

# REMARRIAGE AS A TRIGGER OF PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME

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*Maladaptive efforts to adjust to remarriage can provoke or exacerbate parental alienation syndrome. The remarried parent, the other parent, the stepparent, and the child each may contribute to the disturbance. Underlying dynamics include jealousy, narcissistic injury, desire for revenge, the wish to erase the exspouse from the child's life in order to "make room" for the stepparent, competitive feelings between the exspouse and stepparent, the new couple's attempt to unite around a common enemy and avoid recognition of conflicts in the marriage, the child's attempt to resolve inner conflict, and parent-child boundary violations. These dynamics are discussed and suggestions for treatment are offered.*

Divorcing parents frequently try to undermine their children's affection for the other parent. When such efforts are characterized by severe and repetitive denigration, the children run the risk of suffering estrangement from the parent being criticized. Gardner (1985; 1998) introduced the term parental alienation syndrome (PAS) to describe this phenomenon.

Parental Alienation Syndrome is a controversial diagnosis, in large measure because it is often used in custody litigation. Critics argue that PAS testimony lacks an adequate scientific foundation for admissibility, that it oversimplifies the etiology of the symptoms it subsumes, and that it may result in custody decisions which fail to promote childrens' welfare. (For a review of the literature and an analysis of the controversy, see Warshak (1999a, 1999b). No controversy exists, however, regarding the fact that some children do suffer alienation from a parent following divorce which is not warranted by the history of the parent-child relationship. And that often, the other parent contributes to the alienation through a variety of manipulations. Whether or not a child succumbs to these manipulations, and if so, whether or not the label PAS is used to describe the child's disturbance, the literature is very clear that exposing children to unresolved interparental hostility is distressing (Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Shaw & Emery, 1987). Anything one can do to understand the circumstances in which this is likely to occur, and the underlying dynamics, will assist in helping families.

In Gardner's experience, parental alienation syndrome arises primarily in the context of child custody disputes. Some litigating parents foster alienation in reaction to the threat of losing custody, or with the hope that the child's expressed preferences will help them prevail in the

custody dispute. Gardner regards his formulations as initial efforts that will undergo revision as clinicians and researchers become more experienced with PAS. Expanding on Gardner's concept, Cartwright (1993) reported that financial disagreements and other relatively trivial disagreements can also provoke PAS.

This article discusses another situation that often accompanies children's unjustified alienation from a parent. A parent's marriage subsequent to divorce (or breakup, in the case of never-married parents) may generate or intensify destructive criticism by either parent toward the other parent.<sup>1</sup> Suits to modify custody may or may not accompany such behavior. Even when the object is to win custody, parental bad-mouthing and bashing that occurs in the context of remarriage often reflects maladaptive efforts to adjust to the family transition. This article describes and illustrates some of these dynamics and provides suggestions for intervention.

### JEALOUSY AND NARCISSISTIC INJURY

Cordial post-divorce relations do not insulate former spouses from the tension generated when one of them has found love again. Patients are often surprised at the intensity of their reaction to the news that an exspouse plans to remarry. They may have expected to be unaffected by such an event. Instead, they find themselves reexperiencing much of the hurt and anger that accompanied the divorce. Those who kept themselves unaware of any residual emotional attachment to the former spouse, or unaware that they harbored fantasies of reconciliation, are most likely to have difficulty coping with the jealousy and narcissistic injury triggered by the remarriage. Rather than acknowledge the source of feelings that they regard as unwanted or inappropriate, they use a variety of defenses.

A popular maneuver is to claim that one's anger stems from concern over the children being upset by the remarriage. Wilhelm Reich (1949) called this a "pretended" motive. Therapists can recognize this rationalization when a parent says, "I don't care what she wants to do with her life. But my children are very upset by all of this." If the children had not been demonstrating signs of distress, it is a good possibility that the parent is either attempting to rationalize his own distress, or projecting it on to the children and distorting his perception of their true reactions.

