

Women, work, poverty and the UN: Widening our research lens

Interview with Virginia E. Schein,
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Introduction and about the interviewee

Today I have the pleasure of interviewing Virginia Schein a Work and Organizational Psychologist (WOP) who as a scientist–practitioner has been transformational in our field. In our interview we will visit her early work on gender and leadership, see her transition into humanitarian work with women and poverty and move up to date with her current work with the United Nations (UN).

Virginia received her undergraduate degree from Cornell University and PhD in Industrial–Organizational (I–O) Psychology from New York University. Her early career years were spent as an in–house I–O psychologist for the American Management Association and the Life Office Management Association (LOMA) and as Director of Personnel Research for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (MetLife), all in New York City. It was at LOMA that she conducted the now well known “*Think Manager–Think Male*” research, one of the first of its kind on gender stereotyping and requisite management characteristics. This research has since been replicated over four decades across five continents. At MetLife she conducted one of the first studies on the relationship between flexible working hours and productivity. Based on her work, MetLife put all its 50,000 employees on flextime, being the first company in New York City to do so.

Virginia then moved into the academic world, holding professorial positions at Case Western Reserve University, Yale University, The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Baruch College of the City University of New York and Gettysburg College. She has lectured worldwide on gender and leadership, including in the United Kingdom (UK), France, Turkey, Poland and South Africa. She is the author of *Working from the Margins: Voices of Mothers in Poverty* and co–author of *Power and Organization Development*.

Virginia is a past President of the Metropolitan New York Association of Applied Psychology (METRO) and of the Work and Organizational Psychology Division of the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP). For over 50 years Virginia has been a member of Division 14 of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP). She served as Workshop Chair, then as an elected member to the Executive Committee of Division 14 and as an elected member to the Council of the APA. Virginia is a Fellow of IAAP and SIOP. Our conversation is described in three sections: a) Gender and leadership equality

(Think Manager -Think Male); b) Women, work and poverty; and c) working with the UN.
Keywords: Gender equality in leadership, gender stereotyping, women in management, women who work in poverty, Social Advocacy Research, development of Humanitarian Work Psychology, Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development

Gender and leadership equality (Think Manager -Think Male)

Angela: *Virginia thank you for giving InPractice your time. Can I begin by asking you how the work on gender and leadership equality began?*

Virginia: We need to go all the way back to the 1970s when I was a young manager working in the insurance industry. Quite frankly I would look around, and in terms of being a woman manager, there was just me. I started chatting informally with the senior Vice-Presidents (VPs) and asked them, ‘How come there are no other women general managers?’ I consistently got one of two answers. Either women did not want these jobs; or women really aren't qualified to be managers. While everybody was very polite in these conversations I'm thinking: *No, there's a lot more going on here; and that's how it started.* There was no research on psychological barriers, such as gender stereotyping. I was working at LOMA with contacts in all the life insurance companies in the US and had the research background that gave me the skills to explore what were the psychological barriers to women's advancement into management. I wanted to prove those senior managers wrong, as I knew there was a lot more to this than what they were saying.

I became interested in gender stereotyping, and I wanted to see if that truly was a barrier to women's advancement. The research hypothesis was that successful middle managers are perceived to possess those characteristics, attitudes and temperaments more commonly ascribed to men in general than to women. As I had extremely good support throughout the insurance industry, I was able to do a field study in thirteen companies across the United States (US), with 300 male managers and 167 female managers.

It was a questionnaire study using three forms of a 92-item descriptive index. All three forms contained the same descriptive terms and instructions, except that one form asked for a description of women in general, one for a description of men in general and one for a description of successful middle managers. Each person got only one of these forms of the questionnaire, and they were not aware of the nature of the study. No one did gender

studies in those days, so it wouldn't occur to them that this was what it was about. Furthermore, in my capacity at LOMA I was involved with selection, research and test development. It was fairly common for me to make requests like this.

