

## Participatory research methodologies and popular education: reflections on quality criteria

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The paper, a consequence of the author's research experience and the evaluation of research in popular education, discusses the criteria for quality and validity of participatory methodologies, which since their origin in Latin America present significant affinities with popular education. The following topics are discussed in the perspective of participatory methodologies: the social relevance; the quality of description and interpretation; the collective reflexivity; the quality of the relations among the stakeholders in the research process; and the practicability of the produced knowledge. In the conclusion it is pointed out that the discussion about the quality of research in education and popular education can contribute to confront the academic productivism, where qualitative and quantitative criteria are confused, to be able to overcome the dichotomization between producers and consumers of research, thus enhancing the area's theoretical density.

*Keywords:* Popular education. Research in education. Research quality. Participatory methodologies. Social relevance.

## Introduction

Research in the field of popular education is usually included in the wide spectrum of education research and the social sciences. However, there is a tendency to favor participatory methodologies, that is, methodologies in which research subjects are considered co-producers of knowledge. This text derives from the author's personal experience in research projects and from the analysis of theses and dissertations in the area. It aims to identify quality and validity indicators or criteria in research studies that employ this family of methodologies, which, in Latin America, have had, since their origin, great affinity with popular education. Participatory research<sup>1</sup>, thematic investigation<sup>2</sup>, IAP (*investigación-acción participativa* - participatory action research)<sup>3</sup>, and the systematization of experiences<sup>4</sup>, despite their differences, share, with popular education, the purpose of developing knowledge targeted at the subject's emancipation and the transformation of reality.

Questioning what can be considered good research is pertinent to the field of education, as many researchers in the area have recently pointed out<sup>5,6</sup>. On the one hand, educational research is a professional field that, today, is internationally consolidated, which is attested by the large amount of publications and institutions dedicated to research in the area. On the other hand, so many factors affect the evaluation of a study, and they are so varied, that the discussion should be held from the scientific point of view. It is possible to find different views of quality among different knowledge areas and among researchers with distinct theoretical and epistemological shades, which strengthens the challenge of revealing perspectives and criteria. In this text, quality refers to the value or values attributed not only to the research product but, above all, to the research process; thus, the theme of quality is necessarily pervaded by ethics. This understanding of quality is connected with an ethical-political option in favor of the transformation of the conditions that produce injustice, which is also one of the basic premises of popular education<sup>7</sup>.

Based on these preliminary considerations, this study aims to contribute to the discussion about research methodologies in the field of education. Its presuppositions

are: a) quality criteria are socially and historically constructed; b) it is not possible to simply transfer criteria from other areas, especially the so-called hard or exact sciences; c) objectivity, which is not opposed to subjectivity, can be understood as search for rigorousness. The complexity of an object or fact can be better described and understood through multiple standpoints, in the encounters and crossings of subjects who intend to learn about something. Denying the search for objectivity as a condition for mutual understanding leads to a solipsistic discourse that contributes to the already large fragmentation of research in the area of education. According to two researchers<sup>8</sup> who discuss reliability and validity criteria in qualitative research:

Objectivity, though the term has been taken by some to suggest a naive and inhumane version of vulgar positivism, is the essential basis of all good research. Without it, the only reason the reader on the research might have for accepting the conclusions of the investigator would be an authoritarian respect for the person of the author<sup>8</sup>. (p. 20).

It is, undoubtedly, ironical: being against one type of authoritarianism, we practice another one. Obviously, nobody is obliged to read what someone produces, but there is a public dimension in the research activity (even more so if it uses public funds!) that implies willingness to share the process and the results.

Aiming to contribute to the development of criteria that are, at the same time, open and consistent for education research, especially for popular education, I have identified some themes that have the mark of participatory methodologies but, in many aspects, coincide with what is understood by qualitative research. The themes are: social relevance, the quality of description and interpretation, reflectivity, the quality of the relations among subjects, and the practicability of knowledge. All these aspects can be understood as constituents of academic and scientific quality in participatory research.

## The issue of social relevance

“The study approaches a relevant theme...” is a very common sentence in opinions about theses and dissertations or in evaluations of articles submitted for publication in journals. But what is relevance? What does the adjective “social” add to it? Is a discourse that is politically correct enough to be relevant? Finally, would there be something that is not relevant? Or is the relevance of a research object a construction made by the researcher, who makes it become relevant through his/her rigorous observation? If this is the case, what is involved in this construction?

