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Timothy Thomason, Northern Arizona University

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Timothy C. Thomason
Northern Arizona University

Author Note: Timothy C. Thomason is a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

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Citation for this article:
Abstract

There are many commonalities between the techniques used in Ericksonian psychotherapy and the healing rituals used in traditional Native American tribes. Milton H. Erickson had some Indian heritage and may have derived some of his therapeutic techniques from his study of tribal healing practices. A review of the literature shows that both approaches emphasize symbolic healing through the use of story telling, metaphors, ambiguous tasks, ordeals, and rituals. Both approaches also use direct and indirect hypnosis to relieve psychological distress. Implications for the practice of mental health counseling are described.
Commonalities Between Ericksonian Psychotherapy and Native American Healing

Introduction

Mental health counselors are likely somewhat familiar with the therapeutic methods of Milton Erickson, who has become a highly respected figure in the field of counseling and psychotherapy. Erickson’s methods, while perhaps hard to understand and replicate, are fascinating because they are so unusual and sometimes even perplexing (O’Hanlon, 1987). In contrast, most counselors are probably not very familiar with the therapeutic methods of Native American healers. However, a review of both of these approaches reveals significant similarities (and a few differences). Erickson himself was very interested and involved in Native cultures in his home state of Arizona, and he may have based some of his methods on what he learned about Native American healing.

This review of Ericksonian therapy methods and Native healing methods revealed that the psychological healing process that occurs in counseling and psychotherapy is similar to the healing process that occurs in Native American treatments for psychological distress. Both approaches rely on a somewhat authoritative healer/therapist who uses symbolic methods and rituals to facilitate receptivity to change in the client. Both approaches often utilize hypnotic trance to facilitate healing. There is some evidence that being in a state of trance can have a healing effect, in the sense that trance states can result in a reduction of psychological suffering, whether or not they affect a client's physical illness (McClenon, 2002). In the trance state the individual is more likely to suspend rational thought and be more open to suggestion. A person in this state is
typically more open to considering the counselor's suggestions, including therapeutic reframing of the problem (Waterfield, 2002). This review describes Milton Erickson’s therapeutic approach, Native healing practices that resemble Erickson’s use of hypnosis, and many similarities between the two models of psychological healing.

The procedures and tools used in both Ericksonian therapy and Native healing are entirely symbolic and help clients because they utilize sound psychological principles for creating change (Frank & Frank, 1991). An understanding of these principles and methods can potentially help make mental health counselors more effective. For example, although clients often resist change, Erickson demonstrated that there are ways to utilize resistance to promote change (O’Hanlon, 1987). Both Erickson and Native American healers have shown that change can be facilitated by attributing the power for change to subconscious forces (in the case of Erickson) or spiritual forces (in the case of Native healers). While different cultures use different symbols in healing, the reason the symbols have healing power is that the client believes in them (Frank & Frank, 1991). This review provides support for the need to individualize treatment based on the client’s culture and understanding of how change occurs. This review evaluates the available literature on Erickson’s methods that seem related to or similar to Native American healing methods.

Erickson’s Therapeutic Approach

Milton H. Erickson is generally considered one of the most innovative psychotherapists of the 20th century (O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). Since his death in 1980 he has become a universally admired figure (Haley, 1986), and has been granted a status comparable to that of other great figures in the history of psychotherapy. He was certainly the most respected and famous hypnotherapist in the world, and his influence
has been enormous (Waterfield, 2002). A recent survey of psychotherapists found that Erickson was considered one of the ten most influential therapists of the past quarter century (Top ten, 2007). Erickson was an expert in traditional directive hypnosis, but he created an indirect style of hypnotic induction that contributed to the development of strategic psychotherapy and solution-oriented counseling. Additionally, psychotherapists and counselors have incorporated aspects of Erickson's methods without actually using formal hypnosis (Gurman & Messer, 2003).

Erickson emphasized the importance of helping clients resolve their problems by utilizing whatever assets they already had (Hoyt, 2003). He focused on the presenting problem, did single-session treatments when possible, and did not make interpretations or provide insight. Erickson prescribed homework activities that were meant to promote change and often prescribed ambiguous tasks or ordeals. He used hypnosis, indirect suggestions, paradoxical directives, reframing, metaphors, and story-telling (Lankton, 1990). His general approach was to engage the client's interest and then direct subliminal suggestions to the client's unconscious mind (Rosen, 1982). Erickson's overall goal was to help clients get unstuck by getting them to have experiences that activated their own natural healing abilities.

