

Chapter 21

Crafting, Heritage and Well-being: Lessons from Two Public Engagement Projects

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Abstract

In this chapter I discuss the design and results of two public engagement projects – ‘Remembering the Romans in the Middle East and North Africa (‘RetRo’) and ‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ – that brought together heritage with arts and crafts to promote both more positive narratives about the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the well-being of participants. I start with an overview of the existing research into heritage and well-being, and crafting and well-being, showing how pulling these strands together can be beneficial and might have therapeutic effects for people suffering from trauma. I then present a summary of my two projects before discussing the feedback from the participants to explore in what ways being part of the workshops contributed to well-being. In the final part, I suggest potential ways forward for future work in this area.

Introduction

Existing research into heritage, crafting and well-being, indicates that a combination of these fields might be therapeutic for those suffering from trauma. Recent projects ‘Remembering the Romans in the Middle East and North Africa’ (‘RetRo’) and ‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ used these factors to engage groups of people of different backgrounds and abilities, in order to explore the ways in which they experienced these benefits in the form of improved well-being.

Definition of well-being

For the purposes of my work, and for this chapter, I follow the What Works Centre for Wellbeing’s definition of three dimensions of well-being (What Works Wellbeing 2018):

1. The personal dimension: confidence, self-esteem, meaning and purpose, increased optimism and reduced anxiety;
2. The cultural dimension: coping and resilience, capability and achievement, personal identity, creative skills and expression;
3. The social dimension: belonging and identity, sociability and new connections, bonding, reciprocity and reducing social inequalities.

Crafting, Museums and Well-being: An Overview

There is a burgeoning amount of evidence for links between heritage, well-being and art and craft activities. For the UK context, a lot of this work has been helpfully synthesized by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Report on creative health and the use of the arts for health and wellbeing (APPGAHW 2017; additional scoping work on crafting and well-being is also being carried out currently by the

Yarnfulness Project: Yarnfulness 2018). In this overview, I will draw out salient points from this report as well as explore some of the more specific research into crafting and well-being, particularly in the treatment of trauma.

Having access to heritage and the ability to take part in heritage activities has been shown to increase life satisfaction (APPGAHW 2017: 65). The 'Heritage in Hospitals' project, for example, which ran from 2008-2011, demonstrated that taking museum objects into care homes significantly increased wellness and happiness that could be measured quantitatively (Ander *et al.* 2013a; Ander *et al.* 2013b; Lanceley *et al.* 2011; Solway *et al.* 2015; Thomson *et al.* 2011; Thomson *et al.* 2012a; Thomson *et al.* 2012b. Also see Chatterjee and Noble 2013). The opening up of ways to take part is key here, as co-production and inclusion in decision making are also important for health (APPGAHW 2017, 66). There is, however, a continuing problem over access as demonstrated by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England, English Heritage and Sport England 'Taking Part' survey, which showed that the majority of people both visiting museums and galleries and taking part in creative activities were well-educated professionals aged 55-74, who also had had access to such activities when young (Inglis and Williams 2010). Furthermore, museum visitors and creative activity participants are most likely to be white and unlikely to be black or Asian (Inglis and Williams 2010: 2). Clearly, then, there are significant barriers to access that still need to be overcome. In addition, given that access to heritage and co-production are so important for well-being and health, then what happens when that heritage is forcibly taken from you, for example through destruction? And how can we work to overcome the barriers that might further prevent the same people from having that access? These questions are discussed further below.