The construction of relevance is necessarily related to the purpose of the search for or production of knowledge, which is the objective of research. According to Hugo Zemelman<sup>9</sup>:

One of the first questions we should ask ourselves when we formulate a problem, an investigation, is something as obvious as the following: *With what purpose do I want to know this?* [...] What I am signaling is that the first stage of the reflection is ‘with what purpose do I formulate this problem?’ and it is very difficult to answer this question. (p. 107).

It is difficult to answer this question because social reality is in motion; furthermore, it is polysemic and multifaceted. Therefore, delimiting the object of investigation and formulating the problem is an exercise that requires patience and dedication, as the majority of the Master’s and doctoral students learn in their research experience. The problem presented in the students’ project when they are admitted to the programs will possibly be modified more than once until the final version of the study is concluded. Zemelman argues that the great challenge consists of thinking about the object’s specificity in its movement. According to this author, this would have been Karl Marx’ great contribution to the social sciences, relegated to the background to the detriment of an overvaluation of the economic factor.

I present below three concepts that, in my opinion, help to define social relevance criteria. The first one, “potentiable reality”, is proposed by Zemelman; the second, “theoretical sensitivity”, is borrowed from Grounded theory (data-based research theory); finally, from IAP, founded by Orlando Fals Borda and other researchers, I take the idea of *praxis* with *phronesis*.

The concept of *potentiable reality* presupposes that knowledge and knowledge production occur in spaces that are neither free from interests nor outside power relations and conflicts. According to Zemelman<sup>9</sup>, it is possible that the irrelevance of part of the large amount of research in the area of education is caused by the fact that researchers do not pay attention to the potentiality of the produced knowledge. The statement below should make us stop and think:

Those who are concerned about educational research should think about this and give some examples in this area, and this would be very interesting, as there is a huge amount of educational research, as far as I know, that is deeply irrelevant, and – probably – what is relevant is not being studied.<sup>9</sup> (p. 112).

This potentiality is connected with knowledge of the social and historical context in which the meaning of the problem is constructed. Viewed like this, research acts together with the movement of society to potentiate certain social processes.

The construction of relevance is also pervaded by *theoretical sensitivity*. This concept from Grounded theory is related to the capacity for reading the world, employing theoretical tools that already exist or creating new ones that are more adequate. This is not an innate capacity; rather, it is acquired through studies in the area and in similar fields. Glaser<sup>10</sup>, referring to the sociologist, argues that: “The analyst’s theoretical sensitivity, which is developed through intensive reading in sociology and other fields is also not only sharpened by learning what kinds of

categories to generate, but also by learning a multitude of extant categories that could possibly fit on an emergent basis”<sup>10</sup> (p. 4).

This certainly applies to education, in which, many times, “theoretical frameworks” are assumed in an automatic way because they are the theoretical basis of a research line or of a supervisor. The idea of theoretical sensitivity challenges us to look at alternative constructions, both to strengthen and to modify previous understandings.

Popular education research develops in the midst of society’s contradictions and, due to this, in addition to *what for*, it is necessary to ask in whose service it acts. Orlando Fals Borda<sup>3</sup> used the concept of *phronesis* together with praxis to indicate the direction of praxis and of the knowledge that originates from it. In Greek, *phronesis* means the ability to think how to act in order to change situations, and change them towards justice. Just like truth, it is a virtue that does not exist in an abstract dimension; rather, it is revealed in the researcher’s action and in the action of the subjects involved in the research.

### **Descriptive and interpretive thickness**

This theme is related to what is obtained through the investigative process and emerges as a research result. It ranges from language correction and adequacy to the interpretive potential contained in the text. In this article, I employ the concept of “thickness” freely. Such concept was most expressively formulated by Clifford Geertz<sup>11</sup> and has been broadly used in qualitative research. The original term in English, “thick”, suggests, almost immediately, its opposite, “thin”, which is a little different from what happens in Portuguese, as Brazilians do not remember its antonym easily. The dictionary *Dicionário Aurélio* provides the following synonyms for *denso* (thick): “compact”, “dense”. For what would be its contrary, *esparso* (sparse), the dictionary provides “loose”, “dispersed”.

