

## Examining the Role of Social Work in Poverty Alleviation in the United States from 1964-2014

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Social workers rarely discuss the contributions of the social work profession to the history of poverty alleviation in the United States. This article is based on a historical study that explored the response of the social work profession to poverty over a fifty-year period, from 1964 through 2014. 1964 was chosen as the starting point, consistent with the launching of the War on Poverty. The antecedent conditions to the War and the role and challenges to social work during the period are examined. Primary sources were invaluable for providing information about social work involvement in real time, and therefore carried a significant degree of authenticity. Secondary sources were significant for their ability to provide contemporary information for this study. Oral history interviews were beneficial for understanding the experiences of social work practitioners who worked in poverty alleviation activities. This article is aimed at contributing to scholarship about the role of social work in the social and economic history of the United States.

**Keywords:** Poverty, Alleviation, War on Poverty, Professionalization, Great Society

### Introduction

This article is the product of a historical research study that explored the response of the social work profession to poverty over a fifty-year period, from 1964 through 2014. Social workers rarely discuss the contributions of the social work profession to the history of poverty alleviation in the United States. In reality, social work has long been committed to poverty alleviation in the United States and social workers have worked extensively to make that a reality. However, not enough is known about the specific actions taken by social workers to alleviate poverty during the period covered by this article. As a result, much of the public credit for poverty alleviation is often given to politicians, economists and policy advocates, while social work rarely if ever gets a mention in such conversations. This article does not seek to assess the degree of the success of the social work profession with regard to poverty alleviation between 1964 and 2014, but to present a historical record of that role. The article shows that the social work profession was indeed active in poverty alleviation efforts during the period under review. It also shows that the participation of social workers in those efforts exposed the social work profession to challenges, some of which the profession continues to contend with.

Nineteen sixty-four was chosen as the starting point, consistent with the launching of the War on Poverty. The antecedent conditions to the War and the role and challenges to social work during the period are examined. Primary sources were invaluable for providing information about social work involvement in real time, and therefore carried a significant degree of authenticity. Secondary sources were significant for their ability to provide contemporary information for this study. Oral history interviews

were beneficial for understanding the experiences of social work practitioners who worked in poverty alleviation activities.

*Poverty alleviation* refers to efforts aimed at improving the livelihoods of the poor through education, economic development, health, and income redistribution. In other words, the aim is to reduce poverty. This is distinct from poverty eradication, a term and process aimed at achieving the impossible goal of eliminating poverty. When used in poverty alleviation literature, *empowerment* generally has five elements that are considered necessary to empower those that are considered disempowered. These are social action, political awareness, self-determination, respect and the use of power (Breton, 1994). They are all tools employed in all areas of the social work profession, perhaps more so in poverty alleviation work than in many other areas. In this article, *social work* is used in reference to the discipline and as an active noun.

### Defining poverty

In its 2012 Copenhagen Declaration, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) presented a three-level description of poverty. The first is 'absolute poverty' also known as 'extreme poverty', which is characterized by severe lack of access to basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. The second is 'moderate poverty', which refers to a situation when families are only able to meet their basic needs and nothing else. The third is 'relative poverty', by which is meant a situation where household income is below a given proportion of national income. These distinctions are not made in this article. Instead, the term "poverty", as used here, refers strictly to the general description of poverty as a condition characterized by a lack of money and/or material possessions sufficient to assure an

individual or household sufficient and socially acceptable standard of living (Zweig, 2004). Included in this description are people who are extremely poor, moderately poor and relatively poor.

Laderchi, Saith and Stewart (2003) studied the significant disagreement that exists between schools of thought about how poverty should be defined and they identified the four broad approaches to the definition and measurement of poverty as monetary, capability, social exclusion and participatory approaches. Although they were writing about poverty from the angle of international development, the points that they made can be applied to the understanding of poverty domestically. They argued that, while most statements about poverty suggest that poverty statistics indeed capture some objective reality, the contrary is in fact the case. Decades prior, Miller (1964) had lamented this reality when he wrote that, “Every study establishes its own poverty line and all apologize for the inadequacy of the measures that are used. Poverty cannot be objectively defined; but it should be possible to go beyond the intuitive judgments that are now used” (p. 888).

