Towards a Dynamic Model of the Psychological Contract

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The term psychological contract emerged in the literature about forty-five years ago; it refers to a concept that captures implicit ideas about the employee-organization relationship. The term was first used in the context of work organizations by Argyris in 1960, as a footnote in *Understanding Organizational Behavior* (Argyris, 1960). Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl, and Solley (1962) elaborate the concept in a case study of a utility company. Levinson and colleagues applied Menninger’s (1958) concept of the “psychotherapy contract,” which ascribes the intangible aspects of the contractual relationship that exists between psychoanalysts and patients, to the work setting. They define the psychological contract, or “unwritten contract,” as the sum of all mutual expectations between the organization and the employee. It includes what both parties are entitled to receive and what each is obliged to provide to the other. The underlying idea is that an exchange relationship exists between the organization and the worker, as previously conceptualized by Barnard and Simon (see March & Simon, 1958) and elaborated in equity theory and social exchange theory (Homans, 1961; Adams, 1965).

Levinson and colleagues pointed out that psychological contracts are largely implicit and unspoken, and they frequently antedate the formal relationship between a person and an organization. Some of the expectations (e.g., regarding salary and workload) concern concrete issues, but others are related to less tangible matters (e.g., dignity at work, opportunity for growth, and a sense of being cared for by the organization), which are revealed only indirectly. Nonetheless, all of these expectations are assumed to determine the relationship between the organization and the employee.

In this conceptualization, the psychological contract binds together individuals and organizations (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995). It makes their actions predictable and helps them to realize their goals (McFarlane Shore & Tetrick, 1994). The strategies, structures, and processes of organizations determine what they want from their employees and what they feel able to offer to them, in addition to affecting the way that contract negotiations are conducted and the nature of the contracts that are reached collectively (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995).
Research by Kotter (1973), which aimed to develop an operationalization for mutual expectations, showed that organizational expectations are difficult to operationalize. Because there is no single organizational counterpart for the individual, and because the expectations of organizational members are far from homogeneous, the two sets of expectations are difficult to balance.

Rousseau (1990, 1995, 2005) introduced a more focused view of the psychological contract, conceiving it as “an individual’s beliefs regarding reciprocal obligations” that arises within the context of the relationship between an organization and an employee (Rousseau, 1990, p. 390). Such contracts encompass the perceptions that employees have of the implicit and explicit reciprocal promises that exist between them and their organizations, and their perceptions of what each party is entitled to receive as a function of those promises (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993). According to this perspective, the psychological contract does not have two levels (individual and organizational); it is an intra-individual perception that exists in the eye of the beholder. The organization provides the context in which the psychological contracts of its employees exist (e.g., Guzzo, Noonan & Elron, 1994).

The psychological contracts of employees are assumed to develop from beliefs as individual employees feel obligated to make particular contributions in exchange for particular benefits. According to Rousseau, psychological contracts are perceived obligations, and not merely expectations (Rousseau, 1990). Psychological contracts lend structure to expectations concerning future exchanges, thereby reducing uncertainty (e.g., by defining roles and specifying future courses of action). The contract also plays a role in creating social units (e.g., partnerships, organizations, joint ventures), and managing interdependencies between individuals, groups, and organizations (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993).

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AND COMMITMENT

A psychological contract is a perception of mutual reciprocal obligations. How the concept of the psychological contract is related to organizational commitment is a fundamental question. Psychological contracts influence commitment (Conway & Briner, 2005). Changes that affect the contract may have implications for commitment and employee behavior. Employees respond to the organization’s attempts to manage careers, reward, and commitment (Sparrow, 1996). Contracting involves a dynamic process through which employee aspirations, motivations, career, and commitment evolve (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995).