For many years, Milton Erickson utilized traditional forms of hypnosis in counseling, but he also developed methods for hypnotizing people indirectly. Instead of a formal hypnotic induction, he would simply talk in such a way that clients would go into trance (Haley, 1986). For example, he might tell a meandering story that seemed ambiguous and illogical on a conscious level. The client might struggle to understand the story for a while, but then give up and lapse into a receptive state of suggestibility (Zeig,
Erickson’s indirect style of hypnotic induction resembles what could be seen as the type of trance induction used by some traditional Native American healers. While these healers do not formally hypnotize clients, they often use a style of communication that could have the effect of inducing trance (Winkelman, 1992). The next section makes the case that traditional Native American healers often use hypnotic methods in ritual healing ceremonies.

Native American Healing Practices and Hypnosis

In traditional Native American societies, there are at least two kinds of healers (although some healers embody both kinds). One kind of healer uses plants and natural remedies to treat common ailments such as wounds and stomach distress. Another kind of healer uses spiritual healing methods, such as ceremonies and rituals, to holistically treat the patient's body, mind, and spirit (Walsh, 1990). Native American healers who use a spiritual (or, in psychological terminology, transpersonal) approach in healing sometimes use methods that induce hypnotic trance, either in themselves, the patient, or both (Winkelman, 1992). This paper focuses on the kind of Native American healer who uses transpersonal methods that focus on healing psychological distress. The use of altered states of consciousness, such as trance, is one element in common between some methods of Native American healing and the psychotherapeutic approach of Milton H. Erickson.

Based on a review of numerous cases of Native American healing ceremonies, it has been hypothesized that in some cases ritual healing is facilitated by clients going into trance (Hultkrantz, 1992; Sandner, 1991). The Native American healer often creates a "sacred space" by conducting ceremonies in very specific ways, and the healing may include the use of drumming, singing, chanting, smudging, rituals, and other components.
that mark the healing encounter as a special event (Kalweit, 1992). Ceremonies, rituals, and rhythmic sonic stimulation can have the effect of hypnotizing the patient, who after all, is desirous of healing and willingly participates in the ceremony (Schumaker, 1995). The healer knows that whether or not the client understands exactly what the ritual involves or how it works is irrelevant (Mehl-Madrona, 1997). Clients’ faith in the power of the healer and their faith in the power of the healing ritual can be sufficient to result in a reduction in suffering (McClenon, 2002).

Traditional healers and shamans report that they sometimes go into a self-induced trance to contact the spirit world and channel what they describe as healing energy (Winkelman, 1992). Rosen (1982, p. 66) quoted Erickson as saying "I go into a trance so that I will be more sensitive to the intonations and inflections of my patients' speech. And to enable me to hear better, see better. I go into a trance and forget the presence of others." While the intention is different in the two processes, both involve the use of trance to facilitate healing. Erickson defined hypnosis as "a cooperative experience dependent on the communication of ideas by whatever means are available" (Waterfield, 2002, p. 307). Being in a trance state is not necessarily healing in itself, although since it involves quieting the body and mind it may have similar benefits to meditation or relaxation. Certainly voluntarily participating in hypnosis or a tribal healing ceremony facilitates the client's openness to psychological change (Hultkrantz, 1992).

When hypnosis was demonstrated in the Navajo Indian Medical School, a Navajo medicine man said "I'm 82 years old, and I've seen white people all my life, but this is the first time that one of them ever surprised me. I'm not surprised to see something like this happen because we do things like this, but I am surprised that a white man should know
anything so worthwhile" (Bergman, as cited in Richeport, 1982, p. 389). Based on such reports, it could be hypothesized that tribal healers have been using therapeutic methods similar to hypnosis for hundreds of years.