The hypothesis was confirmed; for the males there was a strong relationship between how they saw men in general, and how they saw successful middle managers. There was an almost near zero relationship between how they saw women in general, and how they saw successful middle managers. And then, similarly, but not quite, for the females there was also a strong relationship between men and managers. There was a slight relationship between how females saw women and how they saw managers, but it was significantly less than that between men and managers. For both males and females the hypothesis was confirmed; hence *Think manager, Think male*. This relationship continues to be one of the psychological barriers to women's advancement. Based upon the research, all else being equal, if the decision-maker looks at a man and a woman, they're going to see the man as more qualified than the woman for a managerial position.

Angela: *What were the implications of this research for practice/organizational change?*

Virginia: I was able to bring these outcomes to corporate executives, showing them the possible effects of gender stereotyping on selection and promotion. I did this both inside the insurance industry and in other companies as well. I was in New York City and there was easy access to groups of executives at meetings and seminars.

In these seminars I knew if I stood up to talk to these executives (all men) and delivered an emotional appeal they would have tuned out almost instantly. But I had my research. So when I presented, I would say - "*Here's what executives like you think about woman as managers*". That got their attention; they sat up and listened. We were able to talk about the negative effect of gender stereotyping on women's advancement and how to improve selection and promotion practices to reduce this effect. It was research done to bring about change and get more women into management.

Angela: *What did you notice happened after your presentations and discussions, were there any signs of change?*

Virginia: It didn't produce immediate reactions. My first study was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 1973, and there was a second publication in 1975; and we were still not quite there yet. But by 1977 and 1978 slowly I could watch it build. People were beginning to understand psychological barriers and read more. I was invited to

give more talks, and so on. I was told that in the insurance industry, where I had the most impact, they did see an effect in terms of women moving into management; so this was an initiating kind of study. Women were moving into regular management levels, although not senior management. Change was just starting, and then it never stopped.

Angela: *Did you notice any changes between the US and elsewhere; say the UK?*

Virginia: Yes; I think these conversations were further ahead in the US, at that point. Actually, I can remember in the late 1970's when I was doing talks in the UK, they weren't quite as excited about the women in management issue. I gave two different kinds of talks, one on women and equal opportunity, and one on power, totally unrelated to gender. The power and management talk got more people talking! It had higher attendance and was even written up in the *Financial Times*. Not so, for the women's talk.

Angela: *What were the international implications of this work?*

Virginia: My research has been replicated in the US and twice in the UK, also in Canada, Germany, Japan, China, New Zealand, Turkey, Sweden, South Africa, Egypt and Ireland, and others, definitely across five continents. *Think Manager-Think Male* is a global phenomenon. It's persistent. It's fascinating if you think about it that across all these different cultures *Think Manager -Think Male* tends to hold, especially among males. It's not always true for females in every country. But among the males, who tend to still be the decision-makers, it holds. So the global phenomenon is one international implication.

The second implication is the way this research can help to foster change in individual countries. By using the same questionnaire about women in management and stereotyping, the research can be easily replicated. If you want to generate interest in this topic, collecting data in your own country on gender stereotyping and management is a good way to do it. Then, as I did in the US, you can use the local research outcomes as a basis for conversations about gender bias in management and start to bring about change. This research shows the global nature of gender stereotyping, further encouraging organizational and legal efforts for change.

Angela: *This research gives a rational vehicle to promote change. It's not emotive. The range of studies enable comparisons to other countries showing how persuasive the phenomena is.*

Virginia: There's an edited book coming out this year (2023) *Organisational Psychology: Revisiting the Classic Studies* edited by Niklas Steffans, Floor Rink and Michelle Ryan. They have included my study as one of the classics. The chapter about my study is written by Madeleine Heilman and Francesca Manzi and it considers the impact and implications of this research. This is really quite exciting!

Angela: *When the authors contacted you about the book, how did that make you feel?*

Virginia: I was extremely pleased and a little overwhelmed. But it did support my thinking about research. I often will say to graduate students. *What I did at the time was to simply look at the world and say "Hmm, something's not right here."* I had an idea about what needed to change. There was an issue at hand that I could explore via research. It's really a tribute to our profession that I had the skills to be able to answer the question in a meaningful way.

That is why they call the book Classic studies; they are big ideas that challenge current thinking. So then the question becomes, "How do you do that?" I don't think you do it consciously. Just wherever you are, it doesn't matter what the topic. You just consider: what questions need to be asked here? What's important? What do people need to understand? By asking clear, direct questions we can often get profound answers.

