Finnish mentality happiness has been perceived as a kind of awkward feeling, something that should be hidden in order not to lose it. Moderate luck is best (see Virtanen 1976). Although most people do not think that way anymore, too much happiness is nothing to boast about. Happiness and joy can also be felt as something very intimate and therefore slightly shameful, a kind of forbidden emotion (see Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2003: 331). Similarly, in this case the narrator communicated her feeling by chuckling, this time in order to conceal, or inhibit the display of the tender emotions during the encounter with me.

Laughter of joy is not an isolated feeling but is combined with fear, excitement, and also uneasiness. One of my informants laughingly told that she felt *happy, tense and panic-stricken* (IF mgt 1994/22) at the time when thinking of her forthcoming delivery.

The women also laugh when expressing how proud they were when they did better than they thought they would. Katherine laughed with pride when telling about the cooperation between the midwife, her husband, and herself.

Naturally, the laughter does not always have any special meaning, but is rather a part of the woman's personal way of communicating.

LAUGHTER AS A MARKER OF PAIN AND LOSING CONTROL

I already stated that my informants laugh when telling about pain. They use laughter to spice up their narration about emotionally difficult situations and about physically demanding experiences. Pain is a bodily sensation which communicates fear. One of my informants, Doris, emphasised the experience of pain:

When they increased the drip, about eleven o'clock, then it was like, I last laid there and groaned [laughter] and thought this is so awful, that I surely will die here [laughter]. I had no other thought in my mind, it was SO painful (IF mgt 1996/63).

The utterance *I surely will die* can be seen as exaggeration or as a real fear of dying, a feeling not unusual in birthing situations (Nykänen 1996) and a feeling that people sense that it is not fully acceptable to be expressed verbally. In connection with pain, laughter can be interpreted as laughter of embarrassment or as a concealing laughter and as a means for the narrator to point to a difficult experience. Laughter in this case can be interpreted as a coping strategy, a way to handle a severe experience. Her laughter can also be seen as an interactive one, as an attempt to check up on my reaction when talking about bodily pain – a way of looking if the emotional expressions were put into circulation, and they were because I was moved by her story. Laughter in connection to pain can be seen as an expression of a breach of an older norm of bearing pain in silence (Sachs 1987: 65ff).

In the next example the narrator laughed in connection with pain and the fear of losing control. When commenting on the surrounding staff she says,

But I didn't really notice them [the staff]; perhaps I was too much into my own circles there. [--] Of course I was a bit worried about my own pain [laughter] [--] In a way I was afraid that I wouldn't have the situation under control (IF mgt 1995/32).

The informant, Florence, had previously emphasized her need to appear active and in control of events. She wanted to present herself as strong and talked about the inner gaze, a need to turn her gaze into her body, to enter into herself and to be able to meet the pain (Fjell 1998). The quote shows that she reflects in her narrative on her own role and activity – she relates how she

experienced a threat of losing control, which in her case meant allowing pain to take over. She explicitly expressed her fear that this would happen. Here the laughter can be seen as a marker of embarrassment, a way of expressing that she did not experience herself being as tough in the birthing situation as she originally had hoped to be.

In the narratives, laughter lessens the dramatic feature of the experience of pain or, on the contrary, increases it. Laughing when telling about pain can also be a way of handling it. Laughter as a marker of pain is a communicating laughter. It takes the sting out of the negative experience and by doing it the informant guarantees an empathic reaction from the listener, in this case, my reaction. Laughter can also be seen as a last resource. Laughter as a marker of pain can be interpreted as embarrassed, disguising or concealing laughter, as a way for the narrator to indicate that she is recounting a difficult and heavy experience.

The women also used laughter to spice up their stories of difficulties experienced during birth-giving. This is associated with the hardship of bearing down, or impending assisted deliveries. In the narrative, the laughter embodies the pain and other corporeal experiences (see Drakos 1997: 71ff). It must be remembered that the way we express pain depends on the surrounding expectations and narrative models and varies in time and place.

LAUGHTER AS A MARKER OF FEAR AND HELPLESSNESS

Pain is a bodily feeling but also a communication of a feeling of fear. In my material fear is mostly linked to pain but also to losing control, as in the above example. Fear or anxiety is also expressed in this situation when facing fact that they will have to cope with the delivery and becoming a mother.

