

Waiting for war: Soldiering, temporality and the gendered politics of boredom and joy in military spaces

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Abstract: The appropriate control and expression of emotion are integral to becoming and being recognisable as a soldier. The regulation of emotion in military settings is profoundly gendered. As a gender-conforming role for men but a gender-non-conforming role for women, the ways in which military men and women perform emotion, and how this comes to be understood, is often dependent on wider gendered assumptions about what men and women are and should be. As such, this chapter considers how gender appropriate and inappropriate displays of emotion operate and what they reveal about the regulation of emotion in enabling war.

International Relations has repeatedly overlooked how “emotions not only represent a particular feeling or sensibility but also actively shape the world around us and the bodies of those that populate it” (Åhäll & Gregory, 2013: 117; Crawford, 2000; Sylvester, 2010). With notable exceptions (*inter alia* Hockey, 1986; Higate, 1998; Eichler, 2012; MacKenzie, 2012), much research on armed forces similarly fails to concern itself with the emotions and sensory experiences of those whose bodies are trained in inflicting state-sanctioned violence. This is rather curious as it is soldiers, and their bodies, that enable that very violence. The so-called ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA) - a shorthand for ongoing technological advancements taking effect in many state armed forces - means that for some, state-based warfare is now far more a “contest, between machines that are served, maintained and operated by men [*sic*]” than something “waged by men [*sic*] employing machines” (Van Creveld, 2010: 225). However, soldiers remain integral cogs in the war machine. A continued reliance on their bodies, whether operating technology or not, ensures that it is not technology alone, but also soldiers, that enables war.

Socialising individuals in the possible and actual enactment of military violence is emotional work therefore. Soldiers quickly learn the value of controlling and displaying

their emotions; of when it is and is not appropriate to express emotions of one kind or another. An oft-repeated notion is that “wars consist of ‘5% horror and 95% boredom’ (or waiting)” (Maeland & Brunstad, 2009: 2). Thus, in an institution where boredom is almost a constant, but danger an ever-present possibility, knowing when to take matters seriously and knowing when to take a joke both become integral to soldiering. One means correctly anticipating real and present dangers; the other means being able to ‘let off steam’ with comrades to cope with those dangers. In both cases, emotional control and display can become a matter of life and death.

Importantly, displays of emotion are also very often reliant on gendered logics of in/appropriateness. The sharing of stories of sexual conquest may be a common way of ‘letting off steam’ for military men (Barrett, 2001; Basham, 2013) for example, but women soldiers frequently find themselves characterised as sluts or dykes for the ‘inappropriateness’ of having more than one sexual partner or none at all (Miller, 1997; Basham, 2013). Similarly, deriving pleasure from combat is often regarded ‘normal’ for military men but suspect for military women. Militaries have traditionally been (and remain) dominated by men, so much so that warfare has historically been “wherever ‘women’ are not”, regardless of their experiences and war’s effects on them (Enloe, 1983: 15). Although what comes to be understood as ‘manly’ varies by time and place (Nagel, 1998), armed forces globally are still comprised primarily of men and shaped by their practices, beliefs and experiences, as has been the case throughout history (*inter alia* Morgan, 1987; Bibbings, 2003). Militaries continue to be valued in societies as key sites for the making of men, regardless of women’s increased participation in military roles¹ (Basham, 2011). Thus, as a gender-conforming role for men but not for women, the ways in which men and women perform emotion in military settings, and how this comes to be understood, is often highly dependent on wider gendered assumptions about what men and women are and should be.

This chapter examines some of these gendered emotional expressions that so frequently characterise what it means to soldier. In particular, I focus on the gendered politics of lives regulated not only by violence but by waiting for it and enjoying it. By drawing on insights from research with serving British soldiers, I consider how the mundaneness of everyday life on the base and the exhilaration of the combat mission can shape the lives of soldiers in particular, often divergent ways. I suggest that military boredom and joy

are particularly important emotions because war relies on the simultaneous inclusion and rejection of particular bodies to function (Basham, 2013) and gender appropriate and inappropriate displays of emotion can reveal aspects of how the gendered socialisation and regulation of emotion make military violence and war possible.