Another rationalization is to claim that one is not upset by the remarriage itself, but by the specific character of the stepparent, or his manner of relating to the children. Parental alienation syndrome comes into play when a parent channels unwanted, confusing, and unpleasant feelings triggered by the former spouse's remarriage into unwarranted denigration of the former spouse and his or her new partner. As Reich (1949) recognized, "The true motive is revenge on the partner through robbing him or her of the pleasure in the child" [p. 265]. "The lack of any consideration of the child is expressed in the fact that the child's love for the other partner is not taken into account" [p. 265].

As with most cases of rationalization, projection, and displacement, facilitating awareness, acceptance, and appropriate expression of genuine feelings can obviate the need for destructive

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<sup>1</sup> The process usually begins prior to the remarriage, often when the former spouse first learns of the relationship. Also, in some cases, though rare, remarriage alleviates PAS; this phenomenon falls outside the scope of this article.

acting-out. The parent must be helped to acknowledge the lingering feelings of attachment. This will be easier if the therapist genuinely regards such feelings among exspouses as normal. Therapists who believe that any sign of emotional connection between exspouses indicates that the couple are evading the reality of the divorce that they are not “emotionally divorced” will exacerbate the problem (Warshak, 1992). The attachment feelings do not create the problem. The problem occurs when such feelings are disowned and drive destructive behavior. The therapist can assist parents to respond appropriately to the remarriage by inviting them to imagine how they would want their former spouse to react to their own announcement of a remarriage. Naturally, when a campaign of denigration is rooted in the belief that the new partner contributed to the divorce, it will be more difficult for the alienating parent to give up the desire for revenge.

Up to this point reactions of the parent who learns of his or her former partner’s plans to remarry have been discussed. But as shall be seen below, destructive criticism is probably just as likely to come from the remarried spouse and the new partner. In work with remarried families, three key dynamics have been identified, in addition to seeking revenge, which often trigger, attempts to alienate children:

1. the wish to erase the exspouse from the child’s life in order to “make room” for the stepparent;
2. competitive feelings between the exspouse and stepparent;
3. the new couple’s attempt to unite around a common enemy.

These dynamics are discussed separately for heuristic purposes. But it is clear that they are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, are often interrelated. Also, they do not exhaust all the possible dynamics of PAS that occur in remarried families.

### I WISH HE WOULD JUST DISAPPEAR

Parents who remarry often believe that they now have the perfect family setting in which to raise their children. But one thing mars this image: the former spouse. Many remarried couples harbor the fantasy, “If only the ex would disappear from the scene . . .” One way to fulfill this fantasy is by driving a wedge between the children and their other parent.

A parent is most likely to regard the other parent as dispensable when her child was very young at the time of the divorce, or the parents were never married, and the new marriage occurs soon after. In these cases, each parent has had little opportunity to observe the child around the other parent. A mother may believe, in the abstract, that children deserve to know their real father. But if she has not lived very long together with the father and child, she has not experienced first hand, how her child benefits from spending time with the man. Certainly a 1-year-old child cannot tell her how much he looks forward to seeing his dad.

Without a history of family interaction involving mother, father, and child, it is harder for the mother to appreciate the father's role in the child's life. When she remarries, she would rather such family history be centered around her and her current husband. The father is seen as an interloper. His involvement complicates the picture. Essentially, the mother would like to pretend that her relationship with the child's father never happened. When he won't bow out gracefully, he is seen as thwarting her second chance for a happy family. One remarried woman told her exhusband, "My daughter has a mother and a father in her home. She doesn't need you."

Some people believe that the less time the child has been with the father, the less that is lost if the stepfather replaces the father. To a certain extent this is correct. Generally speaking, younger children find it easier than do older children to become attached to, and develop a relationship with, a stepparent that approximates a parent-child bond, and to benefit from a competent stepparent's involvement (Bowerman & Irish, 1962; Duberman, 1973; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Lutz, 1983; Ransom, Schlesinger, & Dercleyn, 1979). However, there is no reason why children should have to choose. They are capable of having strong ties to their father and stepfather.

Even when her child is so young that the stepfather could adequately replace the father, a mother still has reasons to promote the father's involvement. When the child is older, he or she may want to know the father. Many children suffer intense feelings of rejection when a divorced parent has not remained involved. Boys and girls who have lost contact with a parent following divorce are more likely to have problems with interpersonal relationships and lower self-esteem (Billler, 1993; Hetherington, 1972). The children's problems may, in turn, diminish the quality of their relationships with custodial parents and stepparents.

