ARTICLES

Postmodernism and Humanism: A Proposed Integration of Perspectives That Value Human Meaning Systems

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Both postmodernism and humanism place a high value on individual differences in meaning systems. However, there are significant theoretical barriers to integrating these systems into a counseling orientation. A theoretical integration is proposed, along with implications for counseling practice.

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Over the history of the counseling profession, hundreds of theories for understanding clients and counseling processes have been proposed (Corsini & Wedding, 2000). One way to organize this vast array of perspectives is according to the degree to which theories value individual differences in subjective experience. Humanism, for example, emphasizes careful attention to client subjectivity, whereas traditional behaviorism, alternatively, places little value on the inner experiential life of clients.

Postmodern perspectives, like humanism, fall on the end of the continuum that emphasizes careful attention to the nuances of client experience (Hansen, 2000, 2002). With their focus on narration and constructivism, postmodern orientations place great value on the subtleties of human meaning systems (Held, 1995). Thus, although postmodern approaches to counseling have an entirely different philosophical foundation than does humanism, they share with humanism an emphasis on client diversity and experiential differences and a reluctance to group clients into broad categories (Gergen, 1995b).

Currently, mental health culture is immersed in the medical model (Barney, 1994; Shorter, 1997), an orientation that falls at the extreme end of the continuum that devalues client subjective experience (Hansen, 2003). Although this orientation has undoubtedly been helpful to certain clients, individual differences in subjectivity are eclipsed in the medical model by an emphasis on classification and treatment of psychiatric symptoms (Hansen, in press).

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Because of the pervasive influence of this model, counselors working in modern mental health care environments are usually required to diagnose and conceptualize clients in terms of overt symptom constellations, a demand that is antithetical to the humanistic underpinnings of the counseling profession (Hansen, 1997, 2003). Thus, the traditional humanistic values of the counseling profession have been suppressed in modern mental health culture by the dominance of the medical model (Hansen, in press).

There are many reasons for the rise of the medical model, including the discovery of chemical agents that alleviate symptoms (Shorter, 1997), the fact that third-party payers are structured according to a medical perspective (Hansen, 1997), and, perhaps most important, because of the economic benefits of this model for organized psychiatry and the pharmaceutical industry (Leifer, 2001). However, another possible reason, which I am now proposing, for the dominance of the medical model is that theories that emphasize human complexity, notably humanism and postmodernism, do not provide a conceptually unified alternative to theories that blur individual differences through categorization, such as the medical model. That is, there is little dialogue or cross-fertilization between humanistic and postmodern orientations. As isolated perspectives, neither humanism nor postmodernism has the critical mass to challenge the dominant medical model.

The purpose of this article, then, is to explore the consequences of integrating humanistic and postmodern perspectives, with the hope that an integration of orientations that emphasize human meaning systems will provide a more effective challenge to the dominant medical model, which virtually ignores individual differences in meaning construction. This is accomplished within the following structure: (a) theoretical background, (b) conceptual similarities and differences between humanism and postmodernism, (c) resolutions to conceptual differences, and (d) discussion and conclusions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Humanism

Humanism, as a counseling perspective, began to emerge in the middle of the 20th century (Hansen, in press). Philosophically, humanism drew from two primary sources: existentialism and phenomenology (Hansen, 2000). Existentialism is a philosophical system that emphasizes certain givens of existence, such as the inevitability of death, the meaninglessness of life, and the consequences of human freedom (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958; Yalom, 1980). Midcentury continental existentialism was an incredibly dark and gloomy philosophy. As an illustration, one existentialist writer (Camus, 1955) proposed that the central question of life was whether or not to kill oneself in the face of the utter meaninglessness of existence.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, is a philosophical system that emphasizes careful attention to the contents of consciousness (Halling & Nill, 1995).

Phenomenologists proposed isolating particular elements of experience, a method called *bracketing*, so that consciousness could be studied directly.

Humanism is a unique distillation of the existentialist and phenomenological systems (Hansen, 2000). From existentialism, humanism borrowed an emphasis on human freedom. The gloomier aspects of existentialism, such as the focus on death, were not incorporated into humanistic theory. From phenomenology, humanism gained an appreciation for conscious experience and human subjectivity. Additionally, humanism also placed an emphasis on the developing, ever-actualizing individual, a value present in American society when humanism was developed (DeCarvalho, 1990).

