Navigating the Hyphen: Reflexive Positionality in Migrant Research

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Abstract

This study explores the complexities of researcher positionality within migration research, focusing on Zimbabwean migrant teachers in South Africa. Employing an autoethnographic approach, it examines the fluid insider-outsider dynamics shaped by overlapping identities and socio-political contexts. Drawing on concepts such as translocational positionality and intersectionality, the research highlights how shifting positionalities influence both the research process and knowledge production. Reflexivity is central to addressing power dynamics and ensuring epistemic justice by centring the voices of marginalised groups. The study contributes to migration research by problematising traditional insider-outsider binaries and emphasising the ethical significance of transparency. Ultimately, this research calls for a nuanced understanding of positionality, demonstrating its importance in producing credible and inclusive knowledge that respects the lived experiences of migrant communities.

Keywords: Positionality; autoethnography; migrant teachers; epistemic justice; South Africa.

Introduction

As a migrant navigating the blurred boundaries between 'home' and 'away,' my identity, and consequently my researcher positionality, has been marked by a perpetual sense of in-betweenness. This fluid positioning inevitably rendered the detached observer approach to qualitative research near impossible. My research, which explores the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrant teachers in South Africa, is situated within these complex interstices—shaped by the shifting insider-outsider positionalities I experience across the transnational spaces I inhabit. The need to explicitly address my multifaceted positionality emerged as an ethical

imperative throughout my fieldwork, mirroring my ongoing commitment to reflexivity in the writing of my research publications. My positionality as both a migrant and a researcher places me at the intersection of overlapping identities and experiences, and this study aims to unravel the intricacies of these positionalities while advancing epistemic justice.

Through reflexive engagement, my positionality revealed itself in the shared yet differentiated stories of migrant teachers carving out precarious lives in South Africa. The common struggles that we faced in our marginalisation—be it overt xenophobia or subtle forms of othering—blurred the line between 'researcher' and 'researched.' These dynamics rendered my identity as neither entirely inside nor outside, resonating with Abu-Lughod's (2008) concept of the 'halfie.' My experiences reflect Anthias' (2008) notion of "translocational positionality," which frames identity as fluid and shifting, shaped by complex power dynamics across time and space. This paper argues for an approach to positionality that moves beyond binary notions of insider-outsider positioning, embracing instead the complex intersections that challenge static understandings of identity.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on the role of positionality in knowledge production, particularly within migration research. By openly addressing positionality, I aim to provide transparency around the constructed nature of my knowledge claims. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of positionality not only enhances the quality and credibility of research but also has an ethical significance, advancing the goal of epistemic justice by recentring voices that have been historically marginalised (Medina, 2013). This introduction aims to situate the study within a critical, reflective framework that problematises conventional boundaries and highlights the necessity of a nuanced exploration of researcher positionality.

Conceptualising Positionality

Positionality is a multifaceted concept that has been interrogated across numerous disciplines. It refers to the social, political, and ideological positions that a researcher brings to their work, based on their identity, experiences, and roles (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Rowe, 2014). The concept of positionality gained prominence through feminist and postcolonial scholarship, which highlighted how knowledge production is situated and perspectival, inherently shaped by power hierarchies linked to identity markers such as race, gender, and class (Harding, 1987; Merriam et al., 2001). Positionality implies that the researcher's perspective influences all aspects of the research process—from the questions asked to the way findings are interpreted (Huisman, 2008). This section traces the conceptual origins of positionality while integrating an understanding of its importance in research, particularly in migration studies.

The traditional understanding of positionality often relied on a dichotomy between insider and outsider perspectives. Merton (1972) defined insiders as those belonging to the group under study, while outsiders are non-members. In migration research, the insider-outsider divide typically positions migrant researchers as insiders and those outside the migrant group as outsiders (Carling, Erdal, & Ezzati, 2014). However, such binaries have increasingly been problematised by scholars who argue for a more nuanced understanding of overlapping and fluid positionalities (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Merriam et al., 2001). In the context of this study, my positionality as a Zimbabwean migrant researching other Zimbabwean migrants situates me both

within and outside of the group, depending on multiple intersecting factors such as professional status, socio-economic background, and individual experiences of migration.