McClenon (2002, p. 79) said "I hypothesize that shamanic rituals constitute hypnotic inductions, that shamanic performances provide suggestions, that client responses are equivalent to responses produced by hypnosis, and that responses to shamanic treatment are correlated with patient hypnotizability." Dennett (2006) has proposed that the ailments tribe members go to the tribal healer for are those ailments that are particularly likely to benefit from symbolic treatment (for example, stress and the symptoms of stress). Ceremonial healing rituals can help the participants reduce their psychological distress, give them a sense of belonging to the group, and restore a sense of balance and harmony. The various forms of symbolic healing (including psychotherapy, counseling, hypnosis, and tribal healing ceremonies) are all aimed at reducing psychological distress and demoralization, rather than healing a physical illness (Frank & Frank, 1991). Of course the relaxation resulting from reducing stress and distress can contribute to physical healing (Rakel & Faass, 2006). The next section establishes that Milton Erickson used healing techniques that could be considered shamanistic methods if they were practiced in the context of a Native American culture.

**Erickson's Similarity to Native American Healers**

According to Hammerschlag (2001), "Erickson had Indian blood, possessed a medicine bundle, and was very proud of his Indianness." The medicine bundle was the kind that some Indian healers carry as a powerful healing tool, and it contained a gazing crystal. In another place Hammerschlag said "Erickson was proud that he had Indian
blood. He sponsored a scholarship at Phoenix College for Native American students. He was the keeper of a Navajo medicine bundle (ji' ish) which contained the medicine man's most sacred healing totems" (Erickson & Keeney, 2006). Erickson filled his waiting room and office with magical symbols to create a sacred space. He often used "secret words" and Indian fetishes such as masks and dolls. Zuni fetishes, which are usually carvings of animals in stone or shell, are said to contain a spirit that can provide supernatural assistance to the owner. Hammerschlag (1988) described his meeting with Milton Erickson, where he was surrounded by the Seri Indian carvings: "Erickson was like a medicine man in his hogan. He was a storyteller capable of spinning magic" (p. 53). Story-telling as a method of healing psychic distress is one major commonality between Erickson's approach and Native American healing.

Tafoya (2000) also commented on Erickson's Indian heritage, saying "Erickson, by the way, was of American Indian ancestry" (p. 54). It is unclear how distant the Indian ancestor was, but he or she was most likely more than three generations away. Erickson's daughter, Betty Alice Erickson, stated that because of his dark eyes and hair, and his darkly tanned skin, "He was often mistaken for a Native American Indian" (Erickson & Keeney, 2006). Of course, like many Americans, Erickson could well have had an Indian ancestor, but there is no evidence that he claimed to be Indian or Native American.

Parke (n.d.) suggested that Erickson's interest in nonverbal, indirect influence was related to his exposure to Native American cultures; he said "Of all the oral traditions I have reviewed, Milton Erickson's work bears closest resemblance to that of the American Indians" (n.p.). Erickson had ample exposure to and extensive knowledge of American Indian cultures, including direct experience (Parke, n.d.). Gilligan (as cited in Erickson &
Keeney, 2006) said that Erickson was like "an incredible wizard, an amazing healer" whose "hypnotic presence was really very strong--like an old shaman" (p. 20). Likewise, Lankton considered Erickson "one of the true shamans in America" (Erickson & Keeney, p. 293). The anthropologist and psychologist Teresa Robles also compared Erickson to a shaman: "Like traditional healers, he met his clients in the waking dream he developed with them, the hypnotic trance. Then . . . he helped them to change" (Erickson & Keeney, 2006, p. 306).

Keeney (2006) asserted "Rest assured, Erickson is a shaman. . . . We insult him when we say he was anything less than a shaman or healer" (p. 19). Although Erickson may have incorporated traditional Native American healing ideas and practices into his own approach to psychotherapy, he never claimed that he was a shaman (Keeney, 2006). Erickson's therapeutic techniques may well have owed something to what he learned from studying Indian healers, but it is also possible that the similarities were coincidental. This review of Erickson's writings has not revealed any references to borrowing or adapting Native American healing practices in his own therapeutic work.

