

Building a Path to Sobriety: Challenges and Strategies of Rehabilitation Workers in the Aftercare Process of Substance-Abuse Individuals

Edmar Jane P. Cerna*, Nica Ella B. Acebo, Daryll T. Dingal, Jhade R. Villarde, Darwin F. Ignacio
Notre Dame of Dadiangas University, General Santos City, South Cotabato, Philippines

*Corresponding Author email: ejanecerna@gmail.com

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Abstract. Rehabilitation workers contribute to sustaining the sobriety of substance-abuse individuals who have finished their formal treatment by delivering the aftercare process. The study explored the challenges and strategies of rehabilitation workers in the aftercare process of substance-abuse individuals. The researchers utilized the phenomenological research design to describe the challenges faced by the rehabilitation workers in the aftercare process of substance-abuse individuals and the strategies they employ as well. The researchers interviewed nine rehabilitation workers at the JJ Valderrama Behavioral Management Center in Davao City. Utilizing the thematic analysis approach created by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, the results revealed various challenges that rehabilitation workers face: manpower shortage and other implications, clients' commitment to aftercare, handling deception, unforeseen circumstances, maintaining professional roles, and existing workers' limitations. Further, implementing treatment program activities, incorporating various counseling therapies, collaborative approaches, skills, and insight-driven approaches, emanating warmth, personality, and individualized approaches, and exhausting all efforts emerged as the strategies employed. The findings suggested that while rehabilitation workers assist clients, they are also human beings with limitations. Additionally, workers must utilize strategies and adjust when things do not go as planned, as recovery is a complex process. Aftercare is of paramount importance in building the path toward sobriety.

1.0 Introduction.

The path to sobriety, as experienced by substance-abuse individuals, is built upon the assiduous hands of rehabilitation workers. As stated by De Costa (2019), rehabilitation workers assist in improving the effectiveness of drug rehabilitation, decreasing drug-related deaths, reducing drug charges, and maintaining the sobriety of drug-abuse patients. However, according to American Addiction Centers Editorial Staff (2023), a lot of effort and time is required to assist patients in achieving sobriety. It is then crucial that the workers understand their role in treating substance abuse, given that the road to recovery is often complex ("Social Work and Substance Abuse," 2023; Felman, 2018). When challenges arrive in the work lives of rehabilitation workers, the call to employ strategies also arises.

Moreover, aiming for a prolonged recovery is generally complex because drug addiction, for instance, can be persistent and long-lasting, involving repeated relapses and behaviors. Depending on the duration and intensity of the addiction, recovering and abstaining from the substance can take several months or even years (Coast, 2015). Here, the essence of the aftercare process comes to exist. The aftercare process is an outpatient service delivered by rehabilitation workers to those who have finished inpatient treatment. Its primary goals are to help those in recovery to stay abstinent and help facilitate reintegration into their families and communities (Elias, 2017).

Workers in rehabilitation centers help individuals sustain treatment progress by achieving the goals of the aftercare process.

Further, performing the obligations of rehabilitation workers remains arduous. Specifically, rehabilitation workers must also meet the demand for consistent, proper treatment until the aftercare process is delivered. In addition, they also have to meet the need for stable and healthy minds, as the study by Lamb and Cogan (2016) stated that excessive job stress on mental health workers could cause mental illnesses affecting both the individual and the more significant population. According to Bizzarri et al. (2020), most of the employees working in psychiatric centers frequently encounter verbal aggression, physical aggression, and injuries at clients' hands. In implementing the aftercare process, coping with work-related emotional, physical, or mental issues is essential.

In the Philippines, rehabilitation workers face several challenges in the aftercare process of substance-abuse individuals, including a lack of social support and a high risk of relapse. The study of Tuliao and Liwanag (2011) attributed predictors such as high levels of drug cravings and negative emotions toward relapse among male methamphetamine users exclusively. Similarly, Samson (2021) found how internal factors affect the aftercare program of drug dependents by linking persistent feelings of deep sadness and negative thoughts toward the occurrence of relapse. Additionally, the deficiency in the participation of aftercare patients in San Jose Del Monte Bulacan, explored by Villegas (2022), is another challenge rehabilitation workers face in the aftercare process. Accordingly, being on the front line of treatment facilities, rehabilitation practitioners closely encounter challenges in the aftercare process.

