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New Town Culture: creative processes in social work with refugee and asylum-seeking young people

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This case study was drawn from a collaboration between researchers and arts and social care agencies in a local authority in London, working with cultural organisations and individual creative practitioners on a culture programme for young people accessing the authority's social care services. The overarching aim of the programme was to explore how artistic and cultural experience can enhance the work of social care practitioners and thus help to support adults and children in need of social care services. The programme pursued three strategies for achieving this aim. Firstly, it increased the arts offer to young people and adults using social care, in one of the most deprived boroughs in London, through the direct provision of new arts-based workshops and projects ('clubs'). Secondly, it embedded this offer within local authority social care, making the activities an integral part of the local authority's provision to support children and young people using support by social care services. Thirdly, it promoted a cultural exchange of ideas and expertise between the arts and social care sectors, with the local authority's culture department and social care practitioners participating in the design of the programme. The programme pursued an agenda of systemic and structural change in addition to one of change for individual participants.

In recent years, a considerable literature has developed which highlights the benefits (and challenges) of socially engaged art (Gibson and Edwards, 2015; Barnes, 2018; Camic et al, 2018). This chapter adds to that literature by providing further data to demonstrate the positive impact of art on the wellbeing and sense of belonging of marginalised people. However, this is not the main purpose of the project. This chapter explores what impact art and creative processes can have on the systems and processes of social care, rather than the impact of art and artists on individual social care users and practitioners – it is a narrative focused on systemic rather than individual transformation. As will be evident, some social care practitioners already incorporate artistic ways of working in their practice and social care leaders

have developed their own arts-based projects within their services. However, we are interested more in how art can be integrated into social care, becoming part of the 'core business' of social care practitioners and, put simply, a way of doing social work.

We begin with a brief outline of the research project, which employed multiple methods of reflective and collaborative data generation with a broad range of stakeholders over a two-year period. The purpose of the project was to examine and understand processes for positive change in the provision of social care in an innovative programme in the London borough of Barking and Dagenham, curated by Marijke Steedman, leading to new forms of training and development, including an interdisciplinary form of reflective practice involving cultural and social care practitioners. Five key 'creative processes' emerged as commonalities from across the various creative clubs, tools and activities we observed and participated in. These processes are overlapping, complementary and somewhat fluid categories but all were linked to positive change, both for services users and the teams across the social care agencies. For the first four processes, 'hopeful disruption'[1], 'radical hospitality', 'ceremony' and 'unlocking culture', we present a specific case study for each one, as an exemplar from our data set. For the final process, 'not knowing', we draw together strands of reflections from multiple service providers. The New Town Culture programme offers a model for using creative collaboration with asylum seekers and marginalised migrant communities that centres their own agency and allows social workers to practice in a more open and reflective way which recognises the creativity and humanity of all partners.

The research

In order to complete our work, we attended and participated in art groups with looked after young people, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people and foster families. In addition, we received data (in the form of the artist's session plan and a recording of a debriefing session) from young women at risk of exploitation. We also attended a workshop run by an artist for social care practitioners from the local authority's Youth Justice Service. We had detailed one-to-one conversations with nine artists and shorter conversations with social care practitioners attending the groups. We attended routine debriefing sessions which took place at the end of groups. We looked at photos from the groups, including photos of artwork. Four of the artists shared written reflections with us, in the form of session plans, reflective diaries and progress reports. We also had a large number of meetings with the programme curators and social care managers and senior leaders, which were instrumental in the identification of the processes discussed in this chapter. As such, the collection and analysis of data falls within a participatory action research paradigm of building relationships,

observing, and gathering and generating materials collaboratively (Cornish et al, 2023) between 2018 and 2020, producing a report by the Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London (Hughes, 2020). The research outlined in this chapter was originally presented in that report.