Geertz takes this concept from the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle, and presents an example provided by this author to demonstrate what thick description

would be. Two boys blink, one of them in a reflex movement and the other as a gesture of conspiracy with his friend. The same eye movement could also be a sign between lovers, an imitation of someone and so on. A thick description is characterized by much more than the record, even if it is a detailed one, of closing and opening the eyes: there is a social context, an intentionality, history, and people who compose the meaning of the blink. "A good interpretation of anything – a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society – takes us into the heart of that which is being interpreted"<sup>11</sup> (p. 18). This would be the role of description in an anthropological perspective.

There is a similarity with what Bruno Latour<sup>12</sup> says about description. Reviewing his understanding marks the encounter with another area of the social sciences: sociology. In his actor-network theory, Latour sees society not as a structured entity but as a movement of actors who gradually configure networks. Hence his emphasis on what the actors effectively do, each one as an essential part of this network. The role of description would be to capture the actors' movements in their details, which would reveal, in themselves, the theoretical bases and the context. That is why he insists in the importance of learning the "art" of writing, which is the researcher's main work tool. His warning to sociologists also provides an important lesson for education research. He argues that, in order to shed light on the social dimension, good sociology must be well-written (p. 217). Translating this into education research, good writing without research can exist (for example, when someone tells a story), but good research without good writing cannot exist.

The example below, extracted from a study carried out by Carlos Rodrigues Brandão<sup>13</sup> about places where one learns when he/she participates in community life, translates this thickness of description and interpretation. Although it is not said, the text expresses the power relations, feelings, and the social and cultural context as part of a huge web within which people teach and learn. And the attentive and participant observer is present.

Gathered and solemnized, gestures are powerful and teach more forcefully than others, which are equal but are used on a daily basis. I have hardly seen owners of houses weeping as much with emotion as in the 'farewell' moments of a Revelry of Kings. On the other hand, the attentive eyes of the boys indicate that they, too, are touched, have fun and learn. As everything has its order and its place, and because the entire ritual is nothing more than a ceremonial sequence of gestures that *are* and *make* social rules explicit, everything that happens *teaches*. Songs, speeches and prayers repeat, every year, a small fraction of the rite, and become, more than only legitimate, a cherished idea. The religious rite recreates the order of relationships among people, an order that is grand and, at the same time, affective: parents and children, siblings, close friends, other relatives, neighbors and companions. The boys who accompany the Company and are revelers, with jobs and positions in the team of devotees, learn, as we shall see, in order to continue the Revelry ritual. But the children and adolescents who watch everything as dwellers or as people who accompany the Company learn, too. There they learn the beliefs that support the norms that code peasant life. (...) All the 'locals' share common beliefs and knowledge. Only a few things can be improvised, and because people unequally *know* what will happen and unequally *know* how to behave, the rite recreates what is known and, thus, renews tradition: what must be repeated every year as *knowledge*, to be consecrated as a common *value*. It renews a kind of knowledge whose strength is being the same in order to be accepted. Repeating itself until it becomes, more than just *knowledge about the sacred*, *knowledge that is socially consecrated*.<sup>13</sup> (p. 34)



From the perspective of participatory methodologies and popular education, in which Brandão's work is included, I would like to highlight some special elements. First, the idea of movement among the different subjects who play certain roles in this festivity. We can learn with the author of the account that, the better one captures this movement, the better the text will be in terms of descriptive and interpretive thickness. Furthermore, it is in the movement among different subjects, which has become an object of reflection, that the knowledge that the author captures and translates is generated.

A second remark concerns the voice of the different subjects. In the account above, there is no transcription of their discourses, but the protagonists are portrayed in a very vivid way. In other texts, Brandão uses long transcriptions and lets his research companions speak, adopting a hearing attitude. Large excerpts generally offer a better visibility of who is talking, while short excerpts enable a more fluent discursive construction.