It is worth considering, too, what would happen if the mother's second marriage failed (not an unlikely event since second marriages have a higher divorce rate than first marriages). In most such cases children lose all contact with their former stepfather even when he has been a central figure in their development (Brody, Neubaum, & Forehand, 1988). Maintaining a close tie to the father is good insurance against such a loss. Much less likely, but also possible, is the death or incapacitation of the mother. In these cases, custody is usually transferred to the father. A good strong relationship with their father can help children through such hard times. A history of alienation from the father would compound the tragedy.

A parent who has simply not considered some of the issues discussed above may benefit from an educational intervention, it is essential to involve the new partner because he or she is likely to exert much influence over the ultimate decision regarding the child's contact with the other parent.

When the effort to remove the other parent from the child's life reflects the wish to deny the reality of the relationship that produced the child, the alienating parent must be helped to appreciate that this denial may satisfy the parent's short-term desires, but will sacrifice the child's interests and, therefore, the parent's long-term interest in raising a healthy child. Furthermore, denying the former relationship handicaps the new marital relationship. The new marriage will stand on a much firmer foundation if the spouses face, rather than avoid, the existence of the former partner. Therapists should attempt to facilitate communication between

spouses of unspoken thoughts and feelings regarding the former partner. This can result in a general reduction of anxiety and may reduce the need to eliminate the other parent from the child's life.

If the remarried parent is genuinely worried about the impact on the child of maintaining a relationship with the other parent, these anxieties should be explored with all the adults involved. Each party should think of things that they can do, and that the others can do, to ease the anxieties. For example, a father may provide some indication to the mother of his value to their child, if he describes some of the activities and routines that father and child share. The goal is to help the mother see the reality of the relationship. This gives her a concrete experience of what she would be destroying if she succeeded in alienating the child from the father.

### COMPETITION

Competitive feelings toward one's predecessor in love, sex, and marriage are natural. In mild form, such feelings do not become a problem. They may, in fact, benefit the children by motivating a stepparent to do the very best job possible in raising the stepchildren. The children then gain an additional adult who protects and advances their interests.

When competitive feelings are very strong, however, the stepparent may resent having to share the children's affection with their other parent. Many factors contribute to such resentment. A general sense of low self-esteem is one element. This may be manifest in generally excessive competitiveness in most situations. More specifically, doubt about one's worth as a parent may stimulate a desire to prove one's superiority over the other parent. Visher and Visher (1979) describe how a man who feels that he failed as a father in a first marriage may regard the second marriage as a chance to compensate for his earlier shortcomings. The sense of failure may be particularly acute if the stepfather has not maintained regular and meaningful involvement with his biological children. For some men, their reaction to this sense of failure is to try to replace the other parent in the children's heart. To accomplish this, they instigate, or at least actively support, destructive criticism of the other parent. The result may be the child's alienation from the target of criticism.

Another situation that exacerbates competitive feelings occurs when stepparents have no children of their own and, for reasons of choice or infertility, do not foresee having their own children in the future. This dynamic, and other factors underlying excessive competition, affect stepmothers as well as stepfathers.

Nelda and Ophelia were best friends. Then Nelda had an affair with Ophelia's husband and married him soon after his divorce. Nelda had no children from her previous marriage, was unable to become pregnant, and did not want to adopt any children. Ophelia's daughter was Nelda's one chance to be a mother.

Feeling intense rivalry with her now "exbest friend" Nelda pressured her husband to move to a new town, 4 hours away by car with no airport nearby. At the same time, through overindulgence, extravagant promises, excessive badmouthing of the mother, and the

cooperation of the father, Nelda manipulated her stepdaughter to ask to move with them. Ophelia initially resisted, but her daughter insisted that she really wanted to move and was angry that her mother was making it difficult. Against her better judgment, and without legal counsel, Ophelia caved into pressure and agreed to the move.