Therefore, humanism represents a unique cut-and-paste blend of existentialism, phenomenology, and American individualism. These influences also determined another vital feature of humanism: its antireductionist stance (Hansen, 1999, 2000, in press; Sass, 1989). Early humanists charged that psychoanalysis and behaviorism, the dominant counseling orientations at the time, were guilty of reducing clients to component bits, such as psychic structures and discrete behaviors (Matson, 1971). This psychological dissection was completely antithetical to the value system of humanism, which advocated that the counselor fully encounter clients as holistic beings.

The humanistic emphasis on unreduced conscious experience places humanism at the extreme far end of the continuum that deeply values differences in human meaning systems. Early humanists abhorred the reductionism and categorization of psychoanalysis and behaviorism and insisted that each human be wholly appreciated as a unique experiencing being (Matson, 1971). Objectification of others became the cardinal sin: "[W]hen all are regarded as object, the subjective individual, the inner self, the person in the process of becoming . . . is weakened, devalued, or destroyed" (Rogers, 1961, pp. 213–214). Humanism, then, is the quintessential orientation that values human experiential differences.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism, unlike humanism, is not a counseling orientation. Rather, it is a revolutionary epistemic system that has inspired various counseling approaches, such as narrative (White & Epston, 1990) and solution-focused (deShazer, 1985) and social constructionist orientations (Guterman, 1994, 1996). To appreciate the implications of a postmodernist perspective for counseling, one must understand the historical emergence of this philosophical system.

Until the mid-20th century, Enlightenment assumptions dominated the Western mind-set (Sexton, 1997). The central idea of the Enlightenment was that steady progress in all areas of human inquiry could be made by discovering objective truth. These truths would accumulate and build on each other, and humankind would gradually move toward a utopian state (Anderson, 1990). For example, by discarding the pre-Enlightenment idea that diseases were caused by demons, scientific investigations of the objective, physical

causes of disease could be conducted. As objective evidence accumulated, cures would eventually be discovered.

This modernist mind-set of discovering objective truth also formed the basis for all systems of counseling (Hansen, 2002). For example, psychoanalysis endeavors to discover actual unconscious processes, behaviorism operates by an analysis of real behaviors, and even humanism assumes that there are actual conscious experiences with which to empathize. Thus, it is the aim of all traditional counseling orientations to discover truth, at least some version of it, with counseling clientele (Hansen, 2002).

In the latter half of the last century, though, Enlightenment ideals were increasingly challenged (Rosenau, 1992). With the threat of global atomic destruction, the continual emergence of new forms of pestilence to replace cured diseases, and rampant social problems, the modernist equation of objective discovery equaling increased human happiness began to appear seriously flawed. Furthermore, the idea that there is one true, discoverable reality was also challenged (Hansen, 2004; Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Leary, 1994; Rosen, 1996; Ryan, 1999). For example, if one social group regards a tree as a purely biological phenomenon, another regards it as an artistic object, and yet another considers it as a means to obtain wood, which group possesses the truth? The "tree-ness" does not lie within the tree waiting to be discovered, according to postmodernist conceptualizations; rather, the group or individuals observing the tree impart reality to it.

This idea, that reality does not reside in the object, is known as *antiessentialism* (Muran, 2001). That is, things do not have essential properties in and of themselves, as in modernism. Rather, observers imbue the world with various versions of reality. This antiessentialist hypothesis is arguably the central feature that unites the various postmodernist perspectives (Muran, 2001).

Postmodernism began to gain momentum and influence a variety of disciplines during the 1960s and 1970s (Anderson, 1990). For example, the modernist goal of literary analysis was to determine the true intentions of the author (Rosenau, 1992). However, if there is no essential message in the text, the reader becomes the definer of meaning, not the author. Indeed, postmodern literary theorists began to speak of the "death of the author" (Rosenau, 1992). As another illustration, modernist architects aspired to build structures that were functional, true to the needs of the people who would inhabit them. Postmodernist architects, alternatively, freed from the singular truth of function, built structures that mixed various designs and emphasized aesthetic appeal and originality rather than function (Jencks, 1995).