In our view, the existence of a psychological contract implies that the employee is in a certain state of commitment; he or she is willing to accept work roles and tasks offered by the organization and to carry them out in accordance with certain standards. Organizational (affective) commitment implies a readiness to act for the benefit of the organization (Brown, 1996; Meyer & Allen, 1997).
Although contracts are, by definition, accepted voluntary agreements between parties to do something (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993), the terms of the agreed-upon contract may vary in the extent to which they converge with the employee’s needs and expectations. The acceptance of a contract by an employee implies a willingness to follow through with its terms (see also Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). The employee, however, develops a perception of whether the contract is personally more favorable or less favorable. In other words, employees evaluate the actual “state of affairs” with regard to the mutual obligations between employer and employee, relative to their needs and expectations (see also Shore & Barksdale, 1998).

Terms that are more favorable for the employee are likely to be associated with a more favorable perception of the organization, thereby resulting in greater commitment to the relationship. The perception of (un)favorability thus influences organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1990; Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982; Steers, 1977) and, consequently, the readiness to accept work roles and tasks, the willingness to engage in extra-role behaviors, and the willingness to avoid tardiness and poor performance, and other negative behaviors. Good contracts result in organizational citizens that are more committed, motivated, and trusting (Sparrow, 1996). Many studies have confirmed that psychological contracts that are more favorable are related to higher levels of organizational commitment (Cassar, 2001; Freese & Schalk, 1996; Guest & Conway, 1997, 1998; Guest, Mackenzie Davey & Patch, 1998; Lester, Turnley, Bloodgood & Bolino, 2002; Turnley & Feldman, 1998; Ten Brink, Den Hartog, Koopman & Van Muijen, 1999).

On the other hand, employees who feel that the organization has not fulfilled its side of the bargain are less likely to engage in organizational citizenship behavior or other extra-role behaviors (Lewis-McLear & Taylor, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994; Turnley & Feldman, 1998). Employees who believe that the organization has overstepped the boundaries of their psychological contracts (contract violation) are more likely to have high levels of tardiness, absenteeism, and intent to leave (Cartwright & Cooper, 1994; Freese, Heinen & Schalk, 1999; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Schalk, Freese & Van den Bosch, 1995; Sparrow, 1996; Turnley & Feldman, 1998).

THE DYNAMICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

The aim of this article is to develop a model and a set of propositions that can guide future research on the dynamics of psychological contracts and behaviors. The concept of the psychological contract is inherently dynamic. Psychological contracts are established at a certain point in time, and they are assumed to be able to change over time. Psychological contracts can be breached or violated, and can be abandoned or deserted. However, our knowledge on the way in which psychological contracts develop, and on the conditions that initiate and influence changes in the psychological contract is still limited. In addition, we know little
about the way in which changes in the psychological contract affect changes in attitudes and behaviors.

Profound changes in psychological contracts may be caused either by organizational changes (for example, “new deals” that are imposed by organizational transformations: Schalk & Freese, 1997) or by individual changes (for example, entering a new phase in life that is associated with different needs and expectations: Schalk, 2004). Critical events that can cause changes in psychological contracts occur quite frequently in organizations (for examples, see Conway & Briner, 2002). The findings of two small-scale studies involving in-depth interviews with employees provide a good illustration. In a small sample of Dutch employees who had permanent employment contracts (N = 27; 56% employed by profit organizations, 48% female, 67% non-managerial), fifteen indicated that they had experienced events in which they had strongly expected the organization to fulfill an obligation that it ultimately did not fulfill. Three employees had not received a pay raise or reward, and four had been denied promotions or particular positions; four had not been supported by the organization or had seen promises that had not been kept, and three others had experienced incidents that were related to the content of their work. Respondents reported that they had reacted with anger and disappointment, a strong need for knowing the reasons for the decision, decreased commitment, and stronger intent to leave. Unexpected positive events were reported by nine employees: one reported having received a bonus, six had received promotions or pay raises, and two reported receiving special treatment or recognition.

Among forty employees (35% male, 73% non-managerial) of an Australian telecommunications company who were interviewed about their experiences with organizational changes in the company, eighty percent claimed to have experienced violations of their expectations. The nature of these incidents involved work-related issues (28%), relocation (18%), the denial of a pay raise or reward (18%), or the denial of a promotion or particular position (15%). Almost all (93%) of the employees also reported unexpected positive incidents. These incidents had involved bonuses, vouchers, or awards (32%); positive work outcomes (20%); customer satisfaction (15%); or promotions and pay raises (13%).