Shortly before Christmas vacation, Ophelia received a letter from her daughter. The girl wrote that she did not want to be forced to see her mother during the Christmas vacation. Her dad and Nelda had scheduled a trip to Disneyland, and she would have to miss it if she spent the vacation with her mother. The vocabulary and sentence structure of the letter made it clear that, although it was in her daughter's handwriting, it was composed by adults. A note from Nelda accompanied the letter. In her note, Nelda selfrighteously exhorted Ophelia to place her daughter's interest before her own. Nelda pleaded with Ophelia to allow them to establish themselves as a family before pressing for contact with her daughter. Ophelia took what she thought was the high road, and allowed her daughter to go on the trip to Disneyland instead of seeing her.

When Ophelia was next scheduled to see her daughter, on the girl's birthday, she received another letter. In this letter, her daughter expressed her resentment of what was now being called "forced visitation" and added that, instead of seeing her mother, she wanted to spend her birthday with her family. Nelda and her husband had succeeded in twisting this girl's mind so that she no longer thought of her own mother as part of her family! When the author first became acquainted with Ophelia, she had been waiting 2 years and had still not seen her daughter.

Ophelia's error, all too common among parents who find themselves the target of alienation, was to wait too long before taking action. This generally results from an inadequate understanding of the dynamics and course of PAS. Some parents, who recognize that their children have been manipulated, still find it difficult not to take the rejection personally. They may respond with hurt and anger and counter-reject their children. Other parents hope that patience will pay off and that the children will come to their senses and spontaneously recover positive feelings.

It is very important that target parents understand that the absence of contact with their children creates a fertile habitat for poisoned messages to take root and crowd out loving memories of the parent-child relationship. It isolates children from information and experiences that might enlighten them by contradicting the programming to which they are exposed. And it makes the children more dependent on the parent promulgating the alienation (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991).

Some therapists contribute to the process by recommending postponement of parent-child contact while they conduct traditional individual psychotherapy with the child. The hope is that therapy will result in the reemergence of the child's positive feelings for the target parent. An analogous situation would be to recommend that a school-phobic child be allowed to stay home until therapy succeeds in helping the child overcome his or her anxiety. Therapists should be aware that such an approach to PAS is not likely to meet with success. As Lund (1995) points out, "If contact is stopped between a parent and a child, a pattern is likely to develop such that it will be difficult to mend the relationship" (p. 314). There are no reports in the literature of effective treatment of moderate-to-severe cases of PAS that does not include enforced contact

between the children and the target parent (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Gardner, 1998; Lampel, 1986).

If a target parent consults the therapist in the initial stages of PAS. The advice should be to maintain contact with the children, and work to gradually assist the children to understand the manipulations to which they are being exposed and how to resist these manipulations. When consulting with parents, such as Ophelia, whose children are resisting spending time with them, or access is being restricted by the former spouse, therapists should advise the target to reestablish regular, face-to-face contact as soon as possible. Early intervention is critical. As with all cases of PAS and other emotional disturbances, interventions in the early stages are most likely to meet with success. The longer the alienation continues, the more difficult it will be to undo. In Ophelia's case, nothing short of a court order to enforce her access to her daughter could begin to resolve the problem

In working with excessively competitive stepparents, therapists can try to help them appreciate that they can carve out important roles for themselves with a child without having to undermine the child's attachment to the other parent. It may help to frame the role of healthy stepparent as including the ability to successfully support the child's relationship with the nonresidential parent. Successful treatment will assist stepparents in accepting their competitiveness and finding healthier ways to express it. Also, anything the therapist can do to help strengthen the new marriage can lessen the stepparent's need to compete with the nonresidential parent. If a stepparent has poor relationships with his or her biological children from a previous marriage, taking steps to improve these relationships may reduce the sense of competitiveness with the out-of-home parent of the stepchildren.

Competition works both ways. After the remarriage, the former spouse can support the children's relationship with their stepparent. Or he or she may try to drive a wedge between the children and their new stepparent. When the former spouse is still single, he or she may fear that the children will prefer the two-parent household because it more closely approximates the intact family that was lost with the divorce. Driven by such fear, the former spouse may attempt to compete by undermining the child's sense of love and security in the remarried household.

