

# Bullying: description and analysis of the phenomenon

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## **Abstract**

*This article purports to present this Special Issue about Bullying and, at the same time, to introduce the phenomenon of bullying in order to facilitate readers an updated vision about the problem that will be worked from different perspectives by researchers from national and international scope. With this purpose, we present some controversial aspects in the characterization of bullying related to definition, incidence and prevalence of bullying and the influence of specific variables like age and gender. At the same time, it is done a revision of the more frequent types of bullying behaviours, the characterization of involved agents, as well as the analysis of the most important risk factors those are underlying problem's genesis. The final goal is to provide information about bullying for facilitating the characterization and comprehension, more specifically, of a real problem that is interesting and important into the educational centres.*

**Keywords:** *bullying, incidence, victims, aggressors, risk factors*

## **Introduction**

Bullying is not a new problem for schools, since it has been present for a long time; however, only in recent years is its importance being recognized. We speak of a specific phenomenon of school violence which affects schools around the world regardless of national borders, geography or politics (Debarbieux, 2003). Ever since the initial pioneer studies by Olweus in Scandinavian countries, many other studies have followed. In the first phase of research, most studies focused on an attempt to define the problem (Olweus, 1993; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Crick, Casas & Ku, 1999), giving way to other studies addressing the incidence of the problem (Boulton, 1993; Olweus, 1996; Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee, 1999; Defensor del Pueblo, AA.VV., 1999), an aspect which still concerns us today and is reflected by specific studies published in the last five years (Carney & Merrel, 2001; Solberg & Olweus, 2003; Toldos, 2005; Avilés & Monjas, 2005; Cerezo & Ato, 2005; Ramírez, 2006). The detailed description of the phenomenon then encouraged the appearance of studies concerned with describing the agents involved (Rigby, 1997; Monks, Smith & Swettenham, 2003; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Oldehinkel, De Winter, Verhulst & Ormel, 2005; Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Perren & Alsaker, 2006), with analyzing the problem's risk factors (Lahey, Waldman & McBurnett, 1999; Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004; Farrington, 2005), and analyzing the effects of the problem particularly among its victims (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Perren & Alsaker, 2006). As a final result of all the prior research as well as results from current studies, there is now an increase in research focused on the design, development and systematic evaluation of intervention programs (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Trianes & García, 2002; Elinoff, Chafouleas & Sassu, 2004; Nordhagen, Nielsen, Stigum & Köhler, 2005; Benítez, Almeida & Justicia, in press).

## **Towards a definition of bullying**

Defining bullying is no small task, especially if we seek a definition which is agreed on among researchers of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, despite the many proposed definitions, we can affirm that most share a common characteristic: bullying is identified as a specific conduct of aggressive behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

Beginning with this common characteristic, we find the definition offered by Olweus (1993), where bullying is the set of physical and/or verbal behaviors that a person or group of persons directs against a peer, in hostile, repetitive and ongoing fashion, abusing real or fictitious power, with the intent to cause harm to the victim. This definition establishes fulfillment of certain criteria in order for the behavior exhibited to be defined as bullying:

- (a) an imbalance of power between the victim and the aggressor, to be understood as a dishonest, domineering, opportunistic and illegitimate use of power over one's opponent;
- (b) incidence and duration of the bullying situation, with a minimum incidence of once per week and a minimum duration of six months;
- (c) intentionality and proactive character of the aggression, since one is seeking to obtain some social, material or personal benefit, without prior provocation; and,
- (d) the intent to do harm.

However, Olweus's definition must be expanded with regard to the nature of the behaviors exhibited. Some authors, including Olweus himself, distinguish between direct and indirect aggressions of the bullying phenomenon (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukianen, 1992; Olweus, 1993) or overt as compared to covert aggressions (Crick, Casas & Ku, 1999). Among direct or overt aggressions, we find both physical (kicks, punches, pushes, threats with weapons, etc.) and verbal (insults, blackmail, etc.). Similarly, among indirect or covert aggressions we find those of a physical nature (hiding property, damaging materials, stealing, etc.) and those of a verbal nature (name-calling, spreading rumors). Nonetheless, we have yet to include within the range of bullying behaviors those relational aggressions which are only indirect or covert. These aggressions seek to socially discredit the victims, provoking their isolation from the peer group and a progressive social exclusion (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