### **Poverty in the United States**

In its preamble, the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers states that “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, p.1). It is clear from this preamble that the NASW considers poverty alleviation as the profession’s primary mission.

Considering the high rate of poverty in the United States, it is relevant to understand the role that the social work profession has played in alleviating the conditions of the poor. More than 14% of United States population (that is, 46 million people are food insecure and receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (USDA, 2011) and many millions are too poor to afford some of their basic needs. More important, is the fact that very little is known by social workers and non-social workers about the contributions of the social work profession toward poverty alleviation in the United States. That may be because the profession has not been very good at, or pays very little premium to, amplifying its successes in relation to its mission. This article will be important for its contribution to scholarship that presents a concise record of the role of social work in poverty alleviation.

It is now over fifty years since President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty in the United States. At best, it would seem from these realities that efforts to reduce poverty, which are at the core of the existence and mission of the social work profession, have been less successful than they should

ideally be expected to be. In terms of the responsibility of the social work profession (and social workers) to maintain commitment to efforts to alleviate poverty, it would seem that the profession has not lived up to that responsibility. However, such a claim would not only be negating the structural causes of poverty but would also be negating the important role that the social work profession has played in alleviating poverty in the United States.

Few measures of economic performance in the United States receive greater attention and scrutiny than the poverty rate and it has been difficult in the last few decades to keep that rate on a linear regressive path. The poverty rate at the time was 14% when President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty. By twenty-two years later, in 1983, the poverty rate in the United States had risen to 15.2% (Littman and McNeil, 1987). The poverty rate was 15% in 2010 (Essenburg, 2014) and 14.8% in 2014. Despite a doubling of real GDP per capita and trillions of dollars spent on anti-poverty programs, the official poverty rate in 2010 was more than 2 percentage points higher than the rate in 1970 (Meyer & Sullivan, 2013) and the rates at various points since the War on Poverty was launched have been presented above.

### **Social work and poverty**

The study of the relationship between the social work profession and poverty from 1964 to 2014 stands as an example of the assertion made by Danto (2008) that “all historical studies lack evidence” (p.32), that available records apply only to the actors and are not always complete. Therefore, according to Danto (2008), oral history is highly relevant as a tool for bridging gaps in historical knowledge. If one accepts this as fact, then it is appropriate to wonder how much has been told about the story of poverty in the United States, and its effects, considering that oral history involving the social work actors of the time have largely been missing from much of what has so far been written about poverty during the period under review.

Much of the record has been about the causes and effects of poverty and evaluations of policies aimed at poverty alleviation. One exception to the rule was Lewis (1966) whose oral history project chronicled the story of three generations of the Rios family living in what were then known as Puerto Rican “ghettos” in San Juan and New York. This case study consisting of five households produced new knowledge about the roots, nature and meaning of poverty to the future of both the larger American and Puerto Rican families. Lewis (1966) found that it was very difficult to get the affluent to understand that poverty did indeed exist in the United States. He concluded that what he described as “the culture of poverty” was a significant phenomenon requiring close attention anywhere in the world.

The role of social work in poverty alleviation has been long recognized. Quite early in the War on Poverty, Shepard (1965) studied the poverty alleviation efforts associated with the War and identified social workers as the “sergeants”, and the poor as the “foot soldiers” (p.16) in that war. Her work describes the strategy employed by social workers during that war and shows that there was a sophisticated mobilization strategy that included enlisting the poor and clergy as partners in poverty alleviation. This use of collaboration as a strategy continues to be an important tool for community building in social work. According to Shepard (1965), victory in the poverty alleviation efforts depended largely on a good amount of unity and organizational talent, which the poor were considered not to possess.

In his article reviewing the poverty alleviation measures of the War on Poverty against the background of the settlement house, Gans (1964) argued that the mission and work of the latter in earlier times also made the settlement house well suited as a strategy and tool for fighting the War on Poverty. It is important to put this in perspective for the comparison to make considerable sense. First, the settlement house workers were politically and socially engaged. Furthermore, they held strong beliefs about their work, they had significant focus on neighborhoods and were both guided and empowered by those beliefs to muster political pressure on politicians to use their positions to improve their communities (Gans, 1964). This approach was consistent with that which social workers used in poverty alleviation efforts in the sixties and seventies, and is consistent with modern-day advocacy methods adopted by social work associations, like the National Association of Social Workers, other smaller groups and individuals working in several aspects of social work practice, including social welfare advocacy.

