

The Appreciative Qualitative Interview: A Research Method for Empowering People

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Abstract

This article introduces the Appreciative Qualitative Interview, a qualitative research technique grounded in Appreciative Inquiry, Social Constructionism, and the narrative turn in psychology. The Appreciative Qualitative Interview emphasizes positive, strength-based questioning to elicit more empowering personal and collective narratives from participants in qualitative research studies. The aim is to uncover and amplify participants' successes, strengths, and aspirations, thereby facilitating a more generative, enabling, and transformative research process. This tutorial article provides a detailed interviewing blueprint for conducting Appreciative Qualitative Interviews, including opening, core, and closing questions. While acknowledging the challenges of overemphasizing positivity, the article highlights the value of this approach within an action research and social constructionist epistemology.

Keywords

appreciative inquiry, qualitative research, action research, social constructionism, positive psychology, interviews

Appreciative Inquiry and the Narrative Turn in Psychology: Words Matter?

In this article, I provide a detailed guide on how to conduct qualitative interviews informed and inspired by the Appreciative Inquiry framework. The Appreciative Qualitative Interview blueprint presented here includes specific examples of opening, core, and closing questions, along with detailed probes for appreciative tasks that can help participants develop empowering and enacting narratives for themselves and their com-



munities. My aim is to provide a concise tutorial that introduces students, qualitative researchers, and practitioners working with human systems to the theory and practice of Appreciative Inquiry and social constructionism.

The theoretical framework of social constructionism posits that knowledge is not discovered but actively constructed by individuals through language, symbols, and communication during social interactions (Gergen, 1978, 2009, 2020). Language plays a crucial role in social constructionism because it is the primary medium through which humans share their lived experiences and perceptions of reality. By doing so, they negotiate their culture, values, and meanings. The words and concepts we use frame our understanding of the world and, in turn, shape our experience and perception of it, within a framework of reciprocal determination. In this way, language becomes a form of social action (Tseliou et al., 2019). For instance, the way we talk about gender, race, or success can reinforce certain social norms and values, making them seem natural or inevitable when they are, in fact, socially constructed and culturally bound.

Appreciative Inquiry is a method for research and intervention originally developed to promote positive organizational change as a response to traditional action research approaches that focused solely on problem-solving (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Whitney et al., 2019). David Cooperrider, alongside with his PhD supervisor and mentor Suresh Srivastva, developed Appreciative Inquiry at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s (Barrett, 2017). Today, Appreciative Inquiry is increasingly used by researchers and human systems practitioners across various domains, such educational action research, psychological practice, and community interventions (Boyd & Bright, 2007; Clarke & Thornton, 2014; Duncan & Ridley-Duff, 2014). Appreciative Inquiry is grounded in the theory of social constructionism and the narrative turn in psychology. For Cooperrider, Appreciative Inquiry demonstrates the Heisenberg observer effect principle in social sciences, or “how just the mere act of inquiry in human systems can change a whole organization.” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013, p. 11).

The importance of language in Appreciative Inquiry is evident in the way it frames questions. Its cornerstone is the belief that questions themselves are interventions, capable of reshaping organizational systems (Barrett, 2017). Instead of attempting to discover the *what is* out there, as traditional normal science usually does, Appreciative Inquiry’s primary interest is in uncovering the *what could be* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013). Understanding the power of language in shaping reality allows us to be more mindful of the words we use, the questions we ask, and, effectively, the futures we co-create.

Central to Appreciative Inquiry is the 4D model (Barrett, 2017; Ludema et al., 2001), which consists of the following phases:

- *Discovery*: Identifying and appreciating the best of what already exists within an organization, of what gives life to human systems.
- *Dreaming*: Envisioning what the individual or group could become in the future, based on their strengths.

- *Designing*: Creating plans and strategies to achieve the envisioned future; finding what is needed for someone to become what they are dreaming of.
- *Deploy/Destiny*: Deploying the designed plans, enacting the desired future, and sustaining the changes.