As these findings illustrate, events that violate expectations about obligations that are included in the psychological contract (negative as well as positive) probably occur quite frequently. These events may imply either gradual, continuous change or discontinuous, sudden change at the side of the organization. The implications of these changes for employee attitudes and behavior, however, are not clear. For example, one phenomenon that has thus far received little attention from organizational-behavior researchers is the fact that an employee’s commitment may remain relatively stable over time, despite apparent variations in the exchange relationship between the organization and the individual, but that it can decrease (or increase) suddenly because of circumstances that the employee perceives as critical.

The situation that is described above seems to suggest that commitment accumulates over time (Meyer, Bobocle & Allen, 1991; VandenBerg & Scarpello, 1994) and that
it is maintained with little attention until some triggering event (change) sets off a re-evaluation of this type of behavior (Guzzo, Noonan & Elron, 1994). Although the psychological contract is always present, it receives full attention only in response to certain situations. The psychological contract seems to include a standard for evaluating whether changes are, or are not, important enough to respond to. The psychological contract is therefore not “operating at all times” (Schein, 1965), nor is it continually assessed through a constant method of accounting. More specifically, the psychological contract seems to be a mental model that provides cues to individuals with regard to the types of events they can expect and how they should interpret them (Rousseau, 1995, p. 30).

**CHANGE AND STABILITY**

In order to explain the various ways in which psychological contracts can evolve over time, we rely on self-regulation theory (Bandura, 1988; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Karoly, 1993; Latham & Locke, 1991; Vancouver, 2000). We postulate that employees monitor changes in their organizational environment and evaluate these with the help of their psychological contract. The psychological contract is a mental model of the employee-organization relationship that serves to interpret events and that is the basis for action and subsequent attitudes.

Self-regulation theory postulates (1) that there is a comparison of a variable state with a desired state, and (2) that there will be a corrective action to significant discrepancies. In employment situations, employees observe the actual behavior of the organization (related to employer obligations) and themselves (related to the employee obligations). They compare the behavior of the organization with their own ideas about the behaviors that are implied in the current psychological contract. This means that employees monitor and evaluate the possible occurrence of deviations from agreed-upon mutual obligations within the framework of the existing psychological contract.

With respect to the corrective action to significant discrepancies we assume that the psychological contract implies standards for what is considered to be acceptable. We postulate the existence of two sets of standards, one defining acceptable discrepancies, and the other defining unacceptable discrepancies. We refer to these standards as the “limits of acceptance” and the “limit of tolerance”.

**Proposition 1:** The psychological contract includes acceptance bands that determine the boundaries of what is considered as appropriate behavior with respect to the mutual obligations included in the psychological contract.

**Proposition 2:** The psychological contract includes a tolerance band that determines what is considered as inappropriate or intolerable behavior with respect to the mutual obligations implied in the psychological contract.
Depending on whether the perceived discrepancies are interpreted as overstepping these standards, we assume that employees will engage in different types of corrective responses, i.e. balancing, revising, or deserting. Below we will explain under which conditions the different types of responses will occur and how they differ from each other.

Proposition 3: There are three different patterns of responses to changes in employer behavior related to mutual obligations included in the psychological contract: balancing (positive and negative), revision (positive and negative), and desertion.

In the case of minor discrepancies between perceptions and expectations, an employee may take corrective action without changing the psychological contract. In novel situations or situations that involve drastic deviation from the psychological contract, the employee is similarly likely to take corrective action. These actions, however, may result in a change of the psychological contract. As a cognitive model, the psychological contract serves as a frame of reference that makes it easier to evaluate events that take place within the work domain (cognitive ease). People attempt to fit events into this schema as long as they continue to perceive it as valid. The contract model is applicable to a particular range of acceptable experiences; in other words, there is a “zone of acceptance” (Rousseau, 1995, pp. 148–149, also referred to as the “zone of indifference”: Barnard, 1938; Simon & Barnard, 1976). This zone of acceptance refers to the perceived variety of behaviors that one party will accept from another party without question. In our model this zone is bounded by the limits of acceptable behaviors.