In the next example one of my informants, Doris, recounted a feeling of helplessness in the childbirth situation which shows that she wanted to hand over the responsibility to the staff and rely on their expertise:

I thought that I would never have pulled through this on my own. I've no idea [laughter] how people who give birth at home [manage]. [---] I would have died [laughter], that's how I felt, that if somebody else hadn't taken the responsibility for it I don't know what would've happened (IF mgt 1994/63).

Doris was the only one in my study that gave birth all alone, which in the Finnish context meant giving birth without her husband or a friend at her side. This may have been one reason for her expressing feelings that I have interpreted as anxiety. In her mind she compared her situation to older times

when women gave birth alone without the help of a midwife. She related the perception of an ideal childbirth to the notion of a mythological past, an ideal time when women gave birth easily, without pain and with no medical intervention. This quotation can also be interpreted as a voice of doubt about the modest attempts to establish a homebirth movement in Finland (Viisainen 2000). In Doris's case the safety was to be found in a high-technology hospital. The laughter can be interpreted as an uneasiness she felt in a situation she did not fully control. She repeated the expression *I would have died* as she did earlier in the interview (see previous chapter).

Yet another informant, Gabriella, laughed when she told how her baby broke his collarbone during the birth because he was so big. Although she laughed when telling this story, she took the matter very seriously. The laughter underlines one of the central points of her narrative. It was a question of her thoughts of what could have happened to her and her baby had she not had access to a high-standard hospital during the labor. She gazes towards a by-gone time, towards nature which stands for the real and genuine, while at the same time the safety of a high-technology hospital birth is seen as a basic requirement (see also Nylund Skog 2002).

LAUGHTER AS A MARKER OF ANGER AND VULNERABILITY

Lisa, one of my informants, had a Caesarean section but in the birthing situation the doctor tried to postpone the decision to operate although it was agreed on beforehand. Lisa described the vulnerability a birth-giver can feel when her will is ignored:

And the doctor wanted to postpone it [the Caesarean] all the time; he talked about perhaps choosing it till the morning. Then I myself started thinking no-o ... do they really want me to give birth [laughter] the normal way [--]. I almost got really angry [laughter] when they didn't care (IF mgt 1995/13).

Here we can sense a bit of embarrassment at her feeling of anger, a feeling that perhaps like happiness it is not fully acceptable to be expressed verbally. Carla, one of my informants, was the only one who pronounced a directly negative opinion about the staff and primarily about the doctor. In the narrative she recounted how she was stitched after the birth by a doctor who talked only to her husband:

I thought, bloody bastard [laughter] I want to kick you in the face and send you flying into the corner. For somehow he didn't care at all about me, but he only talked to the boys (IF mgt 1995/45).

She expressed strong negative feelings; she was in fact furious at not being taken into account. At the same time she mollified her anger during the encounter with the interviewer by laughing. This quotation also illustrates the doctor's gendered and positional power.

CORPOREALITY

The birth-givers also laughed when they tell about bodily reactions other than pain. They laughed when telling about how their waters broke or when bearing down. This kind of laughter has an interactive character, as a comment laugh, in which the narrator, so to speak, checks the interviewer's reaction to her talk about corporeality, about pain. Here the laughter forms a protective wall between the narrator and the interviewer because of her wish to guarantee an empathetic attitude in the interview situation.

The women told about situations in which the body appeared imperfect, the delivery advanced too slowly, for example. Another central theme in the narratives where the narration is intertwined with laughter was when the women recounted their feeling of the slowness and stagnation in the course of events during birth-giving. Emily recounted, in both versions, her being discouraged and still laughing about how the birth did not proceed at the desired rate and how she felt disappointed and uneasy. She said:

And... it was really a disappointment that nothing happened [laughter] although you have contractions and all that, so I began to feel rather uneasy [--] They also wanted it to proceed more rapidly, so they put me on a drip. And... I don't think it went on any more rapidly anyway [laughter]. (IF mgt 1994/66)

This uneasiness and irritation was central in Emily's narration and is something that she marked by laughing.

The women mark the uneasiness they feel in the birthing situation. They do it in a humorous style at which the laughter has a concealing function: it was not all that bad, or, it cannot be told how bad it was, therefore the women choose to use laughter as a way of verbalizing the experience. The narrative style employing humorous means is most certainly a way of presenting them as capable birth-givers, and it can be a smooth way of presenting critique and bitterness as well.

The laughter or chuckling can be of a different character. There is explaining laughter or apologetic laughter, as when Doris, full of laughter, told about how her trained muscles prevented the baby from dropping and consequently delayed the course of events.