The eighties saw significant attacks from conservative politicians and authors on social welfare policies, especially those aimed at poverty. The attacks were direct hits at the core of the mission of the social work profession. Some of the writings were presented as scholarly works produced through reasoned research into American social welfare policy. For example, Murray (1984) argued that, although the United States was spending more money since 1965 on efforts to eradicate poverty, American prosperity and progress against poverty was actually greatest prior to 1964 when the War on Poverty began. While his measures of poverty were consistent with conservative arguments, they were less so with most definitions of poverty that were mostly based on economic and social factors. For him, the proper measure of poverty should be declining numbers in terms of the proportion of Americans living below the official poverty line. He argued that the anti-poverty programs associated with the poverty alleviation programs associated with the War on Poverty actually worsened

the social problems that they were intended to solve. Furthermore, Murray (1984) advanced the argument that the quality of education declined because of the focus on poverty. According to him, the educational system became less able to prepare people for the labor force and young women became pregnant in increasing numbers because they knew that they and their children would be cared for on public funds.

Orloff (1985) offered a direct rebuttal to Murray (1984) in her essay in which she provided perspectives that were missing in the Murray’s (1984) formulations. In her formulation, poverty should not only be measured by economic means but also by overall quality of life. According to her, the facts about the conditions of the poor were more complex than Murray (1984) presented in his work. While acknowledging that progress in reducing poverty had been less than expected since the 1960s, Orloff (1985) argued that most of the aid received by the non-elderly poor since the late sixties had been in-kind, such as medical care and food assistance, rather than cash assistance. According to Orloff (1985) these had already in fact led to significant improvement in dealing with the problems that such programs were intended to address. For example, increased access to medical care through Medicaid, along with improved nutrition due to programs like Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and food stamps, contributed to an increase in life expectancy and decrease in infant mortality for the poor – especially poor blacks – over and above improvements on these indicators within the population at large (Orloff, 1985). Social workers in social service agencies, medical facilities and home care agencies were (and continue to be) at the forefront of educating, assessing eligibility and working with clients to apply for entitlement benefits, such as Medicaid, WIC and food stamps (SNAP), that were established to alleviate poverty.

In a period, that is the eighties, during which the core mission of the social work profession was being attacked as has been discussed, the commitment of the profession to poverty alleviation diminished or took a different turn at best. Instead of the prior concerted effort on addressing the increasing social problem of poverty, a splinter developed in the focus of social work advocacy. After a history of fighting against poverty, the eighties became an era characterized largely by a shift in conceptual perceptions of poverty. The idea that poverty was the product of systemic causes and that the elimination of poverty should be a priority or the preoccupation of the profession shifted to an emphasis on the role of social work as helping individuals of all classes to adapt to the environment (Resser and Epstein 1987, 1990). Maton (1992) suggested that this conflict would continue to be a matter for review in social work not only in the United States but also in other countries, including Canada, as

social work scholars ponder if the profession is moving away from its core foundational principles toward professionalization.

Maton (1992) argued that, at least in Canada, this conflict might in the end be good for social work because it will lead to a more refined, self-regulated profession with a clearer mission. While that may be so, the mission of social work in the United States is not in question, nor is the fact that poverty eradication is at the core of that mission. Instead, the question is whether the profession's emphasis on other aspects of social work practice, such as clinical work and professionalization, has replaced or diminished appropriate focus on the profession's core mission, of which poverty alleviation is key. Even to this, Abramovitz (1998) argued that internal and external political conflicts are not new to social work and that even within such tensions are opportunities for change.