We talked to participants during the course of groups, including, when appropriate, asking them for their views on the groups though we did not speak to them one-to-one as we felt this would be negatively associated with bureaucracy and official power, and could impact on creative processes and spaces. We also felt that one-to-one interviews were ethically problematic, given the fact that a significant number of participants were likely to have suffered traumatic interviews with officials in the past, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking people's meetings with border officials. The risk of re-traumatising young people through intrusive questioning is highlighted in qualitative research methods literature (see, for example, Hopkins, 2008 and Connolly, 2008, cited in Children's Society, 2018). All participants, or their parents or carers, had given permission for Goldsmiths University involvement when they signed up for the New Town Culture programme. To ensure that participants understood our role as fully as possible, we also distributed picture/symbol-based information sheets in English and four other languages (Arabic, Vietnamese, Albanian and Amharic) and/or gave short talks to participants at the start of the art groups. While artists wished for their names to be used in this chapter, we concealed the identity of the individuals who feature in the case studies, including changing personal characteristics where we felt this was necessary.

Five creative processes

We identified five processes as significant because we saw them happen across all of the groups and settings we observed and because they appeared to be linked to positive change. The processes are overlapping and connected and are perhaps best thought of as different lenses. It is interesting to think about the point of intersection of all the lenses: What can we see if we look through there? What kind of focus does it give us? The names given to them come from the language used by the artists, curators and social care practitioners we spoke to. We hope that gives the terms resonance in the art and social care worlds and enables the ideas behind them to become bridging concepts that facilitate the kind of cultural exchange New Town Culture is aiming for.

Hopeful disruption

At a time of great and dispiriting disruption in the world, it feels odd to be writing about 'hopeful disruption'. We arrived at this term via the term

'positive disruption', to which our attention was drawn by senior social care leaders in the research who use the term themselves and recognised it as a term used in social work internationally. By 'hopeful disruption' we mean artistic acts, carried out by artists or social care practitioners, which challenge conventional ways of talking and acting within both social care spaces and spaces of 'high' culture such as museums and galleries. Such disruption can be orchestrated or spontaneous, but it always emerges from an attitude of hope, and it can generate further hope. To set out to make art and culture part of the core business of local authority social care services is a clear challenge to the current way of doing things in the UK social sector, which is to outsource cultural provision to voluntary sector providers (Hickmore, 2019). 'Hopeful disruption' is also fundamental because, from a socially engaged perspective, all art is, or should be, a form of disruption (Thompson and Sholette, 2004).

In the work of the artists in the programme, there were many instances of orchestrated disruption. For example, in one case an artist supported trafficked and asylum-seeking young people in taking photos of each other's faces. He printed these out and distributed bamboo sticks for them to mount them. Participants carried these placards on a journey on public transport to a museum in central London. At the museum, the artist and young people formed a parade and proceeded to a room full of portraits of the founders and patrons of the museum. Here, they placed their photographic self-portraits alongside those of these wealthy 18th-century philanthropists.

We also observed hopeful disruption in the actions of participants. In the case study below, the activities with the loudspeakers gave the young asylum-seeking people a voice within a public space which is not always open and welcoming to them. The young people played with the boundaries of the activity the artist had devised and he plays along, according them agency within the interaction.

Sound mirrors and loudspeakers

In the morning, Albert Potrony, the artist, shows the young people images of the Second World War giant concrete sound mirrors, precursors to radar, used in the work of artists Amalia Pica and Tacita Dean. He provides the young people with cardboard, tin cans, string, scissors and glue guns and encourages them to make their own communication devices. They engage in this activity with their usual focus and openness.

After lunch we take the DIY communication devices into the street outside the social services building. The young people are relaxed and up for having fun. The sound mirror becomes a hat, which is offered to others, including me, to be tried on. Albert asks the young people to give him words in their own languages to shout into the improvised loudspeaker. One young man

causes great merriment among his co-nationals by supplying Albert with words which are almost certainly rude. Albert gamely shouts them out. There are a few amused glances from passers-by. I am not sure if they understand the words or are simply taken by the fun the young people are having.

By playing along with the young man here, Albert showed that he did not see the disruption as problematic. On other occasions, we saw Albert and other artists noting with pleasure instances of disruption initiated by participants. When, at the end of the week's workshop, Kevin, a quiet and apparently shy young man, picked up the sculpture he had made and 'played' it like a saxophone, Albert commented: 'Wow! People surprise you!'