If we fulfill with all the aspects mentioned above, we can come to a clearer, more concise definition of bullying. Such a definition would take into consideration the intentionality of causing harm without prior provocation, incidence and duration of the bullying situation, power asymmetry between victim and aggressor, as well as the direct or indirect nature (verbal, physical or relational) of the behaviors exhibited. As we can observe, hostile behaviors displayed by aggressors go beyond mere harassment—a label used by the media for referring to the phenomenon—since, in most cases, they are undisguised behaviors where the aggressor

neither hides nor remains anonymous, and where direct and indirect aggressions can be verbal, psychological or involve social exclusion.

## **Characterization of the phenomenon**

### ***Incidence of the phenomenon***

Many studies have focused on the incidence and prevalence of bullying (see Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalana & Slee, 1999). Incidence and prevalence rates indicated by such studies reveal two aspects: (a) that the phenomenon of bullying is not more important today than some years ago, since incidence figures are similar; and (b) incidence rates, despite being similar in many studies, do show differences (Table I), though these differences may be due to factors relating to the definition of bullying accepted by the authors, the heterogeneity of instruments used to collect data, characteristics of the sample, etc. Nonetheless, despite differences with respect to the incidence rates found, the differences are not significant, leading one to think that the incidence of bullying is similar in different countries regardless of their culture or educational system (Carney & Merrel, 2001). Olweus (1991) carried out pioneer studies, most notably one performed in Scandinavian countries, with a sample of 130,000 students between the ages of 7 and 16 years. Results obtained indicated that 17.6% of participants had been involved in episodes of bullying either as victims (9%), aggressors (7%) or as aggressor/victim (1.6%). The study in Great Britain by Whitley & Smith (1993) took on similar parameters, where the researchers found that 14% of students were victims of bullying, though only 4% had suffered severely, while the percentage of aggressors came to 7%. In Australia, in a study carried out by Rigby (1997), it was shown that 14% of schoolchildren had been victims of bullying. Likewise, in the report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2003) on problems of victimization in the United States, it is noted that 8% of the student population has been involved in bullying problems. Recent research by Solberg & Olweus (2003) on the prevalence of the phenomenon in Norway shows that the percentage of students involved in episodes of bullying comes to 18.2% of the population studied: 10.1% are victims, 6.5% aggressors and 1.6% aggressor-victims.

**Table I. Comparison of studies and incidence rates**

Study	% Affected	% Victims	% Aggressors	% Aggressor-Victims
Olweus, 1991	17.6	9	8	1.6
Whitney & Smith, 1993	21	14	7	-
Rigby, 1997	-	14	-	-
Defensor del Pueblo [Ombudsman], 1999	12	7	5	-
NCES, 2003	8	-	-	-
Solberg & Olweus, 2003	18.2	10.1	6.5	1.6
Avilés & Monjas, 2005	11.6	5.7	5.9	-
Serrano & Iborra, 2005	20.1	12.5	7.6	-
Ramírez, 2006	10.5	6.4	3.1	1

In Spain, many studies have been carried out and offer data on the phenomenon. We begin with noting the Report on School Violence put forward by the Ombudsman (AA.VV., 1999). The study was carried out on a national level with students from Secondary Education, with a victim rate near 7%, and aggressors nearing 5%. Avilés and Monjas (2005), who performed a study with student participants between the ages of 12 and 15 years, indicated that 11.6% of participating students had been involved in abuse situations. Of these, 5.7% were victims and 5.9% aggressors. The study sponsored by the Reina Sofia Center (Serrano & Iborra, 2005), also on a national level and with students between the ages of 12 and 16 years of age, shows greater indices of persons affected. That is, authors claim that the percentage of victims comes to 12.5%, while percentage of aggressors rises to 7.6%. Finally, in a study performed among Primary and Secondary students in the autonomous city of Ceuta (Ramírez, 2006), similar levels are expressed, placing the rate of those affected by bullying at 10.5%: 6.4% victims, 3.1% aggressors and 1% aggressor-victims.