Betty Alice Erickson (Erickson & Keeney, 2006) likened her father to a shaman, saying that "my father shares the traditions of many of the world's indigenous healers" (p. 27-28) in the sense that he used nature as a teacher, as a healing metaphor, and as a resource for working with clients." He often quoted Chief Seattle, collected Hopi Kachina bolo ties, and "used the wisdom of the totem, an amulet," (p. 76) to teach his children lessons (Erickson & Keeney). He "had a love for Indians as well as Native art (Erickson & Keeney, p. 114) and owned the largest collection of ironwood carvings by the Seri Indians of Mexico in existence. Jim Hills, the trader who sold the carvings, said
that Erickson loved to hear about the Seri Indians' use of songs and dance, and what the Seri shamans taught. Of Erickson, Hills said "He was definitely an American shaman . . . he had spirit power" (Erickson & Keeney, 2006, p. 268).

Like many shamans, Erickson faced significant ordeals early in his life, including being told he would not survive having polio. When he did survive, Erickson paddled a canoe down the Mississippi River by himself to restore his strength (Erickson & Keeney, 2006). Later, as a therapist, Erickson sometimes prescribed ordeals and rites of passage for his clients, which could be seen as somewhat similar to the Native American vision quest and other rituals such as the sweat lodge ceremony. In fact, Erickson may have borrowed the practice of prescribing an ordeal for therapeutic purposes from Native American traditions. Today Ericksonian psychotherapists accept that homework assignments for clients "should involve ordeals, trials, tribulations, and 'shamanic tasks,' none of which have to make sense to the person" (Kottler, Carlson & Keeney, 2004, p. xi).

In a speech at a conference Hammerschlag (2001) said that the same features that are found in Ericksonian psychotherapy are found in the methods used by shamanic healers:

"As Ericksonians, we acknowledge that each individual sees the world through the veils of their own experience and we treasure their uniqueness. We incorporate those features to craft strategic interventions using the patient's own story and symbols . . . these elements of our work are also the crucial aspects of shamanic healing" (n.p.).
Hammerschlag told a story about a Hopi woman who believed her baby would die because a hummingbird had flown in the window of her home and broken its neck hitting the wall. According to him, the medicine man provided an explanation for the event (the bird's death was because the woman broke a taboo), gave her absolution, and assigned her a ritual task to gain power that was greater than the witchcraft that was inflicted upon her. Hammerschlag concluded "That is Ericksonian Psychotherapy," and "A shaman has the capacity to combine stories with rituals that alter people's consciousness." There are several apparent similarities between Erickson’s techniques and some of the ritual healing methods of traditional Native American healers.

Similarities Between Ericksonian Psychotherapy and Native American Healing

Traditional Native American healers use a wide variety of diagnostic methods to determine what is wrong with a patient. A Navajo medicine man, Ben Silversmith (1994) said "The five ways of contacting the Spirit are hand trembling, star gazing, fire listening, crystal gazing, and hot charcoal study. Star gazing and crystal gazing are the Navajo X-rays. The healer selects a certain star and concentrates on it, or looks into a crystal and concentrates on it. Before long the star or crystal will yield a detailed picture of the organ within the patient which is diseased" (p. 1).

As mentioned earlier, Erickson possessed a medicine bundle that contained a gazing crystal. In his therapeutic work he sometimes used crystal gazing with clients who were hypnotized (Rossi, 1980). The client would be asked to look into a natural crystal, a crystal ball, or a mirror and see what images appeared. Some clients saw extensive imagery of, for example, themselves walking down a street and doing various activities (Erickson, 1954; Haley, 1967). Modern psychologists often consider crystal gazing a new
age practice with little therapeutic value (Norcross, Koocher, & Garafalo, 2006), but the use of a crystal as a source of ambiguous stimuli could be likened to the use of inkblots in psychological assessment. The crystal or crystal ball is simply an aid to visualization.

Eventually Erickson went beyond the use of a physical crystal ball, and asked clients to visualize a crystal ball, in which they could picture past experiences or images of future activities (Zeig & Munion, 1999). According to Battino (2006) Erickson asked people to visualize a crystal ball, look into it and see themselves in the future after they have solved their problem, and then report how the changes occurred. Erickson found that he had better results with imaginary crystal balls than when he used a real crystal ball (Waterfield, 2002). He said he considered external devices (such as crystal balls, mirrors, metronomes, and flashing lights) incidental aids to be discarded as soon as possible, in favor of the utilization of the client's behavior (Erickson, 1980). Steve de Shazer borrowed Erickson's crystal ball visualization technique and made it an important component of Solution-Focused Therapy (de Shazer, 1985; 1978).