Consequently, according to Lamb and Cogan (2016), rehabilitation workers use strategies to address identified challenges in the aftercare process and combat the negative consequences of work risks. In the scope of mental health workers, resilience is one of the essential elements of strategies to address stressors in their chosen field. The development and maintenance of resilience in mental health professionals may also be paid for by training programs that include elements of recent advances like acceptance and responsibility training and mindfulness (Lamb & Cogan, 2016). In terms of training, Antonio et al. (2019) discovered that pretest and posttest scores of nurses, psychologists, and social workers who took an accreditation course covering drug dependence understanding, assessment, drug abuse and dependence management, and drug rehabilitation work differ. Strategies like pursuing knowledge equip them with skills to make their work manageable and help individuals achieve sobriety.

As the study aimed to explore the experiences of rehabilitation workers in JJ Valderrama Behavioral Management Center, an accredited drug-treatment facility in Davao City, it highlighted the locale context of the challenges and strategies employed in building a path toward sobriety for substance abuse individuals. As long as the rehabilitation workers continue to perform their calling profession, any enlightened discoveries by the current study would bring fruitful insights to mental health advocates in establishing a sound community where commitment to help across all ages prevails. Indeed, conducting a study among rehabilitation workers is essential as they have their journeys to explore and stories to tell.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design emphasizing a phenomenological approach to achieve its goals. Ho and Limpaecher (2022) expounded that this research design describes and strives to understand a phenomenon in its universal essence. The research design helped the researchers study the lived experiences of rehabilitation workers. Specifically, through it, the researchers aimed to provide accurate descriptions of rehabilitation workers' challenges in delivering aftercare to substance-abuse individuals. Similarly, the study explores their strategies.

2.2 Research Participants

The researchers utilized homogenous purposive sampling to determine the research participants in this study. In non-probability or judgment sampling, the researchers purposively chose a particular group of participants because they have attributes or characteristics necessary for answering the research questions (Frost, 2022). Due to the narrowly defined subpopulation, the researchers interviewed nine (9) rehabilitation workers during the data gathering. The researchers set specific characteristics for the target participants. The participants of the study

are the selected rehabilitation workers at JJ Valderrama Behavioral Management Center, an accredited drug-treatment facility in Davao City, who are actively involved in the aftercare process of substance-abuse individuals. Their involvement may be direct, such as delivering clinical operations, or indirect, such as facilitating and monitoring individuals' aftercare progress. In addition, they must be 23-60 years old. Furthermore, they must have worked as rehabilitation workers in the center that delivers the aftercare process for at least six (6) months. The researchers did not include any potential participants working in public rehabilitation centers. In addition, the researchers did not include the target participant who has transferred to a department that does not have direct or indirect involvement in the aftercare process.

2.3 Research Instrument

The researchers gathered the necessary data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. A semi-structured interview is one of the standard data collection methods, which enables the researchers to collect unstructured data, examine participant perceptions of the research topic, and ask open-ended questions (Busetto et al., 2020). This approach often involves a conversation between the researcher and the respondent, aided by a flexible interview process and expanded by follow-up inquiries, questions, and remarks. The researchers utilized an interview guide as the primary investigative tool for the study. The research tool consisted of 10 questions. Five-item questions seek to identify the strategies, and the other five questions focus on the challenges faced by rehabilitation professionals. Moreover, three credible professionals, an experienced rehabilitation worker, a psychologist, and a guidance counselor, validated the research questionnaire. The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants at the workplace.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Initially, the researchers sent a letter to the chosen rehabilitation center to gather initial information about their possible participants through a pre-survey. Through online communication, the researchers had a preliminary assessment that gathered employed rehabilitation workers' initials, ages, and years of experience. Then, they drafted an interview guide questionnaire that aided the individual interview as they sought to explore the challenges faced by rehabilitation workers and their strategies during the delivery of the aftercare process for substance-abuse individuals. Credible professionals validate the research instrument before they can utilize it in the study. Next, the researchers made a letter of approval to perform the research at the specific rehabilitation center. Moving forward, the participants signed the informed consent form, ensuring their participation was voluntary. The selected participants answered the researchers' questions using the validated instrument. They participated individually in the semi-structured interview, which took place in the rehabilitation center. Lastly, after obtaining the needed data, the researchers analyzed the gathered data through the Thematic Analysis.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The researchers followed ethical considerations during the study, as Ignacio (2023) suggested. The researchers secured the participants' information, keeping all data collected, including personal profiles and responses, confidential and anonymous. They did not share nor distribute this information unless the respondents agreed. During the interview, the researchers explained the purpose of the study and how the participants could withdraw from the study at any point. The researchers believe informed consent empowered rehabilitation workers to make an informed decision to participate without feeling forced or scared of any negative consequences.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Challenges in the Aftercare Process of Substance-abuse Individuals