### *Characteristics of victims and aggressors*

Approximately 10% of schoolchildren can be classified as students repeatedly victimized (Olweus, 1993). Most of them are passive and have almost never reacted aggressively, they do not defend themselves, and they are rejected by their classmates; these are the so-called *passive victims* (Carney & Merrel, 2001). Other victims are members of a smaller

group which is extremely aggressive and tends to provoke attacks from other pupils. Members of this group suffer more social rejection, they confront both aggressors and passive victims and they are known as *provocative victims* (Olweus, 1993). The latter group of victims belongs to that set of students who, as a function of contextual and/or situational variables, take on the role of victim or aggressor, giving rise to the figure of *aggressor/victim* (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

Passive victims are characterized as possessing low self-esteem and internalization of problems such as anxiety and depression, having few friends, rejected and socially isolated by their classmates (Olweus, 1993). While provocative victims tend to show hyperactive traits, strong temperament and are aggressive (Venstra et al., 2005; Perren & Alsaker, 2006), passive victims are more sensitive, cautious and unassertive (Olweus, 1993). Both types of victims are usually unable to control their feelings or to solicit the attention of their classmates.

Victims differ from others in how they process the social information they perceive (Venstra et al., 2005). Submissive children, when solving conflicts, more highly value submissive options and they undervalue aggressive options. Likewise, they predict better consequences for submissive options even when they don't like them. In this sense, Troy and Sroufe (1987) suggest that victims become vulnerable in certain contexts since they tend to aggravate their difficulties by appearing more needy than others: they need more time to be accepted, when they are excluded they continue to make ineffective attempts at social interaction, etc., indicating poor social skills that contribute to aggravation of the bullying problem.

Olweus (1993) affirms that approximately 7% of preschool or elementary children frequently bully one of their classmates. Active aggressors initiate bullying on their own; sometimes other pupils support them, but the latter do not initiate bullying, they are known as passive aggressors (Olweus, 1993). This group of passive aggressors is less popular and less secure than active aggressors, who enjoy relative popularity among their classmates (Perren & Alsaker, 2006).

As for personality, aggressors tend to show low levels of empathy toward their classmates, they value violence as a tool for getting what they want, and they show aggressive tendencies not only towards peers but also towards teachers, parents and siblings (Carney & Merrell, 2001). They are impulsive, unempathetic, hostile, dominant, uncooperative and unfriendly; moreover, they appear to have low levels of anxiety and insecurity (Carney &

Merrell, 2001; Veenstra et al., 2005). Aggressors as a whole show poor adjustment in school, low academic performance, and they perceive that they are less supported by their teachers (Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Daluja & Ruan, 2004)

Like victims, aggressors differ in how they process the social information that comes to them. Aggressive students tend to show hostile attributions when they find themselves in ambiguous social situations, perceiving them as intentionally negative towards them, and responding to these situations aggressively (Griffin & Gross, 2004). This social problem-solving style, accompanied by aggressiveness and impulsive temperament, seems to contribute to the pattern of antisocial behavior that places aggressors at risk of suffering other behavior problems, such as consuming drugs or delinquency.

### ***Bullying and age***

Olweus (1993) affirms that, over the course of studies he has carried out, rates of victimization among students decrease as age increases, and that furthermore, physical aggressions occur with less frequency. However, despite this decrease in the rate of victimization, it is not statistically significant. On the other hand, as for the aggressors themselves, their tendency to abuse increases, or at least is maintained as age increases (Solberg & Olweus, 2003; Ramirez, 2006).

In a retrospective study led by Eslea & Rees (2001), it is claimed that the largest number of victims is found between the ages of 11 and 13 years. Such results are similar to those found by Ramírez (2006), who also indicates this age range in his study as the range with highest rates of students victimized. This turning point in age coincides with the passage from Primary to Secondary Education, which can be especially difficult for some children due to the appearance of effects of puberty, changes in the social hierarchy around them, and a decrease in social support being received, perhaps explaining the increase in victimization rates at these ages (Pelegri & Long, 2002). Nonetheless, several studies have shown the inconsistency of these data since the analyses performed provide contradictory data, thus indicating a need to continue investigating the relationship between bullying and age.

