

## Attribution Processes in Distressed and Nondistressed Couples: 2. Responsibility for Marital Problems

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Attributions for marital difficulties are examined in couples seeking therapy and in a community sample. Seventy-four spouses rated their two most important marital difficulties on several dimensions and indicated the extent to which they blamed their spouse for the difficulties. Distressed spouses were more likely to see their partner and the relationship as the source of their difficulties, to perceive the causes of their difficulties as more global, and to consider the causes as more reflective of their spouses' negative attitude toward them. The results are discussed in terms of the assessment of attributions in relationships, and their implications for marital therapy are outlined.

For some time cognitive therapists have examined the utility of attribution theory and research for understanding the acquisition, maintenance, and remediation of clinical problems (cf. Fincham, 1983; Forsterling, 1980). Recently, this interest has manifest itself in the area of marital therapy as both practitioners and researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of attributions in marital dysfunction (e.g., Baucom, 1981; Berley & Jacobson, 1984; Doherty, 1981a, 1981b; Epstein, 1982; Fincham, in press; Jacobson, 1984; Revensdorf, 1984). Several writers have utilized the distinction made in attribution theory between internal and external causes and have argued that distressed spouses attribute negative partner behavior to internal factors that function to accentuate their negative impact and maintain marital distress (Berley & Jacobson, 1984; Wright & Fichten, 1976). Nondistressed spouses, in contrast, are thought to make external attributions for negative behavior, thereby mini-

mizing its impact. Conversely, distressed spouses are hypothesized to make external attributions for positive partner behavior, whereas nondistressed spouses make internal attributions. It has also been suggested that these attribution patterns mediate behavior exchanges between spouses and thus account for differences in behavioral reciprocity between distressed and nondistressed couples (Berley & Jacobson, 1984; Fincham, in press).

However, despite the appeal of the idea that differences in patterns of attributions for a spouse's behavior underlie variations in patterns of behavior exchange and marital satisfaction, there are only a few studies in this area. Moreover, these studies involve some conceptual difficulties that make interpretation of the results problematic. Jacobson, McDonald, Follette, and Berley (1985), using couples recruited from the community, found that a distressed group (one partner scored below 100 on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976), relative to their nondistressed counterparts, made internal attributions for negative spouse behavior and attributed positive acts to external factors. In contrast, Fincham and O'Leary (1983) and Fincham, Beach, and Nelson (1984) found no differences between couples seeking therapy and happily married community couples in the extent to which they attributed positive or negative spouse behavior internally to the spouse as compared to themselves, others, or circumstances.

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The above findings are not only contradictory, but the interpretation of each data set is also problematic. Consider the attribution items that subjects rated in Jacobson et al.'s (1985) study: "She or he was trying to please me," and "She or he wanted to put on a good performance for the camera." The first is considered *internal*, the second *external*. Yet it is possible to argue that the structure of both is identical, as the motivation occurs in the actor and is directed to an external source. What is at issue is the external target; the first attribution is an example of an interpersonal attribution (Newman, 1981a) because it states what the partner is like in relation to the attributor, whereas the second is not. In an alternative attempt to capture the internal-external distinction, Fincham (Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Fincham et al., 1984) contrasted the spouse with all other causal factors on a single bipolar rating scale. However, this measure is also problematic as it assumes that (a) attributions to the spouse are only important when contrasted with other potential causes (contextual assumption); (b) attributions to all nonspouse causes have the same psychological meaning (equivalence assumption); and (c) spouse and nonspouse attributions are inversely correlated, such that an increment in one necessarily accompanies a decrement in the other (hydraulic assumption). These assumptions rest on conceptual distinctions that may not be appropriate.

This lack of conceptual clarity has also given rise to measurement problems in social psychological research concerned with intrapersonal attribution processes (Miller, Smith, & Ullman, 1981; Ross, 1977). Although the internal-external distinction retains considerable appeal despite these measurement problems (Ross & Fletcher, in press), its utilization in relationship research creates even greater difficulty. One needs to consider, for instance, whether internal attributions apply only to individual partners or also to properties of the relationship. Similarly, one must determine whether a spouse's influence on his or her partner is external, or whether situational influences reside only outside of the dyad. One solution to this problem is to distinguish conceptually between causes residing in the attributor, his or her spouse, the

relationship, and outside circumstances (Fincham, in press). Attributions to each of these causes is therefore measured separately in the present study.