Postmodern ideas, however, did not begin to have an influence on counseling orientations until the 1980s and 1990s (Sexton & Griffin, 1997). Although there are many diverse postmodern systems of counseling, postmodern assumptions have brought about two fundamental, conceptual shifts in the way counseling processes are understood. First, if the discovery of objective truth about clients is no longer a goal of counseling, clients and counselors are free to renarrate a client's life in any way that proves helpful, regardless

of considerations for accuracy. In this way, counseling becomes a process of meaning creation rather than objective discovery (Hansen, 2002). Second, the self as a unified, cohesive agent is viewed as an unneeded relic of the Enlightenment (Rosenau, 1992). Operating under an antiessentialist epistemology, counselors need not assume there is an essential self in the client lying beneath the various social masks. Multiple identities become the norm rather than a sign of psychopathology (Gergen, 1995a).

CONCEPTUAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Similarities

The primary similarity between postmodernism and humanism is an appreciation for the complex and idiosyncratic over the simple and categorical. As mentioned earlier, a fundamental tenet of humanism is that each person must be appreciated as a unique being with a vital intrapsychic life. Postmodern counseling approaches, primarily because they are rooted in antiessentialism, also value the unique realities created by individuals and groups. Thus, on a hypothetical continuum of orientations that emphasize categorization versus individuality, postmodernism and humanism both fall on the far end of the continuum that emphasizes variations in human meaning structures.

This similarity has a parallel in the historical emergence of postmodernism and humanism. Both of these systems of thought emerged as responses to dominant reductionistic metanarratives. Humanism, as it began to congeal as a counseling perspective, drew much of its power and identity by challenging the reductionism of the dominant orientations of the time: psychoanalysis and behaviorism (Hansen, in press; Matson, 1971). Early humanists preached an enlightened perspective that appreciated individuals in their experiential entirety and refused to reduce them to behavioral bits or psychic parts. Likewise, postmodernism was born out of critiques of the modernist ideal of discovering an objective reality (Hansen, 2004; Leary, 1994; Sexton, 1997). Postmodern theorists argued that claims to truth are epistemically indefensible and often represent hidden power plays (Foucalt, 1980). Thus, postmodernism advocated perspectival diversity by challenging the modernist vision of singular truth (Rosenau, 1992).

Humanism and postmodernism, then, share an antipathy for reductionism and singularity. Both systems revere complexity and diversity and historically emerged as challenges to dominant reductionistic metanarratives. However, although they have this commonality, there are substantial theoretical barriers to integrating these systems into a unified counseling orientation.

Differences

There are numerous theoretical discrepancies between postmodernism and humanism. However, as these systems relate to counseling processes, differences arguably center on issues of essentialism and visions of an ideal self.

Regarding essentialism, humanism has traditionally emphasized accurate knowing through empathy (Hansen, 2000). That is, clients possess essential, real, psychic lives that can be accurately known via a counselor's empathic identification (Hansen, 2004). From this theoretical vantage point, it follows that a counselor can make a remark that either correctly or incorrectly reflects a client's essential experience. Accurate reflection, of course, is the humanistic objective.

Postmodernism, alternatively, with its antiessentialist stance, does not have accuracy as a goal (e.g., White & Epston, 1990). Indeed, in the postmodern vision, there is no essential, enduring psyche about which to be accurate (Hansen, in press). Rather, the psyche, like everything else, is an observer construction, a mere linguistic by-product of social interaction (McNamee, 1996).

Further undercutting the humanistic aim of accurate empathy is the postmodern assumption that meanings are brought into being via dialogue and do not lie in the client's psyche waiting to be accurately discovered by the counselor's empathic identification. That is, "narratives are not fashioned out of veridical experience; rather, experience is fashioned out of narratives" (Russell & Wandrei, 1996, pp. 311–312). The objective of postmodern counseling, then, is meaning creation, not objective discovery (Rosen, 1996). Therefore, a fundamental pillar of humanistic theory, accurate empathy, is completely annihilated by postmodern assumptions regarding the nature of the psyche and knowledge acquisition, placing these systems of thought at opposite ends of an epistemological continuum.