Comparing the age of aggressors and victims, Solberg & Olweus (2003) note that victims are generally younger than their aggressors, given that victims indicate they are attacked

more frequently and commonly by students older than themselves. This age difference is accentuated in Primary school and is weaker during Secondary school, just as is supported by other studies (Olweus 1993; Rigby, 1997; Nansel et al., 2001)

### ***Bullying and gender***

In studies carried out in Norway and Sweden (Olweus, 1993), it was found that boys seemed more exposed to bullying than girls, particularly during Primary Education. As for gender, 80% of male victims and 60% of female victims were bullied by male aggressors. Similarly, the existence of female aggressors was corroborated, although generally speaking, these practiced a more indirect type of abuse, such as social exclusion or ridiculing the victims. Later studies have shown this reality, for example, Tapper and Boulton (2004) indicate that boys are more frequently involved in bullying situations. Solberg and Olweus (2003) indicated that among victims, a larger number of boys was found than girls, with significant differences between both groups. Prevalence of this difference was independent of age, and boys presented aggression rates 2 or 3 times greater than girls. Finally, in the case of aggressor-victims, these were also largely male (Espelage, Mebane & Adams, 2004). Veenstra et al. (2005), for their part, indicate that in their study of a sample of adolescent students, passive victims are mostly female.

In the case of gender and type of abuse being used, the idea that boys use direct aggression, not covert, seems to be confirmed, while girls opt for indirect aggression of a relational type. Some data suggest that while boys tend to practice direct verbal and physical abuse more frequently, both sexes appear equal when it comes to indirect abuse, such as social exclusion. In a study by Toldos (2005) with Spanish adolescents, differences as a function of gender and type of aggression displayed were only observed with regard to direct physical and verbal aggression (more common among boys), while no significant differences were seen between the genders with regard to indirect aggressions, despite being more common among girls.

### ***Effects of bullying on victims and aggressors***

However, the numbers are not what alerts us to this situation, but the adverse consequences which this phenomenon brings for both victims and aggressors. The victims are those who most suffer the consequences of bullying: lack of self-esteem, loss of self-confidence, social isolation and rejection, school absenteeism, decrease in academic perform-

ance, psychosomatic problems, anxiety, social dysfunction, depression, suicidal tendencies, etc., leaving their mark in the short, middle and long term (Perren & Alsaker, 2006). Aggressors also suffer effects of the problem, since patterns of aggressive, disruptive conduct can be maintained and generalized. Aggressors become accustomed to living by abusing others, which keeps them from adequately integrating into the social life of the school. Furthermore, if not controlled in time, this ruthless, cruel behavior can be transferred to other places of interaction and other social relationships, bringing about serious social integration disorders that may be the predecessor of delinquent behaviors. In the academic setting, aggressors do not devote attention to their assignments and their learning suffers, usually provoking tensions, indiscipline and disruptions in the dynamic of school activity (Farrington, 2005). Due to these effects, intervention measures to prevent and/or alleviate bullying are urgently needed. Intervening on the effects caused by bullying involves addressing the phenomenon from different angles, since bullying is produced from the interaction of several factors.

### *Analysis of risk factors*

#### *Personality, temperament and impulsiveness*

Certain personal characteristics such as sociability or impulsiveness can explain how one reacts in certain situations (Farrington, 2005). Several studies have found a relationship between violent behavior, impulsiveness and the child's temperament (Brier, 1995). A temperament characterized by high levels of activity, inflexibility, difficulty in life transitions and being prone to frustration and distraction makes the child less understanding, have less self-control and be more impulsive. Some of these children fall under clinical profiles such as hyperactivity or opposition conflicts, and a relationship exists between these clinical profiles and the risk of committing delinquent or violent acts. The longitudinal study led by Caspi (2000) showed a strong relationship between a difficult temperament at three years of age, and a later display of violent behaviors. Chess and Thomas (cited in Farrington, 2005) reached similar conclusions, relating a difficult temperament at four years of age, characterized by irritability, low obedience, and poor adaptability, with poor psychological adjustment between the ages of 17 and 24 years.