Anthias' (2008) concept of "translocational positionality" is particularly relevant in conceptualising the complexities inherent in migrant researcher identity. This concept moves beyond binary notions of insider-outsider to capture the fluidity of identity and belonging across different locations and contexts. For migrant academics, positionality is not fixed but changes over time and across spaces, shaped by both privilege and subjugation in different contexts. For instance, during my research, my identity as a Zimbabwean migrant initially appeared to confer insider status, enabling me to build trust with participants who shared similar experiences of migration and marginalisation. However, differences in education level, legal status, and socio-economic position simultaneously positioned me as an outsider, complicating the assumed insider privilege.

This fluid nature of positionality reveals the importance of embracing complexity rather than eliminating it. Positionality must be seen as a spectrum, with researchers occupying different roles depending on their interactions with participants and the sociocultural context of the research (Sultana, 2007). For instance, in some instances, my identity as a migrant created shared empathetic connections that facilitated communication, while at other times, my academic position introduced distance and power dynamics that required careful negotiation. This underscores the ethical importance of transparency and reflexivity in qualitative research, allowing readers to critically assess the influence of the researcher's positionality on the knowledge produced.

Positionality, as grounded in critical theory and feminism, asserts that all knowledge production is partial and situated within prevailing sociocultural and political contexts (Harding, 1987; Kobayashi, 2003). Recognising the importance of positionality challenges the assumptions of objectivity and neutrality that have long dominated traditional research paradigms (Cohen et al., 2011). Instead, it posits that researchers' social identities and experiences invariably shape what is seen, what is asked, and how findings are interpreted (Lilley, 2009; Mullings, 1999). By bringing self-reflexivity into the design and execution of research, researchers acknowledge the ways in which their social positions impact the research process (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

The importance of positionality lies in its capacity to reveal the relational and situated nature of knowledge. By recognising that all researchers hold intersecting identities shaped by gender, race, class, nationality, and migration status, positionality encourages researchers to critically engage with their own perspectives and assumptions. This approach is particularly pertinent in migration research, where apparent shared attributes between researcher and participants—such as nationality or migration background—can obscure substantial differences in lived experience and power relations. Ganga and Scott (2006) highlighted how shared nationality does not always equate to shared positionality, as internal hierarchies and divergent migration trajectories may create divisions that complicate the researcher-participant relationship.

The notion of "translocational positionality" also emphasises the importance of reflexivity in dealing with overlapping and shifting identities (Anthias, 2008). As a migrant researcher, my position changed fluidly throughout my fieldwork. In some situations, shared experiences of

marginalisation allowed me to empathise deeply with participants, blurring the boundaries between researcher and researched. In other instances, my relative privilege—in terms of education or legal status—distanced me from participants, reinforcing my outsider status. These complexities highlight the importance of critically reflecting on one's positionality throughout the research process. Reflexivity is not merely an add-on to qualitative research but a crucial practice that allows for greater transparency and accountability in the construction of knowledge.

Reflexivity involves continuously interrogating how one's positionality affects every stage of the research process, from design to data collection and interpretation (Finlay, 2002). It also necessitates being attuned to the power dynamics inherent in the research encounter. In this study, my positionality influenced not only my access to participants but also the ways in which I interpreted their narratives. The recognition of these influences is critical for advancing epistemic justice, as it brings to the forefront the perspectives and voices of marginalised groups (Medina, 2013). By making explicit my positionality, I aim to ensure that my interpretations do not reproduce dominant discourses but instead create space for alternative, subaltern narratives to emerge.

The concept of positionality also underscores the ethical dimensions of qualitative research, particularly in the context of migration studies. Researcher positionality is not merely a matter of methodological transparency; it also involves ethical obligations towards participants. In migration research, the researcher often holds a position of relative privilege, which necessitates careful consideration of how power dynamics shape the research encounter and influence participants' willingness to share their stories (Sultana, 2007). Acknowledging positionality, therefore, is a step towards addressing these power imbalances and ensuring that the research process is conducted in an ethically responsible manner.