Not your average nine to five

Suggested techniques for the Marine in the avoidance of boredom and loneliness: masturbation. Rereading of letters from unfaithful wives and girlfriends. Cleaning your rifle. Further masturbation... Discussing in detail every woman the Marine has ever fucked... Left- versus right-handed masturbation (*Jarhead*, 2005).

A few weeks into every autumn semester I sit down with undergraduate students, all taking my class in *Gender, Militarization and Resistance*, to watch Sam Mendes' *Jarhead*. There are a number of reasons for this, aside from the war it depicts, its upbeat soundtrack, and a fine performance from Jake Gyllenhaal in the central role of US Marine Anthony Swofford, as he 'proceeds' through basic training to deployment in the 1990-1991 Gulf War to 'homecoming'. One such reason is how well the film depicts the process of becoming and remaining recognisable as a soldier. Through *Jarhead's* depiction of basic military training, it reveals some of the ways in which soldiers begin to produce, maintain and then embody very particular corporeal, psychological and social capitals. From marching, standing tall and meticulously cleaning uniforms, to exhibiting valued traits to peers like loyalty, courage and a good sense of humour, becoming a soldier is an unending performance (Hockey, 1986; Higate, 2003). Moreover, that depiction of basic training takes place in an all-male environment and highlights some of the pleasures that men have long-derived from the transformative process from civilian to soldier that confirms recruits have opted out of the usual 'nine to five' (Woodward, 1998). Though Swofford and his comrades find training tough, brutal even, this very brutality affirms that each of them can "make themselves into the man they want to be" (Dawson, 1991: 119).

Although women also now undergo military training, its physical regimes, standards, equipment, machinery and even uniforms have developed with male bodies in mind. An enduring legacy of women being traditionally deemed unsuited to combat and more suited to being war's sweethearts, wives, mothers, nurses and clerks (Enloe, 2000) is that their bodies are suspect in military settings. Though, as popular culture reflects, the desire of men to fulfil fantasies of warfighting is somewhat commonsensical, women's desires to reject the nine to five are still an irregularity. This is reinforced through the habitual denigration of the 'feminine' in military training. Recruits become soldiers precisely by proving they are not women or 'effeminate'. Gendered insults - 'pussies' - hurled at recruits lagging behind serve as frequent reminders (*inter alia* Hockey, 1986; Harrison & Lailberté, 1997). Appearing 'unmanly' in the eyes of other men often elicits shame (Kimmel, 1994), an especially negative emotion in an institution that reveres pride. Furthermore, for many, biological functions like menstruation and more general perceptions of the inferiority of women's bodies and their inability to 'stomach' war fully justify the marginality of women (Cohn, 2000). When women in Western armed forces were deployed in substantial numbers for the first time during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, many newspapers reported the tears of 'girl soldiers' whilst their male counterparts stoically comforted their tearful wives and girlfriends (Forde, 1995). Though it is not uncommon for *men* under fire to tremble, sweat, piss themselves, vomit, or even shit themselves (*inter alia* Holmes, 2003), the salience of the idea that 'the soldier' is a man elides this.

Importantly, some acts of becoming such as cleanliness, tidiness and domesticity that are more commonly associated with the feminine can also be reconstituted as ways of 'being a man' if they become controlled military activities. An orderly bunk and a well-ironed shirt when carried out within the parameters of the masculinised environment of basic training, all symbolise the rejection of the civilian and the primacy of military efficiency. As military efficiency has a male face, these activities reinforce the 'manly'.

Jarhead depicts such everyday mundane tasks as integral to the soldier-self. As the above quote suggests *Jarhead* reveals war to be a waiting game; one of military service's key features is the "queuing, being 'processed' for this or that, [the] waiting" (Morgan, 1987: 9). The prevalence of boredom in military settings is both an enduring feature of war and something soldiers must endure (Maeland & Brunstad, 2009). Military officials

take this seriously; boredom potentially undermines soldiers' abilities to 'switch on'; those ways of "moving, seeing, hearing, touching and smelling" that enhance a soldier's "individual and collective capacity to kill the enemy" (Hockey, 2009: 481).