#### *Intelligence, school achievement and social adjustment*

Several papers have documented the importance of a limited intelligence and school achievement as important predictors of behavior disorders, delinquency and antisocial behav-

ior. Longitudinal studies have shown the relationship between low verbal intelligence, low school performance, lack of problem-solving skill and precarious social skills with the risk of being aggressive and behaving violently (Moffit, 1993; Eron & Huesmann, 1993).

A low verbal quotient is also related to poor school performance, and both can predict development of violent behaviors (Farrington, 2005). Children who do not do well in school more easily become those who tend to commit delinquent acts; even early indifference toward schooling is related to becoming delinquent. When children do not attend or are often absent from school, they join with others who have either been delinquent themselves, or who, like themselves, hate school, or have even been expelled. These deviant groups form part of a larger group rejected by their peers, and offer an opportunity for involving more young people in delinquent or violent acts. The opportunity is more likely found in these groups than in others where the members attend class and feel identified with their school (Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992).

#### *Characteristics of the family home and parents' child-raising styles*

The family is the first socialization model for children, and doubtless is a key element in the origin of violent behaviors. A large number of studies have investigated family influence in the aggressive child and the child at risk (Harris & Reid, 1981; Morton, 1987; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsay, 1989; Patterson & Yoerger, 2002; Farrington, 2005), and they identify the following family aspects as predictive factors of violent behavior:

- Family destructuring: change in traditional roles, absence of one parent, lack of attention, etc.
- Abuse and violent modeling in the nuclear family, where the child learns to solve conflicts using physical harm or verbal aggression.
- Family models where one learns that power is exerted by being the strongest, with a lack of negotiation and dialogue.
- Child-raising methods with lax, inconsistent practices, restrictive practices, or in some cases excessively punitive practices are the most important factors, along with poor supervision.
- Lack of affection between spouses, with absence of security and emotional warmth.

Children are socialized from a very young age, they are taught how to handle frustration, to react in certain situations and to solve problems effectively. Most of this early socialization takes place at the child's home, in the family nest, and the evidence is clear: parents of aggressive children punish them more frequently, more inconsistently and ineffectively. They also tend to be coercive and manipulative with their children, and they fail to reinforce their children's positive, prosocial behaviors. A coercive style in the parent/child relationship leads parents to unconsciously reinforce coercive behavior in their children, since the latter are rewarded when they stop bothering or manipulating their parents. These children learn that aggressive behavior usually leads them to getting what they want.

Parents who are careless, who reject their children or who are negligent also have a high risk that their children become involved in violent acts. Neglect, or lack of parental follow-up of their children, has been labeled as a factor which increases the risk of delinquency, resentment in the child, etc., which can be expressed through poor school performance and antisocial behaviors. Parents who effectively supervise their children and are more actively involved in their children's activities produce children who are more competent from the social point of view.

Children whose parents are antisocial also have a high risk of falling into delinquency and violence. Part of this risk is related to the violent or criminal behavior of their parents, or it can also be related to an inherited temperament.

Finally, we must note that children who are victims of abuse by their parents during childhood have a higher risk of being involved in violent acts during adolescence (Farrington, 2005). In the study by Thornberry (1994), 38% of young people from non-violent families admitted having been involved at some time in violent acts. This percentage increases to 60% when we speak of children who belong to families where any type of violent acts occurs (domestic violence, hostile family atmosphere, child abuse) and even 78% when children of these families are under the influence of all three types of violence. Results from this study suggest a significant influence from ongoing exposure to acts of violence and victimization as an underlying factor in development of violence in the child.

### *Influence of the peer group, the school and the social context*

As indicated earlier, having a delinquent peer group is an indicator which precedes development of violent behaviors (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). In this sense, it is clearly apparent that violent young people associate with peers who have behavior problems, and that the latter reinforce their antisocial behavior. As we said, a peer group with behavior problems also has a negative influence regarding school, as expressed by: school absenteeism, lack of identification with other students and with teachers, lack of commitment to one's studies, etc.

