




Opinion

Analysis of Participatory Action Research as a Decolonial Research Methodology

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Abstract: Decolonising the research process is inevitable in today's world full of social and power inequalities. Participatory Action Research (PAR), as one of the methodologies that enhances the transformation of both the researchers and researched, is, therefore, inevitable in social research targeting social, inclusive, and informed change. This study responds to various agitations of decoloniality of the research process that sees the participants as mere subjects rather than essential partners of the knowledge production process. This study conceptualises decoloniality and PAR with an argument recognising PAR as a decolonised research process. This study is located within a transformative paradigm and employs conceptual analysis as a tool to argue the nexus between decoloniality and participatory action research and their assumptions. This study attests to the fact that it is an effective and valuable tool in achieving the decolonised research process because it allows for the research subjects to have input into the process, have their voices recognised, and provide them with a platform to take agency and exercise self-determination. The elements, therefore, resonate with the decolonial agenda to deconstruct oppressive power structures and remembering those who have been historically dismembered by systems of colonial occupation. In this way, this study finds that PAR functions as an important element in implementing the decolonised research process.

Keywords: participatory action research; decoloniality; transformation; research methodology



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1. Introduction

In today's world of social and power inequalities, decolonising the research process is inevitable. This involves rethinking and reworking the ways of investigating and understanding the world, with a particular focus on challenging underlying racial and colonial ideologies. Doing so necessitates approaching research from an ethical perspective in order to produce meaningful knowledge that furthers development without perpetuating established oppression frameworks (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). It also requires strong collaborations between members of diverse cultural communities so their perspectives can be included in academic spaces (Keikelame and Swartz 2019). Ultimately, occupying a decolonial stance facilitates accurate interpretation of marginalised voices and claims (Barnes 2018), which are essential to ensure an equitable process of generating new thoughts and approaches towards life's intricacies. From this perspective, one can argue that ensuring strong collaborations between the *researched* and the researchers will go a long way to promote a decolonial stance of liberation and *remembering* in the research process.

According to Naylor and Mifsud (2019), in order to effectively reduce structural inequalities, researchers must bring a critical eye to their own processes and ask whether the work being done aligns with or perpetuates systemic inequity. This means being aware of how practices are situated and how they impact both people and systems—acknowledging positioning and having the courage to innovate alternative methods that can address issues of bias, privilege, and access at their roots. Therefore, decolonising research is crucial in creating a more representative practice essential for producing knowledge that honours

our diverse world. Hence, there is a need for a deliberate displacement of traditional Western-dominated ways of thinking and doing in favour of decolonial models, which reimagine research as a practice grounded in divergent perspectives and motivated by justice (Barnes 2018; Keikelame and Swartz 2019). Importantly, this involves actively engaging with diverse voices who possess relevant knowledge and insights, meaningfully responding to the existing inequalities that shape our societies, and creatively weaving together new, emancipatory possibilities for living differently.

From the above argument, commitment to speaking the unspoken in order to imagine alternative realities and relationships between different knowledge systems is not negotiable. And one of the ways with which this could be achieved is to take a critical look at one of the notable research methodologies, which is Participatory Action Research (PAR). In the world of research, PAR has been effective in achieving social, inclusive, and informed changes (Janes 2016; Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale 2020; Costa and Andraeus 2021). This method acknowledges the power dynamics between resource holders or centres of authority involved in research and those deemed as collaborators (Mirra et al. 2015). That is, it allows for a balance of power, providing a much-needed shift away from traditional research methods where colonisers were dominant. Through PAR, transformations occur not only in the realisation of research but also among all those involved in the process (Morales 2016). Ultimately, this makes it an inevitable methodology within social research if decolonisation is to take place, building knowledge founded on better relations across cultural differences.

This concerted study is a response to the much-needed decolonial agenda for research, which has long discarded the idea that research participants should be merely considered as subjects rather than collaborators in knowledge production. It takes into account that when grappling with our contemporary understanding of knowledge, there is substantial value in engaging with those within and beyond institutions who bring alternative perspectives and contexts. Therefore, this study aspires to refute traditional modes of data-gathering and yield essential information while considering participants' needs, experiences, and realities. Through this process, it endeavours to foster more equitable understandings of how we generate, circulate, and consume knowledge. Hence, by considering both the contextual realities of the participants as well as their input into the construction of theoretical frameworks and models, this paper establishes an innovative framework for rethinking research practices in a more equitable and ethical way that seeks to heal the legacy of colonialism.