Many attempts at mitigating military boredom are also gendered. From military officers providing 'rest and recuperation' for servicemen in brothels (Morgan, 1994; Enloe, 2000) to 'jokes' about servicewomen's alleged sex lives, mitigating the mundane relies on gendered assumptions about appropriate sexuality (Miller, 1997). Preparing for and going to war is still a 'boy's own adventure', not a girl's. As most "real soldiers' tales", written almost exclusively by men, attest, this is an idea central to both boyhood and military culture (Woodward, 1998: 288). Moreover, taking an interest in, and in some cases pleasure or joy in combat is also gender-conforming for men but not for women (Sasson-Levy, 2003). Moments of military boredom and joy thus often reinforce the gender-conformity and non-conformity of men and women's military service respectively.

A final reason for screening *Jarhead* is that it toys with the stability of time and space. The military is a prime example of the power of particular configurations of time and space in facilitating social identity. Time and space have traditionally been dichotomised as fluid and static respectively (Massey, 1994). Time has come to be thought of as a matter of progression; life is often considered in cradle to grave terms, as "a straight line or number of straight lines" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 230). Space, in contrast, has often been conceptualised as timeless, as territorially or structurally bound, as a fixed and autonomous (Agnew, 1994). However, the characterisation of time and space in such ways, and their compartmentalisation, relies on the production of sets of boundaries and distinctions that remove temporality and spatiality from the historical, social and political struggles that make them intelligible (Walker, 1993; Agnew, 1994; Lundborg, 2012). In everyday life, spaces and times become intertwined and invested with meaning. The notion that there is a 'time and a place for everything' has become so normalised that a failure to utilise time and space appropriately can elicit emotional responses, from guilt over relaxing and not working to excitement at one's own fashionable lateness (Halberstam, 2005).

Space and time are not fixed or stable. To become so normalised, so entrenched in our daily lives, requires that they become technologies of thought and action through which

individuals “may give expression to themselves” (Lefebvre, 1991: 33). *Jarhead* provides an insight into how these technologies can operate in military settings; how they can ensure that a man is always ‘of’ the military even if not ‘in’ it. Though we follow Swofford from basic training, to war and to ‘homecoming’, we are also told his story is one where:

A man fires a rifle for many years and he goes to war. And afterwards, he turns the rifle in at the armoury and he believes he’s finished with the rifle. But no matter what else he might do with his hands, love a woman, build a house, change his son’s diaper, his hands remember the rifle (*Jarhead*, 2005).

Reiterated constructions of soldiers’ bodies are integral to becoming and being made recognisable as a soldier. It follows that being a soldier can leave marks on the body, marks that “cannot easily be erased” (Godfrey et al, 2012:551) therefore. As already argued, the functionality, meaning and construction of men’s and women’s bodies in military settings varies though. Whereas men’s bodies are often imagined as resilient, adaptable and strong, women’s are more often problematically sexual, reproductive, weak and leaky. Male and female bodies are appropriate for different and specific military tasks (Basham, 2013). Men’s bodies are the measure of ability in being distinguishable from women’s. In military contexts, interlockings between gender, spatiality and temporality similarly and frequently de/legitimise the expression of emotion and its social meaning. Crying over the death of a fellow soldier is more acceptable than crying over brutal training for servicemen, for example. As I found in my research with British soldiers, the military is therefore an institution with a profoundly gendered ordering of socially in/appropriate behaviour; there is a time and place for each emotional expression of soldiering, the intelligibility of which relies on gendered logics.

Behind the wire

Cousin Sally rang tonight – I cannot stress enough how good it was to have some outside contact. I feel claustrophobic and I’m so bored. I guess it’s just a bit weird being surrounded by military personnel the whole time. I mean, just the fact that when Chloe and Rachel (the two women soldiers I met on

the course yesterday) go off for a run, it's always on the base - it's so enclosed here. Oh well, maybe I'm just a mega civilian! Really looking forward to escaping on Friday though... (Extract from Fieldwork Diary, April 2005).