Humanism and postmodernism are also completely opposed in terms of their visions of an ideal self. Humanism has historically emphasized the achievement of a united, congruent self as a counseling objective (e.g., Rogers, 1951). Indeed, traditional humanistic theory specifies that client problems are signs of incongruence between disparate aspects of self (Rogers, 1957). Bringing levels of self together into a unified, actualized whole is the implicit treatment goal of humanistic counseling. Spin-off orientations placed even greater, more overt, emphasis on self-consolidation. Gestalt counseling, for example, actively promotes self-congruence through a variety of interventions, such as the empty chair technique (Perls, 1969). In the humanistic vision, then, multiple selves are the problem, and self-consolidation is the solution.

Postmodernism has a significantly different conceptualization of self. Within the postmodern vision, the self is continually constructed as a function of social interaction (McNamee, 1996). That is, an individual may adopt one persona with the boss and another with the spouse. Unlike the humanistic vision, there is no essential self that lies beneath, waiting to be discovered (Gergen, 1995a). The collective personas are the person.

Furthermore, these multiple selves, rather than being problematic, are necessary to adapt successfully to the various roles one must play in contemporary society (Gergen, 1991). Indeed, with modern technology, individuals are exposed to identity possibilities that would have been completely unthinkable in previous ages (Gergen, 1999). The fully functioning individual,

then, freely samples from the identity boutique, trying on various personas and continually expanding opportunities for diverse and more adaptive versions of self (Gergen, 1991). Self-multiplicity and fluidity, then, are the postmodern ideal, whereas self-unity and holism are dysfunctional relics of an earlier age.

Of course, this analysis cannot possibly do justice to the diversity of ideas within humanism and postmodernism. For example, skeptical forms of postmodernism do away with the self altogether, whereas more affirmative varieties often retain a self, although it has radically different properties than the consolidated, Enlightenment self (Rosenau, 1992). This analysis of similarities and differences, then, has drawn from the more mainstream, traditional, and affirmative varieties of postmodernism and humanism. Some resolution of the differences between these systems of thought might provide a stronger theoretical base for understanding and appreciating variations in human meaning systems than either system alone can provide.

POSSIBLE RESOLUTIONS

There are various possible resolutions to the essentialism and self-conflicts between postmodernism and humanism. My strategy for resolution is based on the idea that each of the systems contains precisely what the other needs. Humanism patches certain theoretical holes in postmodernism that limit its effectiveness as a counseling orientation. Likewise, postmodernism updates humanism to a contemporary epistemological foundation.

First, regarding essentialism, the postmodern critique is cogent. To illustrate, after a counselor makes a remark that is intended to be accurately empathic, what would constitute evidence that the counselor had been correct about the essential nature of the client's original experience? Did the experience exist prior to the remark, as traditional humanism contends, or did the language of the intervention bring the experience into being, as postmodern conceptualizations of meaning creation suggest? Supposing the client agrees with the remark, perhaps even with some emotional force supporting the agreement. Is this verification of accuracy? Perhaps it is only persuasion at work.

The history of counseling teaches that clients can become convinced of all sorts of things about themselves, that they are unconsciously deploying the symptoms they wish to ameliorate, that hidden familial pressures are responsible for their problems, or that their archetypes are strangely acting up, to give a few examples (Frank & Frank, 1991). Moreover, cross-cultural studies of healing indicate that people can have the experience that their souls have left their bodies or that they have been demonically possessed (Torrey, 1972). The sheer diversity of things people believe about themselves when suggested by an authority casts serious doubt on the idea that the level of client agreement can serve as a barometer for counselor accuracy.

However, if the postulate that accuracy can never be gauged is accepted, it does not logically follow that anything counselors say will be helpful to clients. For instance, empathically communicating to clients that they are experiencing hidden communications from dead ancestors would probably have little appeal, at least in Western culture. What can counselors use as a guide for helpful interventions, if the concept of accuracy is no longer tenable?

With the postmodern critique in mind, perhaps emotional resonance, not accuracy, should be the goal of humanistic interventions. In other words, counselors should aim interventions at being experientially meaningful to clients, without regard for considerations of correctness. Importing postmodern antiessentialism into humanism, then, allows counselors to operate within mutually generated meaning systems, freeing counselors from a narrow focus on accurate reflection of clients' original, preverbalized experience. What counts becomes the experiential palatability and pragmatic utility of the counselor's remarks in developing helpful meaning systems, not whether the counselor had been right or wrong about a client's original experience.