The generative power of 'hopeful disruption' may be similar to the power of a crisis. Crisis intervention is an established model within social work, which still features in textbooks (Trevithick, 2012), but has lacked a recent evidence base for some time (Parker, 2007). The individualisation of risk within society (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and the dominance in local authorities of a bureaucratic audit culture where 'new ideas are seen as problematic' (Munro, 2019: 126), may be responsible for the marginalisation of crisis intervention. Hopeful disruption, thus, recognises potential risk but also opens up new relational spaces which we see in the following process of radical hospitality.

Radical hospitality

The ability to convey a sense of being cared for and, more fundamentally, create a sense of safety, is, at root, a tacit, embodied one. It is there in the light touch of approbation on a shoulder, in the steady timbre of the voice and in the beaming smile. The artists we observed were skilled facilitators who possessed this ability. The idea of 'radical hospitality', however, goes further. We first came across the term in an artist's plan for Transform Yourself, a five-day workshop run for young women at risk of exploitation. At the start of the workshop, the artist, Albert Potrony, provided participants with beanbags, duvets, cushions, rugs and gold foil fringe curtains and asked them to transform an area of the room they were working in into a place to relax and take care of themselves. This space was maintained during the whole week as a space for rest and conversation. Reflecting in correspondence with us on how he had come to give this activity the title of 'Radical Hospitality', the artist said:

> I thought that it could be a radical thing to do for these young women at risk of or being abused to experience hospitality in a safe environment, to take care of themselves for the sake of it, without an ulterior motive or benefit to anybody else. By doing so, hopefully, the act of self-care could help them to value themselves for who they are,

in their own terms, and not by what someone else wants them to be. To take control of their own care.

Perfect party

In a three-day workshop for foster families, the artists Rebecca Davis and Alice White gave participants the possibility to control and alter the relationships between themselves as hosts and the participants as guests. The form of collaboration – the preparation and enjoyment of a 'perfect party' – was chosen by the participants at the outset. Activities included the planning and preparation of table mats, table decorations and the food for the party, including a centre-piece of bread dough spelling out 'Perfect Party'. Through these activities, the participants became 'hosts' alongside the artist.

Control over food is a very basic form of agency not infrequently denied to people in state care (McIntosh et al, 2010), and New Town Culture participants appreciated it when it was accorded to them: 'You get food … and the fact that we had a choice … instead of people picking for you … it was nice'.

Choice of food is an important signifier of identity (Fischler, 1988). As part of Your Future, a six-month-long project for young people in the care of the local authority led by the artist Paul Crook, the young people and artists went out into Barking to interview and film members of the public in restaurants and cafes. Paul reflected in his diary that it: 'Was a good experience going out and visiting the restaurants. Faisal took pride in making the introductions and speaking to staff. … We all felt that we had seen parts of Barking we would not normally see.'

Here, one of the participants, Faisal, was able to act as host to the artists and his fellow group members, because he had been placed in a situation where he had something to offer (language expertise and food). Indeed, in this way, Faisal had the opportunity to share and offer something of his very self. This was possible because Paul and his co-worker Dela were willing to relinquish their role as hosts and accept Faisal's hospitality. Derrida holds that 'absolute hospitality' 'emerges when we give up control over our sovereign spaces' (Batchelor et al, 2019: 5) within which he includes ourselves. This is a generosity of the self; a kind of radical openness to others.

In social care both currently and historically there are powerful implicit and explicit rules which govern expressing or sharing anything about oneself with 'service users'. In social care environments influenced by neo-liberalism and an audit culture – that is, most social care environments – these can tend towards avoiding sharing oneself and preserving distance from service users. Warner (2019) frames these issues in terms of proximity, arguing that, from the early 20th century onwards, there has been a tension within social work between practitioners who aim for objectivity and distance, and those who

believe in closeness and the value of personal relationships. While social work at the start of the 21st century was in a phase where objectivity and distance were more highly valued, since the mid-2010s, it has taken something of a relational turn. This is evident in the gradual incorporation of models such as 'relationship-based practice' (Ruch et al, 2018) and 'contextual safeguarding' (Firmin and Lloyd, 2020) into practice, as well as in research which suggests that when practitioners are not allowed to show their compassion through touch and self-disclosure they burn out (Tanner, 2020). In this sense radical hospitality may affect positive change for service users and providers alike.