It seems unlikely, however, that the locus of a cause alone fully captures the psychological meaning of the explanations that people give for marital problems or is a sufficient basis for conceptualizing attributional differences between distressed and nondistressed couples. For example, attributing a spouse's lack of punctuality to a factor that may affect many areas of the relationship and may be difficult to change (e.g., "because he or she is selfish and uncaring") carries different implications for the marriage than one that is unlikely to affect other areas of the relationship and has no particular implications for the future (e.g., "he or she misread the train timetable") even though both are internal attributions. These observations suggested that examination of attributional differences with respect to the global-specific and stable-unstable causal dimensions might reveal attribution patterns that are related to marital distress. The expected group differences have been found on the global-specific dimension (distressed spouses see causes as more global for negative spouse behavior and more specific for positive spouse behavior), but not on the stable-unstable causal dimension (Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Fincham et al., 1984).

In sum, it appears that there is both conceptual confusion about the properties of particular attribution dimensions and, perhaps as a result, empirical uncertainty about attributional differences between distressed and nondistressed spouses. Moreover, examination of the social and clinical psychological literatures suggests that there have been important oversights in the research conducted on attributions in marriage. For instance, Passer, Kelley, and Michela (1978) found that attributions in relationships differ on an underlying dimension defined by the positive/negative nature of the attributor's attitude toward his or her partner. This study suggests that a dimension, potentially of great importance for attributions in marriage, has been overlooked. From the perspective of the clinician, another oversight is that couples seldom describe their difficulties in terms of the specific, concrete spouse behaviors used in

previous research. More typically, when entering therapy couples present and make attributions about global problems. Moreover, the attributions are often overtly evaluative. Indeed, it is the attempt to operationalize general complaints and overcome evaluative attributions that characterizes the early stages of marital therapy (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979).

The present study, therefore, examined causal and evaluative attributions for marital difficulties in distressed and nondistressed couples. It was hypothesized that distressed spouses would (a) differ from their nondistressed counterparts on the internal-external causal dimension when attributions to the spouse were assessed independently of other causes associated with this dimension, (b) see the causes of their difficulties as more global and reflective of their partner's negative attitude toward them, and (c) blame their spouses for the difficulties.

## Method

### Subjects

Thirty-seven couples participated in the study. The distressed group comprised 18 couples in the early stages of marital therapy. They had been married an average of 7.3 ( $SD = 5.2$ ) years and had a mean gross family income of between \$18,000-\$21,000 per year. Husbands averaged 31.7 ( $SD = 5.2$ ) years of age, 14.9 ( $SD = 3.0$ ) years of formal education, and had an average score of 85.7 ( $SD = 27.2$ ) on the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). Wives averaged 30.6 ( $SD = 5.9$ ) years of age, 14.7 ( $SD = 2.6$ ) years of formal education, and had an average score of 77.2 ( $SD = 29.8$ ) on the Marital Adjustment Test.

The nondistressed group consisted of 19 couples recruited from the community. Couples responded to an advertisement in a local newspaper that asked for volunteers to participate in a study on marriage. This group had been married for an average of 11.6 ( $SD = 5.8$ ) years and had an average gross family income of \$18,000-\$21,000. Husbands averaged 37.1 ( $SD = 8.4$ ) years of age on average, 15.3 (2.6) years of formal education, and had an average score of 98.4 ( $SD = 29.1$ ) on the Marital Adjustment Test. Wives averaged 34.8 ( $SD = 5.9$ ) years of age, 15.3 ( $SD = 2.5$ ) years of education, and scored an average of 109.6 ( $SD = 10.6$ ) on the Marital Adjustment Test. As expected, the couples in therapy were more maritally distressed than the community sample,  $F(1, 73) = 11.0, p < .001$ .

### Materials

Each spouse completed a battery of questionnaires that included the Marital Adjustment Test, a demographic questionnaire, and an areas of difficulty questionnaire.

