ADVANCING

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

EDITORS: BEVERLY J. IRBY, BARBARA POLNICK

Full Length Research Paper

Is it Really Helping? A Review of Women's "Self-Help" Literature

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In this article, we review recent popular literature about women in leadership at work. We focus on popular literature because of its extensive and diverse audience, and approach it as an indication of the status of women in the workplace: what is faced and how it is handled. In our review of the most frequently purchased books about women and leadership, we argue that these works' general message is as follows: women face difficulty *getting ahead* in their careers, women require advice about how to be successful leaders in their workplaces, and that advice instructs women that if they aspire to *get ahead* or even just stay afloat in systems that, for the most part, are still dominated by men and built on hegemonic values, then women employees must change aspects of themselves. We argue that this focus on individual women changing their behavior and appearance in the workplace fails to challenge systems issues that contribute to women's experiences as leaders in work. We conclude by inviting scholars to shift these conversations from how women should change to how everyone, including women, should work together to change workplace norms.

Keywords: Women in leadership, work, self-help literature

Introduction

In this article, we review recent popular literature about women in leadership at work. We focus on popular literature because of its extensive and diverse audience, and approach it as an indication of the status of women in the workplace: what is faced and how it is handled. In our review of the most frequently purchased books about women and leadership, we argue that these works' general message is as follows: women face difficulty *getting ahead* in their careers, women require advice about how to be successful leaders in their workplaces, and that advice instructs women that if they aspire to *get ahead* or even just stay afloat in systems that, for the most part, are still dominated by men and built on hegemonic values, then women employees must change aspects of themselves. We argue that this focus on individual women changing their behavior and appearance in the workplace fails to challenge systems issues that contribute to women's experiences as leaders in work. We conclude by inviting scholars to shift these conversations from how women should change to how everyone, including women, should work together to change workplace norms.

We commence our literature review by discussing Lois P. Frankel's (2004) *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: 101*

Unconscious Mistakes Women Make That Sabotage Their Careers. Subsequently, we address Sheryl Sandberg and Nell Scovell's (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. We conclude by reviewing Katty Kay and Claire Shipman's (2014) *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance - What Women Should Know*. We focus on these works because they are currently among the most popular non-academic works on the subject of women in leadership. Also, these works are frequently purchased together on websites like Amazon.com, as of our 2016 search. As among the most popular books on the topic, these works inform expectations of and about women in the workplace, and thus warrant close examination. This literature review attempts to determine the recent and currently held notions about women in leadership roles at work that such *self-help* authors address.

Frankel's *Nice Girls*

In her 25 years as a coach, trainer, human resource professional, and psychotherapist, Lois Frankel has worked with thousands of women to help them achieve their goals in the workplace. In *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: 101 Unconscious Mistakes Women Make That Sabotage Their Careers*, Frankel offered anecdotes to explain what she calls the "mistakes"

women make, along with coaching tips to help women improve their performance in particular areas.

As indicated by her chapter titles – "How You Play the Game," "How You Act," "How You Think," "How You Brand and Market Yourself," "How You Sound," "How You Look," and "How You Respond" – Frankel blamed women employees for the challenges they faced in their workplaces. Then, she offered advice on how women should go about changing their behavior in their work environments to achieve success. This, Frankel explained, can happen when women take her advice to "quit bein' a girl" and instead begin acting like "grown women" in the ways she stipulated (p. xvi).

According to Frankel, during childhood girls are "taught that their well-being and ultimate success is contingent on acting in certain stereotypical ways," which include being polite, remaining soft-spoken, being compliant, and being relationship-oriented (p. xvi). She argued that some women do not grow out of these habits as they age. Because of this, women workers continue to "act like girls" in their jobs, and, as a result, they are unsuccessful, especially as leaders. Frankel advised women to remedy this by starting to act like grown women, in an effort to get ahead in their jobs. She argued that women are at fault for not seeing success in their careers because of how they act and appear in work environments. However, she argued, women employees are capable of improving their situation by changing their behaviors at work; this she equated to women's empowerment.