At certain times through its history, the social work profession has tended to struggle between what Abramovitz (1998) refers to as "the twin pressures of containment and change" (p. 512). The eighties would seem to have been one of those times but so have many other periods. On the internal conflict addressed by Resser and Epstein (1987, 1990), social work has either been on both sides of the argument or has been aloof. Certainly, this claim sounds contradictory because the positions are admittedly contrary. However, without seeming to take a firm stand on what mission should be privileged between poverty alleviation and professionalization, the message appeared to be one of a recognition of a need for change in light of the times while at the same time maintaining poverty alleviation as a core claim of the profession. What the profession has sought to do through the period under review has been to maintain a balance by keeping at the center of its focus the needs of individuals, families, groups and communities in whatever form those needs have arisen.

Certainly, the perception of poverty by social workers shifted again in the eighties, as did the profession's approach to poverty alleviation. According to Resser and Epstein (1987), poverty became more associated with its perceived causes, namely existing social structures and unequal distributions of power. However, social workers were less inclined to directly confront these power structures and less inclined to maintain serve to the poor as their primary objective. Instead, they stopped seeing poverty alleviation as their mission and perceived of their role as that of helping people of all economic classes to adapt effectively to their environment. Social workers resorted to forms of client advocacy that were institutionally sanctioned. Instead, they view the role of social work as helping individuals of all classes to adapt to the environment. In this way, the emphasis on clinical social work practice was enhanced and promoted.

Starting in the late eighties through the 2014, the focus of social work began to shift again in response to events in the

American political landscape. President Clinton became President in 1992 and began to push the Republicans' long-held position that welfare reform was needed. The social work profession barely opposed that position and did not stand in his way. However, the seeds of social work acquiescence had already been sown even prior to the Clinton presidency. According to Nichols-Casebolt and McClure (1987), social work had already turned its back on its traditional position of criticizing the government's emphasis on labor participation as a prerequisite for receiving welfare.

In 1987, NASW delegates voted not to oppose mandatory work requirements for welfare recipients and stated that social work would instead just state that voluntary participation was the recommended way to go. This is not to say that social workers at any time abandoned the profession's commitment to poverty alleviation. An argument can be made that, by the time the Clinton presidency ended, the social work profession had lost significant grounds because it had failed in its role as a strong advocate for the poor. In effect, it can be argued that the profession and its practitioners had essentially resorted more to a support role of helping the poor cope with the consequences of policies, for example welfare reform and a crime bill, that seemed intended to score political points at the expense of the poor. Such arguments would not be entirely accurate. In fact, after the controversial welfare reform law was passed in the nineties, social workers developed new programs and engaged intensely with individuals, families and communities to reduce the otherwise destructive impact of the law on welfare recipients. Out of that challenge developed many community health and counseling agencies that remain in existence to this day.

The period from 2001 to 2009 was one during which America's focus was on war. The Iraq War dominated the country's attention and saw significant cuts in social welfare programs, such as food stamps funding and Section 8 subsidies. Although social work was active in opposition to the Bush administration's policies that were highly unfavorable to the poor, advocacy yielded little in terms of results. Medicare Part D, which was instituted as a prescription plan for the older persons imposed on most poor older persons a level of uncertainty and financial costs that they previously did not have. Although, once again, whatever challenges there were could not stop the implementation of this policy, social workers took on the active role of helping poor older persons navigate the policy to ensure that their fears were allayed and that they selected plans that would lower the potential financial burden on them.

The period from 2009 to 2014 was one during which the profession of social work found successes in its poverty alleviation efforts. Social work engagement was heightened in response to the establishment of the Affordable Care Act (ACA),

a national healthcare insurance intended to provide coverage for most Americans that had been uninsured. The ACA also expanded Medicaid eligibility to ensure that more poor Americans could have health insurance coverage. Once again, social workers were very active in working with individuals, families and groups in educating them about the ACA and helping them enroll in the most suitable plans for them. In addition, through 2014, social work also continued to lead in many other areas of poverty alleviation by providing services to benefit poor women and children, immigrants, communities, individuals and organizations.

