

## **Towards a capability approach to careers: applying Amartya Sen's thinking to career guidance and development**

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Received: 11 February 2013 / Accepted: 8 September 2014 / Published online: 4 October 2014  
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**Abstract** Amartya Sen's capability approach characterizes an individual's well-being in terms of what they are able to be, and what they are able to do. This framework for thinking has many commonalities with the core ideas in career guidance. Sen's approach is abstract and not in itself a complete or explanatory theory, but a case can be made that the capability approach has something to offer career theory when combined with a life-career developmental approach. It may also suggest ways of working that are consistent with educational (human capital) approaches to development in emerging economies.

**Résumé.** **Vers une approche des carrières par la capacité : Application de la pensée d'Amartya Sen à la pratique du conseil et développement de carrière** L'approche par les capacités d'Amartya Sen caractérise le bien-être d'un individu en fonction de ce qu'il est capable d'être et de ce qu'il est capable de faire. Ce cadre de pensée a plusieurs points communs avec les idées centrales du conseil en orientation. L'approche de Sen est abstraite et ne constitue pas une théorie complète ou explicative en soi, mais, de toute évidence l'approche par les capacités a quelque chose à apporter à la théorie de la carrière lorsqu'elle est combinée avec une approche développementale de la vie et de la carrière. Elle peut également suggérer différentes manières de travailler cohérentes avec les approches éducatives (capital humain) en matière de développement dans les économies émergentes.

**Zusammenfassung.** **Auf dem Weg zu einem Laufbahn-Fähigkeitsansatz: Eine Anwendung von Amartya Sen's Denkweise auf die Laufbahnberatung und –entwicklung** Der Fähigkeitsansatz von Amartya Sen charakterisiert das individuelle

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Wohlbefinden in Bezug auf das, was Personen in der Lage sind zu „sein“ und zu „tun“. Dieser Denkansatz besitzt viele Gemeinsamkeiten mit Kernideen der Laufbahnberatung. Sen's Ansatz ist abstrakt und keine in sich selbst abgeschlossene oder erklärende Theorie, aber in Kombination mit einem lebenslangen Laufbahntwicklungsansatz kann der Ansatz einen Beitrag zu Laufbahntheorien leisten. Der Ansatz könnte zudem Arbeitsweisen aufzeigen, welche mit Bildungs- bzw. Humankapitalansätzen in Schwellenländern einhergehen.

**Resumen.** **Hacia un enfoque capacitador de la carrera profesional: aplicando el pensamiento de Amartya Sen a la orientación y al desarrollo profesional** El enfoque capacitador de Amartya Sen define el bienestar del individuo en términos de lo que es capaz de ser y de hacer. Este marco de pensamiento tiene muchos puntos en común con los dogmas centrales de la orientación profesional. El enfoque de Sen es abstracto y no constituye por sí solo ninguna teoría completa ni explicativa. Sin embargo, combinado con un enfoque desarrollista, sí tiene algo que aportar a la teoría de la carrera profesional. Igualmente puede sugerir técnicas de trabajo consistentes con enfoques educativos al desarrollo (capital humano) en las economías emergentes.

**Keywords** Career guidance · Capability approach · Economic development

### The capability approach

Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA; Sen, 1993) can be understood as response to dissatisfaction with two alternative ways of characterizing well-being (Gasper, 2007). Firstly it is distinct from approaches to welfare economics that emphasize personal utility maximization. It moves away from these traditional utilitarian models and their assumption that people are best understood as rational economic actors. In contrast, Sen's approach implies a more sophisticated conception of human nature (Alkire, 2005). For Sen, income, possessions, and similar objective measures are necessary but not sufficient to capture how people's lives are going; non-economic factors such as family relationships, friends, beliefs, health, exercise, and purposeful activity are also important (Gasper, 2007).

Secondly Sen's approach is distinct from those that focus on subjective well-being characterized by measures of happiness and life satisfaction. This latter perspective has begun to influence career theory (e.g., Walsh, 2008). The CA has developed largely separately from this psychological approach. People may sometimes knowingly make decisions that trade off their happiness or well-being against other valued goals, as illustrated by the extreme case of a hunger striker (Kotan, 2009; Sen, 1993), or in the more mundane example of a parent who foregoes rest and leisure in order to earn money to fund his or her child's education. So again, Sen sees measures of subjective well-being as insufficient if used in isolation. In essence, the CA requires taking into account a very wide range of information (which may include traditional economic or subjective well-being

information) in order to make evaluative judgments about a person's quality of life. It offers a more plural view of well-being.