We believe this view parallels the notion of blaming victims of sexual assault, when issues of rape culture are what warrant attention and intervention (*WAVAW*, 2016). Though different contexts, the focus in both circumstances is on what individuals are assumed to do or not do, and how those presumed behaviors or actions contribute to the problem. Instead, the focus should be on systemic issues at play that constitute problematic environments. A cybernetic approach to such circumstances, for instance, would facilitate a stepping-out of the limits of the given circumstances: seeing the issues at play from outside of the boundaries of the issue, while recognizing what roles are played on the inside. Such an approach has the potential to lead to more nuanced systems understandings of the problems at hand and offer solutions that engage all workers in identifying a solution (Keeney, 2002).

Frankel (2004) offered a frame based on socialization rooted in traits learned through social interaction. For instance, she conveyed the notion that women do certain things well because women are expected to do such things well. Frankel provided an example of this in the beginning of "How You Play the Game," her second chapter:

> Let's start with the most important lesson: Business is a game and you can win it. [...] I talk to [men] about the importance of things like listening, collaborating, motivating, and seeing the human side of their staff. These are typically things women do well because they've been

taught the behaviors and have had a lot of practice at them. (p. 19)

With this as her premise, Frankel advised women on how to "play the game" more effectively, and warned against behaviors such as "Working Hard," "Doing the Work of Others," and "Waiting to be Given What You Want." To address these errors, Frankel offered women coaching tips including learning to play chess because "it will help you to develop a more strategic mind," and "unless you're directed otherwise, never ask permission to spend money. Instead, expect you'll be told if there's a problem" (pp. 21, 33).

Frankel also outlined behaviors women enact that, when combined, create an overall impression of unprofessionalism. These, she explained, include being naive, seeking approval, and having low self-confidence. According to Frankel, behaviors like "Needing to be Liked" and "Polling Before Making a Decision" can reduce any leader's credibility, yet others are behaviors that are stereotypically attributed to women. For instance, she linked "Sharing Too Much Personal Information," "Helping," "Feeding Others," and "Offering a Limp Handshake" with actions that play up a woman's femininity. Frankel framed these behaviors as mistakes because they reduce a leader's ability to earn respect, share her vision, and be taken seriously.

Frankel posited that the first step to changing one's behavior is to change one's attitudes. She explained that women tend to work harder, not necessarily smarter. By "Making Miracles," doing more with less, and meeting impossible deadlines, individual women workers continuously raise the bar for what is expected of all women employees. By doing things like "Taking Full Responsibility" and "Obediently Following Instructions," women workers focus on details and outcomes, losing sight of the bigger picture and ultimately missing the chance to highlight their abilities to think and act strategically. She argued that by doing all of this, women sabotage women. Frankel warned against thinking too narrowly about work to the detriment of workplace and personal relationships, and warned women against "Minimizing Your Work or Position" and "Giving Away Your Ideas." Frankel advised that women need to define their strengths and how they match to what the company needs. By doing this, she argues, women will be able to build credibility as valuable employees and leaders.

Frankel spent two of eight chapters addressing women's appearance at work, because, as she stated, "combined with how you look, how you sound comprises more than 90 percent of the perception of your credibility" (p. 147). The mistakes that women made in this realm included asking permission, apologizing, using "touchy-feely language," and speaking at a "higher-than-natural pitch." Frankel outlined common mistakes women make in their physical appearance, as well, including smiling inappropriately, sitting on their feet, and even wearing inappropriate makeup and the wrong hairstyle. To correct these mistakes, Frankel coached women to "inform others of your intentions" instead of asking questions, schedule frequent visits with hair and makeup stylists at top department stores, and have

regular hair color and cut appointments (pp. 155, 201). By citing these as mistakes that women make, Frankel argued that playing up femininity in particular ways reduces a woman's credibility. Concurrently, Frankel offered ways that women should more effectively attend to how they present themselves at work. We find her focus to be superficial: she discussed appearance, looks, and physical presentation of self, but ignored the content of women's speech, the actions women take, and the strategies women use at work. These aspects are eclipsed by how women come off to others when speaking and acting in their workplaces.