Research Objectives

Based on the above research purpose, the following research objectives were raised to guide this study:

- This study explores the concept of decoloniality and PAR.
- This study establishes relationships between decoloniality as a concept and PAR as a research methodology.
- This study justifies that PAR is one of the methods of decolonising the research process for social transformation.

2. Methodology

This theoretical paper utilises the transformative worldview as a lens to exemplify decolonial propositions in PAR. The transformative paradigm consists of a critical approach aiming to understand and point out power dynamics in society (Chilisa 2019; Shannon-Baker 2016). Its researchers strive to discover knowledge through empirical methods and represent meaning through radical social movements and counter-hegemonic practices (Avelino et al. 2019). Therefore, this theoretical paper attempts to build on these approaches to make a visible research proposition that confronts societal oppression, aggression, and exploitation. In this way, it endeavours to work and promote more just, equitable, and open societies through research. Hence, this theoretical paper falls within this worldview

due to its emphasis on decentring traditional research methods and looking for new ways to expand the scope of rigorous research towards transformative change. That is, it seeks to bring about change or transformation in connected areas of academic discourse by providing a path for cutting-edge insights and breakthroughs in various disciplines through an innovative lens. Ultimately, as the transformative paradigm continues to grow, it will be fascinating to know that this paper further contributes towards its ongoing development.

In order to make sense of this theoretical paper via inductive argument, conceptual analysis becomes quintessential. This is relevant because it enables the researcher to explain and deductively make sense of complex concepts for the purpose of making clarification (Weathers et al. 2016). Through this process, the interpretative power of conceptual analysis is on full display, enabling researchers to explain overarching theories (decoloniality and PAR) in simple language that can be applied more universally. This combination of thought-provoking intellectualism and tangible applications makes conceptual analysis a quintessential tool for making sense of complex concepts (Pfadenhauer et al. 2017). Therefore, this method of analysis is an indispensable tool for the researcher as it allows for a concise and precise understanding of complex topics, thus resulting in a clear-cut conclusion.

Furthermore, in shaping a conceptual analysis, the transformative paradigm guides researchers to question traditional methods, prioritise the voices of marginalised communities, and seek innovative ways to argue the relationships between PAR and decoloniality. By integrating radical social movements and counter-hegemonic practices, it encourages an examination of de-colonial propositions in participatory action research (PAR). The ultimate goal of such an analysis would be to bring about transformative change across connected academic fields, contributing to ongoing development within the transformative paradigm. The following section conceptualises decoloniality and PAR as separate concepts.

3. Presentation of Concept: Decoloniality

Decoloniality is important for understanding present conditions in many parts of the world. It takes a critical approach to Western-dominated knowledge systems, challenging dominant narratives and power structures that have disadvantaged certain communities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Mignolo 2020). Not only does decolonial theory recognise a range of complexities arising from the histories of multiple colonisations, but it also focuses on creating new pathways towards social justice through enacting more equitable practices and dynamics (Hamilakis 2018; Waghid 2019). More than merely being a critique, decoloniality underscores the need for us to reimagine different modes of socialisation that lead to transformation (Abazeri 2022). By paying attention to previously marginalised voices and realities, we become better equipped to foster meaningful change at both individual and systemic levels.

Therefore, decoloniality is an important concept in postcolonial thought, centring the experiences of oppressed people and communities, often in the global South, to challenge entrenched power structures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015a; Chaka 2020). It calls into question the dominant ideologies like racism, sexism, colonialism, and imperialism that continue to oppress those affected by them (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015b; Dei and Dei 2017). Decoloniality imagines a life free from these oppressive structures and aims to foster an equitable world for all by redistributing economic resources and creating space for different ways of knowing (Seroto 2018). Furthermore, it seeks to undo colonial legacies by reimagining culture, community, and identity in ways that cross or bridge geographic boundaries (Fernández et al. 2021). In this context, its reparative politics reclaims what has been taken away from subjugated populations throughout history and works towards healing past wounds. All of these elements come together to construct a powerful element for decolonisation efforts that seek to dismantle harmful existing systems so that we can build more equitable ones in their place.