Similar to heritage, there is also increasing evidence that engaging in craft activities can have a positive influence on well-being. It promotes motivation, a positive sense of self, personal growth, and a sense of competence and achievement, as well as a sense of being in control and able to make choices (Bedding and Sadlo 2008; Hacking *et al.* 2006; Perruzza and Kinsella 2010; Riley 2008; Reynolds 2009; Tzanidaki and Reynolds 2011; for a useful overview, see Riley *et al.* 2013). Crafting with textiles and fibres seems to be particularly beneficial for well-being. Participants in the Stitchlinks project (Stitchlinks 2018), for example, which surveyed 3545 people from 31 countries, reported that when they knitted they felt calmer and happier. The reasons cited for this benefit revolved around several themes. The rhythmic and repetitive nature of knitting was deemed to have therapeutic and meditative qualities that provide a 'mental break' and help to prevent negative thoughts creeping in (Riley *et al.* 2013: 52-53). Respondents also commented that knitting was a way of being socially active, including giving things to other people, and gave them a sense of accomplishment: 'a touchable feelable result' (Riley *et al.* 2013: 55). This tactility of the craft was reflected by 46% of respondents commenting that they felt texture affected their mood. In addition, as well as opening up new skills, including other crafts, respondents felt that it gave them a connection to tradition. This was also found to be the case in the study by Boerema *et al.* (2010) of sewing and well-being amongst immigrant women in south Australia, for whom sewing also provided a link to cultural traditions. This perceived link between crafting and tradition opens up a space for heritage, crafting and well-being to come together in concert, as will be discussed further below.

Also of relevance in this context is current research into trauma, mindfulness and creativity. Trauma, in particular Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), manifests itself both as a strong desire to avoid thinking about the original trauma and as unbidden memories, often referred to as 'flashbacks', and nightmares (see Caruth 1995; Smelser 2004; van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995). Fear of triggering the trauma can lead to social isolation and avoidance of pastimes that were previously enjoyed. Traditional treatment for PTSD has

focused on exposure-based therapies in which patients gradually confront their anxiety and trauma. More recently, there have been moves to supplement these traditional therapies, which treat the trauma-related psychopathology, with alternatives that may be gentler, help people feel safer and foster personal strength and growth (Smyth and Nobel n.d.; Southwick *et al.* 2015; Talkovsky and Lang 2017). These alternatives frequently draw on mindfulness as a technique to promote resilience, especially in adults. In bringing thoughts back to the present through mindfulness, life can be engaged more in the present rather than fixating on the past and future. Attention can be controlled in order to decrease negative biases, regulate emotions and improve threat appraisal (Smyth and Nobel n.d.: 4; Southwick *et al.* 2015: 3).

There is a similarity here with the rhythm and absorption of arts and craft practice that provides potential for these practices to be used as alternative treatments (APPGAHW 2017: 40). Where work has been done in this area, it has tended to focus on PTSD in military veterans (for a summary of projects, see APPGAHW 2017: 111), though the Mental Health Foundation's Amaan project has been working with asylum-seeking women in Glasgow (Mental Health Foundation 2018; see also APPGAHW 2017: 113). As well as the mindfulness benefits of crafting, crafting as part of a group also has other positives for PTSD sufferers as it recognizes that individuals are part of wider social groupings and structures (on the need for this recognition, see Southwick *et al.* 2015: 1).

Group-based activities can both help increase social inclusion for people who have avoided social activities and aid in creating community cohesion between, for example, host communities and newly-arrived refugees (APPGAHW 2017: 113; Kidd *et al.* 2008; Smyth and Nobel n.d.: 3-4). Finally, taking a 'craftivist' approach, i.e. the gentle act of protest through crafting, may also be beneficial for people experiencing trauma. Often a contributing element to trauma is the lack of any sense of control over a situation (on health and a sense of control, see APPGAHW 2017: 20). If, through crafting and craftivism, a participant is able to regain a sense of control that could be potentially very powerful indeed.

'Remembering the Romans in the Middle East and North Africa' ('RetRo') and 'Rematerialising Mosul Museum': Overview and Design

In this section, I will present an overview of the two public engagement projects, before discussing how, and why, they were designed with the promotion of well-being in mind. It should be noted from the outset that neither project had a psychology professional on the team. This means that neither project can be deemed to constitute therapy, though individuals may have experienced therapeutic outcomes (see below). In addition, due to the possibility of triggering trauma in some of the participants, ethical consent was sought for both projects.

'RetRo' took place in the spring of 2016 and was funded by an AHRC Cultural Engagement Fund grant. The project saw two day-long workshops at the Petrie Museum, London and two day-long workshops at the Great North Museum, Newcastle, as well as a side project called 'Postcard to Palmyra', which is discussed in detail in Kamash (2017). The workshops were a collaboration with the museums and with artist Miranda Creswell, photographer Rory Carnegie and creative writing specialist Sarah Ekdawi. During the workshops, the museum curators gave a brief tour of their collections, then participants were invited to choose either an object or objects from either a pre-selected set of objects or any object on display, and to respond to it through drawing, photography and/or creative writing with the guidance of Miranda, Rory and Sarah (Figures 21.1 and 21.2). Participants (32 across all workshops) included people with a Middle Eastern or North African background and people with an interest in the archaeology of the region.