The latter questionnaire measured attributions for the difficulties spouses experienced in their marriage and was specifically designed for this study. It asked respondents to list the two most important difficulties they experienced in their marriage, which were then rated on 7-point scales for severity (*very minor* to *very severe*) and intensity of feeling about each difficulty (*neutral* to *very negative*). The following instructions were given for this task:

All couples experience some difficulties in their relationship, even if they are only very minor ones. In this questionnaire you are asked to list what you consider to be the two most important difficulties that exist between you and your partner. To assist you in this task we have listed below numerous areas in which couples can experience difficulties. You can choose the items you write down from the areas in this list or you can add your own completely different items. For each item you list please also indicate how much of a difficulty it is in your relationship. The final two questions ask how you feel about each difficulty.

A list of 18 potential difficulties followed (communication, unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse, decision making/problem solving, children, etc.). The difficulties were derived from lists used to survey the frequency of marital difficulties (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981) and the areas covered by the Spouse Observation Checklist (Weiss & Perry, 1979). Subject-generated stimuli, rather than standard stimuli, were used to ensure that the difficulties rated by each spouse were indeed relevant to their marriage.

The remainder of the questionnaire was similar in format to the Attribution Style Questionnaire (Peterson et al., 1982) used in depression research. Thus, subjects wrote down what they considered to be the major cause of the difficulty and answered seven questions relating to the cause. The first four concerned the locus of the cause. Thus, subjects were asked to indicate the extent to which the cause of the difficulty rested in themselves, their spouse, the relationship, and outside circumstances, respectively. The fifth question required the participants to locate the cause on the global-specific dimension by asking whether the cause affected only this area of difficulty or whether it affected other areas of the marriage. The sixth question asked whether the cause would again be present in the future when the difficulty was experienced, and thus measured its stability. The last causal question asked subjects to indicate the extent to which the cause was due to their spouse's negative attitude or feelings toward them. Finally, spouses indicated the extent to which they blamed their spouse for the difficulty. All answers were given on 7-point rating scales. The questions for each difficulty were answered on separate pages.

### Procedure

The distressed group were referred to the study by practitioners in the community. Only couples who presented for therapy with marital problems and who had not participated in more than three therapy sessions were eligible for the study. Community couples interested in the study telephoned the laboratory in response to a newspaper advertisement. The experimenter briefly outlined the study to the couples and, if they agreed to

participate, arranged a single appointment for them to visit the laboratory. When couples arrived at the laboratory the study was again briefly outlined. Subjects were then given a battery of questionnaires that they completed independently of their spouses. The experimenter remained in the same room as the couple and was available to help spouses in the event that they encountered any difficulties with the task. Such difficulties were infrequent.

Following their completion of the questionnaire battery, couples were given the opportunity to discuss their experiences in completing the task and to ask any questions they might have. All couples were paid \$10 for participating in the study.

### Results

The difficulties listed by each spouse were examined to determine whether distressed and nondistressed couples differed in their agreement regarding the difficulties they had experienced in their marriage. Three couples in the whole sample (2 nondistressed, 1 distressed) agreed on what constituted their two most important marital difficulties, and only a small percentage of agreement was obtained in the distressed (27.7%) and nondistressed (22.2%) groups regarding individual difficulties. The frequency with which each group listed specific problems was examined, as attributions are a function of both the characteristics of the attributor and the event for which an attribution is made. A series of chi-square analyses showed that the frequency with which specific difficulties were listed by the distressed and nondistressed groups did not differ. This finding suggests that any group differences in attributions are not therefore simply due to distressed and nondistressed spouses rating different problems. Finally, the pattern of ratings obtained on the measures of problem severity and feelings about the problem were similar for each of the two problems. Thus, these ratings were summed to form more stable measures. As might be expected,  $2 \times 2$  (Group  $\times$  Sex) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed that distressed couples rated their difficulties as more severe,  $F(1, 70) = 10.63, p < .005$ , and felt more negative about them,  $F(1, 70) = 9.82, p < .005$ , than did nondistressed couples. No other significant effects were found.