Both the Ericksonian psychotherapist and the Native American healer avoid direct interpretation, since most people can consciously defend against it; what is needed is a way to influence the client's unconscious mind, such as indirect suggestion. Both the Ericksonian approach and Native American healing emphasize the use of metaphors and stories. Native Americans often use myths and stories to teach their children their place in the world and how they should behave. Erickson believed that metaphors and stories slipped beneath the patient's defenses and spoke to the client's subconscious. According to Combs and Freedman (1990, p. 11), "Because metaphor involves multiple dimensions and random elements, people often find different, but relevant, meanings than therapists
intend." For example, Erickson told a client who needed to learn patience a story about how Indians used to hunt by waiting by rabbit trails in the forest. They never knew when of if any animals would walk by, but they just waited for hours to see what would happen (Erickson & Keeney, 2006).

Hammerschlag (2001) claimed that "all therapy, essentially, takes place in trance," and that both Ericksonians and tribal healers utilize the patient's symbols and stories in making strategic interventions. "We tailor what we do to what they want to hear . . . . Milton said if we come to individuals with an open mind you can make people respond in specific ways. This is the hallmark of all shamanic healers" (Hammerschlag, n.p.).

Tribal healers utilize traditional symbols and stories in some of their healing ceremonies, and these symbols and stories are presumably shared by the client. However, Ericksonian counselors cannot always assume that their clients share the counselor's symbols and stories about health, illness, and healing. One of Erickson's contributions to counseling was his emphasis on the necessity for the counselor to understand and enter the client's belief system, rather than imposing a belief system from a theory outside the client's experience. What matters is that the healing ritual has credibility to the client and fits within the client's belief system. When talking about psychological healing, what matters most is the client's beliefs about how healing occurs, rather than the counselor's beliefs.

Hamerschlag (1988, p. 114) stated that "The process of psychotherapy is, in a sense, a kind of witchcraft made complicated. The therapist removes 'spells' by assisting the patient to discover a power within him- or herself that is greater than the power that
produced the symptom." The implication is that if the client believes in evil spirits, then the counselor can use that context to call on the power of good spirits. Symbols used in counseling must have meaning for the patient.

Differences Between the Two Approaches

While Milton Erickson utilized symbolic communication and therapeutic rituals in his counseling, one significant difference between him and tribal healers is that he was not interested in a spiritual dimension. He said "I have worked for over fifty years to disassociate the study of hypnosis from mystical and unscientific connotations" (Rosen, 1982, p. 192). According to Zeig (1997), "Erickson did not discuss spirituality . . . . he was a rationalist and did not have truck with transpersonal explanations. He maintained that what he did and experienced could be described in concrete, scientific terms without the necessity of using esoteric reasoning" (n.p.).

Although he had no interest in the supernatural, Erickson believed there was a role for the irrational in psychotherapy. He said that "Sometimes . . . therapy can be firmly established on a sound basis only by the utilization of silly, absurd, irrational, and contradictory manifestations" (as cited in Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 12). Presumably Erickson believed that symbolic healing methods worked (when they worked) due to the client's belief in their power to heal. This process may be poorly understood, but it is well established that a great variety of healing rituals can relieve suffering and demoralization (Frank & Frank, 1991). Rationalists assume that there is a good scientific explanation for how various forms of symbolic healing work, and that there is no need to resort to supernatural explanations. But the supernatural or spiritual beliefs of clients can be
utilized to promote their psychological healing, whether or not those beliefs can be proven to be true.

Betty Alice Erickson (2004) has noted that while traditional psychotherapy seeks theory, explanations and hypotheses, shamanic traditions welcome mysteries, and use prayer, music, and dancing to create altered states of consciousness and new possibilities. Just as many of Milton Erickson's homework tasks for clients made no logical sense, Native American healers sometimes give their clients tasks that make no logical sense, but that are meant to operate on a spiritual level, or what Euro-American psychologists might call an unconscious level (Duran & Duran, 1995; Gustafson, 1997).