LAUGHTER OF EMBARRASSMENT

In the women's narration, laughter communicated embarrassment, as when Florence requested anesthesia although she had imagined she would give birth in a natural way, without interventions. The embarrassment is connected with fear of losing control over the body and the birthing situation. It is a situation which can be interpreted as a degradation of the body. Laughter is thus a marker of meaning. Laughter can be looked upon as a way to verbalize topics you otherwise should remain silent about (Nylund Skog 2002). Carla laughed with embarrassment when she told how she lost control and screamed during bearing down. So did Katherine when she told about the breaking of her waters as *something wet in her briefs*. Other birth-givers laughed a bit insecurely when they told about the uncertainty they felt facing birth and not knowing how to behave in the birthing situation.

Most of the emotional expressions my informants communicated to me, emotions that they wanted to express or tried to conceal with laughter are in different ways connected to embarrassment or shame. Shame is often looked upon as an expression of uncertain and insecure social relations (Dahlgren & Starrin 2004: 115). Else-Britt Kjellqvist writes about shame, *[s]hame is put under taboo and banished to the backyard of soul³* (Kjellqvist 2006: 11). It is shameful to be ashamed because embarrassment only awakes awkward silence (Kjellqvist 2006: 11). To fill this awkward silence they laughed to make sure they can go on and still have the sympathy of the listener.

LAUGHTER AS A WAY OF COMMUNICATING EMOTIONS

The laughter in my material communicates expression of humour and of emotions such as joy, tenderness, pain, fear, anger, vulnerability and embarrassment. In my thesis (Marander-Eklund 2000) when comparing the narratives told immediately after the birth and one year later, I found that laughter in the second narrative is not as frequent or of the same character as in the first narrative. I have not had the possibility to present the analysis of the importance of time more thoroughly here, but this shows that laughter is intimately connected with the closeness of the experience. It seems likely that the women have had time to mentally process the experience during the year and assimilate the events that they had previously experienced as traumatic. Another explanation to this is that a year after the birth, the women narrated about the birth as mothers rather than birth-givers – new challenging experiences of motherhood shows that they did not have the same need for marking the experience with laughter in the same way as before.

The laughter can be seen as interpersonal; the women laughed to communicate something to their audience, in this case me, the interviewer. The laughter put emotions into circulation. According to my analysis, laughter is corporeal, ambiguous, and interpersonal and an expression of both shame and pride. The shame or embarrassment can be seen as a reaction to the breaking of conventional rules. Today in the Western world it is more or less acceptable to talk about childbirth and pain, but it is less acceptable to talk about losing control, to scream in pain, to behave as if out of control, to be afraid of dying, or to be really angry. To talk about corporeality in the form of the lower parts can also be seen as breaking conventional rules.

The birth-givers used laughter when talking about corporeality and telling how something was difficult or hard. Women laugh when recounting humorous situations but also when retelling situations that they experienced as severe, difficult or hard or when they felt embarrassed or uneasy. This goes for pain in particular, as a way of concealing and smoothing over the dramatic element in it, but also as a way of emphasising the dramatic feature and revealing and representing the point of the story. Furthermore, there is laughter with communicational functions which can be interpreted as a way of checking the listener's reaction to what has been uttered or as a way of underlining the focus of the story. It can also be interpreted as a way for the women to convey a self-presentation, a way to stand out as an adequate birth-giver. Laughter is also a part of a woman's personal narrative style, which reflects her values, in this case, values concerning childbirth.

In this article laughter has been interpreted as ways of expressing emotions, as a way of reducing the burden or the shamefulness of the experience that is narrated. It is obvious that the comical laughter "sticks" to the listener more easily and results in shared laughter. The narrator's expression of non-comical laughter does not emerge in a shared laughter as the comical laughter does, but it puts emotions into circulation. Laughter marks the importance of narration and affects and touches the listener.

COMMENTS

¹ I aspired to conduct the fieldwork in a spirit of ethical responsibility, to establish a subject–subject relation between the interviewee and myself. In practice, what happens is that one makes room for what the interviewee considers important, that one respects the personal integrity of the interviewee and problematizes one's own presence (Koivunen & Liljeström 1996). The interviewees have been given assumed names.

² See also Alho 1988 and Apte 1985.

³ My translation from Swedish.

UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

Åbo, Åbo Akademi University
Folklore archive at Åbo Akademi University (IF)
IF mgt 1993/22
IF mgt 1994/60, 63, 66
IF mgt 1995/13, 32, 77

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