Moreover, acknowledging positionality enhances the authenticity of the research by situating the researcher within the field they study. My identity as a Zimbabwean migrant inevitably shaped my interactions with participants, influencing both the data I collected and how I interpreted it. For example, the empathy that arose from shared experiences of xenophobia and marginalisation facilitated a level of openness in interviews that might not have been possible for a non-migrant researcher. However, this empathy also required careful management to ensure that my interpretations remained analytically rigorous and did not overly privilege my own experiences. As Sultana (2007) and Mullings (1999) note, the challenge for researchers lies in maintaining a balance between empathy and analytical detachment, ensuring that personal experiences do not overshadow participants' voices.

By integrating an understanding of positionality into the conceptual framework of the research, I aim to highlight its significance for both the methodological and ethical dimensions of the study. Positionality is not static but shifts across different contexts and interactions, requiring researchers to remain vigilant about their own influences on the research process. In this study, the importance of positionality is underscored by the continuous negotiation of insider-outsider dynamics and the reflexive practice of acknowledging how these dynamics shape knowledge production. This commitment to reflexivity is not only an ethical obligation but also a methodological imperative that enhances the credibility and inclusivity of the research.

Anthias (2012) further argues that positionality must be understood in relation to intersecting power structures that shape social identities and influence the research encounter. In the context of my research, this means acknowledging how my positionality as a migrant researcher is shaped by broader socio-political forces, such as migration policies, xenophobia, and socio-economic inequality. These intersecting forces influence not only my identity but also the ways in which participants perceive me and are willing to engage with the research process. By situating positionality within these broader contexts, I aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in migration research.

Ultimately, positionality is a lens through which the complexities of researcher identity and its impact on knowledge production can be critically examined. It challenges simplistic notions of objectivity and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how researchers' intersecting identities shape the research process. In migration research, where issues of power, privilege, and marginalisation are particularly pronounced, the importance of positionality cannot be overstated. It provides a framework for understanding how shared and divergent experiences of migration shape the researcher-participant relationship, influencing both the data collected and the interpretation of findings.

Thus, the conceptualisation of positionality in this study is grounded in the recognition that all knowledge is situated, partial, and shaped by the researcher's identity and experiences. By embracing the complexities of positionality, this study aims to provide a more transparent and ethically sound account of the research process, advancing the goal of epistemic justice by recentring the voices of marginalised migrant communities. The reflexive practice of acknowledging positionality is crucial for ensuring that the knowledge produced is inclusive, representative, and attuned to the intersecting power dynamics that shape the lives of Zimbabwean migrant teachers in South Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that combines translocational positionality, intersectionality, and critical race theory to examine the complexities of migrant research. Anthias' (2008) concept of translocational positionality provides the foundational lens for understanding how my identity as a migrant researcher is continuously negotiated across different contexts. This framework moves beyond static insider-outsider dichotomies, recognising the fluid, context-dependent nature of belonging and identity. By embracing translocational positionality, the research highlights how intersecting identities—such as nationality, socio-economic status, and migration experience—interact to shape both the research process and the relationships with participants.

Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), is integrated into this framework to explore how overlapping social identities impact the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrant teachers. The intersectional lens allows for an in-depth analysis of how identities such as race, gender, and migration status are interconnected, affecting the dynamics of power and privilege within the research context. This is particularly relevant in understanding the multiple layers of

marginalisation experienced by migrant teachers in South Africa, who face not only xenophobia but also gendered and class-based discrimination.

Critical race theory (CRT) is employed to examine the structural forces that perpetuate inequality and shape the experiences of migrants in South Africa. CRT's emphasis on the role of systemic racism provides a crucial perspective for understanding how broader socio-political contexts influence both my positionality and the experiences of participants. This theoretical lens underscores the importance of situating individual narratives within the broader historical and political landscape, highlighting how institutionalised power dynamics shape the everyday realities of Zimbabwean migrant teachers.

Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for exploring the fluid and intersecting nature of researcher and participant identities. By integrating translocational positionality, intersectionality, and critical race theory, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how identity, power, and privilege intersect to influence knowledge production and the ethical obligations inherent in-migrant research.