### **Discussion**

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the War on Poverty on January 8, 1964. This declaration represents the starting point for this study of the role of social work in poverty alleviation. Ehrenreich (1985) presents a remarkable snapshot of the socioeconomic conditions in the United States around 1964. Long-term poverty was widespread, poor educational levels kept most of the poor unemployed or underemployed, rampant racial discrimination shot African Americans out of hiring opportunities or out of jobs with living wages and promotion, and women were unable to participate in the labor force because of difficulties associated with obtaining childcare. Crime rate was high across the country, schools were ill equipped to meet the educational needs of children, malnutrition, poor housing, and medical and mental health problems were significant. Concern was growing around the nation and opinions were diverse about the causes of poverty and how to solve the associated problems. Some scholars, for example Moynihan (1965), attributed the plight of poor black families to the structure of black families dating back to the slave era and many others attributed the cause of poverty to something inherent in the poor individual. In his article urging action to end poverty, Roberts (1960) echoed the comments made by Charles Colwell who was the former director of Atlanta's Community Chest two years earlier as he wondered: "Which will it be: Trickle of social services or social work meeting the challenge?" In that article, he recommended community action as the way to tackle what had become an intractable level of poverty and he implied that the involvement of social work was needed to resolve the situation.

Miller (1964) attacked the perception that the poor were responsible for their own plight and implied that the American society was hypocritical by arguing that if the society was as fluid as was generally claimed, "...we would recognize that economic opportunity, or the absence of it, plays a major role in the individual's aspirations; that a ceiling on a man's job outlook inevitably places a damper on his initiative" (p. 888). However, the social work profession that could have provided the lead was

divided, as some social workers believed that the best way to address the social problems of the day was through individual casework while the other school of thought held that the best way to address the problems was through large-scale social reform and government action (Ehrenreich, 1985).

As designed, the poverty alleviation strategies of the War on Poverty seemed to straddle both positions in the conflict within the social work position in the sixties. The policy recognized that the problems associated with poverty were not necessarily independent of one another, that the institutions and professionals that has traditionally provided services had been unsuccessful for several reasons, and that the various training programs that were available to the poor were not the best at addressing deep personal and structural factors affecting the poor.

The poverty alleviation programs of the War on Poverty had a significant presence and impact on the role of social workers in the sixties and would most likely have continued into the next decade but for the election of President Nixon, whose conservative agenda brought most of the poverty alleviation programs to a halt. In some ways, the poverty alleviation role that social workers played enhanced the status of the social work profession during this time, as the implementation of the poverty alleviation programs led to the creation of more social work jobs and propelled the consideration of new ways to understand and practice the social work profession. However, that was not before the radicalism of the period had created major image problems for social work.

Indeed, as Maton (1992) found, social workers in the sixties were very polarized concerning their positions on professionalism and social activism and many were more likely to view the poor as being responsible for their own poverty. However, they were also more involved in protest and activism on behalf of the poor (Maton, 1992). With these pressures, social work finally responded to the changed political climate, returned to its settlement house roots and shifted its focus from coordinating services to mobilizing clients for community self-determination and resource redistribution (Abramovitz, 1998).

Social work had difficulty maintaining a strong focus on poverty alleviation in the seventies. The Vietnam War had peaked in 1969 with more than 500,000 U.S. military personnel involved in the conflict. Against that background, the attention of social work and indeed the entire nation was distracted from poverty alleviation to the armed conflict in Vietnam and the politics surrounding it. This fact was well captured in my oral interview with Dr. David Gitelson, a 1972 Master of Social Work graduate of Columbia University and a Doctor of Social Work (DSW) graduate of Hunter College. A recent retiree from the Veterans Administration Health Care System, Dr. Gitelson continues to

maintain a university adjunct faculty position and teaching social welfare policy and practice courses. While he was aware that social work had been involved in poverty alleviation efforts, he put his experience this way:

When I became a social worker in 1972, the attention of social work had shifted because of the Vietnam War. Although I had never been actively political, and had never been involved in any protest, the war sensitized me to the need to be involved at an advocacy and policy level. Social work was very active in the protests against the Vietnam War. Social workers travelled a lot and protested a lot. It was a mission that social workers believed in (Personal communication, October 9, 2019).