On another note, it seeks to acknowledge indigenous knowledge and gives voice to those who are often silenced, dismissed, or excluded in mainstream cultures, histories,

and societies (Hunt and Holmes 2015; Fellner 2018). From this perspective, one can argue alongside Sindane (2020) that decoloniality attempts to remember the dismembered by working against the marginalisation of any kind. This may include various forms of civic action, such as promoting social inclusion or taking political stands against systemic discrimination. Hence, decoloniality ultimately serves as a bridge for healing and restoring oppressed people's rights to build more just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive communities.

Based on the above decolonial concept, the following three major assumptions were deduced and interpreted deductively: dismantling dominant power structures, remembering the dismembered, and self-determination. They are discussed as follows:

- **Dismantling power structures:** Based on the above discussion of the decoloniality concept, one can argue that it is an approach that seeks to dismantle the power structures of colonialism and challenge the narratives, systems, and politics associated with this history. Through this, decoloniality has sought to provide a space for people to reimagine their relationship to the world around them and work towards restoring indigenous sovereignty. Inherent in this assumption is that colonialist power structures must be dismantled in order for more just societal relationships and dynamics to exist—and this process requires direct engagement with how these oppressive forces manifest across various structural levels. Moreover, this could be seen as an alternative perspective on how knowledge is generated, privileging experience over institutional knowledge that reproduces coloniser–colonised relationships.
- **Remembering the dismembered:** Based on the above discussion of the decoloniality concept, one can argue that decoloniality is a powerful philosophical and political tool that seeks to undo the damage inflicted by systems of colonialism that have heavily influenced global culture. One of its major assumptions is the idea of “remembering”, restoring, reclaiming, and reviving forms of knowledge, identities, ways of being, and relationships that were lost or dismembered due to colonisation. It does so by re-instating identities and diverse ways of being in the world that have been invalidated or erased due to colonialism, hoping to create systems of thought, practice, and action that challenge the leftover of colonialism. Through decoloniality's focus on remembering the dismembered, it is possible to move towards creating more consistent modes of justice, equality, freedom, respect, wellbeing, and sustainability.
- **Self-determination:** Based on the above discussion of the decoloniality concept, one can argue that decoloniality seeks to challenge the hegemony of Western knowledge systems and instead promote the notion of self-determination and indigenous knowledge. It then becomes an approach to societal transformation that demands the full realisation of freedom for previously disadvantaged people, utilising their own forms of knowledge rather than solely pre-existing knowledge accepted by the colonial system. This new kind of thinking encourages a reinterpretation and redistribution of power, transcending conventional narratives and reflecting on new narratives that give agency to those most affected by colonisation. Through this process lies a great potential for authentic decolonisation—a transformation towards true liberation and reparations for wrongs carried out in the past.

4. Presentation of Concept: Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an efficient method for researchers to create active partnerships with the populations they serve. PAR draws on the expertise of both researchers and communities to identify solutions to problems based not only on theories but also on the lived experiences of members of those same communities (Kelly 2005; Baum et al. 2006; Sherwood and Kendall 2013; Jacobs 2016; Trott et al. 2020). This process helps ensure that solutions are not only relevant to community needs but may also be easier to implement since they have been at least partially generated by the community itself. In this way, PAR is a powerful tool for putting research into practice in ways that much more accurately reflect and respect the local culture.

On another note, PAR is an evidence-based approach to research used when studying social phenomena (Abad-Corpa et al. 2010; Friesen-Storms et al. 2015). Typical PAR studies involve those who are part of the studied phenomenon and are actively and collaboratively involved in producing and assessing the research (MacDonald 2012). This type of research has been increasingly employed in the past few decades in many fields of studies, including education, social sciences, and health and management sciences, due to its emphasis on solidarity, collectivism, and democratisation processes as well as its ability to generate community-validated knowledge (Kekäle and Pirttilä 2006; Borda 2008; Kindon and Elwood 2009; Mubuuke and Leibowitz 2013). This method is popular among these researchers because it allows researcher and community members to observe and characterise the issue under investigation, hypothesise on potential solutions, and collaborate to implement actionable change based on empirically informed conclusions. In this way, PAR serves as a mechanism for developing knowledge and bringing about meaningful social transformation.