The study investigated the challenges that rehabilitation workers face in delivering the aftercare process. After the analysis of gathered data, six themes appeared to be what rehabilitation workers are challenged with namely, achieving clients' sobriety, manpower shortage and other implications, client's commitment to aftercare, handling deception, dealing with unforeseen circumstances, maintaining professional roles, worker's limitations to meet client's needs.

Theme 1: Achieving Clients' Sobriety

Rehabilitation workers are bound to encounter various challenges during the aftercare process. One of these is achieving a client's sobriety, which may encompass individuals' self-control, cravings, and temptations, lack of support system, and family as triggers, and substance as triggers, all of which pose significant threats to clients'

sobriety. Comparably, a study revealed that following detoxification and inpatient rehabilitation, individuals in recovery reintegrate into their regular lives; still, these facets of daily life can serve as potential triggers for cravings and temptations (Addiction Center, 2023). In a study by Parker et al. (2021), participants often faced significant challenges in their daily lives that tested sobriety. They described how the pull of familiar people and places could trigger past addictive behaviors, making this an ongoing challenge in their quest for long-term sobriety. It necessitated constant dedication, vigilance, and awareness of potential threats to their recovery journey. Spending time with patients who cause unhappiness, including coworkers, friends, family, or others, can significantly raise the risk of relapse, as it can trigger feelings of discontent and vulnerability (Hill, 2023). The ongoing existence of these challenges, including the triggers associated with specific individuals and environments, can create significant hurdles for rehabilitation workers in aiding individuals on their journey to recovery.

Theme 2: Manpower Shortage and other Implications

Aftercare programs must implement essential measures to safeguard the well-being of both clients and staff members throughout the treatment process. The results showed that the lack of case managers, implementing aftercare programs, and legal implications are significant obstacles that rehabilitation workers encounter during the aftercare process for substance abuse individuals. Similarly, Sereta et al. (2016) uncovered a substantial issue within rehabilitation centers; 73.6% of the problems were due to understaffing and an overloaded workforce. In addition to financial constraints, both staff and patients felt the impact of overcrowding, inadequate recreational facilities, and poor infrastructure, ultimately resulting in some patients prematurely discontinuing their prescribed treatments. Closely related to the finding of this study, a standard safety and security concern encountered in related programs is the arrival of clients under the influence of drugs or alcohol, posing a potential risk to the institution (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2006). The combined challenges of manpower shortages straining resources, the complexity of implementing effective aftercare programs, and the added intricacy of legal implications underscore the daunting task rehabilitation center workers face in ensuring their clients' successful recovery.

Theme 3: Clients' Commitment to Aftercare

One of the challenges that rehabilitation workers face is ensuring individuals' commitment to the aftercare process. Sustaining sobriety can be difficult when non-appearance, failure of report, loss of contact, and unfinished treatment exist. In comparison, Daigre et al. (2021) discovered a progressive rate of dropouts until the six-month follow-up in their investigation of treatment adherence and abstinence of outpatients with Substance Use Disorders. Further, it is an unfortunate reality that due to Substance Use Disorder's chronic nature, dropouts are more likely to be encountered than clients finishing treatment (Brorson et al., 2013; Syan et al., 2020). Commitment can make or break it in helping individuals achieve long-term sobriety through the aftercare process.