The causes generated by distressed and nondistressed spouses for their problems were not given in sufficient detail to allow reliable categorization and, hence, formal analysis. However, the causes given by the two groups

did not appear to systematically differ on the basis of an informal visual inspection. The attribution ratings made regarding each problem were similar. Correlations between corresponding attribution ratings for each difficulty were significant (average  $r = .41$ ; range = .32-.51). Hence, the corresponding ratings made for each of the difficulties were summed to form more stable measures. The mean scores obtained on the attribution measures are shown in Table 1.

A  $2 \times 2$  (Group  $\times$  Sex) multivariate analysis of variance yielded only a significant group main effect,  $F(8, 63), = 4.7, p < .001$ . Univariate analyses of variance confirmed that this effect, as predicted, was due largely to the fact that distressed spouses, relative to their nondistressed counterparts, were more likely to see their partner,  $F(1, 70) = 5.24, p < .03$ , and the relationship,  $F(1, 70) = 12.2, p < .001$ , as the source of their marital

Table 1  
*Mean Attribution Scores and Standard Deviations of Distressed and Nondistressed Husbands and Wives for each Attribution Measure*

Measure	Group			
	Distressed		Nondistressed	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Self				
<i>M</i>	8.61	7.28	8.37	8.16
<i>SD</i>	2.77	2.65	2.41	2.73
Spouse				
<i>M</i>	8.67	9.61	7.68	7.58
<i>SD</i>	2.14	2.33	2.77	3.75
Relationship				
<i>M</i>	7.83	8.22	5.84	5.10
<i>SD</i>	3.09	2.07	3.37	3.73
Circumstances				
<i>M</i>	7.28	8.00	5.89	7.36
<i>SD</i>	4.13	3.38	3.25	4.66
Globality				
<i>M</i>	9.88	11.11	7.89	6.94
<i>SD</i>	2.05	1.81	3.03	3.27
Stability				
<i>M</i>	10.61	10.38	11.21	10.89
<i>SD</i>	2.53	3.31	1.72	2.42
Attitude				
<i>M</i>	6.38	7.38	5.42	4.94
<i>SD</i>	3.19	3.15	2.87	3.54
Blame				
<i>M</i>	7.55	7.55	6.52	7.26
<i>SD</i>	2.17	3.41	3.77	2.90

difficulties; to perceive the causes of their difficulties as more global,  $F(1, 70) = 25.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and to see the causes as more reflective of their spouses' negative attitude toward them,  $F(1, 70) = 9.25$ ,  $p < .01$ . As the community sample contained 13 subjects who scored in the distressed range on the Marital Adjustment Test (scores  $< 100$ ), the above analysis were repeated excluding the data obtained from these subjects. An identical pattern of results was obtained. However,  $t$  tests comparing the distressed ( $n = 13$ ) and nondistressed ( $n = 25$ ) spouses in the community sample showed that these two subgroups differed in that the distressed subgroup considered the causes of their difficulties to be more global,  $t(36) = 2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ , more stable,  $t(36) = 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ , more reflective of their spouses' attitude toward them,  $t(36) = 2.47$ ,  $p < .02$ , and showed a tendency to regard the relationship as the cause of the difficulties,  $t(36) = 1.78$ ,  $p < .09$ . Despite the small size of the subgroups, these results are consistent with the differences found in the overall analyses between distressed spouses (operationalized in terms of couples seeking marital therapy) and a community sample.

In order to examine the assumptions made in previous research regarding the internal-external dimension, the Pearson product-moment correlations between the four variables used to operationalize the causal locus dimension were computed. As group differences were found on some of these dimensions, the correlations were computed separately for each group. This was done to ensure that the relationships examined were not an artifact of sampling extreme groups (Guilford & Fruchter, 1978). The correlations between the self, spouse, relationship, and circumstance ratings were then converted to Fisher's  $z$  scores, and the average correlations between these variables were calculated. It will be recalled that previously used bipolar measures contrast attributions to the spouse with attributions to the self and to circumstances. They thus imply an inversive relationship between attributions to the spouse and those made regarding the self and circumstances (hydraulic assumption). The only evidence obtained to support this assumption was a significant correlation between self and spouse

attributions,  $r(74) = -.21$ ,  $p < .05$ . The magnitude of the correlation is, however, low. The use of a single internal-external measure also makes the assumption that all nonspouse causes are similar and hence can be grouped together at one end of the scale (equivalence assumption). This assumption implies a positive correlation between self and circumstance attributions. No such correlation was found in the present study,  $r(74) = -.07$ ,  $p > .05$ .