From this concept, one can deduce that PAR involved inclusivity in the research process, recognition of the *researched*, and acting for transformative change. These assumptions are explained below:

- **Inclusive research process:** Deducing from the above concept of PAR, one can argue that PAR involves a collaborative process that brings together those facing the problem and creates a platform for them to collectively discover solutions. This research method has been seen as an empowering approach to reducing the gap between researchers, decision-makers, and those affected by the issue. As such, it encourages inclusivity and provides a space for groups to discuss their issues and advocate for change. Furthermore, this model prioritises knowledge accumulated from the direct experience of the people being studied, challenging traditional forms of research, which often favour scientist-driven methods with smaller numbers of participants. Consequently, PAR stands in the position to sustainably create environments that benefit both the researcher and the researched.
- **Recognition of the researched:** Deducing from the above concept of PAR, one can argue that PAR acknowledges and privileges each party's unique contributions to the research process. From PAR, a non-hierarchical structure is established where power is shared mutually between the participant and researcher. Both parties are equal contributors in the co-creation of knowledge within the research project. In doing so, PAR presents an opportunity for stakeholders to use their knowledge in a meaningful way to benefit all parties involved, from practitioners influencing policy to participants seeing direct impacts from sharing their experiences. Ultimately, PAR fosters meaningful dialogue between the subject of research and the researcher, increasing understanding from both sides and ultimately expanding collective wisdom.
- **Actionable change:** Deducing from the above concept of PAR, one can argue that PAR is a research methodology rooted in the belief that evidence-based action taken on behalf of marginalised communities is essential in fostering meaningful civic engagement and ultimately promoting social change. It encourages researchers to involve community members as active participants during all stages of the research process, including identifying research needs, designing data collection methods, collecting data, and generating strategies for taking action. By giving those typically excluded from decision-making processes ownership over their own research agenda, PAR democratises knowledge production while providing avenues for empowering communities to take concerted action towards achieving their vision of self-improvement. As such, PAR can be seen as a tool for collective activism and transformative social justice that has far-reaching implications for lasting change.

5. PAR Methodology as a Decolonised Research Process

This section discusses and justifies how PAR methods can be regarded as a decolonised research method or a decolonised research process. This is performed by placing the

assumptions of decoloniality side by side with the assumptions of PAR as indicated in the above section. That is, the relationship between dismantling power structures as an assumption of decoloniality and an inclusive research process as an assumption of PAR, remembering the dismembered as an assumption of decoloniality and recognition of the researched as an assumption of PAR, and self-determination as an assumption of decoloniality and actionable change as an assumption of PAR were correlated deductively.

5.1. Dismantling Power Structures and Inclusive Research Process

From the deductive reasoning emanating from decoloniality and PAR, we argue that PAR is a way to foster inclusivity and collaboration that challenges the dominant power structures proposed by decoloniality. It works to equalise power dynamics amongst those facing a problem by allowing them to work together collectively towards finding a solution. This process of working collaboratively creates the opportunity to create different avenues for knowledge production, which allows voices that have been traditionally silenced or excluded from hegemonic narratives the chance to be heard and thus have an impact on the solutions chosen. While this approach cannot single-handedly dismantle oppressive structures, it offers an alternative way of developing strategies that can help such structures become dismantled over time.

Drawing from the principles of decoloniality, PAR suggests a different type of power structure. Instead of operating on a hierarchal basis, it proposes a pattern of inclusivity and collaboration as a way for those facing issues to come together to address them. Furthermore, this strategy encourages participation from all involved, creating spaces for all voices to be heard without discrimination and facilitating collective discovery of responsive and effective solutions. Ultimately, this weaves the colonial concept of power into a new and more equitable nature by allowing those who suffer most from oppression to take the lead in creating solutions that benefit everyone. This further confirms that the inclusive and collaborative process of PAR is a systematic way to decolonise the research process because it eliminates power dominance that could further subjugate the *researched*. Hence, PAR could be regarded as a decolonial research method.