[Figure 21.1: RetRo workshop in progress at the Petrie Museum, London: creative writing and drawing]



[Figure 21.2: RetRo workshop in progress at the Great North Museum, Newcastle: photography]

‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ grew out of the RetRo project and was funded by the British Institute for the Study of Iraq and the Institute of Classical Studies. The project took place in the summer of 2018 when two workshops were held at Cheney School, Oxford. These workshops were a collaboration with fibre artist Karin Celestine. Photographs of objects that had once been in Mosul Museum (from: Project Mosul 2017) were used as inspiration during the workshops, together with photographs of monuments in the city (from: Monuments of Mosul 2018), images of objects from the British Museum and the Ashmolean Museum, actual objects that I have inherited or received as gifts from family members and, at the second workshop, postcards of various sites in Iraq brought by one of the participants. During the workshop, Karin demonstrated the wet felting technique, so that participants could make a felted panel inspired by their chosen picture or object (Figures 21.3–5). Participants (14 across both workshops) included people with an Iraqi background, people learning Arabic who wanted to learn more about some of the cultural aspects and people who wanted to learn a new craft skill as well as being interested in archaeology and Iraq.



[Figure 21.3: Felting workshop in progress at Cheney School, Oxford. Karin Celestine (standing) explains the wet felting technique to the participants]



[Figure 21.4: Participants of the first felting workshop with their final felted panels]



[Figure 21.5: Participants of the second felting workshop with their final felted panels]

Both workshops were motivated by a desire to shift the narrative around the MENA region and its heritage. An important element in this was to make an effort to amplify voices of people from that region and, in so doing, try to break down some of the barriers to access outlined above. Adverts for the projects were bilingual (in English and Arabic) and flagged to cultural organisations working with MENA communities in the UK. There were two major hurdles encountered here. Firstly, in the RetRo project it seemed that using museum spaces for the workshops may have imposed a further barrier, being off-putting for people who were not already used to being in these spaces. As a consequence, the ‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ felting workshops were held in a state secondary school, which seems to have helped this problem, at least in part. The second hurdle, however, has been harder to overcome so far. This barrier came from cultural organisations themselves, especially refugee organisations, who have been extremely reluctant to engage. There seem to be a couple of potential reasons for this reaction: 1) a concern over the ethics of this kind of work (i.e. potentially provoking trauma in vulnerable individuals), and 2) an under-appreciation of the potential value of this kind of work (for example one organization considered this not to be their type of ‘helpful’ work). The first is, of course, a legitimate concern and was considered by seeking ethical consent prior to each project. The second is more frustrating and indicates the need for more work to demonstrate this potential – this volume is, of course, one step, hopefully, in that direction.

As well as wanting to promote a more positive narrative around MENA heritage, these projects were also a reaction to the current trend for cultural heritage reconstruction projects, especially in Syria and Iraq. A key problem for me in many (though not all – see e.g. #NewPalmyra (2018)) is the lack of consultation and participation, particularly of people connected to the region. Given the growing evidence for co-production for health in decision making outlined above, it seems likely that the same would be true of reconstruction projects. There is, therefore, not only a moral imperative to include people’s thoughts and views, but also a healthcare imperative. These workshops represent a first step in exploring that imperative and in finding ways for people to re-establish connections with their heritage that have been forcibly removed through destruction.

As such, a key aim for both projects was that the space provided should be open, supportive and friendly in order to promote creativity and sharing. There were various ways in which this was achieved. Some were quite simple, such as providing Middle Eastern treats like baklava and dates, as well as tea and coffee, for participants. In all workshops the focus was on ‘gentle engagement’ i.e. chatting informally to participants one-on-one or in small groups about what they were doing and the objects they had chosen. As part of this ‘gentle engagement’ process, opening talks were kept short and light in order to help break down any perceived barriers between ‘experts’ and ‘participants’. In particular, I felt it important that I participate alongside everyone else at the workshops, and learn the new skills myself. This helped to make everyone feel at ease, especially people who may have felt nervous about their artistic abilities (see below) - I was a novice, learning just as much as everyone else. This meant that everyone participating could feel that they had their own kind of expertise and experience to share with the rest of the group and that these flows were multi-directional.