The lifestyles that people value are diverse, and increasing wealth is not the only way in which lives may be improved. In describing capabilities, Sen used the phrase "valued beings and doings" to capture those elements of a person's life that contribute to his or her well-being. He makes an important distinction between functionings and capabilities. *Functionings* refers to what people actually do, their achievements, lifestyle and identity; the current status of their "beings and doings." *Capabilities* refers to what they *could* become and do. These are the valued beings and doings that people could achieve in the future, taking into account all the factors that might constrain them. To be engaged in the occupation of school teacher and to live the associated lifestyle is a functioning. To have the realistic potential to become a school teacher is a capability.

The inclusion of potential future lives is one of the things that makes the CA distinctive. It means that to evaluate someone's life and situation it is not adequate to look only at their current status or functionings, it is also necessary to look at what they are able to become and do. Potential attainable alternative lifestyles also matter in this approach. The means and the ends are sometimes overlapping (Robeyns, 2005).

The CA is couched in general terms and at an abstract level. It is a paradigm, or a framework for thought, rather than a theory (Robeyns, 2005). Sen has been reluctant to provide lists of capabilities or to specify the nature of well-being (Alkire, 2002, 2005), although others have attempted to do so, notably Nussbaum (2000). A key feature of Sen's CA is its incompleteness (Sen, 1993). The approach is intentionally under-specified (Robeyns, 2006). This risks making the ideas less persuasive, harder to communicate, and open to misuse (Gasper, 2007). It also raises unresolved issues of how these concepts can be operationalised or measured. On the other hand it has the advantage of making the approach adaptable to a wide variety of contexts. Sen allows others fill in the gaps in applying ideas to specific problem situations. It can combine with other ideas and evolve to fit the context. This enhances its cross-cultural applicability.

In some of his writings, Sen appears to go beyond the CA to adopt freedom as a central concept (e.g. Sen, 2001). It is clear that his notion of capability can be understood as the freedom to implement alternative lifestyles (Sen, 2008). As Kajanoja (2002) highlighted, ideas such as capability relate well-being to freedom and human rights. In particular Nussbaum (2000) in her perspective on capabilities has stressed ideas of justice, law, and politics more than Sen, whose work is perhaps more rooted in economics (Robeyns, 2005).

### **Linking capabilities to career development**

Having outlined some of the features of the CA, it is now possible to identify its commonalities with the concerns of career development, as well as areas where there is no overlap.

## Valued beings and doings

The notion of valued beings and doings has particular resonance with the work of career guidance, especially when Sen's approach is applied at the level of the individual (as opposed to a community level which is also possible). A central question asked of individuals by their friends, family, teachers, and career advisers is: "What do you want to *do*?" Sometimes the verb is substituted: "What do you want to *be*?" Whilst both questions typically concern choice of occupation, the latter question makes clearer what is also implied: the choice of social identity.

Questions of being and doing (identity and occupation) are fundamental to educational and vocational guidance. Identifying the "beings and doings" that an individual values is a core task of guidance. This is consistent with modern conceptions of career that reject a narrow definition of lifestyle choice and social identity in vocational terms. Both the notion of capability and a career development perspective are concerned not just with what people do now, but also with the set of potential lives that are within their grasp but have not yet been realised. Both perspectives concern maximising the control an individual can exert over this possibility space.

## Agency

The concept of agency is important in Sen's work. There are diverse interpretations of what is meant by agency and how it can be measured (Alkire, 2008). Kotan (2009) provided one workable definition: "A human agent is a person or collection of persons having the ability to exert power so as to influence the state of the world, to do so in a purposeful way and in line with self established objectives" (p. 370). This definition combines three key ideas: power to influence the world, a sense of purposiveness, and goals that are self-determined. There are clear commonalities with career theory here. The ability to act on the world in order to implement career choices and realize a self-concept is important. Agency is an important concept in making sense of career development and interventions to support it. Notions of agency used in career thinking derive primarily from social-cognitive approaches to psychology, and the most influential is undoubtedly Bandura's (1997, 2001) self-efficacy approach. Bandura's approach has directly influenced career theory (Betz and Hackett, 2006).