Methodology: Emergence of Themes

The four key themes of this study—In-Betweenness and Hybrid Identity, Empathy and Shared Vulnerability, Navigating Insider-Outsider Dynamics, and Ethical Imperatives and Epistemic Justice—emerged from an iterative process of thematic analysis, grounded in an autoethnographic methodological approach. This section outlines how these themes were identified and refined through systematic coding and reflexive engagement with the data.

The data corpus was generated through in-depth autoethnographic reflections, field notes, and interviews with Zimbabwean migrant teachers in South Africa. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework guided the thematic identification process, which involved a rigorous sequence of data familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for patterns, and reviewing potential themes. During the coding phase, both deductive and inductive approaches were employed, drawing from existing theoretical frameworks while remaining open to emergent insights from the data itself. The process began by categorising the data into meaningful units and subsequently coding them to capture shared and divergent participant experiences. Reflexive journaling played a key role, enabling continuous interrogation of my own positionality and how it shaped the themes. This reflexive practice ensured that the emerging themes were not only rooted in the empirical data but also informed by critical reflection on the research process.

The themes emerged organically through this dual approach, combining empirical data analysis and reflexivity. For each theme, specific vignettes and episodes from the fieldwork were integrated, demonstrating the lived experiences of the participants. This approach lends authenticity to the narratives and highlights the relational dynamics at play. For instance, themes like Empathy and Shared Vulnerability were exemplified by the personal connections formed during interviews, while Navigating Insider-Outsider Dynamics became evident through the continuous negotiation of my own fluctuating positionalities.

Navigating Positionality: Reflexive Themes in Migrant Research

In exploring my positionality as a migrant researcher studying other migrants in South Africa, several key themes emerge that reflect the multifaceted nature of my identity and experiences. These themes—In-Betweenness and Hybrid Identity, Empathy and Shared Vulnerability, Navigating Insider-Outsider Dynamics, and Ethical Imperatives and Epistemic Justice—illustrate the complex dynamics of being an insider-outsider, the deep empathetic connections formed through shared vulnerabilities, the continuous negotiation of fluid positionalities, and the ethical imperatives driving my research. By examining these themes, this section provides a comprehensive understanding of how my positionality influences and shapes the research process.

In-Betweenness and Hybrid Identity

My positionality as a migrant researcher in South Africa is marked by an inherent in-betweenness, a condition of existing between 'home' and 'away' without fully belonging to either. This theme reflects my hybrid identity, which places me in a perpetual state of liminality. The concept of "translocational positionality," introduced by Anthias (2008), aptly captures the complexities of my identity that oscillates between privilege and subjugation across different contexts and interactions. In this regard, I embody the "hyphenated selves" (Fine, 1994) shaped by fractured histories of mobility, which inherently influences my perspectives as both a researcher and a participant in migrant experiences.

The notion of "in-betweenness" is not merely theoretical but an active experience I live out in my research encounters. My "halfie" (Abu-Lughod, 2008) positionality means that I am neither wholly inside nor completely outside. This dual positioning has practical implications for my research approach, allowing me both to empathise with my participants and to experience similar forms of 'othering' as we navigate life in South Africa. This dynamic relationship makes it impossible for me to maintain the 'fly on the wall' detachment often associated with traditional qualitative research. Instead, my proximity to my participants is shaped by an ethical imperative to address shared experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.

Anthias (2008) suggests that such positionality challenges static notions of insider-outsider relationships, revealing the fluid and intersectional nature of identity. For example, during my fieldwork, my shared identity as an African migrant allowed for moments of resonance with participants as we collectively faced xenophobia and discrimination in South African schools and communities (Manik, 2013; Neocosmos, 2008; Tarisayi & Manik, 2019). However, this also created moments of tension where participants' experiences differed significantly from my own. These contradictions, rather than being a limitation, enrich the research process by allowing a deeper exploration of the intersectional experiences of migrants. My cultural hybridity thus provides both a vantage point for understanding participants and blind spots that necessitate ongoing reflexivity.