Between the winter months of 2003 and those of 2005, I visited, ate at, and occasionally slept at, a wide range of British military bases. I was in these places to carry out fieldwork-based research with members of the British Armed Forces. Through interviews and generally waiting around, I explored the significance of gender, race and sexual orientation to the self-identities and relationships of the military personnel I encountered. I reflected on the implications of their stories for them, for military culture, for societal relations with the military, for war itself, and for preparations made for its inevitability and built a doctoral thesis, book and a career based on knowledge claims about their lives (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that carrying out fieldwork was a profoundly emotional experience. At different times and settings and to varying degrees, I found it challenging, unsettling, humiliating, rewarding, tedious, fun and funny. I experienced dismay, anger, hurt, fear, happiness, laughter, friendship, and as alluded to above, boredom. How I have come to understand this research and those I spoke to has been profoundly shaped in and through emotional encounters. Whilst scholars are disciplined with both small and large 'ds' into making "distinctions between scholarly activity and 'real life', in practice this is not a distinction that holds up to close examination" (Morgan, 1998: 657).

Two especially resounding emotions for me were sympathy and empathy, from the tale of the chaplain leading his first religious service following the deaths of four of his fellow soldiers, to the homesick St Lucian clerk who had enlisted to send money to her family back home, I felt sympathy. I also empathised with many I encountered by virtue of sharing their temporal and spatial frames, albeit in a fleeting way. The boredom and tedium of life behind the wire was one such empathetic encounter. As the above extract suggests, I found life behind the wire difficult, even though I only experienced it a few times in short bursts. On one particular visit to private soldiers at an Army base in the middle of the countryside, I was especially struck by the greyness of the canteen walls where they ate, of the garages and offices where many worked, and of the barrack blocks where most slept. On talking to these soldiers, most of whom were in their late

teens and early- to mid-twenties, I was overwhelmed by just how mundane their lives seemed to be. When I asked them what they did socially they told me:

Me: What do you do, like socially, where do you go? Whereabouts?

Kelly: Just across the road, only there, to the barracks bar

Will: Nothing. I've never got no money

Tonya: Salisbury's too far to go out, it's like, 25 quid a taxi there and then 25 quid back, so we go over the road most nights

Life behind the wire for these soldiers meant living out time in particular spaces over and over again (the office/garage, the mess, the barrack block, the barracks bar). This shaped their emotional responses to their lives in the military, as the following exchange suggests:

Me: Are you happy with what you're doing?

Kelly: Sometimes. It's just boring, doing the same things every day

Me: how do the rest of you feel? Are you happy with your Army career?

Mark: There's always room for improvement I guess

[long pause]

Me: so what about these adventure sports things that you hear about in all the recruitment campaigns?

Will: I went sailing, that's all I've done

Kelly: other people do skiing and things like that

Angus: Yeah

Me: have any of you done skiing or anything else?

Will: Sailing from Gibraltar to here

Me: Wow, sounds great

Will: That was emotional shall we say?

Kelly: Someone just asked us to join the skiing team, never skied in me life... 3 months away from the regiment, I'll gladly do it!

[Laughter]

Many of these soldiers shrugged when I asked them whether they enjoyed being in the Army; others expressed that it was 'ok', 'could be improved'; most suggested when probed that life in the Army was quite different from the life of adventure conjured up by recruitment ads. The overwhelming impression these soldiers left me with though was that they had senses of humour well-honed for their mundane circumstances. Boredom has long been seen as an integral part of military life but a potential threat to military readiness (Maeland & Brunstad, 2009). Humour has long been seen to be an integral part of military life *and* the alleviation of boredom. Humour in military settings has been variously conceptualised as a 'compensatory device making the fear and tragedy of the moment seem only temporary' for military personnel (Hockey, 1986: 137) and "a way of practicing positive emotions, which enables building personal resilience and capacity to respond to life challenges, as well as building relationships with others" (Brown & Penttinen, 2013: 125). The stories of the soldiers above suggested that whilst life behind the wire could be mundane, humour could help one endure it.

However, many attempts to mitigate military boredom rely on the normalisation of the 'heterosexual potency' of military men and the simultaneous policing of servicewomen's sexuality (Hockey, 2003; Basham, 2013). Whereas servicewomen are required to wear uniforms that satisfy heterosexual definitions of feminine attractiveness, frequently find their sex lives the subject of gossip, are maligned for falling pregnant, and are advised to carry condoms and birth control because they are outnumbered by men (Basham, 2013), expressions of male sexuality are habitually normalised, privileged and reinforced in military settings. From the common refrain that anyone falling behind on a run is 'tart' and stories of sexual conquest, to the organisation of prostitutes "to service" servicemen as a form of rest and recuperation (Kane, 1993; Morgan, 1994; Brighton, 2004), sexual joy among servicemen is appropriate in ways that women's sexual joy simply is not. During the 95% of the time that soldiers spend waiting for war, emotional expressions are thus often regulated by gendered norms.