Psychological approaches to agency are pitched at a micro level, and are often intentionally operationalised in specific and narrow ways in order to facilitate measurement. The CA has some resonance with concepts of personal agency derived from social-cognitive theory, but Sen appears to have a much broader and deeper notion of agency, and one that includes political and moral dimensions. An individual's ability to act depends not only on his or her efficacy beliefs, but also on his or her abilities and economic and social capital; on social norms and expectations; and also on the legal, policy, and human rights environment that s/he inhabits. A wide range of factors affect agency, and all need to be taken into account.

### A lifespan perspective

Many of the core ideas of career development are evident in the CA, including identity, agency, and occupation. However one central notion is conspicuous by its absence: lifespan development. Here, the incompleteness of Sen's conception is apparent. The notion of lifespan development is largely absent from the capability literature; however, it is central to some psychological conceptions of career development (Kidd, 2006; Swanson & Fouad, 1999). When directed at children, the question "What do you want to be/do?" is often followed by the phrase "when you grow up." In practice, the CA will always need to be combined with other social theories (Robeyns, 2006), and it seems that a life-career perspective may be a necessary addition in this instance.

Furthermore, a lifespan perspective is likely to be an important feature of guidance internationally (Van Esbroek, 2008). Leung (2008) argued that to operate across cultures career theory needs "indigenization" so as to develop approaches that are either derived from local understandings or, where ideas are imported, to be adapted to the local culture. CA provides a broad foundation on which to build an indigenized theoretical framework, albeit one that must be layered with local cultural understandings of maturation. This is consistent with Vondracek and Porfeli (2008) argument for a developmental-contextual perspective on career that integrates an awareness of lifespan development, with an awareness of client's interactions with his or her environmental context.

Combining the CA with a career development perspective makes sense because people adopt and value different 'beings and doings' at different points in the lifespan. Their status, identity and social roles evolve with maturation. The plural is used as often people fulfill multiple roles (a combination of functionings) at any one point in time. Sen emphasized plurality in judgments of well-being: capability implies the ability to make choices about what one values. Thus career choice depends not just on maximizing income, or even on maximizing satisfaction by choosing interesting work, but also on a complex reasoned choice balancing many factors depending on what people value: their health, their leisure, their housing and transport, the needs of their family, the fulfillment of breadwinner or caring roles; community and political roles; spiritual and religious activities; and so on.

### A holistic perspective

This notion of multiple life roles is deeply rooted in career thinking as a result of the extensive influence of Donald Super (1981), whose work brought together lifespan development psychology perspectives with the psychology of self-concept and identity. Through this lens, the holistic idea of "life-career" is preferred to a narrow conception of career as paid employment. This sense of holism continues to be strong element of contemporary career theory, and context, particularly local social context, also features prominently. Two notable examples are the life-design framework for career counselling (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, van Esbroeck, van Vianen, 2009), and Patton and McMahon's (1999) application of systems theory to career development. A holistic

contextualized view of functioning as a set of identities and activities not restricted to formal employment is very compatible with the CA. However, it is important to note that Sen's ideas stemmed from very different intellectual roots to the social constructivism that underpins much of contemporary career theory, including the life-design and systems perspectives. The CA has its roots in moral thought, political philosophy, and development economics (Comim, 2008).

### The meta-capability to choose

Van Ootegem and Spillemaeckers (2009) suggested that perhaps there is a basic capability required to cope with capabilities: that of making choices. More choices do not necessarily improve well-being unless one can cope with them: So, having many options is important for well-being but it is not unambiguously positive. Freedom could be a burden, because it is not always easy to make choices in life, and "choosing can be losing." Learning how to manage choices can influence well-being. It is easier to manage when one knows what one wants and if one has a plan in life (Van Ootegem & Spillemaeckers, 2009).