Balancing

When the psychological contract is stable, we assume that the relationship between the psychological contact and behavior is regulated in a more or less automated way as proposed by control theory (e.g., Campion & Lord, 1982; Lord & Hanges, 1987). Sandelands, Glynn, and Larson (1991) argue, “The differences between human social systems and control systems are such that they prevent either from serving as an adequate metaphor for the other” (p. 1110). They reject the control theory approach, stating that people neither act nor regulate their behavior automatically, mechanically, or unthinkingly, as a mechanical system does. Although we agree with Sandelands and colleagues (1991) that this applies to the total spectrum of human behavior, we are of the opinion that the control metaphor is appropriate for describing a particular type of human behavior: behavior that is regulated by a “fixed” cognitive mechanism, as in the case of a stable psychological contract. In situations in which the contract is not clearly affected, people do tend to act rather automatically, predictably, and mechanically without giving much thought to their behavior.
Revision

When mutual obligations change over time, however, different patterns should be used to describe changes in psychological contracts and the consequences of such changes. In this case, control theory does no longer apply, and employees have to rely on more conscious and deliberate forms of self-regulation. The development of the exchange relationship between employer and employee, in relation to the employee’s perceptual biases regarding that development, may create significant changes in the employee’s perception of the contract. If the change implies an overstepping of the standard of acceptability, a revision of the psychological contract is to be expected. That is, the terms of the contract will be reconsidered, and a new contract will be established. In other words, the information that employees obtain from observing their own and their employers’ behavior may alter their ideas about what they owe the organization and what the organization owes in return (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). The shift to a more instrumental perspective in MBA alumni described by Robinson et al. (1994) is a good example. Although most of the employee obligations that were perceived by these MBAs decreased over time, most of the employer obligations (as perceived by the MBAs) increased. The passing of time permits employees (as well as employers) to estimate whether the other party has honored promises that have been made for the future (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995).

Desertion

Revision of the psychological contract will only occur when the deviation is moderate and within the range of what is seen as negotiable. In case of extreme events or changes that are perceived as intolerable the psychological contract will be deserted. Employees lose commitment at once and no longer feel obligated to keep the promises implied in the psychological contract.

THE CHANGE MODEL

Figure 1 illustrates the general patterns of changes in psychological contracts that have been described before.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the psychological contract serves as a cognitive model of monitoring behavior, and it continues to serve as a basis for action until it becomes clear to the employee that the contract is no longer valid. This may occur because of unexpected events or in response to a gradual drift that leads to the crossing of critical boundaries. In such cases, the contract is no longer valid in the individual’s perception, and it is prone to revision. When the changes cannot be incorporated into a revised contract, the contract will be deserted.
The mental model of the psychological contract includes beliefs about which behaviors fall within the boundaries of acceptability and which are intolerable in the interaction with the organization (Schalk & Freese, 1997). These boundaries of what employees perceive acceptable and tolerable with respect to reciprocal obligations should be taken into account in any explanation of changes and consequences of changes in psychological contracts.

In this context, the psychological contract is a set of beliefs that employees hold with regard to two dimensions: the activities of the organization relative to employer obligations and the activities of individual employees relative to their obligations towards the organization. The activities that are related to mutual obligations may change over time. The actual behaviors of both parties influence the perception of mutual obligations.

As a cognitive model, the psychological contract is balanced under normal circumstances (Rousseau, 1995). In other words, balanced implies being in a state of homeostasis. As mentioned above, this model serves as a frame of reference into which employees attempt to fit events, as long as they continue to perceive the schema to be valid. The behavior of the organization and the employee (as perceived by the employee) varies over time, with fluctuations within a given range. For example, employees may work harder, be more helpful to colleagues, or be more successful and perform more effectively on some days than they do on others; conditions at work or the support of supervisors fluctuate over time as well. The psychological contract allows for such changes within the limits of acceptability. The boundaries of what is considered acceptable are determined by the obligations that are deemed important within the framework of the existing psychological contract.