Theme 4: Handling Deception

An Intensive Outpatient Therapy counselor and a client build the foundation of their therapeutic bond on compassion, trust, and a genuine dedication to the client's journey to recovery. Researchers found that rehabilitation workers encounter difficulties when clients are being defensive, lying, being secretive, and making up excuses to conceal certain aspects of their lives. Addiction and dishonesty are closely linked in some instances, as dependence relies on lying and deception, increasing the risk of relapse and harm to personal relationships. The situation poses a significant threat to a client's recovery, as it reinforces negative habits involving lying, secrecy, and denial to avoid the discomfort associated with honesty in addiction (The Impact of Honesty Recovery, 2021). Similarly, in a comprehensive study of psychotherapy clients, Farber (2019) found that many admitted to being untruthful or holding back information about substance use, confirming earlier reports on the seriousness of this clinical issue. When clients are defensive, lying, or making excuses, it can hinder the development of an open and honest therapeutic relationship, making it more challenging to address the root issues during the aftercare process.

Theme 5: Dealing with unforeseen circumstances

Substance-Abuse individuals return home upon finishing the formal treatment while still fulfilling the plans they have designed with the rehabilitation workers, which is integral to the aftercare process. When they report back, rehabilitation workers are uncertain, particularly the activities outside that are out of their control and may have disturbed the patient's sobriety. In fact, in the year 2015, reported readmissions in government residential facilities

reached a rate of 20%, implying that receiving a formal recovery program for illegal substance abuse does not guarantee sustained sobriety upon going out. Moreover, Lifetime Recovery (2021) affirmed that coming across substance use triggers is inevitable, and rehabilitation workers do not have control over situations, such as their clients giving in to these triggers when they are outside of the rehabilitation center's premises.

Theme 6: Maintaining professional roles

In extending the recovery treatment towards the aftercare process, upholding a professional stand appeared challenging for rehabilitation workers. In one qualitative study by Sang et al. (2022), professionals identified limitations stemming from imposed regulation and stigma as barriers to recovery treatment. Similarly, this study discovered that rehabilitation workers must carefully deal with personal biases, restricted actions, and others. Despite the need to deliver ethical and professional services, it is often difficult to achieve professional boundaries between practitioners and clients (Fronek et al., 2009). As stated by Plaut (2011), the ability to establish and maintain professional boundaries also depends on the rehabilitation workers' degree of awareness of the impact of their behavior, their needs, and how vulnerable they can become. Regardless of the competencies possessed, internal and external factors make it challenging for rehabilitation workers to maintain their professional roles.

Theme 7: Workers' Limitations to meet client's needs

Rehabilitation workers should possess the skills needed to deliver aftercare services for substance-abuse individuals post-treatment. The World Health Organization emphasized how rehabilitation facilities need workers capable of effectively promoting and providing treatment to individuals. Contrastingly, the results showed that existing workers' limitations were a challenge for workers in extending the maximum help individuals or their clients need. Certain conditions often limit rehabilitation workers' abilities to cover client's concerns beyond what they can offer. In comparison to the study by Legha et al. (2014), socioeconomic challenges like unmet basic survival needs hinder the pursuance of treatment. Clients desire to prioritize other needs, such as occupation, yet these are beyond what rehabilitation workers can assist.

3.2 Strategies in the Aftercare Process of Substance-Abuse Individuals

The study also explored the strategies that rehabilitation workers employ in offering aftercare services to substance-abuse individuals. This subsection justifies the following seven themes that emerged after careful analysis.

Theme 1: Implementing treatment program activities

Rehabilitation workers frequently face the challenge of achieving clients' sobriety, which links to a lack of self-control, cravings, temptations, and lack of support, family triggers, and substance triggers. Nevertheless, rehabilitation workers create initiatives and action plans that assist clients in making progress and avoiding relapse, including creating aftercare plans, adjusting treatment plans, setting clear goals, utilizing workbooks, seeking feedback, and keeping in contact. Editorial Staff (2023) of American Addiction Centers states that aftercare is any ongoing care patients receive upon completing treatment. 12-step meetings, counseling, outpatient treatment, and sober living are the most popular formats. Additionally, one example is the aftercare support program of a group from a Florida-based drug and alcohol addiction treatment facility called Palm Partners, where patients learn to recognize their respective and particular relapse signs and symptoms and provide assistance in creating effective treatment plans. The group's aftercare support assists patients in learning how to manage stress and resolve issues in their personal lives (Palm Partners, 2015). Developing an aftercare plan allows workers to anticipate future client sobriety challenges and develop solutions. Rehabilitation workers establish programs and strategies requiring careful planning and adaptability to ensure effective patient-centered care.