Often the nonresidential parent fears that the children will come to love the stepparent more. This fear is exacerbated if the children begin using terms similar to mom or dad when referring to their stepparent. Because younger children are more apt to seek and accept a quasi parent-child relationship with the stepparent, they are particularly at risk for exposure to bashing and brainwashing of the stepparent. And they are more likely to be influenced by negative programming because of their increased suggestibility (Ceci & Bruck, 1995). For example, a father may tell his young son that his stepfather was sent by Satan. Even if the boy does not believe this, he begins to feel uneasy in his stepfather's presence.

Older children may feel more initial reserve and resentment toward a stepparent. Instead of helping their children adjust to the transition, competitive exspouses sometimes welcome their children's nascent negative feelings about the stepparent and use these transitional feelings as a foundation for a campaign of alienation. When confronted about their manipulations, such

parents will usually reply with some variant of, "I can't help the way my child feels about her stepparent. But I'm not going to stop her from expressing her true feelings."

One mother with whom I worked demonstrated how parents can put their children's interests above their competitive feelings. Patty worked hard to resist strong impulses to disparage her daughter Rachel's stepmother. Through a combination of inadequate legal representation, convincing lies told by her husband, and a bad court verdict, Patty's involvement with Rachel was drastically curtailed. When her husband remarried a week after the divorce, he delegated most of the responsibility for raising Rachel to his new wife. Patty naturally resented the fact that another woman was raising the child that she had carried in her womb for 9 months and taken care of for 5 years. Her resentment acted as a filter when it came to evaluating the stepmother's parenting skills. Criticisms came easily; positive thoughts about her rival took decided effort. When Rachel complained to her mother about the stepmother's treatment, Patty felt some secret pleasure which she kept secret. Though her rivalous feelings were gratified, she knew that the stepmother was doing a lot for Rachel. And she knew it would not benefit Rachel to develop a bad relationship with her stepmother. So Patty listened to Rachel's complaints, but did not respond eagerly. As far as the girl was concerned, bad-mouthing her stepmother was not the way to her mother's heart. Patty set an inspiring example of a woman whose love for her child outweighed strong impulses to engage in destructive criticism.

It is easy to appreciate how tempting it can be for some parents to try to undermine their children's relationship with their stepparent. Therapists can help alleviate destructive competition by emphasizing the deep foundation of attachment between most parents and children and reminding parents of the many experiences that formed the foundation of the relationship. Parents can be invited to consider their own attachment histories. In most cases, new affectionate relationships do not replace earlier attachments. Most of us retain our love for our parents regardless of how many other people we come to love. Without negative programming, children's new relationships will not usually undermine existing ones. It may help parents to talk to other parents whose children have maintained strong love for them while still getting along well with the stepparent.

Adults who attempt to foster alienation must be helped to see that instigating and supporting conflict between the children and a parent or stepparent will make life more difficult for the children. This will, in turn, make life more difficult for all the adults, because they will have to cope with angry or depressed children and the associated behavioral sequelae.

#### THE COMMON ENEMY

Remarried families are fragile. Children do not choose their stepparents. And adults do not marry in order to acquire stepchildren. The children merely go along with the deal. It takes time for the new family to get used to each other. It takes time to feel like a family. It is even more of a challenge when each adult brings children from a prior marriage. Small wonder that divorce is common in these types of "blended" families.



One way to strengthen family cohesiveness is to unite around a common goal. Unfortunately, in some families bad-mouthing and bashing the nonresidential parent becomes that goal. It may be the glue that holds the new family together, that gives them the sense of being on the same team.

Even more significant, while everyone is trashing the other parent, they are avoiding negative feelings that would inevitably arise among them. As their anger gets channeled into criticisms of the other parent, they distract themselves from problems within their newly constituted family. Isaacs (1986) described this process as deflecting the new couple's problems through the outside parent. The motive is to deny the presence of conflict in the new relationship. This protects the couple from the anxiety generated by the prospect of another divorce. In some families, the new partner joins in a campaign of denigration as a means of ingratiating himself or herself to the spouse. The basic message is, "Your battles are my battles." Particularly in the early stages of remarriage, the new spouse may find it difficult to take a different position with respect to the exspouse's character and the type of treatment that he or she deserves.

Hal Q. and his second wife, Annette, spent much of their time colluding in trashing Hal's first wife, Melinda. The more they did so, the closer they felt. Annette's children joined the chorus of denigration. Hal's son, Tosh, couldn't resist participating. At first he felt disloyal to his mother, but he wanted to be accepted by the family, and complaining about his mother seemed to be the price of admission.