As a result of this ‘gentle engagement’, guest books were used instead of feedback forms, where people were welcome to share any thoughts about the workshop (and were equally welcome not to write anything at all). One consequence of this decision is that neither project has gathered quantitative data about how the participants felt during the workshops. In order to mitigate this, however, follow-ups were conducted for each project after the workshops. For the RetRo project, all participants (including museum curators and creative practitioners) were invited to reflect on their experiences and what they had learnt one year on from the workshops; these responses have been published as a co-authored journal article (Kamash *et al.* 2017). For ‘Rematerialising

Mosul Museum', an email survey was sent out two months after the workshops that asked explicitly for reflections on the three well-being dimensions outlined above.

Measuring Well-being During and After the Workshops

In this section, I will present the feedback from participants in order to analyze how the workshops measure against the What Works Centre for Wellbeing's well-being dimensions (see above). This feedback is taken from the guestbooks and from the co-authored *Epoiesen* article written one year after the RetRo workshops (Kamash *et al.* 2017), where participants were not asked explicitly to reflect on well-being. In the case of the 'Rematerialising Mosul Museum' project, participants were asked to comment directly on these three dimensions, two months after the felting workshops had taken place; all participants, including fibre artist Karin, responded to the feedback request. All participants providing feedback have been asked whether they wish to be anonymous in this publication; where anonymity has been requested, names have been redacted, otherwise participants are referred to by their first name. The respondents who have requested anonymity are referred to here as 'Respondent 1' and 'Respondent 2'. Several respondents self-identify as suffering from generalized anxiety, with at least two being unable to work at the time of the workshops due to anxiety-related issues. Phrasing in direct quotes from respondents has been kept as in the original.

Under the personal dimension, several themes recurred in the feedback around confidence, pride and anxiety, coping and resilience, and identity and self-esteem. This dimension sees significant overlap with the cultural dimension, so these factors are discussed together here. Some participants in the felting workshops commented on the process of felting itself being calming and therapeutic (Respondent 1) with Rana, Yasmin and Deema explicitly noting that the rhythmic nature of the process helped to reduce anxiety. This echoes some of the findings from Stitchlinks, as well as linking with the mindfulness aspects noted above. The task was also key to how Respondent 2 felt about the process as there was a 'defined outcome' (i.e. making a felted panel), but there was also 'room within the definition for me to have to make some decisions'. Respondent 2 goes on to say that making choices related to the crafting 'increased my confidence in making other, wider choices' and also that:

'Completing the felt piece and sharing pictures of it with friends was really positive. Look, I'm someone who can create something. I made this. I am not just someone who is incapable of doing... I didn't feel like a proper person for a while, and... doing this helped.'

This ability to make creative choices within the task was also identified as a positive aspect by Lucia. This seems to demonstrate that a feeling of control and self-determination is an important element in activities that aim to promote well-being; this may be even more important for people who have lost a sense of control over their lives during conflict.

A sense of achievement and pride was also noted by Karen, Christina and Alec. Some respondents also highlighted that the positive effects on their confidence had continued after the workshops. In relation to the RetRo workshops, for example, Jayne (in Kamash *et al.* 2017) stated that participating had given her more confidence in her studies. Commenting on the felting workshop, Respondent 1 said: 'The workshop most definitely had a tremendous "feel good" effect on me. I had a sense of pride in my achievement, both whilst at the workshop and afterwards.' One of the most interesting aspects of this kind of developing confidence came from several respondents for whom participating was in some way anxiety-inducing in the first place. Thinking about the RetRo workshop, Muna commented that she had felt 'terrified' about being in a room with artistic people, but that choosing to photograph an object she felt she could identify (i.e. a ceramic jug) meant that she

was ‘freed up from the worry’ about her ‘lack of creative ability’ (Kamash *et al.* 2017). Having built her confidence at RetRo, Muna also came to a felting workshop. In addition, Florence who was very nervous at the start of the RetRo workshop, flourished with some gentle encouragement. Her daughter, Thandi, who accompanied her to the workshops, wrote: ‘Archaeology is now a passion of hers.... she [Florence] has gained such confidence in herself and her ability to relate to history’ (email communication 20.10.17; quoted with permission).