Ceremony, or making moments matter

By ceremony we mean a process of saying, thinking or doing which 1) unfolds in an ordered sequence (while still having room for spontaneity), 2) involves repetition, 3) makes use of objects in a symbolic way, and with attention to aesthetics and 4) has a collective dimension (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977). We might think of ceremonies as large-scale events, such as graduation ceremonies or award ceremonies. Due to COVID-19, these events were not able to take place. However, what we could call 'everyday ceremony' was also an important part of the work the programme artists did with young people in groups and workshops. Some of these 'everyday ceremonies' were familiar ones within Western cultures: for example, the presentation of certificates of achievement at the end of each group, routine 'warm-up' exercises, and 'countdowns', such as this 'jelly ceremony', part of the Perfect Party: 'Are we ready? Five, four, three, two, one – yeah!' (lifts the mould off the jelly).

Ceremonies like this have aesthetic appeal which was recognised by the artists – and they can be fun! This may be why artists sometimes incorporated spontaneous moments of ceremony in their activities. Other ceremonies, like the powerfully evocative Tokens, an activity with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, were less familiar in their format and carefully crafted, rather than spontaneous.

Tokens

In a room in the Foundling Museum, we stand in a circle holding our objects. In turn we go forward and place our objects on the floor in the centre of the circle. A small pile accumulates. I see Albert's father's spectacles and a picture of Muhammed's worn wristband woven in the colours of the flag of his home country. It has been on his wrist throughout his journey to the UK. There are the photos of the painted nails of the girls, Celestine and Mahmooda, who had not known what to contribute, because they had nothing to bring. It was their social worker, Amina, who suggested they

could photograph their beautiful nails. Ibrahim comes then, and only then, to place his printed-out verse from the Qu'ran on the top of the pile. When it falls slightly to the side, he returns to adjust its position. It is important – essential – that the verse remain on top. The pile looks like a small heap of offerings. In the rooms above us, glass cases contain objects – tokens – left by women as markers of identity for the babies they entrusted to the care of the Foundling Hospital.

There are, in fact, many ceremonies within local authority social care practice; indeed, the work of practitioners is largely organised around them. These ceremonies – local authority processes – include review meetings, case conferences and transition planning meetings. They have their own form of spatial ordering (often, round a table in a local authority office), their own symbolic objects (written documents of pre- determined format) and they unfold in particular sequences, time and time again (Joyce, 2005). One practitioner, reflecting on social care practice in the past, expressed concern about the extent to which local authority processes drive social care and social work practice today. This concern was mirrored in the talk of some senior leaders in the local authority who talked about rooting out 'procedural' practice.

> We weren't as process-driven. We were able to spend more time. It was unheard of if it was a child's birthday not to give them a card and take them out for lunch. We need to get back into that place where children feel that if they're special to anyone then their social worker is among those people.

The point here is that, for some social workers, it feels as if this kind of personal celebration is not central to what they are supposed to be doing. This may have been the experience of some social care users. One New Town Culture participant told us:

> Even though my social worker is nice, it's always kind of 'business'. I feel like they have so many children to care for and look after and sometimes, after a while, you just get tired of going through the same procedure over and over again, loads of kids, can you imagine that.

In Tokens, we see the psychosocial importance of ceremonies: they are processes or rituals that express and reinforce values, assist with life transitions and signify cultures (Laird, 1984). Tokens was a celebration of who the young people were – their identities – as well as where they had come from – their cultures – and their journeys (their transitions from one culture to another, and from childhood to adulthood). Within trauma theory, there is recognition that, 'if transitions are insufficiently marked and integrated, they may continue to be sources of pain, stress and dysfunction' (Laird, 1984: 126;

Levine, 1997). Moreover, it is maintained by some trauma therapists that social recognition of an individual's previously unrecognised transition can be healing, even when it is belated (Levine, 1997). The New Town Culture programme points to the vital importance of ceremonies which celebrate the young person's identity and culture – birthdays and more – and to the importance of social workers being part of these ceremonies. We cannot go without formal 'ceremonies' such as case conferences and review meetings; however, there may be ways, perhaps through new composite ceremonies, which can achieve the same ends while also celebrating the individual whose interest they have been designed to serve.