Independently of the style employed to integrate the research subjects into the account, it is important to consider the possibility of other products, with other forms of protagonism. Orlando Fals Borda<sup>14</sup>, in *Historia Doble de la Costa*, literally wrote two texts which were published in the same book, on parallel pages: on one side, the academic version, and on the other, the popular version, with short stories, songs and other elements. Telmo Adams<sup>15</sup> was the "writer" of the story of a solid waste recycling association (the association's members considered themselves as its authors), while he was writing his doctoral dissertation<sup>16</sup>. In our research practice, we made videos that were used for reflection in groups. Therefore, there is the possibility of sharing the authorship of description and interpretation with other subjects and other languages.

## **Reflectivity**

Many authors consider that reflectivity is a central characteristic of good research. Donald Schön<sup>17</sup>'s work about the "reflective teacher" is widely known in the

field of education. Paulo Freire<sup>18</sup> insists that one of the ways to think right is to think about one's own practice. This possibly applies to other disciplines and professional fields, as reflectivity, in a broad sense, is an evolutionary capacity constructed by human beings, not the privilege of a few. A good agricultural practice requires as much reflectivity as a social study, although it has its own characteristics. Therefore, it is important to focus on the meaning of reflectivity in research as a specialized activity.

Reflectivity, as we understand it here, has three dimensions. The first one is the increase in the reflectivity potential of the subjects of the practice that if the object of study. I resume here the concept of praxis in the Aristotelian sense<sup>19</sup>, expanded by the tradition of historical materialism<sup>3</sup>. In its first meaning, the quality of praxis is measured by criteria derived from praxis itself. For example, violinists know how to distinguish the intrinsic quality in the execution of a piece according to details that are not noticed by someone not acquainted with the handling of the instrument. A corollary of this is that perfection in the art of playing the violin will not be reached by reading manuals, which can be useful to obtain information; rather, it will be reached through practice. This applies to all practices, including research. According to Eykeland<sup>19</sup>, "Praxis requires sharing and communicating minds in a dynamic community of masters and apprentices. Everyone thereby becomes an experimenter, not an 'experimentee'" (p. 40).

Praxis, in the Latin American tradition of participatory action research, has also acquired the meaning of action–reflection inside the movement of history. The human being is a being of praxis not only because he can improve his professional practice, but also because he can build a project of his destiny. As it was mentioned above, Fals Borda added the concept of *phronesis* to praxis in order to emphasize that it is action–reflection targeted at justice.

The third meaning of reflectivity refers to the researcher's self–knowledge, knowledge of his/her motivations, interests, limits and emotions. Marianne Kristiansen and Joergen Bloch–Paulsen<sup>20</sup> have made a distinction between intervention and mutual involvement in research. According to them, "The interventionist has to risk his logical–analytical sense, while we, in a way, end up risking ourselves as human beings"

(p. 254). This implies the possibility of sharing with individuals and with the group the feelings that emerge in the process. This movement is not an automatic process; it is related to the establishment of conditions for what they call “midwifery conversations”. Among these conditions, we find the construction of “maieutic spaces”, which contain three patterns of relationship: co-humor, relaxed mutual availability and verbal co-production. This would be an adequate space for creative thought. “Maieutic rhythm” refers to creating conditions to make the entire group be in tune.

In Latin America, especially among popular groups, this maieutic space and rhythm are facilitated by *mystique*, which creates environments that are adequate for the expression of each participant. Placing a personal object on a tablecloth spread in the center of the room and talking about the meaning of the object according to one’s experience helps to create affective bonds and provides a space in which each individual practices speaking within a group. Songs, dances or shared food are also part of this.

### **The quality of the relationship among subjects**

“Now I, who used to trust myself in the presence of another, trust the other in my presence. And no longer as a faithful and reliable donor of himself to me, among data, discourses, stories and memories, but as a co-participant of the shared creation of knowledge”<sup>21</sup> (p. 45). In this fragment, Carlos Rodrigues Brandão refers to the “difficult leap” not only beyond quantitative methodologies, in which I trust methods and instruments, or beyond qualitative research, in which I trust in me as a responsible and self-controlled subject; I trust the other as co-participant in the creation of knowledge. Here, the theme of the quality of interpersonal relations in research becomes fundamental. At first sight, it seems that there is a hierarchy in these three loci of reliability<sup>(b)</sup>. A second look at Brandão’s synthesis enables a less discriminatory