Tolerable variation is determined by the basic values of individual employees, regardless of the framework of specific obligations in the existing contract (Schalk & Freese, 1997). In practice, tolerability has only a lower limit, as it is hard to imagine a type of positive action towards another party that would be perceived as intolerable.
Deviations can be positive or negative. Positive deviations are assumed to have less weight (and therefore to have a broader zone of acceptability) than negative deviations do. This is because of the “negativity effect” (Kanouse & Hanson, 1971), which also plays a role in the prospect theory of decision-making, as proposed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979): there is a positive-negative asymmetry in evaluations (Peeters & Czapinsky, 1990).

When the terms of the contract are agreed upon, they always fall within the tolerable variation that is determined by basic values. Employees do not voluntarily accept contract terms that violate their basic values (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). When basic values are threatened in the work situation (e.g., the prohibition of practices that are considered obligatory in a religious context, or when the work environment becomes excessively dangerous or threatening), the boundaries of tolerable variation will be considered as having been overstepped. Responses from employees of home-care organizations when asked what would be intolerable for them in their employment relationships provided such answers as “If my health was affected;” “If I were no longer able to build a relationship with clients or to provide quality care;” “If my job was no longer challenging or fun;” “If the organization were to become too negative;” “If I cease to be treated as a person;” and “If I were to be confronted with sexual harassment.”

Specific contracts include a zone of acceptance that reflects what the employee feels is acceptable variation within the agreed-upon contractual obligations. For example, an employee may expect feedback from the supervisor to consist of weak or moderate praise or criticism (within the limits of acceptability). The employee is therefore likely to find strong praise either surprising or inconsistent with the framework of the existing psychological contract (i.e., it is likely to exceed the limits of acceptability), and strong criticism may be found intolerable, as it violates the employee’s basic value of maintaining self-esteem (i.e., it exceeds the limits of tolerability).

Employment relationships that are based upon trust and good faith are likely to be accompanied by broad zones of acceptability. For example, employees who perceive their managers as credible are likely to have a broader zone of change acceptance than do employees who assign low credibility to their managers.

There are three typical patterns of variations in organizational and individual behavior. Variations in the perceived behavior of the organization, the individual, or both that remain within the limits of acceptability are of no consequence to the psychological contract, and thus to commitment and subsequent behavior. Positive behavioral deviations by the organization are likely to be followed by positive behavioral deviations by the individual, while negative deviations are likely to have the opposite effect. This pattern is called balancing.

If the perceived behavior of the organization, individual, or both reaches or exceeds the limits of acceptability, the consequences are likely to change. In case of negative deviations, employees are likely to reconsider the contract and to exhibit a decline in commitment and subsequent behaviors (Kotter, 1973, Robinson &
Morrison, 1995; Robinson et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1995; Sparrow, 1996). In case of positive deviations, commitment is expected to increase. Furthermore, clarification about and re-negotiation of the contract is likely, resulting in the creation of a new contract, which is likely to have positive effects on commitment and behavior. This pattern is known as revision, as it may lead to a revised contract.

When negative behavioral deviation exceeds the negative limit of tolerability, contracts are likely to break down. Accordingly, commitment is likely to drop strongly and behavioral responses are likely to be extreme. Open conflicts, expressions of emotion, and signs of aggression and depression may also occur (Rousseau, 1990). This condition is called desertion. Figure 2 gives examples of balancing, revision, and desertion.

Proposition 4: Balancing, revision and desertion influence commitment and employee behavior.

The perspective on commitment that is implied by this dynamic model of the psychological contract differs from those that are implied by the value-expectancy model (Heckhausen, 1980; Vroom, 1964), goal-setting theory (e.g., Locke, Latham & Erez, 1988), and other models. Our model assumes neither a monotone relationship between motivating factors and behavior nor a constant computational evaluation.
process in which positive and negative factors compensate for one another. This dynamic model assumes that commitment is durable and somewhat insensitive to situational conditions. Nonetheless, it is possible for commitment to change drastically in response to a single event that violates a norm, as perceived by the employee.