Unlocking culture/s

By unlocking culture/s, we mean opening people's eyes to new possibilities – to new ways of thinking, doing and being – with the aim of giving them new sources of belonging and self-worth. In the arts literature, this process is sometimes referred to as increasing 'cultural literacy' or 'cultural capital' and the culture referred to is arts-based culture. 'Culture' can also, of course, refer more broadly to a shared set of ideas, practices and material objects, which could be associated with ethnicity or nationality but could also be linked to class, religion, gender, age, sexuality, dis/ability, employment status and a whole set of other variables. The New Town Culture programme has tried to work with and think about culture in both senses. It has also had a concern with unlocking culture not only for participants but also for social care practitioners. Its approach to unlocking culture has entailed both bringing participants and social care practitioners into the many contexts of the arts and taking up opportunities and invitations to enter their worlds. Given all of these different dimensions, it is not surprising that this area is still very much a 'work in progress' for the programme. Nonetheless, there have been some important successes so far.

Your Future

In the Your Future group, participants learnt new skills in filmmaking and production. Two participants, in particular, formed strong relationships with the artist and curatorial assistant leading the group (Paul Crook and Dela Anderson), as well as connecting with the New Town Programme curator. One of these two participants is now very interested in trying to build a career or his own artistic practice in this area. In addition, both participants have both now decided to become part of the Advisory Group for the New Town Culture programme going forward. This is a considerable commitment for one of them, as he has a paid job working long hours in order to meet his daily living costs.

One of the ways in which the programme attempted to unlock artistic culture for its participants was by supporting them to visit prestigious cultural institutions, such as Tate Modern and the Foundling Museum. Another was by supporting them to create their own work and then to make connections between their work and existing and often acclaimed works of art, either directly or through showing films or pictures of them. In the Make Your Own English group, a combination of these strategies was used. Ibrahim was an 18-year-old Somali man who, like all the participants in the group, was polite, respectful and willing to 'have a go' at all the activities. At the same time, like many other participants, he was there because he had been told to attend by his social worker. At the start of the week, when asked why he had decided to come to the group, Ibrahim had seemed embarrassed and agitated: 'I don't know … maybe about training … but still I don't know really about this training still. I don't understand why I come here. Still not explain for me too much. The question, it's hard it … I cannot answer this question.'

Later in the week, along with other participants, Ibrahim made a cardboard and plaster sculpture using similar techniques to the artist Franz West. The following day, the group visited the West exhibition at the Tate Modern. Standing in front of a case of models, Ibrahim commented: 'This is interesting … very interesting. Yesterday was fun, but I thought it was nothing. Now I can see.'

Hearing Ibrahim say this felt like witnessing a small epiphany. Looking back, it was perhaps the moment when Ibrahim shifted from being a young man simply complying with his social worker's instruction to attend the group, to being an active thinker and maker within the project. Of course, there is nothing in Ibrahim's words to tell us whether or not he thought that what he was looking at in that moment – Franz West's work – was of particular worth or not. Perhaps what we can say, though, is that he recognised the 'unlocking' that the artist was trying to facilitate. Ibrahim understood that he was being offered a way of connecting to something that was valued in the new society he found himself in, and he appreciated this.

Engaging in greater depth with the culture(s) of social care services in the borough through discussions with social care practitioners led to new thinking about the continuous professional development aspect of the programme. There is a shift, we suggest, from talking about 'continuous professional development' to speaking instead of a more equal 'knowledge exchange' between social care practitioners on the one hand and artists/curators on the other and we are developing a new methodology for this knowledge exchange, a group reflection method which we call 'interdisciplinary intervision' (Hughes et al, 2020). In addition, the curators and artists are planning more workshops focused on engaging with social care

practitioners in their own right. In this way, the task of 'unlocking culture/s' will be progressed in the next phase of the programme.

Not knowing

> We don't know their case history – are they aware of that? Does our not knowing change our approach in how we communicate and interact with them?

With this remark, artist Paul Crook asks, does 'not knowing' the case history of the young people he and his co-worker Dela Anderson are working with change the way he is with the young people? Implicit in his comment is also the question of whether the young people may be different with Paul and Dela because they know that Paul and Dela do not know their case histories. In short, what is the power of 'not knowing'? Paul certainly felt that it was a significant part of the creative process within the Your Future group he ran with young people leaving care. He further commented in his diary: 'Letitia telling us about her experience being in care or Faisal speaking about his difficulties when first living in the UK. These are conversations that could have only happened in the context of the project and were a response to what we were doing.'