Theme 2: Incorporating Various Counseling Therapies

Incorporating various counseling therapies offers a structured and evidence-based approach to help individuals recover from addiction and maintain their sobriety, addressing the challenge of achieving clients' sobriety due to cravings, temptations, lack of self-control, lack of support, and having family and substance triggers. As stated by Yue and Pena (2022), to effectively deliver addiction treatment, incorporating addiction psychotherapy is crucial. There is a wide range of addiction therapy options available and administered in person or online, tailored to the individual's preferences and needs. The group enables clients to identify and overcome potential barriers to developing a recovery lifestyle through follow-ups combining group therapy, coaching, education, peer

interaction, and homework. Also, according to Antonio (2023), workers collaborate with clients to create customized aftercare plans to help patients develop the skills and strategies to maintain sobriety and achieve long-term recovery. This situation has shown the value of applying therapies in improving the lives of countless individuals, making this approach invaluable in providing emotional support, identifying underlying causes, and equipping individuals with the skills needed for lasting sobriety.

Theme 3: Collaborative approaches

Rehabilitation workers collaborate to tackle significant challenges like the lack of case managers, implementing aftercare programs, and navigating legal implications in the aftercare process for individuals with substance abuse issues. Through collaborative efforts and group discussions, these professionals develop strategies that educate, nurture, support, and prioritize the safety of clients and the institution. Comparably, Antonio (2023) emphasizes a team approach, collaborating with clients and their families, fostering a sense of community for shared experiences and recovery support. This collective approach extends to diverse healthcare professionals collaborating to deliver high-quality care and interventions for patients and their families, as Davidson et al. (2022) highlighted. Adopting collaborative care initiatives by large healthcare systems and organizations, as emphasized by Reist et al. (2022), leads to improved treatment outcomes and heightened satisfaction for providers and patients. At the same time, the findings of Marchand et al. (2019) stress the importance of individualized aftercare plans tailored to clients' unique needs and goals. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce substance use and improve the lives of individuals. These strategies, rooted in collective efforts and interprofessional collaboration, not only elevate patient outcomes but also signify a growing trend in healthcare systems, showcasing their effectiveness in addressing the multifaceted needs of individuals with substance abuse disorders.

Theme 4: Skills and insight-driven approaches

The skills and insight-driven approach use reflective sessions, allowing individuals to gain insight into their addiction, triggers, and coping strategies. Rehabilitation workers use reflective listening to facilitate self-exploration, mirroring Roger's belief in self-discovery as a transformative process. Skills and insight-driven approaches also utilize identifying strengths and weaknesses, sharing insights, and giving suggestions, which provides a clear roadmap for individuals in recovery that plays a crucial role in their journey towards sobriety and a healthier life. This situation integrates Roger's (1940) client-centered goal setting, where the clients will focus on their self-concept and self-actualization. Individuals are encouraged to take ownership of their recovery, making it a deeply personal and meaningful process. Implementing a skill and insight-driven approach can enhance clients' commitment to aftercare. By developing practical skills for coping with triggers and stress and gaining insights into their behavior, clients are better equipped to navigate challenges post-treatment. This strategy fosters long-term resilience and empowers clients to actively engage in their aftercare actively, promoting sustained recovery.