For the most part the Ericksonian psychotherapist operates within the traditional individualistic Euro-American therapeutic model. The therapist talks with the client and the relief of suffering results from the client being guided by the therapist (either directly or indirectly) in how to think, feel, or behave differently. In contrast, the Native American healer operates within the context of a tribal society, and shares a belief system with the client. The ceremonies and rituals are presumed to have healing potential due to their linkage with the supernatural world. In both situations, the psychological healing that is hoped for can be explained rationally as the result of the healing power of nonspecific factors such as belief in the process, faith in the healer, and the expectation of benefits (Frank & Frank, 1991).

Milton Erickson was an expert in establishing rapport with his clients, and he felt that good rapport was essential. Of course, when strangers (such as a counselor and a client) meet, establishing rapport is usually a prerequisite for the client to be receptive to counseling. Native American healers, on the other hand, may do little to establish rapport
with their patients, since they are usually already known by the members of the tribe who are likely to call on them. Normally only people who believe in the power of the tribal healers would ask for their help. While there may be some limited discussion of the problem with the client or the client's family, treatment typically follows soon after the diagnosis has been established. Rapport is also less important in Native American healing than in psychotherapy because the tribal treatment is rarely a talking treatment (Duran, 2006). Healing rituals and ceremonies typically require little talk on the patient's part; it is usually assumed that the healer can diagnose the problem and administer a healing ritual without much verbal sharing of intimate personal concerns (Hultkrantz, 1992). If the client believes in the credibility and power of the healer, is open to change, and participates in the healing ritual, that is often sufficient for the relief of suffering to occur (Cohen, 2003).

Conclusion and Implications

It is apparent that there are many commonalities and some differences between traditional Native American healing practices and Ericksonian psychotherapy. Similarities include the use of direct and indirect hypnosis, storytelling, rituals, ordeals, ambiguous tasks, and metaphors. Other less obvious commonalities include a naturalistic orientation, giving directives, utilizing the client's symptoms and beliefs, pattern intervention using the client's language and frame of reference, and symbolic communication that uses reframing and ambiguity to open the client to the potential for change.

A major difference between Native American healing and Erickson's approach is that Erickson did not see what he did as transpersonal or spiritual healing; he believed
that his hypnotic methods were naturalistic and their effects could be explained scientifically. Erickson also emphasized rapport and engaged in conversations with his clients more than Native Americans healers usually do.

Erickson was apparently quite successful with many clients, and traditional Native American healing methods are also often successful (Mehl-Madrona, 1997). In both of these approaches, as in many symbolic healing practices (including psychotherapy) success can be defined as the relief of suffering and demoralization (Frank & Frank, 1991). The existence of similarities between the Ericksonian approach and traditional Native American healing suggests that this modern form of psychotherapy and traditional healing methods may tap the same psychological mechanisms for healing.

This review has several implications for mental health counselors. One implication is that psychological healing is a complex process but one that can be understood rationally. While the healing techniques of Erickson and Native American healers may seem mysterious and difficult to replicate, they are all based on well-known psychological principles. For example, healing methods that utilize either formal or informal hypnosis work, when they work, by increasing the client’s susceptibility to change. A state of openness and suggestibility increases the likelihood that the client will consider that change is possible and may not be as difficult as previously thought.

Another implication of this review is that counselors should carefully consider how the concept of resistance applies to each client. Both Erickson and tribal healers assumed that people resist change consciously but are susceptible to suggestions to change subconsciously. Story-telling, prescribing mysterious tasks, and other methods can be used to engage clients’ attention and bypass conscious resistance to change.
Perhaps the most significant implication of this review is that psychological healing is a powerful process that transcends cultural boundaries. The same principles of change appear to function in different cultures. Trance-states can have healing potential, whether used by Erickson with Anglo clients, or by Native American healers with Native clients. While the context and symbols used in healing encounters vary by culture, the common humanity of clients means that their psychological functioning is at least somewhat similar. A Native client who might not be responsive to an Erickson treatment by an Anglo therapist might very well respond positively to a Native healer using a similar, but more culturally appropriate, treatment. Non-Native American counselors should ensure that the therapeutic techniques used are compatible with the client’s culture. This awareness of cultural variability and psychological similarity can enhance the mental health counselor’s effectiveness with culturally diverse clients.
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