Paul is talking here about participants revealing aspects of their identities and their personal histories which were sometimes unknown to their social care practitioners. During the course of the Make Your Own English group, there was another, particularly striking example of this. Celestine, a quietly spoken young woman aged 16, was introduced to the Make Your Own English group by her social worker as a new arrival in the area who spoke very limited English. The social worker explained that Celestine spoke only a minority African language and that the team had as yet been unable to find an interpreter in London who spoke that language. During the course of the week there were a number of activities designed to celebrate the many languages spoken by the participating young people. For example, the young people taught each other the names of animals in all the languages they could think of. They photocopied their hands and then wrote onto the photocopies all the languages they spoke. At the end of the week, they wrote their evaluation of the week on mini-whiteboards, reading out the words so that the different sounds resonated around the council chamber rooms. Through these activities, it emerged that Celestine actually had a good knowledge of two major African languages, as well as her own minority language.

Celestine's social worker, Amina, was quite delighted at this unexpected development. She explained to us that it can be very difficult to find out key information about the young people because they are reluctant to talk about themselves: 'We refer them to CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] but they don't always want to go or they don't want to talk.'

Sometimes, young people have been explicitly instructed by traffickers not to share information and sometimes they have a mistrust of officials, built up during their journey to the UK. Amina felt that it was due to the nature of the space which the artist had created in the Make Your English group that Celestine felt it was alright to share information about herself. Albert Potrony, the artist who ran both Make Your Own English and the Transform Yourself groups commented that: 'These sessions are a social space in which you can see this person in a slightly different light. A space where another type of relationship can come up … still a professional relationship … (but) where different things can be learned.'

'Not knowing' is a process that may allow young people to be seen in a different way and therefore opens up the possibility for new relationships. The New Town Culture programme curator played a key role in sustaining 'not knowing' because she had to take decisions about what information about young people to share with commissioned artists. In fact, the potential of 'not knowing' in social care practice has been recognised for some time and has renewed prominence as a result of the recent revival of systemic theory within local authority social care practice (Messent and Pendry, 2019). Barry Mason has developed the concept of 'safe uncertainty' (Mason, 1993; 2019) and argues that though 'clients' or social care users want to feel safe, this is unlikely to be a sustainable position. Instead, the practitioner can help the individual to a place of 'safe uncertainty' by using their expertise to open up space for new meaning to emerge. This involves allowing different stories about who the service user is to exist alongside each other.

This was in fact New Town Culture curator Marijke Steedman's position when it came to planning the content of groups and 'experiential encounters' were exactly what the New Town Culture programme art groups were able to offer. In this context, 'not knowing' does not mean ignoring important information about a person but rather not allowing that information to stand for the whole person.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have written about five creative processes which we observed in the work of the 'New Town Culture' programme. The artistic acts, carried out by artists or social care practitioners of 'hopeful disruption' challenge conventional ways of talking and acting within various social spaces. 'Radical hospitality' welcomes others warmly, while also giving place to them though sharing control over relationships and spaces and even the boundaries. The 'ceremony' processes, though sequencing, the use of symbols and attention to beauty, add to the wider social significance of what is being enacted. The act of 'unlocking cultures' opens people's eyes to new possibilities – to new ways of thinking, doing and being, while 'not knowing'

allows for different stories about who a person is to exist alongside each other. The New Town Culture programme continues to thrive, offering a radical vision for connecting art practice and various public services of public life. The development and implementation of these innovative processes have fundamentally changed the provision of social work and youth justice in the borough of Dagenham and Barking, to the extent that New Town Culture has now evolved into a platform for 'radical new training', research and tools for social care practitioners, artists, and cultural organisations, including a Creative Social Work course for social work professionals. In this, the project aims to re-imagine the city through the roles of creativity and lived experience leadership in transforming policy design, service delivery and community engagement throughout the UK.

Note

[1] Tim Fisher, a social worker and social care manager, is co-creator with us of the term 'hopeful disruption'.

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