Theme 5: Emanating warmth personality

Rehabilitation workers continuously foster a culture that values the client as an individual, genuinely caring for and making clients feel comfortable through approachable behavior. The researcher found that rehabilitation workers express warmth through empathy, unconditional positive regard, establishing rapport, and continuing support. According to Riess (2010, as cited in Moudatsou et al., 2020), research has shown that empathy is a pivotal factor in enhancing mental health outcomes and comprises a fundamental element of the therapeutic relationship between healthcare providers and their patients. Furthermore, better therapeutic outcomes happen due to a health professional's empathy (Hojat et al., 2001, as cited in Moudatsou et al., 2020). The dedication of rehabilitation professionals to treating every client as an individual and establishing a welcoming, compassionate, and encouraging atmosphere highlights the personality's critical role in promoting therapeutic relationships and the more general domains of relationships and health. Emanating a warm personality serves as a strategic approach to managing clients' deception during the aftercare process for individuals recovering from substance abuse. This compassionate stance fosters trust, encouraging clients to truthfully open up about their challenges. Creating a supportive atmosphere enhances the therapeutic relationship and contributes to a more effective aftercare process, ultimately supporting sustained recovery.

Theme 6: Individualized Approaches

Substance abuse is a deeply personal and complex issue, with each patient having a unique set of needs, challenges, and circumstances. As Marchand et al. (2019) agreed, individualized needs assessment and treatment delivery come together, providing comprehensive and flexible care tailored to the client's unique needs and values. This approach also considers the whole person, recognizes the impact of trauma, respects cultural diversity, and ensures that care is relevant and suitable. In comparison, Hilton and Pilkonis (2015) found that measures should have the ability to adjust or extend without imposing a substantial additional burden to effectively cater to the specific needs of patients in recovery and address conditions that may worsen the situation, such as physical health issues or enduring psychiatric conditions. Overall, an individualized approach recognizes the uniqueness of each patient and tailors treatment to their specific needs and circumstances.

Theme 7: Exhausting all Efforts

Rehabilitation workers have acknowledged that, at some points, they struggle to meet the client's demands due to their finite capabilities. Nevertheless, this recognition entails the driving force to make the best of what they have by exhausting all efforts. In a study by Muthelo et al. (2023), the limited resources for the prevention, treatment, and recovery and active efforts of stakeholders combatting substance abuse in rural communities are of utmost importance. Maximizing all possibilities allows rehabilitation workers to remain positive in extending the client's sobriety. Maintaining professional boundaries also relies on the rehabilitation workers' efforts to maintain their commitment (Legha et al., 2014). However, in contrast to the presented studies, Manuel et al. (2017) have highlighted how patients, despite workers exhausting all means, specifically considered access to community resources as one of the facilitators of a successful transition from long-term residential substance abuse treatment.

4.0 Conclusion

The study aimed to highlight the challenges met by rehabilitation workers that are associated with aftercare for substance-abuse patients. During formal treatment, patients benefit from a secure and structured environment supporting their recovery. However, the transition to the real world has numerous temptations and triggers that pose a constant threat to their newfound sobriety. The challenging experiences of rehabilitation workers are achieving clients' sobriety, manpower shortage, other implications, clients' commitment to aftercare, handling deception, dealing with unforeseen circumstances, maintaining professional roles, and workers' limitations to meet client's needs. Following the Goal-Setting theory, rehabilitation professionals are eager to assist people who abuse substances despite the difficulties they face. This increases their perseverance in carrying out tasks and engaging with clients to motivate them to set and achieve goals and become committed to empowering clients in their recovery. Though driven by internal pressure, concepts of Organismic Integration theory support that rehabilitation workers nevertheless perform the value and importance of a particular activity, performing the task willingly even though it may not be intrinsically enjoyable.

Exploring the strategies of rehabilitation workers in providing aftercare services to substance-abuse patients is another objective that the study sought to achieve. They are instrumental in addressing potential challenges that may compromise the overall effectiveness of the rehabilitation center. Rehabilitation workers ensure clients can achieve and sustain their recovery by incorporating various counseling therapies, using individualized approaches, and applying collaborative practices. Moreover, as Person-Centered theory has outlined, rehabilitation professionals, in that instance, demonstrated their empathy, allowed themselves to become role models, and created a secure, nurturing environment where patients could discuss their challenges and emotions without fear of being judged. This study has the potential to inform policies, improve the quality of care, reduce stigma, and contribute to more effective and holistic approaches to addiction treatment on both individual and societal levels. It becomes evident that effective aftercare services are of paramount importance within rehabilitation centers as they not only assist in the practical aspects of behavior change but also serve as the path toward sobriety.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm the equal contribution in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest

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