During the *Discovery* phase, the researchers ask questions that elicit stories of pride, success, and achievements in life, stories about high point experiences where people “felt good about themselves, their relationships and the work they did.” (Dole et al., 2008, p. 20). McAdam and Lang (2009) report on several case studies where Appreciative Inquiry was used to engage students, particularly those facing personal challenges and adversities, as well as marginalized groups, in meaningful activities. By focusing on their dreams and strengths, students were able to reframe their identities from “problematic” to “capable and valued”. Examples include projects where interviewed students envisioned their ideal school (*Dreaming* phase) or were empowered to take on specific responsibilities such as computer maintenance in their classes (*Designing/Deploying* phase) (McAdam & Lang, 2009). By shifting the focus from problems to possibilities, students and teachers alike were empowered to take ownership of their actions and contribute positively to the school community.

Appreciative Inquiry bridges the gap between theory and practice, rejecting the traditional dichotomy that separates them. It treats the act of inquiry as both theoretical and transformative, positioning inquiry itself as an agent of change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

At this point, it is important to emphasize that Appreciative Inquiry is, in principle, a relational practice rather than an individualistic one. As a social constructionist practice, Appreciative Inquiry is grounded on the premise that “It is through our relationships, through dialogue, through coming to common understanding, through creating beliefs, values, and relational patterns that we create the worlds in which we live.” (Dole et al., 2008, p. 2008). Therefore, the idea of conducting qualitative interviews with individuals inspired by Appreciative Inquiry may initially seem paradoxical. However, this article will demonstrate that qualitative interviewing as it is proposed here is realized as a deep relational practice involving the participant, the researcher, and the systems in which they are embedded.

The Appreciative Qualitative Interview Blueprint

In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are key tools for empirical data production/collection. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher needs to prepare an interview agenda, which is a set of open-ended questions for the participants to answer. The interview agenda in a semi-structured qualitative interview differs from a

questionnaire with open-ended questions, as seen in a fully structured interview (Willig, 2013). In the latter, the aim is for participants to follow the protocol and answer the questions one by one in a structured and strict format. In contrast, in a semi-structured qualitative interview, the purpose of the questions is not just to elicit specific answers from participants but also to serve as prompts to help a more spontaneous dialogue to unfold, allowing unexpected and unanticipated information to emerge during the conversation.

The narrative turn in psychology highlights the importance of stories and narratives in shaping individuals' identities, beliefs, and behaviors. The way questions are framed and the narratives that emerge from qualitative interviews can profoundly impact the interviewees, the interviewers, and the broader context being studied. A well-designed Appreciative Qualitative Interview protocol can help students and researchers in crafting a research process that elicits positive, constructive narratives, which can, in turn, empower participants and foster a more optimistic view of their capabilities and potential. Such an approach aligns with the narrative turn's emphasis on the transformative power of storytelling for human systems (Brailas & Sotiropoulou, 2023).

An Appreciative Qualitative Interview guide grounded in social constructionism should ensure that the language used during interviews contributes to the construction of positive, shared meanings rather than reinforcing deficits or problems. By following a well-designed guide, researchers can be more intentional in their role as co-constructors of reality, ensuring that the research process itself contributes to positive social change. Therefore, I propose the following Appreciative Qualitative Interview guide, which I believe will be useful to students and researchers who wish to conduct a series of qualitative interviews inspired by Appreciative Inquiry.

Opening Questions

As in every semi-structured or ethnographic qualitative interview, the opening questions aim to set the stage for an appreciative dialogue to emerge. People need sufficient time to connect, trust each other, and build rapport, so the first opening questions aim precisely at this. Opening questions should be more general and not too intimate, allowing participants enough time to warm up before engaging with the core questions/activities. For example, if we are interviewing teachers, some opening questions could be:

“Can you share a little about your journey in this profession? What initially inspired you to become a teacher? Could you please describe a typical day of you at school? What do you usually do? What are your duties and responsibilities? With whom do you interact? What are usually your most interesting moments, and what are your most boring or difficult ones?”

Core Questions/Appreciative Tasks

Appreciative Task #1: Recall a Peak (Positive) Emotional Experience

“I will invite you now to relax. You may like to take a deep breath, and take as much time as you like, and recall a moment from [...], something that you remember with pride, something that warms your heart, maybe an achievement, or something that moves you emotionally in some way, something that brings you joy. It could be something you have done, something you achieved, something quite big or something quite small, as long as you feel proud of it. There is no right or wrong memory here; it is completely subjective. Often, the first memory that pops into our mind intuitively is also the ‘best’ choice. Take your time.” [We relax and allow the participant time to recall their experience] “Would you like to share this moment with me now?”