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<sup>b</sup> Reliability and validity are two concepts derived from the area of psychometry. The first refers to the quality of a test producing the same results in different situations; the second refers to the quality of the data according to the established purposes<sup>7</sup>. These concepts are widely used outside this specific context, as is the case in this text.

reading. It is important, in any research, to develop instruments that allow for reliability. Statistics has its mathematical rules, an observation or interview script has its “logic” according to the objectives, a field diary also has its rigorousness requisites. Trusting myself as a researcher is related to self-knowledge of the motivations, of information on the object of the investigation, and of individual capacities. It is the “control” of the subjective element that is present in the whole research process and which is translated in the empathic openness to feel and perceive things that may contradict my beliefs and presuppositions. The third locus of trust, trust in the other – something desirable to the entire research and to all human relations –, is, however, a fundamental element for participatory research, or for research that is defined in a dialogic perspective.

What does quality of the relationship among subjects mean? Why should we be concerned about this? Is it possible to evaluate the quality of the relationship in research? Let us begin with an example. In the first meeting with a group at a community center located in the periphery of a big city, one of the women said the following: “Oh, yes, you’re doing research! Many people come here to do research and we already know what to say.” I do not know to which researchers she was referring, but I can imagine a teacher sending his/her students to the villages with half a dozen questions in order to conduct a field research. Perhaps this exercise teaches something to the students and teacher, mainly about what research is not, but I doubt that this research adds something useful to the life of people in this community.

Let us discuss this example a little further. Firstly, the research apparently had nothing to do with the group about which they wanted to learn. Answering the questionnaire was seen as an obligation or as a sign of respect, many times implicitly attributed to the academic environment, especially by the so-called “simple people”. It is likely that people with a higher level of schooling had refused to answer the questionnaire, in an explicit gesture of distrust. Secondly, the research subjects did not establish bonds that allowed mutual engagement to learn about a certain aspect of this community’s life. In a participatory process, it is important that the attitude of willing

to learn is stimulated and developed by both sides. Thirdly, the research does not seem to have left any marks on the community's life.

Quality of relationships refers both to formal and informal situations. The former are structured spaces for scheduled interviews, group meetings and negotiations of the research proposal. Informal situations can be created in the breaks between meetings and seminars, or are situations in which the researcher participates in moments of the group's life. For example, accompanying some work that is being executed, a party in the community, meetings of an association or school, among many other possibilities. Eykeland<sup>21</sup> argues that, to understand a situation, one must become native. With this, he does not intend to say that the researcher must disguise him/herself as a student, a teacher, a bricklayer, a youth or an elderly person; rather, he/she must establish empathy to apprehend the knowledge that is generated within and from the situation.

Empathy means the capacity to feel what the others feel, knowing that you are not the other. Studies have shown that the "emotional contagion" also occurs among animals or newborn children, for example, when the cry of one baby provokes the cry of the others without any explanation for it. Empathy, in turn, is a condition that is socially developed and implies the possibility of assuming the other's perspective. For example, it means participating in the other's suffering while knowing that it is not your own suffering, but it was triggered by the other's suffering<sup>23</sup>. In research, it is a form of being together with the other, feeling with the other, at the same time that you know that such involvement has limits.

### **The practicability of knowledge**

When we were accompanying participatory budgeting meetings in the quality of researchers, someone introduced us as the group that would "tell our story". This statement expresses the expectation that, to the organizers of this movement, which, every year, involves thousands of people in the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Southern Brazil), our work will be useful. Perhaps the statement has a partisan bias in the sense

of “saying” what was this policy of a government that defines itself as popular and democratic, but it is also the objective of one of the subjects involved. In an informal meeting, a community representative manifested the low representativeness of popular and community organizations in the movement. He did not say it, but the implicit expectation was that the research should also capture this element when it composed the story.

I use the term *practicability* to distinguish knowledge produced in participatory research both from applied research, which generates knowledge and then applies or “transfers” it to practice, and from practicality, which has a connotation of convenience and adaptation. Practicability refers to the possibility of providing feedback for practice in the research process in order to generate a theory that is coherent with practice. According to John Dewey<sup>24</sup>, a classic reference in action research and education, “(...) knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the ideal view of an unconcerned spectator” (p.338). Paulo Freire<sup>2</sup> (p. 73), quoting Sartre, criticizes the “digestive” or “nutritive view” of knowledge, and, also, what is known as the “banking” view of knowledge. The criticism focuses on the same point, that is, knowledge that is not related to the life experience and to the praxis of the subject as a historical being.