Worrying about a lack of creative skill was also raised as an issue for Karen at the felting workshop, because ‘it is something that at an early age I was identified as not being very good at’. By being able to prove that anxiety wrong Karen says that ‘it has taught me to have more regard for what I can do and in that respect helped to increase my confidence in stepping outside what I know and my self-esteem in relation to what I can achieve if I try.’ Furthermore for some people even the act of getting to a workshop can be anxiety-inducing; both Karen and Christina commented on how nervous they were about journeying to the felting workshops. Again, for both, feeling that they had overcome that anxiety was a source of pride and a reason to feel increased confidence: ‘It has given me [Christina] confidence in knowing that I can overcome my fears and anxieties’. These instances remind us that not everyone feels immediately comfortable about participating in these kinds of activities, so creating a space and an atmosphere in which people can gently be encouraged is key, as noted above.

An additional and vital layer within this, of course, has to be that these workshops were intended to tackle and open up a range of challenging issues, some of which related very directly to difficult elements of some participants’ identities. Muna, for example, explained:

‘I was very keen to attend [the felting workshop] as I am of Iraqi origin and have found it extremely challenging to remain optimistic in relation to long running turmoil there. There is also an all pervasive negative narrative that can come from being of Arab origin... It was also extremely important to me that my teenage son has the experience of being around positive Arabic role models and learns about Iraqi culture as a counter balance to some of the stereotypes that he will have to be able to navigate. He hides his identity all the time, even from his friends, so things like this help to ensure that he has self-esteem.’

In relation to this, the nature of the activity was highlighted as an important element. For example, Heba reflected that taking a creative approach in the RetRo workshops helped her to ‘feel more empowered to write my own story freely.’ Similarly, Rana, Yasmin and Deema said ‘it [the felting] provided people with the means to portray their personal identity through a media other than words — this was refreshing for our Iraqi identity.’ The importance of non-verbal expression — especially for people who may have experienced trauma, and so find ‘putting it into words’ difficult — cannot be underestimated. It may be aspects such as this that make these activities effective supplements to traditional therapies. In addition, the use of the ‘gentle engagement’ method was key to creating the right kind of atmosphere during the workshops. Thandi commented: ‘You and Karin created an ambiance for peaceful reflective thought about identity, memories, politics and academic value which is often rather tricky to tackle in conversation alone without getting super-heated.’ Within this, time and space to reflect were identified as some of the most important aspects of the workshops, in an anonymous comment in the felting workshop guestbook and by Muna:

‘It is not really possible to over emphasis how important I feel it is to allow people time and space to explore this culture... There are many layers of anxiety associated with being connected to this area that have often spanned a lifetime and continue to stretch in front of you into the future. There is often not time for your mind to process as it is not a one off traumatic event that you can “move forward” from. It is

rather a way of being that you learn to live alongside. The time to spend in this workshop in a positive way surrounded by Arabic culture was fantastic and left me feeling elated.'

Moving into the cultural dimension of well-being, where this did not overlap with issues of resilience, achievement, personal identity etc. discussed above, the majority of respondents commented on creative skills and expression. Numerous respondents commented on the value of learning or enhancing a skill for their well-being, and the value of having help, especially from Karin, to build on their creative skills and expression. For Lucia, Sarah and Respondent 2, this was also a reminder of the importance of creativity in their lives, and it provided a focus for wanting to introduce more creativity into their lives in the future. One anonymous person in the felting workshop guestbook commented that it was fun to experiment with ways of being artistic that are not provided for in schools. Muna also noted that linking with a creative side 'allowed the workshop to appeal to all ages' and to include people who had differing levels of archaeological knowledge.

As well as learning skills, participants also commented on other kinds of learning that fit into the social dimension of well-being. Two respondents discussed how being at the felting workshops meant they knew more about Iraq and Iraqis afterwards. Karen talked about hearing stories from Iraqis at the workshop that:

'...made me realize that this was something that although seemingly a part of daily life through the news media, that I knew nothing about beyond what I am told in the news... [The experience] made Iraq to me feel like more than just a place I hear of on the news (sort of 3D rather than 2D if you know what I mean).'