This theme of in-betweenness is intrinsically linked to the ethical and epistemic dimensions of my research. Addressing my positionality involves making explicit the constructed nature of my knowledge claims, as emphasised by Malterud (2001). Such transparency not only enhances the credibility of the research but also aligns with an imperative for epistemic justice by recentering

the voices of marginalised groups (Medina, 2013). My positionality as a migrant researcher is not static but evolves through continuous engagement with the community of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, striving to reconcile insider-outsider tensions through an autoethnographic praxis that challenges simplistic dichotomies.

Empathy and Shared Vulnerability

A significant theme in my research is the notion of empathy and shared vulnerability. As a migrant studying fellow migrants, I frequently experience a deep empathetic connection with my participants. Our shared vulnerabilities create a powerful emotional resonance that influences both the research process and the interpretation of data. This connection is not just a matter of shared experiences of migration but also a profound alignment of socio-political and cultural contexts that shape our daily lives.

Through autoethnographic reflections, I have come to realise that my participants' fears, coping mechanisms, and survival tactics often mirror my own. This shared vulnerability fosters a sense of solidarity, which is both empowering and challenging. For instance, during interviews, my understanding of the participants' experiences of xenophobia, job precarity, and social exclusion was not merely intellectual but deeply personal. These were experiences I, too, was navigating. Such empathy facilitated the development of a rapport that went beyond the conventional researcher-participant relationship, creating a collaborative atmosphere conducive to honest, meaningful dialogue.

However, shared vulnerability also poses ethical challenges. While empathy is crucial for gaining rich, authentic insights into participants' experiences, it also risks blurring the boundaries between researcher and participant, potentially leading to over-identification and bias. As Sultana (2007) notes, the emotional toll of such engagement necessitates constant reflexivity to maintain both emotional and analytical distance. The balancing act between proximity and distance is therefore a central aspect of my research practice. It requires me to be mindful of my emotional responses and to ensure that they do not cloud the interpretation of participants' narratives.

This theme of empathy and shared vulnerability also plays an essential role in advancing the goals of epistemic justice in my research. By acknowledging our shared struggles and emotional connections, I strive to challenge the dominant narratives that often portray migrant communities as passive victims. Instead, my approach seeks to highlight the resilience, agency, and complexities of these individuals, who navigate a hostile socio-political landscape in South Africa. Medina (2013) argues that embracing empathy as part of reflexive practice contributes to epistemic justice by giving voice to marginalised communities. My goal, therefore, is to provide a platform where the experiences of Zimbabwean migrant teachers are acknowledged and valued, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their realities.

Navigating Insider-Outsider Dynamics

The theme of navigating insider-outsider dynamics is integral to understanding the fluid nature of my positionality. In migrant research, the insider-outsider dichotomy is particularly complex, as

shared national or cultural backgrounds do not necessarily equate to shared experiences or perspectives. My positionality as a Zimbabwean migrant in South Africa affords me insider status in some respects, yet, at times, it also positions me as an outsider. This fluid positionality requires continuous negotiation and reflexivity to balance the advantages and limitations that come with each role.

My insider status allows for easier access to participants and provides a shared cultural understanding that can facilitate communication and rapport. During interviews and participant observations, my familiarity with the participants' language, cultural references, and migration trajectories created a space of mutual understanding. For instance, discussing the socio-political challenges faced by Zimbabwean teachers in South African schools often brought out shared experiences, allowing participants to feel understood and less constrained in their narratives (Tarisayi, 2023).

However, the complexities of my positionality often meant shifting between the roles of insider and outsider. My position as a researcher, with academic privileges and professional standing, sometimes distanced me from participants who viewed me through the lens of my educational and socio-economic status. As Anthias (2008) argues, positionality is shaped by intersecting axes of identity, which can simultaneously confer privilege and create distance. In my case, while shared nationality provided an initial point of connection, differences in education, legal status, and socio-economic conditions positioned me as an outsider in other ways. This paradoxical position required ongoing reflexivity to recognise how these dynamics influenced participants' willingness to share their experiences and how they perceived my role in the research.

This fluidity of insider-outsider boundaries necessitated a reflexive approach that embraced the complexities and contradictions inherent in such positionality. As Mullings (1999) suggests, the adoption of "adopted insider" roles requires the researcher to be constantly aware of the shifting nature of power dynamics within research encounters. By critically examining my positionality, I aimed to mitigate potential biases and ensure that my interpretations remained faithful to the participants' lived realities, acknowledging both the connections and disjunctures that characterised our interactions.