5.2. Remembering the Dismembered and Recognising the Researched

Drawing from deductive reasoning emanating from decoloniality and PAR, we argue that PAR is a powerful tool in working towards the decolonisation of the subjugated, as it allows for people who face problems to be recognised as knowledge-holders and co-producers for viable solutions. PAR offers the opportunity for all participants involved in researching the issue to become co-producers of solutions or knowledge arising out of the research process (Sallah 2014). This method is decolonial in practice by valuing all voices within the research context regardless of place or status, and thus works to “remember” those who have been so easily forgotten during colonial assimilation processes. As engaging with different voices creates new knowledge, individual perspectives are better understood through dialogue, and thus their identities are more meaningfully incorporated into what is created together. In this way, recognising those facing the issue can be considered a decolonising process meant to recognise the voice of people who have been dismembered from society—literally and metaphorically.

Based on this, one can further argue that PAR can be seen as a decolonising process to remember the “dismembered” within a community. This process is grounded in recognising those who are facing or have otherwise encountered the problem, seeing them not merely as victims but as co-producers of solutions and knowledge. With the Decolonial lens, these are not just individuals; rather, they are seen in the context of remembering those who have been dismembered or disregarded by oppressive societal structures. In seeking input from those facing problems, PAR works to redress any harm done to marginalised communities and ensures that their impacts are represented in the array of chosen solutions.

5.3. Self-Determination and Actionable Change

Taking cognisance of conceptual analysis principles that allow deduction in the process of meaning-making, we argue that self-determination as an assumption of decoloniality is a practical way of bringing people facing the problem to take part in the process of finding actionable solutions as proposed by PAR, which opined that action is taken to ensure social change, liberation, or transformation into the lives of the researched. That is, the principles of self-determination give power to the people to self-determine their ways of life without epistemological imposition, allowing those confronted with oppression to voice and act on solutions to their own problems. As proposed by PAR, decolonisation involves engaging people in transforming oppressive social structures into ones that cultivate equal freedom and justice. The principles of self-determination allow people to direct changes in their lives without external forces dictating their path. By allowing this autonomy, possibilities of emancipation and resistance can be substantiated beyond what has been traditionally prescribed.

Therefore, in the form of a decolonial lens, participatory action research acts as a transformative tool, allowing people to interact with systems of power in order to mobilise social, economic, and political transformation. Such a process is essential if true liberation and empowerment are to be achieved; it allows the voices of those most affected by the problem at hand to be heard. By engaging people in their own liberation processes, PAR provides a powerful framework in which people's lives can be transformed for the better. Hence, it could be tagged a decolonised research method.

6. Empirical Justification of PAR Methodology as a Decolonised Research Process

To further justify the suitability of PAR as decolonial methodology, the following empirical argument highlights studies where PAR has been used as a method in decolonial research. Most importantly, PAR has been used in various case studies around the world to address power imbalances, challenge dominant narratives, and promote social justice and equity. For example, in indigenous communities in Canada, participatory action research has been used to decolonise research by prioritising indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies (Kelley et al. 2018; Snooks et al. 2021). In South Africa, participatory action research has been used to address the legacies of apartheid by involving marginalised communities in defining research objectives and conducting research that is relevant to their needs and realities (Keikelame and Swartz 2019). PAR has also been used as a decolonial methodology in research to give voice and agency to marginalised communities, challenge dominant narratives and knowledge systems, and promote social justice in Ghana (Dorpenyo 2020). In these studies, participatory action research provided a platform for marginalised groups to actively participate in knowledge production, challenge hegemonic structures, and advocate for their rights and self-determination.

Therefore, one can argue that the ideal collaboration in PAR involves decentring the authority of research professionals to dominate the goals and conduct of research. By foregrounding the establishment of socially just research partnerships and empowering communities to use their indigenous knowledge, PAR disrupts the traditional power dynamics (colonial process) embedded in the research process (Lenette 2022). This approach further confirms the multifaceted relationship between the assumptions of PAR and decoloniality: the dismantling of power structures aligns with the decolonial assumption of inclusivity in research; the "re-membering" of the dismembered correlates with decoloniality's aim for recognition and respect of the researched; and the emphasis on self-determination and actionable change underscores the core principles of both PAR and decoloniality, thereby weaving together a cohesive framework that aligns the ethical and methodological considerations of both paradigms.