Second, postmodern ideas about self question the humanistic ideal of a consolidated self as a goal of counseling (Gergen, 1995a). Indeed, this humanistic emphasis on isolated, congruent individualism, from a postmodern critique, ignores relational factors as continual constructers of self (McNamee, 1996) and is completely out of step with contemporary times, which require the self to be multiple and fluidly adapt to various role demands (Gergen, 1991). The humanistic self, then, is exposed as an arbitrary, and perhaps even maladaptive, ideal.

If the postmodern self is integrated into humanism, counselors should not have as a necessary goal the gradual consolidation of client self. Alternative goals, informed by postmodernism, would be that various aspects of client selfhood achieve greater articulation and that alternative versions of self be developed within the counseling process. This postmodern humanistic counseling environment, then, becomes a kind of meaning laboratory, in which various client self-experiments are conducted, with no necessary aim toward consolidation.

Lastly, the humanistic emphasis on relational factors in counseling must be added to postmodernism in order for counseling interventions to be successful. Postmodernism highlights the importance of meaning construction, as in the development of new and more adaptive narratives to account for the events of one's life. However, meaning construction best occurs in a humanistic environment. Although certain segments of postmodernism highlight the importance of relational factors in narrative construction (e.g., Guterman, 1994), postmodernism falls short of specifying the particular relational factors that must be present in order for transformation of meanings to occur. This, of course, is humanism's strong point. Therefore, an amalgamation of postmodernism and humanism must include specification of core relational factors, a point generally ignored by postmodernists but harped on by humanists.

The previous discussion has been abstract. To show the relevance of these ideas to counseling processes, I present a brief counseling vignette from my practice that is illustrative of this integration.

The client was a middle-aged woman whom I had counseled for about a year on a weekly basis. Her initial complaint was a debilitating depression that had caused her to be virtually homebound for the past several years. One of my primary goals for the first stage of counseling was to establish a humanistic treatment environment that would be accepting, nonjudgmental, and acutely sensitive to her experience. As she started to come out of the depression, she received a job offer and began to work on a part-time basis. Although it had been her goal to return to work, she found herself becoming easily overwhelmed by the demands of the workplace (even by mild job expectations that were well within her capacity) and often had to end the work day early, placing her new job in jeopardy. This upset her deeply. In the middle of a discussion about feeling overwhelmed at work, I empathized, based on what I thought was good evidence, that part of her resented the obligation to work and longed to return to her former pressure-free existence, even though it came with a hellish type of depressive suffering. Reporting to work, becoming overwhelmed, and then leaving her workplace, I suggested, intending to be empathic, were expressive of her conflictual feelings about working. She responded with a resounding "yes," accompanied by profuse crying, explaining that she had felt deeply ashamed of her hidden wish to quit work. The incidents of feeling overwhelmed decreased dramatically as we began to openly discuss in subsequent sessions her shamefully felt wish to stay at home.

On the surface, this vignette appears ordinary and not particularly illustrative of the integration of postmodernism and humanism suggested above. However, the integration can be understood by reviewing the intentionality of the counselor, not the manifest details of the case. The humanistic treatment environment, for example, was instituted as the best conduit for a relational atmosphere of meaning construction. Although humanism emphasizes core relational conditions as healing in themselves (and there is good evidence for this [e.g., Wampold, 2001]), certainly endeavors at meaning construction require an excellent working alliance between counselor and client, a fact that most discussions of postmodernist treatment approaches neglect.

Furthermore, when I made the remark about the client's conflictual feelings regarding work, I had no illusions that I had somehow given words to an actual, as of yet unarticulated, original experience. However, I did feel that bringing forth this element of meaning would enrich her work narrative and deeply resonate with her experience. Without being restricted to accuracy, I was free to select from a much larger variety of remarks than if I had been shackled by traditional humanistic demands for detecting the true nature of her original experience.