Certainly, these words clearly capture where social work was in the seventies and the

direction to which the profession was headed next, as well as the way in which the poverty alleviation role of social work would change. For example, the fact that social workers of the seventies focused actively on the anti-war protests did not mean that social work, or even Dr. Gitelson, turned their backs on poverty. Through the seventies and the rest of his career, Dr. Gitelson and his social work colleagues provided mental health treatment and case management services to veterans. Most importantly, as the Director of Social Work at a VA Medical Center, he supported social work staff's involvement in developing several programs to aid the poor. A food pantry for low income discharged veterans, a Senior Support Outreach Program that sought to identify senior veterans in the community in need of healthcare, supplemental food, housing and access to resources they were unaware of but entitled to were some of the programs that developed on his watch. Others included counseling and alternative to housing programs to support independent living for veterans with mental illness, and advocacy programs for veterans who were facing discrimination in the community due mental illness.

Through its history, the social work profession has experienced numerous internal and external struggles but the nature and intensity of those struggles ramped up in the sixties. Among the social problems requiring social work action in that period were the civil rights and anti-poverty movements. Before then, the most significant struggle in the early history of social work was around the issues of individual and social change (Abramovitz, 1998), and that was during the Progressive Era. Whatever rust had befallen the social work profession was shaken off as activism in the field was rekindled because of the massive disorders of the sixties.

With social work lagging far behind the movements for social change, social workers that had become critical of their

profession accused their profession of being oblivious to national events (Ehrenreich, 1985; Trattner, 2007). Students charged the leadership of the social work profession with maintaining the administrative interests of the organization above those of social work clients, agencies and African Americans. This lack of inclusiveness and unwillingness to engage in African American issues was instrumental eventually to the formation of the Association of Black Social Workers in May 1968 (Abramovitz, 1998). Against this background, social work was forced to change and embrace the movements of the sixties, not only by more active and younger social workers but also by the jobs created that were created by the War on Poverty and other Great Society programs Wagner (1990).

### **Evolution of new theories**

Through the course of the history of social work during this fifty-year period, several theories arose, were advanced and/or adopted to address and enhance understanding of poverty and associated issues. Among these were systems theory, transactional theory, person-in-situation, empowerment and other practice theories that emphasize the relationship between social conditions and individuals, families, organizations and communities (Abramovitz, 1998). In addition, "cultural deprivation theory" was used as a mental health theory to frame urban social and educational policy during the Great Society. This theory linked poverty with psychology and proposed ways to wage war against poverty without necessarily striking at its structural roots.

### **Data collection**

The purpose of this article was to explore the role of social work in poverty alleviation in the United States from the launching of the War on Poverty in 1964 to 2014. To that end, this researcher explored the antecedent conditions to the War on Poverty and traced some of the activities of social work toward addressing and alleviating poverty since that time. Primary sources including books and newspapers from the period of the War on Poverty, as well as secondary sources, were consulted for this study. The primary sources were significant in enlightening this researcher about the reason and aims of the War on Poverty. However, while primary sources are invaluable for providing information about social work history in real time, and therefore carry a high degree of authenticity, secondary sources are often significant for their ability to provide more contemporary information for any study. That was no different in this case. This researcher also conducted an oral history interview that he found to be beneficial in exploring the activities of an experienced social worker who was a witness to the history of social work during the era.

### **Limitations**

Aspects of this article are admittedly subject to some of the difficulty referenced by Ehrenreich (1985) in weaving a historical account that is a mix of academic analysis and personal recollection of events. Like Ehrenreich (1985), my sense of what happened in some cases are shaped by my personal experiences and observations, by the experiences and observations of the subject of the oral history presented here, as well as by my academic research and analysis. This in no way renders irrelevant or inaccurate any aspect of this article but it provides a context upon which information and subsequent research may be built.

### Conclusion

In the decades since the War on Poverty was launched, social workers have been very active in poverty alleviation efforts in the United States and around the world. In the United States, many circumstances have led to shifts in strategy - and many of those circumstances have been influenced by events in the larger society. It is easy to assume that social workers are not engaged because they are often not leading marches or in the forefront of campaigns for causes. Such an assumption would be inaccurate because new forms of advocacy have become necessary in response to changes in the social and political culture of the United States. In response, social workers have been leaders in lobbying efforts focused on entitlement benefits, mass incarceration, education loan forgiveness, income inequality, racism and other social problems that mostly affect the poor. Even in clinical practice, social workers have been leaders in ensuring that indigent clients that they serve who are ineligible for medical insurance are offered the opportunity to pay for services on sliding scales based on their incomes.

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