Angela: *What was happening in your career at this time?*

Virginia: Shortly after I did the research, I left LOMA and I went on to MetLife to head up their Personnel Research Department. There I was able to really do something specific to get more women into management. We implemented an early identification of women in management programme. To kick it off, I made a presentation about the status of women in the company and about my research to the Board of Directors. Then two of my staff gave the same talk to all the Department Heads, so the information would trickle down. Each department manager was then responsible for nominating women for future management positions.

I remember giving the talk. I was young, about 30 years of age, and the Board members were all men, older men, older white men. They just stared at me! Probably the only other young women to ever be in the board room were those pouring their coffee. As I remember, I'm presenting all this data on women, and they're doodling, looking at their shoes and probably thinking "*When will this woman stop talking?*" At the time there were Employment Opportunity Commission (EOC) cases with huge settlements. So I put up a

slide showing how many millions were paid in EOC settlements. They all looked up, sort of like puppets on a string, thinking *Oh, yeah, we better pay attention!* It was an effective talk. I had the support of the senior management, and they were taking this seriously. So, then the Department Heads had to take it seriously and nominate women for future management roles. It was exciting to be able to be in one company and really make change.

Angela: *It's interesting we are talking about promoting women managers in the 1970s. Do you feel this trend has continued?*

Virginia: While I agree we now have more women in management positions, we don't have many women in senior leadership level positions. While the data vary across countries there is not really a change at senior levels. We still have a long way to go. Currently in the US about 52% of all managers, and professionals are women. So that's just where you would want to be. But if you look at senior level positions, only around one-third (32%) of people on our boards of directors are women. You can see a move forward; but we still need to get to the top!

Angela: *So we're going to draw a line under our first section of discussion. Having made an impact on women in management in corporate life you shifted your focus to women who work in poverty.*

Women, work and poverty

Angela: *How did your focus shift to women who work in poverty?*

Virginia: In the late 1980s I moved from New York City to teach at Gettysburg College, which is in a small town in rural Pennsylvania. Rather than continue corporate work, which involved a lot of travel, I wanted to stay put and do something more local. I became interested in the not-for-profit (or non-profit) sector. I started by interviewing executive directors of various non-profit organizations in the area. These interviews, quite unexpectedly, generated invitations to be on a few local boards of directors. First, I was invited to be on the board of the Private Industry Council (PIC); an organization that distributed government funds for job training for low-income people through local PICs. I was also asked to be on the board of the local Battered Women's Shelter and I went on to be Board President eventually.

At this time in the US the attitude was hugely anti-welfare; particularly about women on welfare. The press was castigating them. *They were lazy. They didn't want to work. They just had babies to get more welfare money.* All very unpleasant. So here I am in Gettysburg meeting with low-income women we were selecting for federally funded job training programmes. I remember one woman. She had an eighth-grade education, was a single mom with three children. She was working all day at a minimum wage job, making very little money. At night she was studying for her high school diploma and juggling this all by herself. I was struck by how difficult her life was. This was no lazy woman trying to beat the system. I was meeting a lot of women like this, and I was very impressed with them. At the same time, I would tour job training centres and see women from the battered women's shelter, and they would often be scurrying out the back doors. I asked the director *"Why are they hiding. Why are they going out the back door?"* She told me they didn't want their abuser to see that they're trying to better themselves. I thought *"There's a lot more to this poverty picture than is being addressed"*, and that's how I got into studying women, work and poverty.

There were huge differences in what people assumed (in this case lazy, no-good women, seeking welfare) and what I was perceiving as the reality. I had a research background, I wanted to find out the truth. What could I learn that might help us understand what was really going on?

Angela: *How did you go about doing this research?*

Virginia: This research was very different from my earlier work, when I was a woman manager studying women in management. Here I had very limited experience with poverty issues. I decided I needed to do a study that focused on idea generation, opening up the data gathering process to as much life history and current circumstances of the women as possible. I called it compassion in context. I had to dive in; so I chose the qualitative approach to find out what was going on, sort of learning as you go. I did semi-structured interviews with 30 single women who were on public assistance. They all had some work experience and were raising children alone. I went to the women's homes, sat at their kitchen tables, met their children, immersing myself in who they were as best I could. It was an exciting experience. I remember in the rural areas I would ask for directions and was told *"You go down the lane. You make a right at the dead tree, and then there's the trailer park"* Or in the urban areas, the women would say *"Be careful, it is dangerous around here"*. It was a moving and emotional experience for me. Of course, I had to be calm during the interviewing, as I listened to their stories. But

afterwards I would often go out and sit in my car and just cry.