On the other hand, there are factors internal to the school institution itself which encourage development of violence, since the school stratum itself presupposes a certain format and certain basic principles of socialization. Furthermore, we must consider that school is founded on an internal hierarchy and organization which in itself harbors strain and conflict. Fernández (1998) indicates the most significant traits that can provoke appearance of abusive conduct: (a) lack of common reference criteria among the teachers; (b) problems of school organization; (c) appearance of different cultural values due to immigration; (d) roles and relationships between teachers and students; (e) relationships among the students; (f) size of the school facilities; and, (g) punitive and sanctioning strategies used by the schools to address violent acts among students.

Outside of school, and without going into much detail, numerous studies show the relationship between violence and certain community indicators: lack of neighborhood organization, changes of family residence, lack of parental supervision of their children's behavior, strong presence of drugs and gangs, precarious socioeconomic contexts, etc. (Coulton, Korbin & Su, 1998). Violence at school is to a large degree a reflection of what happens in the neighborhood and in the social context where the individual lives, to the extent that a significant relationship has been established between the quantity of violence in the neighborhood where the child lives and the level of violence seen at his or her school (Ascher, 1994).

### *The Media*

The media are being questioned as a first catalyst of information. The content of the media message presents violence as something immediate, ordinary and frequent. The level of physical violence in cartoons is being discussed by everyone in public debate. Furthermore, children and adolescents are frequently exposed to intense levels of televised violence whether through films, music channels, videogames, cell phone messages, newspapers, news

broadcasts, etc. Several studies have reached conclusions that exposure to violent acts is strongly associated with the risk of suffering or being involved in aggressive or violent behaviors (Derksen & Strasburger, 1996).

There seem to be three clear effects of violence in the media. First, children exposed to high levels of violence in the media more easily accept aggressive attitudes, and after witnessing violent acts, they begin to behave more aggressively with their peers. Second, chronic exposures extended over a period of time can desensitize the child toward violence and its consequences. Third, children accustomed to seeing violence in the media perceive a violent world, where one must fight to subsist; they have a growing fear of becoming a victim in that world and they develop the need to fight and abuse others so as not to become victims themselves.

It is true that not all children who grow up watching large quantities of televised violence end up becoming violent adolescents or adults; however, they do show more aggression when they are small and especially after they have watched violence. By contrast, children who watch programs with prosocial content are less aggressive, more cooperative and have more desire to share their things with other children.

## **Conclusions**

Bullying is a problem at school: its consequences affect all agents involved, and indirectly, the rest of the educational community that must coexist with the effects being produced. Research on this problem has covered much ground, and yet there is still a long way to go for researchers focused on analysis of the problem.

First, we must reach once and for all an agreed-on definition, accepted by the greater part of researchers, which would allow all of us to be speaking about the same phenomenon. Along these lines, methodological limitations related to the definition of the construct must be resolved, as well as time periods of frequency and duration established in the definition of the problem. Not having a common reference point will continue giving rise to methodological limitations relating to instruments used for collecting information, and making it difficult to compare studies carried out in different countries.

Another aspect to be addressed relates to instruments used for measuring bullying. Today a large number of scales are available regarding aggressive behavior; however, it is difficult to extrapolate data drawn from these scales and to interpret them in relation to abusive behaviors. On the other hand, few instruments exist which allow valid, reliable measurement of peer abuse (bullying). Moreover, the available instruments seem to be imprecise and limited; although they measure the phenomenon they are not normalized instruments with respect to developmental levels (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

Research on the influence of certain variables such as gender and age on these behaviors needs to go deeper. The discrepancy between results obtained by different studies reveals this need. Likewise, there is a need to perform studies on bullying during childhood. As we have seen, there are indicators which allow us to foresee the development of antisocial behaviors starting at three years of age. However, the few studies that have been carried out in this area require that conclusions be ratified. These aspects are closely connected to putting effective intervention measures into practice. We require intervention programs, designed and implemented, which are accompanied by powerful evaluation designs that make it possible to show validity and effectiveness from the results obtained. In this sense, it is of vital importance to gather as much reliable information as possible regarding the problem. Thus, in the case of early intervention, studies carried out with students of Preschool and Primary Education would have the best yield. In the case of Secondary or Tertiary interventions, we must make the most of studies related to exploring risk factors that provoke the problem: from our knowledge base we will have the keys for being able to intervene.

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