War Isn't Hell. It's Entertainment²

Death and injury are still ever present possibilities for soldiers, despite the revolution in military affairs. In recent large-scale military deployments, more soldiers in support roles, not only those in combat arms, have found themselves endangered, due to their skills being called upon in complex 'restructuring' missions and in light of the increasingly slippery nature of the 'frontline'. However, for some, combat and close proximity to it is the very purpose of enlisting and can be an emotionally uplifting experience. For example, Terry, a male officer in the Royal Air Force, spoke fondly of combat and as an intense emotional experience:

"You realise how good it was by the number of human emotions that you experienced. When in just one day you can go through utter sadness where you cry - you're a grown man crying - to things being the funniest things you've ever seen or laughed about, to [the] sheer terror of 'I think I'm actually going to die', and you can experience all that in one day and you think, blimey! You reflect on that and actually it's a really positive experience"

In some military settings, how soldiers experience and display emotions and how these displays are made socially intelligible to others, is often highly dependent on whether the soldier is a man or a woman, and also whether the soldier's actions are comprehensible as masculine or feminine (Sasson-Levy, 2003; Taber, 2005) though. For example, a serviceman falling behind on a run is more likely to be chided as a weak *individual*, whereas, a servicewoman falling behind on a run is more often "held up as representative of their gender" because military service is gender conforming for men but not women (Taber, 2005: 292).

The private soldiers I encountered above belonged to a support arm of the Army not a combat one. Both men and women served in the unit, though there were far more men than women on the base, and far more women among the office clerks than men, and many more men among the mechanics than women. Women are still currently excluded from close combat (infantry) roles in the British military but they can and do serve in combat support arms. They have deployed in increasing numbers in recent years to dangerous war zones with some casualties. Regardless of their proximity to the core function of the armed forces, the notion that women are more suited to administrative roles and other traditionally feminine trades such as nursing still abounds. As Stuart, an Army officer I encountered put it: servicewomen have "a sharper eye for detail" and are

“better on the administrative side than men are”. This institutional logic of time (traditional roles/modern roles) and space (rear party/frontline) normalises and reinforces gendered temporalities and spatialities that mean some servicewomen can come to find themselves regarded as ‘out of place’.

This is especially relevant to women who express pleasure at having a role in combat or in close relation to it. Emma, a sailor who worked in a non-traditional role as a weapons trainer in a Navy warfare unit told me that her male colleagues still made ‘jokes’ like “a woman’s place is at home making the tea” in spite of her extensive experience in combat training. Similarly, Rachel, who described herself as enjoying serving in a unit where she got to do things associated with the “more war-ry side of the Army” identified a number of challenges she had to endure - from false allegations of a sexual affair with a soldier after chatting to him in a bar to having to work harder than male counterparts to prove herself - because of her desire to serve in a less traditionally feminine role. Women, as still largely exceptional, alien and strange to militaries, can often find that they are “not perceived as individuals, but are instead regarded as strangers of a certain type” (Simmel, 1971: 148; Basham, 2013). Emma and Rachel’s ability to express joy at being in combat-facing roles and as individuals was thus limited by its gender-nonconforming qualities. For Terry, unlike for Emma and Rachel, the joy of combat was gender-conforming. Even as a ‘grown man crying’, as a social being meant to carry out military operations, Terry’s sense of enjoyment and fulfilment was simply that. It was not a subject of ridicule as it was for many of the servicewomen I encountered. Servicewomen’s tears are often lauded as further evidence of their unsuitability for military service, whereas an emotional but “masculine, aggressive, violent reaction”, such as banging one’s fists into a wall, is more readily normalised in military settings (Taber, 2005: 296). Such gendered logics of intelligibility around the display of emotion can thus profoundly affect what men and women do and what and where they should be.