Finally, Frankel argued that women make the mistake of being more likely to tolerate inappropriate behavior, including sexual harassment, because women:

> […] have been socialized to respond to inappropriate treatment in a polite, docile, or acquiescent way. We're not taught to defend ourselves or get angry when someone is disrespectful to us. Whereas boys are typically taught the art of self-defense, girls are taught to turn the other cheek. (p. 215)

To address this, Frankel offered as coaching tips ways women must stand up for themselves in a professional manner, learn to negotiate, and practice speaking up when they feel they are being taken advantage of or disrespected.

Overall, Frankel argued that the ways in which girls are socialized are why women are often not as successful as they could be in their workplaces. Yet, by highlighting mistakes and providing coaching tips, we argue that Frankel failed to most effectively address the challenges that women leaders continue to face in their jobs. Frankel's approach - instructing women to change their behavior in order to fit a corporate world built on how young boys and men are socialized - fails to take into account a key part of the equation: women are not the only individuals involved in these work systems that continue to be filled with barriers. Workplaces include a variety of types of leaders and styles of leadership. Thus, only asking women workers to change their behavior cannot feasibly be the solution to the problems women face at work. Other approaches are needed, and those approaches must prioritize changes that transform corporate culture, practices, and mechanisms so they become more equitable for all workers, regardless of identity markers (race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, etc.). The problem should be framed as a macro-level one instead of a micro-level one. A wider, more intersectional and systems-based scope is needed.

With Frankel's 101 mistakes and coaching tips laying the foundation for our literature review, we now shift to the most frequently discussed book in the genre. *Lean In* (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013) continues to be the go-to book for women on the topic of workplace success, and it is therefore an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about women and leadership at work.

Sandberg and Scovell's *Lean In*

In 2013, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg made waves by encouraging women everywhere to "lean in," "sit at the table," and "make your partner a real partner." She claimed that engaging in these practices is necessary for women to find success in their careers. For over sixteen weeks, Sandberg and Scovell's (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* topped *The New York Times* bestselling list, was selected as Amazon's Best Book of the Month in March 2013, and received Oprah's gold seal of approval. Years later, the book remains among the most commonly referenced books on leadership and women (Brooks, 2014; Alkon, 2015).

Lean In featured Sandberg's research and personal stories designed to raise awareness about "gender differences," offered "practical advice to help women achieve their goals," and challenged women "to change the conversation from what women can't do to what we can do [...] to work together to create a more equal world" (*Leanin.org*, 2016). Like Frankel (2004), Sandberg and Scovell (2013) outlined the ways women hold themselves back in their careers, and the authors offered advice about how women workers can, instead, "lean in" to their careers, find personal and professional growth, and keep pushing against the institutional barriers that hold them back.

Sandberg and Scovell envisioned a truly equal world as one in which "women [run] half our countries and companies and men [run] half our homes" (p. 7). The authors shared research that highlighted the external barriers preventing women from getting to the top of organizations. They pointed out that internal obstacles are often overlooked in studies of women in leadership, argued that the challenges women in business continue to face are due to macro-level institutional barriers as well as micro-level barriers (p. 8), and stated that both must be addressed. Yet, Sandberg and Scovell's primary aim in this book was to offer ways for women leaders to gain power in work environments by combating internal barriers. In each chapter, Sandberg and Scovell outlined such barriers and offered women workers suggestions about how to overcome the obstacles that prevent them from achieving success. Like Frankel (2004), Sandberg and Scovell focused on what individual women employees can do to change how they work and lead.

Sandberg and Scovell (2013) began by identifying the gender stereotypes introduced in childhood that lead to what they refer to as women's "leadership ambition gap." They explained that these gender stereotypes are reinforced throughout their lives and become self-fulfilling prophesies because of stereotype threat: "when members of a group [like women] are made aware of a negative stereotype, they are more likely to perform according to that stereotype [and] the stereotype of a working woman is rarely attractive" (p. 22). They argued that this plays a major role in the leadership gap because:

> while men are assumed to succeed at work and at home, women continue to carry a greater burden of household chores and childrearing. Because, for women, the goal of having success at work and home feels particularly

burdensome, many women remain in dead-end or low-paying jobs instead of pushing ourselves to achieve more in our careers. (p. 22)

Offering a possible solution to this issue, Sandberg and Scovell articulated the first step women leaders must take is to "Sit at the Table." This means that women should no longer be spectators in their own careers. They encouraged women to play an active role by believing in themselves, leaning in, speaking up, and getting noticed. The assumption here is that women are not doing these things already, or that they are doing them but not effectively enough. However, just as Frankel (2004) writes, Sandberg and Scovell argued that women must only get noticed in the "right ways," which they described as finding a delicate balance between likeability and competence.