Follow-up prompt to invite significant others into the narrative:

“Thank you so much for taking the time to recall this moment and share it with me. Now, I would like to invite you to take some more time to think about other people who directly or indirectly contributed to the experience you just shared with me. Take as much time as you need. These individuals could be friends, relatives, colleagues, or even strangers; anyone you feel played a role in this. Take your time.” [We relax and allow the participant time to reflect] “Would you like to share with me the people you have recalled?”

The appreciative moment/memory participants are invited to recall depends on the context of the specific research/intervention. Some examples follow:

- Your professional journey as a teacher.
- Your experience as an athlete.
- Your professional journey as a therapist.
- Your years as a psychology student.
- Your work as a nurse.
- You as a child.
- You as an adult.
- You as a member of this community/group/organization.
- You as a participant in a program/intervention.

Appreciative Task #2: Imagining the Best Version of Your Future

“Now that you have shared this beautiful experience with me, I would like to invite you to participate in something else. Take your

time again, you may even close your eyes if you wish, and, imagine, bring an image to your mind: the image of the ideal you [...] in ten years from now. What does your ideal future look like in ten years from now in your wildest dream? What qualities and characteristics does this future have? Dream up of views, landscapes, places, sensations, sounds, and smells. Imagine the people you are with, where you are, and what you are doing. What colors define your ideal dream? How would you paint it with your heart? Visualize it and stay with this image for as long as you like.” [We allow them enough time to envision it] “Would you like to share your vision with me now?”

The specific prompt used in the brackets [...] above to invite participants in a process of imagination depends on the context of the specific research/intervention. The more specific details we provide, depending on the specific research context/intervention, the easier it will be for participants to visualize it. Some examples follow:

- Your ideal professional future.
- Your ideal personal future.
- The school of your dreams.
- The work of your dreams.
- Your ideal family.
- Your ideal work as a health practitioner.

Follow-up prompt to invite others into the narrative:

“Thank you so much for taking the time to imagine this. Now, I will invite you to take again some time and try to think of other people that you would wish to have with you in this ideal future you imagined. They can be people you already know, or people you wish to meet in the future. Also, I will invite you to think of people who directly or indirectly could help you to realize this dream. Take as much time as you like. These might be friends, relatives, colleagues, or even individuals you do not know personally but feel they could contribute in some way. Take your time.” [We relax and allow the participant time to reflect] “Would you like to share some of the figures you have envisioned with me?”

Appreciative Task #3: Drawing (Literally) Your Desired Future

“Now I will invite you to capture your imagination in any way you want on this paper, using the markers here. In this drawing, there is no right or wrong, nor are we interested in artistic performance.

It can be something specific or something abstract or symbolic. The less you think about it, the better; the more spontaneous it is, the better. Let your hand guide your drawing. Take as much time as you need.”

Closing Questions

The closing questions aim to bring the conversation to a thoughtful and reflective end in a smooth way, allowing participants to summarize their experiences and insights. These questions should encourage participants to reflect on the positive aspects of the discussion in order to reinforce the strengths and successes identified during the interview. This is an opportunity to deepen the appreciative dialogue by focusing on what has been learned and what future possibilities participants realized. On the emotional side, the closing of the interview should provide a sense of integration and leave participants feeling valued and heard. For example, some closing questions could be:

“Reflecting on our conversation today, what stands out to you as the most meaningful or positive experience you have shared? Is there anything we have not discussed today that you believe is important to share? As you leave today’s discussion, what is one thing you feel inspired or motivated to focus on moving forward?”

These questions are intended to leave participants with a positive reframing and a sense of direction, encouraging them to continue thinking about the strengths and possibilities that emerged during the interview. Throughout the interview the researcher takes care to maintain rapport and to facilitate empathetic listening, dialogue and sharing, in an appreciative way, as realities are produced in relationships:

“World constructions do not begin in the private mind. They are created within relationships that occur from early family life to the most recent conversation. It is through our relationships, through talk, gestures, and actions together, that we determine what is real and valuable for us. It is through relationships that rationality is created, goals become important, and one feels worthy or not” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 10).