The ethical implications of navigating these insider-outsider dynamics are profound. As Sultana (2007) highlights, the researcher must continuously evaluate how their positionality influences the research process and the ethical responsibilities they hold towards participants. In my research, this meant being transparent about my positionality and its impact on the research, thereby ensuring that the constructed nature of my knowledge claims was visible to both participants and readers. By making my positionality explicit, I aimed to foster trust and accountability, ultimately contributing to the ethical rigor of the research.

Ethical Imperatives and Epistemic Justice

The ethical imperatives associated with my research are inextricably linked to the theme of epistemic justice. Central to my positionality is a commitment to making transparent the constructedness of knowledge claims and recentring the voices of marginalised communities. This

commitment is grounded in an ethical obligation to ensure that the research process not only respects but actively promotes the dignity and agency of participants.

In exploring the ethical imperatives of my research, it is essential to recognise that my positionality as a migrant researcher comes with inherent power dynamics that must be addressed. As Mullings (1999) notes, the relationship between researcher and participant is always mediated by power, and in migration research, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. My role as a Zimbabwean migrant with access to academic resources and platforms contrasts sharply with the lived realities of my participants, who often face systemic barriers that limit their opportunities and agency. This discrepancy necessitates an ethical commitment to reflexivity, ensuring that the research process does not exploit participants but instead serves to amplify their voices.

The concept of epistemic justice, as articulated by Medina (2013), is foundational to my approach. It involves recognising and addressing the ways in which dominant narratives and power structures marginalise certain groups, thereby limiting their ability to contribute to knowledge production. In my research, this involves not only acknowledging my own positionality but also actively working to create spaces where the voices of Zimbabwean migrant teachers can be heard and valued. This entails a conscious effort to move beyond superficial representations of migrant experiences, instead engaging deeply with the complexities and contradictions that characterise their lives.

Ethical reflexivity is also crucial for addressing the potential biases that arise from my positionality. As Sultana (2007) emphasises, researchers must be vigilant in examining how their own identities and experiences influence their interpretation of participants' narratives. This involves a continuous process of reflection, not only on the data collected but also on the interactions that shape the research process. By maintaining a reflexive stance, I aim to mitigate the influence of my biases and ensure that the knowledge produced is as inclusive and representative as possible.

Furthermore, the pursuit of epistemic justice involves a commitment to challenging the dominant discourses that often dehumanise or victimise migrant communities. Through my research, I aim to highlight the agency, resilience, and diverse experiences of Zimbabwean migrant teachers, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their lives. This approach aligns with the broader goals of decolonising knowledge production, as it seeks to disrupt the power imbalances that have historically shaped the representation of marginalised groups.

The ethical considerations of my research also extend to the practical aspects of conducting fieldwork. Ensuring informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and being sensitive to the emotional and psychological well-being of participants are all critical components of ethical research practice. Given the vulnerable position of many migrant teachers in South Africa, it is essential that my research does not exacerbate their marginalisation but instead contributes to their empowerment.

In conclusion, the ethical imperatives and pursuit of epistemic justice are central to my positionality as a migrant researcher. By maintaining an ethical and reflexive approach, I aim to ensure that my research is not only academically rigorous but also socially relevant and respectful of the participants' dignity and agency. This commitment to ethical practice and epistemic justice

is fundamental to the broader project of decolonising knowledge production and creating more equitable and inclusive forms of scholarship.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of acknowledging and embracing the fluid nature of researcher positionality, particularly in the context of migration research. By critically engaging with my own shifting insider-outsider positionalities, I have sought to provide a more nuanced and ethically sound understanding of the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrant teachers in South Africa. The reflexive approach employed throughout this research not only enhances the credibility and authenticity of the findings but also advances the goal of epistemic justice by centring the voices of marginalised communities. Ultimately, this study underscores the need for transparency, reflexivity, and a commitment to ethical research practices that recognise the relational and situated nature of all knowledge production.

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