The following excerpt illustrates their approach, which involves advocating for women to change behaviors in order to achieve such a "balance." The authors argued this is necessary for women to become successful as leaders in their work environments:

> If a woman is competent, she does not seem nice enough. If a woman seems really nice, she is considered more nice than competent. Since people want to hire and promote those who are both competent and nice, this creates a huge stumbling block for women. (p. 41)

Because women have a particularly difficult time balancing competence and likeability, Sandberg and Scovell explained, women leaders have to work twice as hard to manage their likeability among peers, while maintaining credibility and respect in their roles. We believe such an approach fails to attend to what contributes to this need for balance. As was the case in Frankel's piece, what remains under-acknowledged is a systems, macro-level approach to identifying characteristics of a valued employee, regardless of gender. Instead, Sandberg and Scovell addressed how women should continue to carry the burden of working within the system by changing their mindsets, actions, and approaches to work.

One solution that Sandberg and Scovell offered involves women taking up a new metaphor to make sense of work: to conceptualize and treat careers as jungle gyms instead of as ladders. A jungle gym metaphor, they explained, permits more flexibility. In addition to allowing more people to climb at the same time, it offers more than up and down moves, Sandberg and Scovell elaborated. They encouraged women to stretch across the jungle gym, to gain new skills, to capitalize on opportunities, and to see more than merely up-down possibilities.

This sensemaking about women in leadership is limited, however, in that it continues to require women to see their work and careers differently, while allowing men to continue working within the current system. Circumstances might begin to shift if corporate culture, practices, and policies are examined and questioned. By changing our focus to analyzing issues that systematically prevent women from "making it," we will more

effectively, efficiently facilitate women's abilities to "lean in" without encouraging women to rely on self-help advice about how they must change individual behaviors to help themselves "make it" in their jobs.

After wrapping up their discussion of internal obstacles, Sandberg and Scovell addressed the external barriers that remain in place. They discussed the importance of speaking up and working together towards equality. Sandberg and Scovell explained that talking about these issues with other people is necessary to allow others to understand the issues, as "equal opportunity is not equal unless everyone receives the encouragement that makes seizing those opportunities possible" (p. 160). They argued that men *and* women need to support women workers, because it will take everybody working together to meet the goal of creating a world in which those social norms no longer exist. They explained that if more children see fathers at school pickups and mothers who are busy at jobs, both girls and boys will envision more options for themselves. In such a world, gender will not set expectations; instead, personal passions, talents, and interests will set expectations (p. 169). Sandberg and Scovell concluded that both internal obstacles and external barriers must be addressed for equality to manifest.

Sandberg and Scovell's tips are no doubt helpful to certain women in certain work situations. Some of their advice is likely quite useful to particular women who are in a high socioeconomic status tier, women who have family members who also work and lend support, and/or women who have financial means to hire others to help them "strike a balance" so that they may attend to their responsibilities at work, at home, and elsewhere. Sandberg and Scovell's guidance seems designed to benefit women who occupy levels of leadership akin to theirs, women who work in companies that operate in ways similar to those of their own companies, and women who have family and personal partnership structures that mirror, or come close to mirroring their own. This limits the usefulness of *Lean In*. The work falls short of attending to issues that other groups of women in leadership face. For example, Sandberg and Scovell used personal anecdotes to explain how Sandberg and her then husband (founder of Survey Monkey) divided parenting duties in order to balance work and home responsibilities. Yet, the examples in the book presented Sandberg's family budget and resources as representative of middle class America when, in fact, this is far from the case. In 2014, Sandberg became one of the youngest female billionaires in the world (Mac, 2014).

Though Sandberg and Scovell's 2013 piece pointed to structural issues that need attention, we find that this book served as an extension of what Frankel addressed in 2004. The mention of systemic issues present in the book's introduction and conclusion merely bookend the central idea: women, as individuals, must change their behavior, routines, and practices at work because doing so is necessary if they want to "make it" in their jobs.