A global internal-external index was computed by subtracting the average of the self and circumstance ratings from the spouse attribution. This was examined to determine whether the same pattern of results found in previous research using a bipolar internal-external scale was obtained. A  $2 \times 2$  (Group  $\times$  Sex) ANOVA yielded no significant effects, which is consistent with previous findings. However, when self-attributions only were subtracted from spouse ratings, a significant group main effect again emerged,  $F(1, 70) = 8.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ; distressed spouses were more likely to see their spouse, rather than themselves, as the source of their difficulties (mean difference = 2.61), as compared to nondistressed spouses (mean difference =  $-.08$ ).

Finally, it was found that blaming the spouse for the marital difficulties correlated highly with seeing the spouse as the cause of the marital difficulties,  $r(74) = .61$ ,  $p < .005$ . Spouse blame was also significantly associated with perceiving the relationship as the cause of the difficulties,  $r(74) = .30$ ,  $p < .005$ ; seeing the cause of the difficulties as reflective of the spouse's attitude,  $r(74) = .43$ ,  $p < .005$ ; and judging the cause to be global,  $r(74) = .31$ ,  $p < .005$ . Rating the self as cause tended to be inversely associated with spouse blame,  $r(74) = -.23$ ,  $p < .025$ .

## Discussion

The results of the present study provide support for the view that variations in attributional patterns within marriage are related to differences in marital satisfaction. This finding is particularly intriguing because, unlike previous studies, the situations considered here involved actual marital difficulties rather than hypothetical or contrived spouse behaviors. Furthermore, the measures used in this

investigation confront some of the conceptual issues regarding the psychological meaningfulness of various distinctions between causes that differ in locus, which means that the results help to clarify the confusion about this problem that has arisen from previous research.

More specifically, the present data revealed differences on only some of the conceptual distinctions that have been suggested regarding the internal-external causal dimension. Distressed spouses, relative to nondistressed spouses, were more likely to see their partner and the relationship as the source of their marital difficulties, but no differences were found between the two groups for self- or circumstance attributions. Thus, little support was found for the assumptions made by the use of a bipolar scale to measure internal-external attributions in relationships. The fact that members of the distressed group were more likely than were members of the nondistressed group to see their spouses as the cause of their marital difficulties belies the contextual assumption that spouse attributions are only important when contrasted with other (nonspouse) causes. In addition, the equivalence assumption, that all external causes can be grouped together in a bipolar scale, was also contradicted by the present data, as no relationship was found between different external causes. Finally, spouse attributions were not inversely related to external attributions to the extent implied by the hydraulic assumption. These data point to the utility of measuring spouse attributions independently of other components of the internal-external dimension. Indeed, when an index was computed analogous to data obtained in previous research using a bipolar internal-external scale, no group differences emerged. These findings are consistent with the results of social psychological research on the measurement of the situational-dispositional distinction (e.g., Furnham, Jaspars, & Fincham, 1983; Herzberger & Clore, 1979; Miller et al., 1981; Solomon, 1978), which suggests that situational and dispositional causes should be measured on separate scales.

Although distressed spouses made more relationship attributions than did nondistressed spouses, the interpretation of this finding is problematic. Conceptually, a dis-