Angela: *It sounds like you had lots of data; how did you do the analyses and what did you find?*

Virginia: The interviews were tape recorded so as to have access to the words of the women and be able to present the outcomes through the words of the women. I wanted to bring the realities of the woman's experiences as close to the reader as possible. The analysis drew on the phenomenological approach and borrowed from the thrust of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory perspective. The analyses focused on category development and the words of the women were used to illustrate these categories.

One outcome I called was the *ABCs of Poverty*. All the women would start by saying that they had always worked, and then they would describe the most menial of jobs that didn't pay anything. What was clear was the *Absence* of any essential education and skills that would enable them to get better work (A). Furthermore, there were a lot of instances of abuse, domestic violence, addiction, partners who had disappeared, all reflecting *Betrayal* by the mate (B). The C was *Childhood*, with most women having difficult childhood years. When things got bad for them, they couldn't go home to Mom and Dad because Mom and Dad didn't have any money, either.

I wrote up this research in a book *Working from the Margins: Voices of Mothers in Poverty*, published by Cornell University Press in 1995. I do remember that when I got to the last draft, I didn't want to let it, or the women go. The stories of the women had really touched my heart.

Angela: *What were the policy and practice implications of this research?*

Virginia: In the book I describe a three-pronged approach to change, based on the themes from the research, in their words. I call it a Framework for the Future. All these women had jobs, but this was not enough, they needed better *income opportunities*. Most of them were terribly isolated, so they also needed *social support and linking systems*. And lastly, because of the abuse they received, they needed *help and healing*. Not only were these women affected by the battering, but their children were also affected.

At the time welfare was still in the press so I wrote about the *ABCs of Poverty* using editorial opinion (Op. Ed.) to explain the issues and causes of poverty. A lot of these Op. Eds were picked up by syndicated newspapers and were carried in newspapers across the country. I also did radio talk shows, speeches and lectures. There was one use I was really proud of. At the time, John Edwards was running a major campaign for U.S. President,

and poverty was one of his key issues. They used my book as evidence in their campaign.

Angela: *Wow, so the focus became one of policy change?*

Virginia: Yes. Eventually I called this *Social Advocacy Research*: doing research to bring about change. I used the voices of the women to sway the minds of the policymakers. There was an emotional appeal that only these voices could present, instead of dry statistics. I wanted to influence the policymakers to use their power to change the circumstances for these women (known as welfare mothers). The policy makers needed to feel what life was like for those women. There were those who wanted to believe they were lazy and were not working, but this research told them this was not true. For example, I made a presentation for the United Auto Workers Union. In it I never used the word welfare, although most of these women were on public assistance. I called them impoverished, poor or low income. Several people came up to me afterwards and said, “That was my grandmother”, or “Oh, this is how I grew up!” One person said, “Oh, thank you for your presentation. These women are so courageous, not like those lousy welfare mothers.” I think those kinds of presentations were effective in that I could help them understand the full circumstances of these women.

Angela: *How did you move your studies onto a more global perspective?*

Virginia: Having done this research on women in poverty in the US, I was really motivated to focus on global poverty. Trying to carry out global research is not easy, but I was fortunate that Gettysburg College had a centre in Nicaragua, and it was through that contact I was able to study women in work related groups.

This study was about 57 low-income women in Nicaragua, who were in eight work-related groups. These groups were: a micro-enterprise development group encouraging women to start their own businesses; two union groups; one being a union of sex workers and another of domestic workers; two worker cooperatives (one in agriculture, the other in weaving); a farm group and a community development group. And lastly, I think the most heart wrenching of all of the groups were the women who worked in the sweatshops, also unionised. I met the women at their work sites, except for the sweatshop workers. We had to meet in secret. If the company had found out I was there, and the women were talking to me, they would have been fired. So the women were very brave.