Josh had another motive. In a contest between his father and mother, Josh sensed that his father had more power. Although he was not consciously aware of it, Josh feared that the family's criticism could turn on him if he defended his mother. Like most people, Josh wanted to side with the winner. He wasn't in a position to stem the tide of denunciation, so he chose to affiliate with it. Essentially, Josh was following the strategy of "identifying with the aggressor." It is more popularly known as, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

Uniting against a common enemy has one fatal weakness. When the enemy is vanquished, conflicts usually arise among the former allies. That happened in this case. Melinda finally gave up her efforts to counter the trashing and she moved to another state. The family had virtually no contact with her. They lost their common enemy. Soon after, conflicts in their own family relationships began to surface. These had been present all along, but they were able to avoid them by making Melinda the target of all their hostility.

#### CHILDREN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PAS

An integral part of Gardner's formulation of the concept of PAS is that the disturbance results from a combination of parental brainwashing and the child's own contributions. Josh Q.'s behavior is a good example. In the case of remarriage, a child may join in a campaign of denigration for several reasons. As already mentioned, the child may be capitulating to group pressure in the service of aligning with the new family. The child may also be attempting to reduce inner conflict experienced as a result of the remarriage. Such inner conflict may be related to loyalty conflicts or difficulty accepting the remarriage and the stepparent.

The child who feels caught between two homes may try to resolve the conflict by declaring a clear allegiance to one household. This dynamic can result in alienation from either parent. A child who is anxious or angry about the remarriage may channel these feelings into unwarranted denigration of the remarried parent and stepparent, or the child's alienation may express the disappointment of reconciliation wishes that have been clashed by the remarriage. Most children of divorce harbor strong wishes for their parents to reconcile (Warshak & Santrock, 1983). Regardless of the child's underlying motivation, if the favored parent welcomes the child's allegiance or passively accepts the child's estrangement from the other parent and fails to actively promote the child's affection for the other parent, the child may cling to this maladaptive solution.

A central goal of therapy with alienated children in remarried families is to help them appreciate that they do not have to choose sides. We can try to help them appreciate the benefits that come from avoiding unhealthy alliances, while working with the parents to support this concept.

### POOR BOUNDARIES

The dynamics discussed in this article help to explain the impulses parents may feel to tamper with children's affections. But an impulse is not an action. Parents often inhibit behavior toward their children rather than act on impulse. For example, we don't spank every time we feel like doing so. And most divorced parents go through a period when they have chronic impulses to badmouth their exspouses whether or not their children are present.

What is it, then, that allows loving parents to act on the impulse rather than inhibit their behavior as they do other behavior they regard as destructive to their children? In many cases the answer is simple: They do not regard it as destructive to their children. Many parents who badmouth are so preoccupied with hurting their exspouses or the new stepparent that they choose not to think about the impact on their children. Other parents appear incapable of recognizing that their own thoughts and feelings and their children's needs may not be identical. So they pursue, with singleminded determination, their goal of demeaning the exspouse, even when this means embarrassing the children, and even when this means confusing them, depriving them, or scaring them. By treating their children as accomplices in the campaign of denigration, these parents obliterate the usual psychological boundary that exists between adults and children.

In families with a history of inappropriate boundary violations, PAS may represent a continuation of maladaptive patterns begun prior to the divorce and remarriage. Treatment with these families is generally more difficult, because the PAS is embedded in a long-standing enmeshment between the alienating parent and child.

### CONCLUSION

This article has presented some of the dynamics often found when PAS occurs in the context of remarriage. It has been shown how PAS can arise in remarried families from motivations other than custody-related concerns. By recognizing the potential for PAS, therapists consulting with

stepfamilies will be in a better position to help prevent or alleviate the disturbance. The emphasis should be on early intervention and maintaining access between the target parent and children, while concurrently addressing the PAS dynamics in therapy sessions. As with other emotional disturbances, interventions in the early stages are most likely to meet with success. Also, work with these families is unlikely to be successful without the support of the court in enforcing access between the target parent and child, and in providing external motivation for the parties to engage in treatment.

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