inction can be made between attributions that focus on the partner (e.g., "She or he does not trust *me*") and those that are truly dyadic (e.g., "lack of affection between us"). The former concerns the perception of the partner in regard to the self and is an interpersonal attribution (cf. Newman 1981a, 1981b). The latter involves the relationship per se, with each partner making an equal contribution (a relationship attribution). It is unclear which of these is represented by relationship ratings obtained in this study. To the extent that such ratings reflect partner-oriented attributions, one might expect them to correlate positively with partner blame, whereas truly relational attributions should not be related to partner blame. The significant positive correlation found between relationship and blame ratings,  $r(74) = .30$ ,  $p < .005$ , suggests that the relationship attributions reflect Newman's (1981a, 1981b) interpersonal attribution category. This possibility is further supported by the correlation obtained between the extent to which the cause was seen as residing in the spouse and in the spouse's attitude toward the self,  $r(74) = .59$ ,  $p < .005$ , and the correlation between spouse and relationship ratings,  $r(74) = .41$ ,  $p < .005$ . The present data thus do not speak clearly to the question of whether distressed and nondistressed spouses differ in the extent to which they make truly relational attributions. If future research that explored this issue in more detail revealed the expected difference, the idea of inducing relationship attributions as a therapeutic goal (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979), would be supported. One approach to this problem would be to ask about the extent to which the cause of the difficulty rests in "both of us—our relationship."

In addition to the above differences obtained on the spouse and relationship components of the internal-external dimension, distressed spouses viewed the cause of their difficulties as more global than did nondistressed spouses, but the groups did not differ on the stability causal dimension. The difference on the global-specific dimension and the absence of any significant effect on the stable-unstable dimension is consistent with previous findings (Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Fincham et al., 1984) and thus replicates results ob-

tained for reactions to hypothetical spouse behaviors. The fact that distressed spouses view causes as global, pervading all areas of their marriage, is also consistent with clinical experience, as couples seldom present specific, circumscribed problems in therapy (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). The recurrent absence of group differences on the stability dimension is also noteworthy as the perceived stability of a cause theoretically mediates the chronicity of a problem (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). However, the very fact that couples are in therapy, attempting to alleviate their difficulties, might explain this finding. Presumably, they believe that with some help the cause of the difficulty can be removed and, hence, do not indicate that it will be present in the future. The stable-unstable dimension may thus only prove important for distressed couples resigned to their difficulties who do not seek therapy. In the community sample, the distressed subgroup indeed saw the causes of their marital difficulties as more stable than did nondistressed spouses, thus providing preliminary support for this viewpoint.

It should be noted that group differences also emerged on the dimension derived from recent social psychological research on interpersonal attribution; distressed spouses were more likely than were nondistressed spouses to view the cause of their difficulties as reflective of their spouse's attitude toward them. However, the high correlation obtained between ratings on this scale and relationship attributions has already been noted, which raises the question as to whether this dimension is conceptually distinguishable from Newman's (1981a, 1981b) interpersonal attribution category. Nonetheless, the overtly evaluative nature of this rating draws attention to the fact that *causal* ratings for marital difficulties do not represent value neutral judgments. In fact, all of the causal dimensions on which group differences obtained were significantly correlated with spouse blame, although the groups did not actually differ in blame judgments. One implication of this finding is that cognitive interventions based on classical attribution principles used to explain phenomenal causality (e.g., coaching spouses to use covariation as a basis for inferring causality; Baucom, 1981) may prove

less appropriate than those that are drawn from the responsibility attribution literature (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). The quintessence of responsibility is the idea of accountability, which implies that behavior is evaluated on the basis of a set of rules or expectations regarding appropriate behavior. Hence, the view that attributions in marriage are, in fact, responsibility judgments necessarily entails consideration of the couple's expectations, which comprises "much of what happens in good marital therapy" (O'Leary & Turkewitz, 1978, p. 247). Indeed, it is possible to argue that a responsibility attribution framework for therapy integrates several cognitive therapy techniques and that coaching spouses in the rules of responsibility attribution may prove to be a useful tool in working with couples (Fincham, in press).

In sum, the attributional differences found in the present study are consistent with the view that attributions serve to maintain current levels of distress regarding marital difficulties. The present study, however, precludes valid inferences regarding the causal relationship between attributions and marital satisfaction. Indeed, distressed spouses saw their problems as more severe than did nondistressed spouses, and it is quite possible that the attributions made by the distressed group reflect their response to severe and chronic problems. The existence of attribution differences between distressed and nondistressed spouses nonetheless provides some justification for the longitudinal research needed to untangle the causal relationship between attributions and marital distress. Finally, the importance of multidimensional assessment of attributions in evaluating attributional differences between distressed and nondistressed spouses is apparent.

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