The researcher during the interview can elaborate further on the appreciative experiences the participants share by employing some open-ended exploratory questions like the following:

- How did you come to that understanding?
- Could you share with me how you felt about that?
- Please tell me more, what do you mean by this?
- Please help me understand this; How does it feel to experience something like that?

- How did you come to this drawing?
- Can you give me an example of this?

Both Appreciative Task #1 (recalling a peak positive emotional experience) and Appreciative Task #2 (imagining the desired future) were developed by the author based on the Appreciative Inquiry research tradition, and particularly on the research and practice of psychotherapists [McAdam and Lang \(2003, 2009\)](#), who applied Appreciative Inquiry in their work with children and marginalized groups. Appreciative Task #3 (drawing the desired future) is based on the long tradition of using drawings in psychotherapeutic practice ([Vassiliou, 1968](#)), as developed in previous work by the author to be used in qualitative interviews ([Brailas, 2020](#)). The proposed Appreciative Interview protocol is not intended to be used as it is but rather as a starting point for a custom research design. Researchers should adjust it, alter it, or expand it to meet the needs of their specific research projects. Qualitative Inquiry, in general, is a research tradition that promotes creativity and flexibility. Qualitative Inquiry acknowledges and celebrates the need for custom, culturally tailored, and context-informed research designs. One size does not fit all.

The Appreciative Qualitative Interview as a Deep Relational Practice

A fundamental tenet of social constructionism is the assertion that the self cannot exist outside a web of relationships ([Gergen, 2009](#)). Since Appreciative Inquiry was designed for and has predominantly been used to intervene in organizations and whole social systems ([Cooperrider et al., 1995](#); [Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987](#)), its application at the individual level, such as in a qualitative interview, may appear somewhat contradictory to its underlying theory. This perception rests on the implicit assumption that an interview is not a relational event. While this may be true for structured interviews driven by a positivist epistemology, where researchers ask standardized questions one by one, aiming to uncover supposed pre-existing truths within the subject's mind, this is not the case for qualitative interviews informed by a social constructionist epistemology. In such cases, the conversation between the researcher and the participant becomes a deep relational and mutually transformative event. To illustrate how an interview with individuals can transcend individualism and become a profound relational practice, I draw on the words of Karl Tomm from a different context, that of psychotherapy:

“Nowadays, I live and work in both domains. For example, if I am preparing to go flying, I live in the domain of empiricism; I believe the airplane has the objective capability of flying, otherwise I would not board the aircraft. When I am doing therapy, I prefer to live in the domain of social constructionism; I want to be thinking

of realities co-constructed in our therapeutic conversation. If you believe in objectivity during therapy and you distinguish something as objectively true, then you are stuck with it and the possibilities for change are reduced” (Collins & Tomm, 2009, p. 11).

In this article, I realize the Appreciative Qualitative Interview as a social constructionist event, a confluence that contains the participant, the researcher, and their context, including family, school, community, friends, and all other systems they are part of: “to say I perceive them as a whole means that I see them surrounded by their whole lives, within the context of a complete narrative having a beginning that precedes our encounter and an end that follows it” (Holquist, 2002, p. 37). For this reason, I have integrated into the proposed blueprint questions that invite participants to include significant others in their lives, allowing them to virtually join and support the stories and imaginations unfolding during this relational event. However, I also acknowledge the inherent risk that this protocol might be misused by scholars lacking the necessary relational mindset, epistemology, and a deep understanding of the tenets of Appreciative Inquiry and social constructionism as a *sociorational science* (Gergen, 1978). This is a well-known risk with any “off-the-shelf methodology” in qualitative research: its potential superficial application as a recipe, ignoring the deep epistemological foundations that would make the difference (Chamberlain, 2012).