7. Summary of Arguments/Findings

This study argues that the PAR proposition for inclusive research and the collaborative research process is decolonial in nature, and hence PAR could be referred to as a

decolonised research method. This is consistent with the argument of [Bourgeois et al. \(2022\)](#) that the collaborative research method enables participants to be viewed as a co-creation of knowledge towards an informed change, liberation, and emancipation. By allowing participants to be actively involved in the creative process, their voices are truly heard and taken into consideration, thus leading to a better quality of information gathered by researchers. This emphasises how recognising all knowledge forms—indigenous, the researched, the marginalised, and other positional theories—allows for a more equitable and authentic outcome in terms of data gathering ([Keikelame and Swartz 2019](#)).

This study also argues that the PAR proposition to recognise the voice of the participants in the process of finding solutions to their problem is decolonial in nature and could be seen as a process to remember the dismembered of the community facing the problem. This contention is grounded on its emphasis on recognising the voice of the participants at the centre of this inquiry process ([Montero-Sieburth 2020](#)). As such, the PAR process becomes a method to recalibrate and re-memorialise those who have been pushed to the margins. This awareness recognises how colonisation has successfully dismantled resilient communities by delegitimising their presence and muting their voices. Therefore, using a PAR research model can provide an empowering platform to challenge colonial narratives and give space for diverse voices to be heard.

This argument also showed that PAR, through its actionable tendencies, compliments the position of decoloniality, which aims for liberation and emancipation through self-agitation and communal knowledge. This argument offers insight into why PAR lines up so much with decoloniality as an approach and goal. Through PAR, participants are provided with an opportunity to contribute significantly to problem-solving efforts and facilitate their community's journey towards emancipation, change, and transformation ([Mirra et al. 2015](#); [Chevalier and Buckles 2019](#)). Self-agitation and shared communal knowledge are indispensable components here, as they ensure that any action taken is the result of self-determined decisions rather than ones imposed on the community by external forces. In this way, decoloniality and PAR join forces to promote active engagement in the search for freedom.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has engaged with the pressing concerns regarding the decoloniality of the research process, challenging views that reduce participants to mere subjects instead of essential partners in knowledge production. Through the conceptualisation of decoloniality and PAR, this study posits a strong argument that recognises PAR as a decolonised research process. This perspective serves as a critical step in reframing the traditional research paradigm, affirming the importance of collaboration, empowerment, and shared authority within the research community.

This study also drew upon the theories of decoloniality to respond to the three research questions posed in this study, resulting in an argument for a decolonised research methodology. Specifically, it recognises PAR as a method that counters the traditional top-down approaches of research, shifting it to putting participants at the centre and arguing towards transformative change. According to the arguments, this process involves three key points: emphasising respect for local communities by allowing space for them to direct their own research processes, focusing on recognising both the agency of participants and on a reflective approach whereby understanding is built through dialogue; and encouraging self-determination processes based on communal strength and grassroots organisation. Thus, this study concludes that PAR can be seen as upholding the principles of decoloniality, such as empowerment, self-governance, and broad social inclusivity.

Therefore, one can conclude that PAR is an effective method for conducting research that adheres to the principles of decolonisation. Through PAR, researchers can foster an environment of inclusivity within their research process while simultaneously recognising the participants and taking action to effect positive change. These elements demonstrate the commitment to deconstructing dominant power structures, acknowledging historical

erasure, and ensuring that impacted communities have the agency to make their own decisions.

9. Implication for Practice

Researchers can embrace PAR's decolonising potential by actively involving participants as essential collaborators in the knowledge production process rather than treating them as mere subjects. This shift requires a reconceptualisation of traditional research dynamics, fostering an environment where research subjects have genuine input, voice, and agency. Barriers to this approach may include entrenched academic practices that prioritise professional authority over communal insight, resistance to recognising the validity of indigenous or non-traditional knowledge sources, and systemic biases that may hinder the full participation of historically marginalised groups. Overcoming these obstacles necessitates a committed, reflective effort to deconstruct existing power structures and develop research practices that truly resonate with the decolonial agenda, aiming for social, inclusive, and informed change.

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