Feeding in the group’s process does not necessarily occur in the form of recommendations and conclusions. In one of the seminars with members of groups that participated in the research, an Education Secretary said that the research’s contribution to the community had been the possibility of asking new questions. That is, they did not expect answers from “outsiders”, but they could count on someone who helped them ask questions that contained this element of practicability. For example, the research helped the community to see that the youths’ low participation in the evenings was related to the fact that they were at school. Transferring some meetings to Saturday afternoons was a proposal that emerged from the community. In this case, the initial theory about the youths’ lack of participation in the meetings was changed by practice.

The research we approach here should be useful, not in the sense of a narrow utilitarianism, but of contributing both to the field of practice and to the scientific community. Palshaugen<sup>25</sup>, discussing action research in a participatory perspective, argues that:

The purpose of action research is a combined one: both to *make use* of scientific knowledge to contribute to practical development and change within some particular field, and to *generate new knowledge* of some particular aspects of this field, knowledge that may be of general interest to the scientific community and which in turn may be useful to the practitioners (p. 237).

Last, but not least, it must be useful to the researcher's objectives of personal and professional growth.

### **Final remarks**

As announced in the Introduction, this text intends to contribute to the construction of quality and validity criteria for education research that help to overcome some deficiencies that are known and which have already been denounced in the area. The academic community must reflect on these criteria because, as we argued above, they are neither fixed nor universal, but should be a meeting point for dialog, as the ultimate purpose is the same, that is, better education for all. It is on this alleged "better" that the discussion is centered.

Paying attention to the criteria of what is considered good research can help us find mechanisms to overcome some pressing issues in the Brazilian academia. The first one is related to the productivism that has entered into the field of education and is evidenced by the huge amount of journals and publications in the area. The question is whether this proliferation contributes to qualify research or whether its main purpose

is to enlarge curricula and institutions' statistics. Just like what happens with research methodologies, opposing quantity to quality would be incorrect; rather, we should realize that quantity without quality is innocuous.

The second issue regards the public that are the "users" of research. To what extent does research on education and popular education really reach the eyes and ears of teachers and other educators? Is research enclosed in a self-referenced circle? Does the classic definition of university as integrating teaching, research and extension include sharing results? Should new dissemination and discussion channels be created? Or does the problem (also) lie in the research methodology, which views the research subjects as informants and, subsequently, as receptors of conclusions, rather than participants in the production of knowledge about themselves and their reality?

Finally, the reflection on quality criteria reveals the relation between educational theory and education research. To a large extent, these two activities are developed in parallel, with little interlocution between them, or in the form of mutual instrumentalization. Theory is used as a reference framework and research results are employed as illustration or confirmation of a given theory. Empirical research is often seen as theory's little sister, maybe due to the alleged contaminating proximity to practice. If theory is the reflective moment of practice, it cannot ignore the mediations that research enables through the winding paths of practices.

Popular education has proved to be a field of methodological experimentation and innovation, not only in terms of teaching, but also of research. Costa and Fleuri<sup>26</sup>, analyzing research presented in the Popular Education Workgroup of the National Education Research Association (Anped) in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have indicated that rethinking the epistemological and methodological presuppositions of research would have been "motivated by the need to understand the diversity and specificity of the emergent popular classes' knowledge and interests in popular education practices<sup>26</sup> (p. 26). Research from studies published between 1999 and 2000 has confirmed the presence of new subjects, such as the unemployed workers movement, women's house, capoeira circles, weaving studios and solidarity economy;



and of new themes, such as the ethics of care, post-modern sensitivities, interconnecting theories and coloniality<sup>27</sup>.

As long as it reflects on its investigative work, systematizing experiences and searching for a theoretical dialog with interlocutors from different epistemic, political and cultural places, popular education will be able to consolidate itself as a specific field whose practice has its own characteristics. Furthermore, it will be able to contribute to direct and strengthen the area of education in general, and it will subsidize research and practice in related areas.

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