Qualitative research is both an art and a craft. Facilitating an interview as a deep, relational, meaningful, and mutually transformative event is not an easy task. Chamberlain (2012) raises important concerns about the codification of practices and the development of methodological “brands” that researchers adopt wholesale, often without sufficient consideration of their epistemological foundations or relevance to specific research contexts. Nevertheless, everything begins somewhere. While acknowledging the risks, I hope this interviewing guide will serve well to initiate students and qualitative researchers into the art and practice of Appreciative Inquiry and inspire them to delve deeper into the world of the relational being and social constructionism (Gergen, 2009).

Appreciative Groups and Appreciative Storytelling Circles

When used in group settings, Appreciative Qualitative Interviews can generate more innovative ideas and solutions, as diverse perspectives are brought together. Figure 1 displays a set of seven collaboratively produced drawings created by small groups of 4–5 people, representing their future professional dreams. These drawings were the outcome of an appreciative activity conducted in an undergraduate university class meeting I facilitated with 29 students. The probe I used was: *In your wildest dream, imagine your ideal professional future 10 years from now*. Participants first reflected individually on

realizations, and aspirations on a collective level. Researchers and practitioners interested in this can develop a custom research design by combining the work presented here with Nomadic Thematic Analysis (Brailas & Papachristopoulos, 2023), a semi-structured and process-oriented qualitative research method for engaging a group of people or a community in a collaborative research inquiry. The full transformative potential of Appreciative Inquiry can be realized only if it is implemented as a relational practice within a social system in accordance with its initial conception as “a generative theory building method for the collaborative construction of reality” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013, p. 5).

Discussion: Criticism and Applications of Appreciative Inquiry

The potential and challenges of Appreciative Inquiry, and of social constructionism more broadly, as a method and as a new research paradigm have been extensively and thoroughly explored (Bushe, 2007; Cooperrider et al., 1995; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Gergen, 1978, 2009; Hosking & McNamee, 2007). Appreciative Inquiry challenges traditional, positivist views of science focused on prediction and control. Instead, it embraces a social constructionist epistemology (Gergen, 1978, 2009), viewing social science as a tool for expanding human imagination and creating new realities, “a science not of probabilities but possibilities” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013, p. 15).

A significant critique of Appreciative Inquiry is its tendency to polarize experiences into positive and negative, often neglecting the complexity and relational dynamics of meaning-making in human systems (Johnson, 2013). Although Appreciative Inquiry in principle can produce a rich body of empirical data and a resulting theory while promoting a positive change in a social system by focusing solely on positive questions and strengths, the exploration of *what gives life*, it may not be suitable for all contexts, especially those requiring a focus on both strengths and deficits (Christie, 2006). The possible exclusion of the negative experiences can suppress meaningful conversations about challenges or conflicts that may be crucial for genuine transformation (Bushe, 2012). For instance, significant challenges may arise in contexts of systemic oppression and marginalization. Duncan (2015), describes the case of an Appreciative Inquiry project with Pakistani women, many of whom had migrated to the UK for arranged marriages. The participants in this study often had to cope with extreme hardships, including restrictive cultural norms, gendered expectations, and a lack of opportunities. Insisting on framing questions positively risked invalidating their experiences, further silencing their voices, and reinforcing oppressive systems. Grant and Humphries (2006), also emphasized that Appreciative Inquiry must critically engage with societal structures and power relations to facilitate deep transformation. By prioritizing only the positive, it may fail to address the systemic and relational challenges people face in their lives. In

contrast, focusing on the generative dimension allows a shift toward the true spirit of inquiry that moves us “from edges of the known to the unknown (mystery) in ways that broadens and opens minds, ignites real curiosity and expansive questions, and inspires fresh images of possibility” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013, p. 6).

Therefore, a more critical realization of Appreciative Inquiry is needed that values both positive and negative narratives (Bushe, 2012; Duncan & Ridley-Duff, 2014; Johnson, 2013). In this way, Appreciative Inquiry can function as a method that acknowledges hardships, appreciates resilience, and uncovers hidden strengths (Duncan & Ridley-Duff, 2014). Difficult stories and experiences are not suppressed but instead explored and honored. By creating a safe space for sharing untold stories and honoring vulnerability, Appreciating Inquiry ultimately helps participants recognize their agency and resilience even in the face of adversity (Brailas & Sotiropoulou, 2023).