I used semi-structured interviews again, with each group, asking what it was like working and being in a group. I had a translator who was brilliant. We got to be almost in sync. I would ask the question in English; she would ask it in Spanish. The women would answer in Spanish. Then she would translate the answer in English. It sounds convoluted, but it wasn't. I felt like I was looking eyeball to eyeball with these women, and so we were. To meet with the chicken and egg group (the farm group), I had to crawl under barbed wire to get to them. We sat in a circle on the ground, with the pigs and chickens all around. It was not your traditional research!

As before, I did thematic analysis using the women's words and assigning categories. I wanted to look at the role of the groups for these women, to see how group participation helped them. One outcome of the research was fascinating and unexpected. These were women in a very male dominated society. No question about it, but in these small work-related groups the women were able to speak for themselves and take leadership roles. It was a first-time experience for the women. The group work was very empowering. They were marginalised in the male dominated society they lived in where just getting out of the house and being able to be with others was a major triumph. There were a lot of positive outcomes to this. However, this research was less change oriented; it was more about understanding what it was like to be a woman doing low-income work in a developing country.

Angela: *What did you take from this research?*

Virginia: Mainly that research like this can be done. We are a global community; let's study the global community of workers. Not just the executives, the upper echelons, not just the people in traditional organizations, but the marginalised people who also work. They contribute to the economies of their country, and we so rarely study them; not even in their own countries. So the major contribution was showing that you could study marginalised communities, and learn more about these women, and how they are able to develop self-esteem and other skills through work. I think the problem is that we look at research through such a narrow lens. We need to widen our lens.

Angela: *What impact did your research have on the development of humanitarian work psychology?*

Virginia: Both my research in the US and in Nicaragua contributed to the development of the *Global Organization for Humanitarian Work Psychology (GOHWP)*. In 2008 Walter Reichman chaired a SIOP symposium entitled *Organizational Psychologists and World*

Poverty: Our Roles and Obligation. My talk was on "*Poor Women and Work in Developing Countries: Research Opportunities for I/O Psychologists.*" This symposium led to calls for the establishment of a Global Task Force on Organizational Psychology for Development. In 2011 my research on women, work and poverty in Nicaragua appeared in a special issue of the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, edited by Stu Carr, on poverty. In 2012, in a book edited by Stu Carr and others, aptly titled *Humanitarian Work Psychology* I used my poverty research in the US and in Nicaragua to illustrate Social Advocacy Research – using research for change. In 2012 GOHWP was officially formed. In 2013 SIOP published *Using Industrial–Organizational Psychology for the Greater Good: Helping Those who Help Others*. My contribution was entitled *Using I–O Psychology to Improve the Plight of Women in Developing Countries: A Research Agenda*. My research on women, work and poverty issues, then, helped to form the early base of research and practice in humanitarian work psychology and demonstrated ways in which WOP psychologists can contribute to poverty alleviation.

Angela: Now we move onto our third section looking at your work with the UN.

Working with the United Nations

Angela: Please tell us about your work with the UN.

Virginia: I think my most significant involvement at the UN has been through my presentations. I felt truly honoured to be an invited speaker at the twelfth *Annual Psychology Day* at the United Nations in 2019. The theme was: *The Time is Now: Psychological Contributions to Global Gender Equality*. They have a different theme each year and this was the first on gender. The psychology groups have representatives at the UN (APA, SIOP, IAAP) who nominate speakers for Psychology Day. I was one of four invited speakers, and the title of my talk was *Women at the Top: From Gender Bias to Gender Balance*. In addition I have presented at two SIOP sponsored panels at the UN. In 2016 my talk was: *Work Psychology and the Women at the TOP International Conferences* and in 2018 my talk was: *When Women Lead: Competency, Connectivity and Courage*. These two panels were held in conjunction with the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which has been held every year since 1947. CSW is the UN's largest gathering on gender equality and women's rights. Over 4,000 women come to the UN headquarters in New York City for two weeks with multiple sessions running from 8 am to 8 pm each day. It's a lot of people and an extraordinary experience to link with women around the world on a whole host of topics.

Another panel presentation was in 2017 at the UN's Commission for Social Development. The presentation was: *Decent Work, Not Just a Job as a Pathway Out of Poverty: Voices of Low-Income Women in Nicaragua*.