Similar themes were raised by Pugno (2008), who suggested that maintaining a personal identity and the ability to choose represent special kinds of capability. Wood and Deprez (2012) posited that capabilities can be taught in the curriculum. It is a small leap to make the connection with career education, which seeks to equip people with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to manage their own careers through time. This appears to be an attempt to enable people to gain enduring choice-making skills, at least in one domain of life.

### Ethical concerns

Sen's (1993) focus on valued goals and the capacity to act could provide a philosophical underpinning to guidance practice. Mulvey (2002) identified key ethical principles underpinning professional practice: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice. Arguably, non-maleficence has primacy for the medical profession, but it is autonomy that Mulvey posited as the central ethical concern of the career guidance profession. This resonates with the CA concern with what people are and do, and also with what they are able to be and do in the future. The good lies not just in people's current lifestyles but also in the future life that they can implement autonomously.

The purpose and objectives of career guidance can be problematic to define. Clearly, outcomes such as improved economic status or happiness and well-being are generally desirable, but attaining them usually requires clients go beyond the help offered by career interventions. They have to make applications, succeed at interview, pass exams, and perform to the satisfaction of their employers. Career guidance interventions cannot guarantee outcomes, as in most cases the client must act for himself or herself; and, besides, the consequences of a chosen course of action may be unknowable. The CA offers a way out of this dilemma.

If the purpose of career guidance is to strengthen capabilities, then support that puts people in a better position to make sense of their situation, to make choices, and to act autonomously is in itself a good and desirable thing. Career guidance acts on improving what they are able to be and do in the future, taking into account all available information. But it leaves the choice, the implementation of a lifestyle and the combination of functionings that can be achieved to the individual. It seems that the CA can point to a vision of the purpose of career development that is both realistic in practice and in tune with the values of the profession by seeking to promote enhanced autonomy.

Turning to the ethical principle of justice, the promotion of social equity is also a key concern of career guidance (Watts, 2008). Again this resonates with the CA in having a focus on disadvantaged groups, most notably women in developing economies, which has been a preoccupation of CA advocates. Prominent among them is Nussbaum (2000), who sought to extend Sen's work to provide philosophy for just governance based on human rights.

### A capability approach to economic development

The CA has been recognized by some governments, international development agencies, and the United Nations, so it has some credibility in policy making circles (Robeyns, 2006). Its focus on economic development and human rights are central here. From the outset, Sen and other advocates of the CA have been concerned with issues of poverty reduction and improving life in developing economies. Sen (2001) argued that freedom is not just a consequence of development; rather, promoting freedom is a means to achieve development. Capabilities can be enhanced by public policy, and interventions in health and education play an important role in combating poverty.

Alkire (2002) described an evocative example of a capability approach to development work. In Pakistan, a group of eight people living in poverty were supported by Oxfam to lease some land. They declined the most profitable option of rearing goats. Instead they chose to cultivate roses, which they made into garlands and sold to worshippers at a religious site. One of them, a widow, explained how this lifestyle change not only enabled her to meet her family's basic financial needs, but also the work left her clothes permeated with the scent of roses, and felt meaningful because of its spiritual significance. She gained respect and began to "walk without shame" in her local community.

Although it is only more recently that these ideas have begun to be applied in developed economies, Sen (1997) has been strong in his critique of wealth inequality in affluent societies in general, and the large scale of unemployment in Europe, in particular. He pointed out that the debilitating effects of unemployment go far beyond the loss of income; if they did not, they would be readily solved by welfare benefits. Unemployment undermines capabilities and deprives people of agency in a way that goes beyond the effects of income deprivation alone (Sen, 2001). Bifulco (2012) described case studies adopting a CA approach in the "WorkAble" project, a European transnational study of disadvantaged youth in

transition from school in nine participating nations. As part of this project, Hollywood, Egdell, McQuaid, and Michel-Schertges (2012) outlined attempts to operationalise young people's capabilities. They drew a distinction between three key areas: capabilities for work, capabilities for education, and capabilities for "voice" or self-advocacy.