The final piece in our review takes a slightly different approach in that it investigates confidence as a key component of success.

Kay and Shipman's *Confidence Code*

Leading journalists Katty Kay and Claire Shipman have interviewed dozens of women throughout their careers, including some of the most influential leaders of our nation. Through their interviews with women, they found a common thread: a great deal of self-doubt. In *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance - What Women Should Know*, Kay and Shipman (2014) drew on research from biology, genetics, neuroscience, athletics, and leadership to discover the source of that self-doubt. They concluded that, in the world of work, confidence is more important than competence, and that women simply have too little confidence. The authors argued that while women have made many gains in their efforts to seek top positions in companies, women leaders are still not successful, because self-doubt holds them back (p. xv).

This work parallels the others that we have addressed in this literature review. Kay and Shipman attended to issues women in work experience. To do this, they honed in on the uniqueness of women as females who (presumably) have innately psychological, neurological, and biological factors that are different from those of males, and argued that those factors contribute to the challenges women face in workplaces. Like the other authors, Kay and Shipman oriented to the challenges women face at work as an issue for women instead of as an indication of issues within workplace cultures.

Kay and Shipman began with what they refer to as the "science of confidence," and they argued that the "confidence gene" – a serotonin transporter that has four polymorphisms, which result in different combinations of resilience levels – is the key component of confidence (p. 57). Kay and Shipman explained that people with female bodies do not tend to have all of one type and people with male bodies all of another: the genetic material involved is split and random. They concluded that genes do not show that females are more confident than males, or males are more confident than females. As Frankel (2004) and Sandberg and Scovell (2013) argued, Kay and Shipman (2014) posited that the different experiences of leaders with differently sexed bodies must be examined as social phenomena: as circumstances, experiences, nurture, and socialization. In this vein, Kay and Shipman addressed how "nurturing" happens differently for people born in certain bodies. Citing the work of Maldonado, Huang, Chen, Kasen, Cohen, and Chen (2013), Kay and Shipman explained that, in childhood girls are taught to sit and play quietly, while boys are permitted to run wild:

> With all their roughhousing and teasing, boys also toughen each other in ways that are actually useful for building resilience. Where many women seek out praise and run from criticism, men usually seem unfazed, able to discount other people's views much earlier in life. (p. 91)

According to Kay and Shipman, since boys are taught how to fail and therefore how to learn from failure, boys are uniquely

socialized to have confidence and be well equipped to find success. They explained that women, on the other hand, struggle with failure because they were taught as girls to doubt themselves and to pursue perfection. Kay and Shipman cited the work of psychiatrist Daniel Amen who finds that women are "more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, insomnia, pain, and being unable to turn off their thoughts" (p. 111) than men. Kay and Shipman argued that these brain differences, in addition to hormonal differences, provide biological differences in the factors controlling confidence in men and women. In this way, they categorized the issues women experience in the workplace as biological issues that must be addressed as such. The assumption here is that once behavioral changes appropriately compensate for these biological issues, women will experience fewer challenges in workplaces.

Presumably having found the source of women's lack of confidence, Kay and Shipman offered women advice about how to "make up for" their biology by reducing self-defeating behaviors in order to be successful. This echoed the models of Frankel (2004) and Sandberg and Scovell (2013). One suggestion Kay and Shipman offered involves teaching parents how to raise confident children. Kay and Shipman encouraged parents to teach girls to be more assertive and reduce the amount of praise given to children, and to teach their children to "accept and even embrace struggle, rather than shy away from it" because it helps children focus on progress rather than perfection in achieving goals (p. 169). Other practical advice they offered is to "push out pink" by encouraging math and science activities, and to tout the benefits of sports because they teach girls how to "play the game" more effectively.

In their book, Kay and Shipman also instructed women about how to rewire their brains in order to have more "productive" kinds of thoughts and stop the cycle of self-critical thoughts and actions. They encouraged women to fail, fail fast, and fail often since doing so will help them develop patterns of thought based on risk and resilience, i.e. patterns that will in turn build confidence. These interventions focus on changes to women's thoughts, actions, and behavior, which is designed to boost women's confidence to increase their chances of succeeding in their work environments.