Lastly, my remark about her dual selves, the one who liked work and the one who detested it, was not aimed at uniting these polarities into a greater, unified, congruent self. Rather, the goal was to bring out and articulate various aspects of

self, so that she might have a better choice about the context in which they emerged. Moreover, developing these selves within the linguistic setting of counseling further refined them and created new selves from which she could choose.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that postmodern and humanistic counseling approaches each contains what the other lacks. Postmodern approaches, to be effective, require the relational environment specified by humanism. Alternatively, the modernist epistemology of traditional humanism is updated and enriched by postmodern conceptualizations of meaning creation and self-multiplicity. When integrated in this fashion, the result is a richer, potentially more effective, theory that is aimed at cultivating human complexity and individual differences in meaning systems.

This integration also expands possibilities within the counseling setting. For instance, by maintaining the traditional humanistic idea that client experiences lie in wait to be empathically discovered, the counselor is limited to intervening in ways that will correctly reflect the original, unverbalized client experience. However, with the postmodern idea that experience only comes into being in a dialogue and does not wait in pristine form to be discovered (Russell & Wandrei, 1996), counselors are able to select from a greater variety of interventions based on the criteria of experiential resonance. Furthermore, the utility of the core humanistic relational ideals is expanded. Not only are these ideals healing in themselves, but they also provide a necessary relational conduit for meaning construction to occur.

Notably, there has been little attention in the literature to an integration of humanistic and postmodern ideas. This is somewhat ironic for two reasons: (a) Both humanism and postmodernism focus on individual differences in meaning systems, and (b) postmodern ideas have had a strong influence on other major counseling theories, such as cognitivism (e.g., Mahoney, 1991) and psychoanalysis (e.g., Spence, 1982). Why have postmodern ideas influenced these other theories but have not generally been accepted by the humanistic community, despite their shared high regard for the nuances of human meaning systems?

One possible explanation is that cognitivism and psychoanalysis, for example, are rich narratives about human change. Cognitivism specifies that thinking is at the heart of experience and must be altered for change to occur (e.g., Mahoney, 1991). Psychoanalysis, alternatively, posits that unconscious conflict is responsible for psychological problems (Hansen, 2000). Traditionally, each of these theories proceeded from the assumption that the discovery of truth about clients (i.e., actual cognitions and real unconscious conflicts) was a necessary prerequisite for client transformation to take place (Hansen, 2002). Postmodernism has influenced these theories by regarding them as elaborate narrative structures, not containers of truth (Hansen, 2002). Psychoanalytic interventions, for example, according to a postmodern cri-

tique, are not helpful because they uncover the truth about clients; rather, they suggest a new narrative structure for client experience (Schafer, 1992). According to the postmodern vision, reorganizing a client's presenting story along new lines is helpful in and of itself, regardless of considerations of accuracy (Hansen, 2002).

Humanism, unlike these other orientations, however, does not have a strong explanatory system that is communicated to clients. Rather, humanism emphasizes particular relational conditions necessary for healing to occur, not theoretical explanation. Because traditional humanism does not purposefully induct clients into a strong explanatory system of etiology and cure of human problems, postmodernism cannot epistemically convert the humanistic vision into a narrative; there is little explanatory structure to convert. Speculatively, this is why postmodern ideas have made such few inroads into traditional humanism. However, as previously mentioned, theoretical integration of postmodernism and humanism should rely on each system borrowing useful conceptualizations from the other, not epistemically converting supposed truths to narratives, as in psychoanalysis and cognitivism.

In addition to expanding counseling possibilities, perhaps an integration of humanism and postmodern perspectives can serve as a counterbalance to the dominance of medicalization in modern mental health care. The medical model, along with empirically supported treatment approaches, is the polar opposite of the traditional values of the counseling profession, which emphasize differences in individual meaning systems, not gross categorization (Hansen, in press). Although these perspectives are undoubtedly helpful at times, they have achieved such dominance in contemporary mental health care that orientations that value individual differences have been suppressed (Hansen, 2003). By integrating perspectives that eschew categorization and focus on nuances of human meaning, perhaps stronger theoretical hybrids can be developed that will challenge the dominance of medicalization. In this way, the value system of traditional humanistic counseling can be restored and, once again, become a powerful force in mental health culture.

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