Appreciative Inquiry is an action-research framework based on the tenet that “through our assumptions and choice of method we largely create the world we later discover” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013, p. 9). The field of application may vary. The original developers of the approach, Cooperrider, Srivastva and the rest of the group at the Case Western Reserve University (Barrett, 2017), having an organizational studies background, focused their practice on what gives life and vitality to social systems and how to facilitate a positive organizational change. Researchers and practitioners associated with the TAOS Institute, an organization dedicated to advancing social constructionism, have also focused on applying Appreciative Inquiry to communities, schools, and broader social systems (May et al., 2020; McAdam & Mirza, 2009; Trosten-Bloom & Lewis, 2020).

Similarly, Dole et al. (2008) applied Appreciative Inquiry to family systems. While Dole et al.’s approach may initially appear to target individual family members, their practice is embedded in the dynamics of the entire family. Their work allows participants to invite the other family members through probes like, “Who was involved, and what did they do? What did you do? What about the situation was fun or energizing?” (Dole et al., 2008, p. 20). Where Appreciative Inquiry can be applied varies, as long as it maintains its social constructionist, bringforthist, relational, and transformational action-research perspective. And this pervasiveness of Appreciative Inquiry across different domains of application is an indication of its significance and effectiveness in transforming human systems.

Concluding Thoughts

The Appreciative Qualitative Interview, as outlined in this manuscript, facilitates the exploration of more empowering narratives and cultivates a sense of agency and optimism among participants. In this way, it contributes toward a research methodology with *generative capacity*, that is: “Capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration

of that which is ‘taken for granted’ and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions” (Gergen, 1978, p. 1346). To paraphrase the words of Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), the almost unquestioned commitment of modern science to merely discovering and reporting the *what is* out there deprives us, as researchers and practitioners, of the opportunity to marvel at *what could be*, and in marveling to embrace the miracle and mystery of humans.

The interview guide presented here serves as a tutorial for researchers, particularly students and early-career professionals, to adopt a more constructive and enacting approach to qualitative research. Appreciative Inquiry operates as a generative theory-building action research methodology grounded in social constructionism, and qualitative research as a whole can be enriched through this epistemological framework. This is critical in an era where the pressing social challenges that modern societies face need to be adequately addressed by qualitative researchers through the further development of existing methodological approaches (Demuth et al., 2023). Additionally, it is crucial to make these methodologies easily available and practically accessible to new researchers, including undergraduate and graduate students. To this direction, this blueprint provides a clear, structured guide for conducting appreciative qualitative interviews.

There is an inherent tension between the idea of proposing an Appreciative Qualitative Interview guide, with the widespread connotation of the interview as an isolated event. There is a possibility that some researchers may use the guide to conduct only a series of disconnected interviews. As an academic/practitioner myself, with one foot in academia and the other in group psychotherapy, I feel this tension. In pedagogy, there is a concept known as scaffolding. It is often critical to create a scaffold, an intermediate step, to help learners gradually conquer more complex skills. I believe there is an urgent need to promote and disseminate Appreciative Inquiry for the benefit of human systems, and not only, worldwide. So, and especially having my students in my mind, developing a scaffolding resource to make this form of inquiry more accessible feels both practical and necessary. On the other hand, “Break the pattern which connects the items of learning, and you necessarily destroy all quality” (Bateson, 1979, p. 8).

Inevitably, as with any off-the-shelf standardized method, the Appreciative Qualitative Interview blueprint presented here poses the risk of superficially applying appreciative tasks without the necessary epistemological grounding in social constructionism and Appreciative Inquiry. Conducting a series of disconnected appreciative qualitative interviews with individuals is only half the journey. The full potential of appreciative qualitative interviews is achieved only when they are realized as a deep relational practice at the level of the researcher-participant dyad, and then embedded within a meaningful group process within the social systems where these actors exist and live. It is not only the elicitation of appreciative narratives that matters, as this can be achieved through an appreciative activity within a qualitative interview, like the one proposed here. What matters most is honoring these narratives within a warming web

of appreciative relationships: “The meanings of words are like caterpillars changing to butterflies when the sun warms them up” (Malinen, 2001, p. 215).

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