### Capability and the "capitals approach"

Education provision is important in this approach to development. In the CA, education may promote economic development rather than following from it. Abel and Frohlich (2011) suggested that the CA can usefully be combined with a "capitals approach." Economists have developed the term "capital" as a metaphor to describe a variety of intangible assets, notably "human capital," which refers to the skills and knowledge of the workforce (Blair, 2011; Burton-Jones & Spender, 2011). Notions of human capital development are often conceived in an instrumental economic way, with a focus on promoting learning as a means to improving productivity (Sen, 2001). In contrast, the capabilities approach sees human capital development as an empowerment process, and emphasizes the multiple values of education including sustainable social and cultural outcomes. People are the "end" for economic activity, and not just a means to an end (Pugno, 2008). Education provides not just job skills but also life skills and life options (Lanzi, 2007). Bourdieu's distinction between four kinds of capital, economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, is also useful in describing differences between lifestyles (Giddens, 2009), and adds sociological nuance to these economic explanations. There have been recent attempts to apply a combined human capital and capabilities approach to poverty reduction using vocational education and training (VET) in Palestine (Hilal, 2012), and in South Africa (Powell, 2012).

### Towards a development role for educational and vocational guidance

Globalization presents the career guidance profession with significant challenges (Van Esbroek, 2008). The career guidance literature has tended to respond to this with a focus on the complexity of work in multi-cultural environments in Western-developed economies. To have global relevance, career guidance practice needs ways of working that are relevant in the emergent economies of Asia, Africa, and South America. With the notable exception of publications for career guidance policymakers in lower income and transition economies (Hanson, 2006; Watts & Fretwell, 2004), this has been a neglected topic in the literature.

It is in these regions that millions of people may begin to need institutional support to navigate the complexities of educational and occupational structures that arise as a result of urbanization and industrialization. The alignment of career guidance systems with a capability approach to human capital development may promote economic gains in a way that tends to support human rights. Human rights are relevant because, as Watts (1999) stated, political systems can have a profound



impact on the way in which individual life-career opportunities are distributed. In the case of authoritarian regimes, independent career choices for some or all citizens can be curtailed, or at least not actively promoted (Watts & Fretwell, 2004). In other settings there may be reluctance to allocate resources to career guidance systems as their potential as drivers for social and economic change may not be recognized.

Informal cultures, social norms and religious practice may also constrain or channel choice as in the case of gender, class, and age based roles. Capabilities are particularly concerned with the opportunity aspects of human rights (Sen, 2005). The focus is on the factors that may facilitate or hinder access to opportunity. Whether or not people choose to take up a particular opportunity is not a central concern from this perspective. Career guidance seeks to provide information about the full range of opportunities available in the public (work and learning) domain, and also to explore and support people in developing a full understanding their own characteristics, their circumstances, and routes to overcome barriers where possible. Guidance is seeking to maximize capabilities, and is closely allied with education in this enterprise.

### **Identifying capabilities for careers**

Through integrating some elements of this discussion, it is possible to tentatively identify a relevant list of capabilities. This is not unproblematic, but it is clear that some attempt must be made to flesh out Sen's approach for application to the domain of career guidance. The list provided in Table 1 draws heavily on the notion of capitals, and implicit in this list of capabilities is the constraints and limitations placed by their absence.

Career capabilities represent potentialities for an individual to undergo a transition from a current set of career functionings to one of a set of viable future functionings, specifically a life-career that they have reason to value. Career resources can be converted into valued beings and doing. Six broad groupings are identified here: agency, life-career management, work and learning, social, economic, and health capabilities.

Clarification of three points is required here. First, the capabilities presented in Table 1 are not discrete categories; they interact and overlap. Second, this is not to be understood as a list of individual characteristics. Superficially, some elements in this list resemble a model of employability of the kind that has become influential in European labour market policy in recent years. These approaches tend to adopt a "hollowed out" understanding of employability by neglecting the economic environment (the demand for labour), and to conceptualise employability as skills or attributes possessed by the individual (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Vocational skills are meaningful only in specific industry labour markets, with access to specific technologies or resources at a particular place and point in time. Similarly, possessing strong self-efficacy is necessary but not sufficient to exercise personal agency. For example, a young woman's cognitive belief in her study skills is not adequate in a culture of human rights that denies her access to education. Career-related capabilities exist in the person's relation to his or her environment; a deeper