This model expands on the model of psychological contract violation that was developed by Morrison and Robinson (1997); these authors focus on antecedent factors that influence the development of psychological contract violation. In contrast, our model attempts to capture the process of psychological contract change, as well as the consequences of these changes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE

The validity of the dynamic model of the psychological contract is an important issue that must be addressed in further research. The model’s validity concerns the structural aspects of the model and its supposed dynamics. In terms of structure, the model attributes a role to perceptions of obligations regarding the multiple dimensions of individual and organizational behavior. Psychological-contract studies have indeed shown that the obligations of both employee and employer are important determinants of organizational commitment (e.g., Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000).

As for the dynamics of the model, a study by Freese (2007) reveals that individuals do indeed evaluate actual behavior with regard to two sets of norms (limits of acceptability and tolerability, proposition 1 and 2) and that the three patterns that have been described exist (proposition 3), and can have attitudinal and behavioral consequences (proposition 4).

Forty-two employees in three home-care organizations were interviewed concerning their experiences with organizational changes that were taking place at the time of the interview. Several examples of processes related to revision were found. At the time of the interview, some of the respondents were experiencing an imbalance in their psychological contracts or were thinking about the consequences of possible future imbalances. For example, one female employee (age 41, 17 years in the home-care organization, and two years of work experience as a home care nurse, with a contract for 32 hours a week) reported that the working methods in the organization were becoming more businesslike. She was considering making a voluntary change from her current position of team coordinator to a non-supervisory job. She reported feeling that her psychological contract was not in balance and that she was expected to do more for the organization—particularly with regard to working extra hours—than the organization did for her.

Another female employee (age 33, five years in a home care organization, with a contract for eight hours a week) wondered, “What they are up to now? I try to remember that it’s only twenty percent; it’s only eight hours a week that you are dependent. I will have to wait and see how it turns out. If it is not what I would
like to have, I will go and try to find something else, because the way it is now is not good. I have given them time until . . . My commitment has changed very much. Yes, at this moment, I am very clearly indifferent towards the organization. . . . If they reorganize again, I will certainly leave.”

In addition to these examples of negative revisions, several examples of positive revisions were reported as well. For example, one female employee (age 27, five years in a home-care organization, one year of experience in an intake job, and a contract for 24 hours a week) used the following terms to describe her new job: “fun, great, keeps me awake, dynamic, higher pay.” A male manager (age 34, seven years in a home-care organization and six months in a management job, with a contract for 38 hours a week) reported having experienced considerable pleasure in his work. He also reported that his new job was challenging; he found this to be positive, although it did cost a great deal of energy.

Examples of desertion are likely to be found among employees who have voluntarily quit their jobs because of problems at work. Interviews with twelve people who reported having felt that their psychological contracts had been deserted revealed differences in the processes that led up to the actual abandonment. Limiting commitment to the work itself, and particularly contacts with clients, was a commonly reported reaction to initial violations of the psychological contract. Two of the twelve respondents reported they had initially reacted to violations by putting more effort in their work. Emotional and behavioral reactions (conflicts, increased absenteeism, putting less effort into work) were other commonly reported reactions.

The situations that led to the desertion of the contract were diverse; examples included harassment or bullying by supervisors or colleagues, excessive work pressure, unmet promises with respect to pay, opportunities for promotion or individual development, rejection of individual ideas by the organization, excessively boring work.

These examples illustrate that unexpected deviations from the limits of acceptance and tolerance can have drastic consequences, not only for the contract as perceived by the individual, but also for the level of commitment and subsequent organizational behaviors. This is preliminary evidence that must be elaborated in future research to demonstrate the model’s validity.

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Journal compilation © The Executive Management Committee/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007
Acknowledgments. We extend our thanks to Denise Rousseau, Jone Pearce, and Charissa Freese for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. We also wish to thank the participants in an AMR Theory Development workshop in Boston and to the participants in a workshop entitled “Changes in Psychological Contracts” in Tilburg, all of whom commented on the model. The examples that are discussed in this article were derived from in-depth interviews held by Jennifer Campbell, Nicky van Dijk, Charissa Freese, Martijn Paulen, Ronald Schouten, and Charlotte Vermond.

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