This has culminated in Karen reading a book about Iraq and its politics that she had been given some time ago 'but had put... aside'. Similarly, Respondent 2 described how creating their piece led them to following up news articles and blog posts to learn more about Iraq:

'I have much more of an appreciation of it [Iraq] as a real place with a long history, a complex and varied culture, a diverse geography, life, people, hope; and not just a place of destruction. This survival, rebuilding, adapting, flourishing, shines a light on how strong people are... it adds to my understanding of the world, and my place in it... Having a focus outside yourself helps change your perspective too.'

These kinds of reciprocity and broadening out of understandings are what Muna, above, was hoping could be achieved. They are amongst the values of having mixed groups at such events, though it should be noted that Respondent 2 participated from home, rather than coming to a workshop. Respondent 1 observed that they felt such interactions benefited and developed their own cultural identity and knowledge. Indeed, Lucia, Muna, Christina and Alec all commented on the value of being with people from other backgrounds, with Lucia particularly valuing the opportunity to share the workshop with Iraqis, whom she described as being 'survivors of their culture so to speak'. Furthermore, for Rana, Yasmin and Deema, being part of a large group gave them 'a sense of overall understanding and ultimately belonging'. Herein, then, lies the value of continuing to break down the barriers to access discussed above.

People also commented on how having 'shared, yet individual, goals' make workshops socially inclusive, with people helping each other out. Karen also commented that having this 'common reason' meant there were 'no barriers to communication', even though people may come from very different backgrounds; she felt this was one of the biggest contributing factors to her well-being as it helped her through the anxiety of making new connections with people. Linked to this, it was interesting to observe at both the RetRo and the felting workshops that numerous people came with friends or family; only one or two came alone. This may also be

connected to the anxieties around participating that were noted above. As a consequence, several people commented on how the workshops gave them an opportunity not only to create new bonds, but also to enhance existing friendships, including, in the case of Sarah, those with Iraqi people who were not at the workshop she attended. Overall, it appeared that seeing the range of responses, and witnessing other people's enjoyment, was a source of well-being for many of the participants. Karin encapsulated these observations neatly in her reflection on her experience of running workshops, including these ones:

'The crafts give a focus of attention and the rhythm of working means that often conversation flows more easily than when just sat together with nothing to do... The sense of community is increased, not just in the meetings of new people, but how we work together. People naturally help each other out, offer to roll the wool, or get hot water. They work together and in that sharing, new bonds and ideas are opened up. In this workshop in particular, having people of different races, religions, backgrounds made this even more great an experience... Sharing a creative experience gives us a way in to someone else's life and culture. The smell of a soap, triggers a conversation and a memory and an understanding that would not happen in normal interaction. That is a golden opportunity.'

Conclusions and Recommendations for the Future

These workshops demonstrate that there is significant potential for these kinds of engagement, involving heritage and crafting, to have a beneficial impact on well-being, and even to be therapeutic for those suffering from anxiety and trauma. In addition, this work shows that continuing the efforts to break down the barriers to accessing to heritage and crafting activities is worthwhile. For people from a range of backgrounds and traditions, participating in these workshops provided opportunities to explore potentially difficult parts of their identities and their link with their heritage, in some cases non-verbally, and to feel part of a wider community. Bringing people together who might not ordinarily mix, created a space for reflection about our interactions in the wider world and seems to have encouraged deeper empathy with those different to ourselves. These workshops also demonstrate the value in continuing the survey work of other projects such as Stitchlinks, and of expanding that research to include a broader range of people who may not come to crafting by themselves.

Clearly, this work has been on a very small scale so far. Further research on a larger scale, potentially including a longitudinal study, will be key to providing more robust evidence of its efficacy. In this, working with psychologists will be vital to unpicking the various strands of evidence and gaining a deeper understanding of what works and why. This may help to overcome the gate-keeping issues encountered with e.g. refugee charities. I hope that such opportunities to increase well-being, which draw on the therapeutic benefits of heritage and crafting, become more routinely offered in future.

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