Other servicemen expressed similar joys to Terry’s at being able to “do what we actually got paid for” and “getting shot at” (Shaun, RAF sergeant); and at being deployed, at being engaged in the “real” deal of there being “bullets in the gun” (Peter, Army Officer). Indeed, for some the “enticing elixir” (Hedges, 2003: 3) of war was so enjoyable that being left behind elicited sadness. Christopher, an Army sergeant told me that

missing out on deployment was a real 'low point', leaving him unable to "join in" with the war stories and be considered a full member of his unit. However, even in the context of the combat mission, soldiers can find that soldiering's emotional spaces and temporalities are not as straightforward as the 95% boredom and 5% horror/joy tale suggests. As previously discussed, and well-illustrated by Swofford's monologue in *Jarhead* on the merits of masturbation, reading letters from unfaithful wives and girlfriends and discussing sexual acts at length, sex can be a source of alleviation of boredom for military men. In Shane Brighton's (2004: 52) reflections on the tour of duty, on the combat experience 'beyond the wire', he observes how sometimes, as in Swofford's frustrating experience in the 1990-1991 Gulf War, "the foreign, dangerous places soldiers visit are not dangerous or foreign enough". Thus, in Northern Ireland for example, British soldiers, would 'spice up patrols' with "near suicidal leaps between speeding vehicles and "divert patrols and stand guard while some lucky individual did a bit of sexual tourism with a friendly local" (2004: 52). Whereas servicewomen's desire for risk and sexuality is treated as suspect, as out of place, bounded by the temporality of what women have traditionally done, and thus, as gender non-conforming, men's risk-taking and sexual encounters (as long as they are potentially heterosexual) are the norm. This entails that the intelligibility of the joy combat, as an emotional response, becomes appropriate or inappropriate through interlockings of gender, spatiality and temporality.

Conclusion

The emotional desires of (heterosexual) military men to wage war continue to be normalised and reinforced, whether in the social practices of servicemen themselves, through the tacit and more obvious support of military authorities, or in popular culture and wider logics of war and gender that cast war as a manly pursuit. Expressions of combat as a pleasurable experience for servicemen are gender-conforming; they are supported by wider and salient beliefs about men making the best warriors. Similar emotional expressions from women are not.

In Britain, and much of the global North, war has become marked as a distinct sphere of life, something beyond the everyday lives of most people that is 'done' by a particular set of embodied actors. War has come to be thought of as a coherent 'event' with a clear

before and after (Lundborg, 2012), even though seeing war this way entails the erasure of multiple experiences of war as an everyday, lived experience that resurges rather than proceeds. For the soldier viscerally experiencing post-traumatic stress, to the civilians living in 'post-conflict zones', and the grieving families of the war dead, war is a continuum (Sylvester, 2010). One of the key ways in which war becomes a distinct space and time though is through the legitimacy granted to men's emotional experiences and tales of fighting war and the proscription of women's legitimate emotional responses to it. Whether as a 'boy's own adventure' or a horrifying ordeal, war entails that it is men who fight as they have 'always' done and that it is women who support men as they have 'always' done. Such boundaries are breachable in modern armed forces but often not without a cost.

The ongoing prioritisation of men's desires in warfare and the marginalisation of women's are not based on the necessity of gender and sexual uniformity for the military to function. The appropriateness of servicewomen's desires to find joy in combat remains contingent because women's bodies fulfil important symbolic roles for servicemen. The desires of military men for a boys' club can make it easier for military institutions to motivate the predominantly male soldiers they have to coax into combat. Thus, even though their actual contributions to military service could enable the functioning of the military, could contribute to the application and normalisation of state-sanctioned violence, for that pleasure to become socially intelligible as legitimate would entail a reconfiguring of time and space. That reconfiguration could reveal the historical, political, cultural and social contingency of military tradition, gender norms and warfare itself with destabilising effects. As such, soldiering's emotional spaces and temporalities have long been, and are likely to remain, gendered.

¹ Women's representation in the vast majority of state armed forces remains liminal, both statistically and in terms of the roles they perform. For example, among the four largest financial contributors to NATO, women account for just 14% of military strength in the United States, 8.8% in Germany, 9.7% in the UK and 15.2% in France (NATO 2012). Servicewomen in a wide range of state armed forces are also still largely

concentrated in traditionally feminised or 'pink-collar' roles such as nursing and administration (Shields, 1988).

² I have borrowed this phrase from the title of Schubart et al's 2009 edited collection on visual media and the representation of conflict.

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