Kay and Shipman concluded by acknowledging that getting ahead in one's career is not always as simple as implementing a few tips and tricks to gain the confidence needed to complement competence. They admitted that many corporate managers have traditional ideas about what confidence looks like and state that women may need to adjust their behavior to fit others' visions of what a woman in leadership should look like. Kay and Shipman's overall message to women was this: take the advice they offer, blend it with your own personal style, and merge the science with the art of confidence to cultivate an authentic, confident self, because "when confidence emanates from our core, we are at our most powerful" (p. 200). The onus, they articulated, is on women; if women want to improve their

experiences at work, women must do the work of making changes to themselves.

Yet, we believe that confidence is merely one small part of entire systems that create and sediment roadblocks that women in work and in leadership at work face. Simply asking women to adjust their behaviors in and outside of their workplaces is insufficient. It fails to problematize the factors of the systems at play that contribute to the issues that women in leadership continue to face. Instead of creating a workforce of women striving to "cultivate an authentic, confident self" (Kay & Shipman, 2014, p. 200) who are fighting against rigid workplaces, organizations should cultivate cultures and work systems that are more reflexive, malleable, and sustainable for all workers.

In a recent *The Wall Street Journal* article, Sandberg pointed to the need for changes to the workplace in order to make a real difference for women workers (Sandberg, 2016). She cited an example of a woman beginning a negotiation conversation by addressing the bias against women who negotiate. She also acknowledged that many more companies are willing to join the conversation about how to advance women workers, but they struggle to put their concern into practice. Sandberg suggested corporate goal setting and tracking as a solution for making equality in the workplace part of the corporate culture. Perhaps this marks a shift from individual behaviors to workplace norms. Such a positive change has the potential to inspire future, necessary academic research that takes a systems approach to addressing the topic of women in leadership in work.

Conclusion

In our review of these three popular books, we note suggestions that authors make for women to change their workplace practices to better align with their workplace cultures so that they will be more successful in their careers. By describing the "ideal" worker, these three authors identified ways women should adjust their behaviors to be "good" leaders and to get ahead in their jobs. We argue that this approach fails to treat women as individuals who have unique talents and leadership capabilities, upholds one type of value system to describe the ideal workers, and teaches women to follow the rules and meet expectations rather than challenge them when doing so is necessary. We encourage scholars and popular literature authors to continue writing about women and leadership to extend ongoing conversations about women in leadership at work, to bring more attention to the issues they face, and to do this by carefully attending to workplace culture and macro-level issues.

Furthermore, popular literature and academic writers committed to studying the issues that women in leadership at work face must include a focus on resistance as part of a potential solution. Among the works that began this inquiry are Pal and Buzzanell's (2013) piece about employee resistance within call centers and Murphy's (1998) work on resistance among flight attendants. Both address resistance as a method of organizational and cultural change. Pal and Buzzanell's ideas of rupturing the cultural stereotype and disrupting the master narrative suggest a

starting point for change, and Murphy offers humor as an opportunity to address inequalities in a public and nonthreatening way. Such scholarship contributes to a framework of resistance that might lead future scholars to offer fresh, new approaches to addressing the issues that women in leadership at work continue to face. If authors are going to advise women to change their behavior in the workplace, we should advise them to act in ways that challenge outdated and hegemonic norms, not acquiesce to them.

We also recommend that future research about women in leadership at work include qualitative analyses of lived experiences of women at work. Such studies might offer a more nuanced understanding of current workplace cultures. For example, in our ongoing research, we analyze data from interviews we conducted with women leaders at a large university in the southeastern region of the U.S., offering empirical evidence to argue how micro-level changes by individual women employees open the door for macro-level work to be done.

That the books we reviewed are so widely read means that scores of people are interested in and talking about the issues women in leadership at work face. This implies that many individuals care about the barriers women in leadership roles continue to encounter in work environments. Sound academic scholarship has the potential to serve as the foundation for helpful popular literature, reaching audiences most likely to utilize it. Future scholarship should address resistance and highlight the day-to-day experiences of women in diverse work situations. Such scholarship has the potential to enhance understandings and solutions to the systemic issues of inequality that women at work still to face.

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