**Table 1** A provisional list of career capabilities

Agency capabilities	Self-efficacy, pro-activity, use of support and advocacy; self-advocacy and “voice”; a context of facilitation and empowerment
Life-career management capabilities	A vision of potential future functionings; hope and optimism; goal setting, decision making and life planning; transition skills
Work and learning capabilities	This broad area encompasses several related types of capability: <i>Cultural capability</i> : habits of language, behavior, manners and shared knowledge that allow an individual to operate within a particular social environment <i>Symbols of capability</i> : qualifications, titles, memberships of key groups or institutions. <i>Generic work and study capability</i> : core skills and attitudes applicable in a wide variety of places of work or study, including literacy, numeracy, computer skills, self-presentation, punctuality, team working skills <i>Vocationally specific capability</i> : knowledge, skills, and attitudes specific to a particular job role, occupation or industry <i>Learning capability</i> : meta-competence to learn, orientation to learning, flexibility, adaptability, and study skills
Social capabilities	Relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and contacts providing informational, emotional, financial or practical support; the quantity and quality of these relationships. An individual’s social connectivity, their social and networking skills; access to and maintenance of relationships underpinned by trust and reciprocity
Economic capabilities	Access to financial income, capital and liquidity, which can be converted into resources required for a particular functioning. Those resources might include access to group membership, fees, clothing, accommodation, equipment, or transport
Health capabilities	The current status of mental and physical health and its robustness to anticipated challenges; physique, biological capability

conception of an individual's attributes arises from making sense of these attributes within a social, political, and economic context.

Third, one purpose of identifying capabilities for career guidance is to define what career guidance is seeking to achieve. Through this lens, effective guidance would include interventions that strengthen an individual's career-related capabilities. Through strengthened capabilities, an individual has an increased chance of being able to implement a social identity and an occupation or lifestyle (beings and doings) that s/he has reason to value. This allows for a diversity of interventions, with diverse goals, and a variety of time scales at which capabilities might lead to fruition as functionings. It aligns career guidance more closely with the educational project in its broadest sense, rather than with an instrumental approach to promoting employability for rapid entry to the job market. Bergström's (2012) discussion of the capabilities of graduates suggested a similar concern about a narrow focus on employability by universities. She asserted that careers services have a key role to play in enabling individuals to convert their resources into work capabilities for the labour market, while valuing non-vocational education.

## Conclusion

There are clear commonalities between the CA and a number of existing career theories. A number of shared concerns can be detected including social identity, occupation or lifestyle, agency, personal meaning, and the individual in a wider political and socio-economic context. The CA needs to be combined with other ideas to be effectively applied to career and career guidance. An attempt has been made here to show that in combination with lifespan development psychology and the capitals approach, the CA can be used to develop a viable model.

Sen's CA offers a number of advantages in conceptualizing careers and career guidance that enable it to make a distinct contribution. It is framed at an abstract level, which gives it flexibility, and is appropriate for an integrative approach. This also means it is not culturally specific, and there is evidence it can be applied to promote development via education in emergent economies. It may have political acceptability in international agencies, and provide a language to facilitate engagement with economists and policy makers. It links the individual to his or her political context, and links career guidance to the role of education in human capital development.

The CA helps to clarify the purpose of career guidance: not necessarily (or not just) to improve economic positions or to enhance well-being in current functionings, but to strengthen capabilities. This is in tune with the key ethical concern in career guidance: the promotion of the client's autonomy. It incorporates a focus on the future and valued goals.

To summarise, "The capability approach is a proposition, and the proposition is this: that social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value" (Alkire, 2005, p. 122). Career guidance, in essence, is a service intended to facilitate people's freedom to choose to be (or become) what they want to be, to do things that they

want to do, to seek a lifestyle that they find personally meaningful, and to have reason to value. It could be seen as a mechanism to maximise capabilities within given social arrangements. It may also support education in the improvement of those arrangements. Thus, career guidance clearly has a potential role to play in the application of Sen's ideas. However, several questions would need to be resolved to take Sen's ideas forward. These questions include how best to combine the CA approach with existing career theory, how to adapt it to specific local cultural contexts, and how best to operationalise the resulting ideas for purposes of client assessment, research and evaluation of outcomes.

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