Over the years I have also been a Non-Governmental Organization /UN representative for IAAP and the Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development (CSEND). I attend sessions focused on the 17 UN Sustainable Goals, such: 1) Poverty alleviation; 5) Gender equality; 8) Decent work; and 13) Climate change. For the past several years I have represented CSEND at CSW, mainly in information gathering and networking roles. Networking is a critical thing; to be able to sit next to someone from Nigeria, for example, who's interested in the same topic and compare what you know, is an incredible opportunity! The information you get from global networking is quite amazing.

Conclusions

Angela: *What have you noticed changing for women in the world of work and what things are not changing?*

Virginia: Women are making significant progress in advancement into positions of power and influence, although there is still work to be done. As I mentioned before in the US, we now have women holding 52% of the professional and management positions, but we still need to make progress at the senior levels. Looking at the data, there are only about 10% women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies. So in terms of progress in management, I would say we're levelling off; and the push is not as strong in the way it used to be.

I would like to see more of a focus on marginalised workers, women in low paying positions who are still having difficulties. There is much less change happening here. For example, it was the low-paid service workers (e.g., cashiers in grocery stores; workers in health care and food processing; child care workers), who were hardest hit in Covid-19. They were labelled the *Essential Workers* at that time; and now to me they've gone back to being invisible. We need to pay more attention to the issues of low-paid workers, especially women who are struggling with jobs with unpredictable hours, costly child care, along with low wages. When I look back at the women in poverty research that I did in the 90s I say now, *there is no timestamp on poverty*. What I found out then is just as relevant today.

I have an example of how to minimise, in a small way, the middle-class influence in education. When I was teaching at Gettysburg, I designed a course called Women at the Top and Women at the Bottom of Organizations. At the beginning of the course, I would send the students out to interview women executives in the workplace. They would be excited to go to New York and come back and talk about the interviews; as this was familiar to them. In the second half of the course I would have them go out and interview women in low-income jobs (I had access to various groups to connect them). Every semester they would be surprised at what they learned about the women's lives. These were mainly middle-class students, and they would say, "I didn't know..." and "I didn't understand..." The day-to-day details of the women's struggles with the basics, such as food, clothing and housing were new to them, and they were truly learning. I was always delighted when they then choose to explore the issues of low-income workers for their term papers. If we want more research and practice about marginalised workers, we need to include it in our teaching.

Angela: *How do you think WOPs can influence these inequality outcomes?*

Virginia: Volunteer at your local food bank, homeless shelter or clothing distribution center. Try to get on the board or governing body. Consider pro bono consulting for poverty related non-profits. Then you will have your own network. When you're ready to do your project, they will help you get in touch with people. Maybe that's the subject of a conference symposium: How do you contact low-income workers, such as cashiers, hairdressers or cleaners? They have their own associations and unions. We don't go to these groups very often but that's where we should put a lot more of our attention.

I would like to end with a quote from one of the women I interviewed for my poverty book, let's call her LaVerne. She was thirty-four years of age, a single mother with one child. She held a variety of jobs, mainly in factories, and when I interviewed her, she was a part-time barber. She said:

"I don't know why life should be so hard... Seems like I get on a boat, and I get going, and something happens, and then I fall back again. Then I have to start all over. Then I get back in the boat and work hard, and then something happens, and I have to start all over again. It seems like I never get anywhere, but I work really hard. The big question for me would be to figure out how I could get somewhere and stay there and keep going. But I don't know how to do that."

She's asking a very good question: *How can I move forward?* When you are tottering on the poverty line, any small thing that goes wrong can send you back to the bottom, as you have no security. When the car breaks down it's a big, big problem; it affects everything, like a domino effect. As a field, we could use our arsenal of expertise and research methodologies to improve the lives of people like LaVerne. By considering all those who work, whether inside or outside of organizations, WOP research and its applications can more readily address humanitarian and social issues.

So—I will end on a humanitarian work psychology note!

Angela: *Many thanks Virginia for giving us your time to explore the fascinating work you do.*

Virginia: *It's been delightful. Thank you so much for inviting me to this. It's been a pleasure.*

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