Deconstructing Women's Leadership: Those Who Laugh Last

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Abstract: There is much research that illustrates the "glass ceiling" effect for women in elite leadership positions. Examining female academic chairs' leadership in a male domain provides insight into leadership practices. The author interviewed three female clinical chairs and integrated the findings into a women's leadership model. Deconstructive thematic analysis of the subsequent text gathered systematic and in-depth information about this case at a U.S. top-tier academic medical center. A deconstructive view suggests that women leaders will be both masculine and feminine, that gender is not an issue although issues were identified by their laughter, that communal behavior may be considered a weakness but became their strength, and that threat may be "in the air" but not noticed. All three female chairs simultaneously accommodated and resisted constructs within the literature. All the barriers described in a model of women's leadership were dismantled by these successful women chairs.

Keywords: Deconstruction, gender, leadership, qualitative, social role theory, academic medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Loden (1996) initially used the term "glass ceiling" as the metaphor about challenges for women progress in masculine domains. Although critics complain that restrictions to women's advancement seemed to be diminished, some scholars still metaphorically label the path as a labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Linstead & Brewis, 2007). This "imaginary" ceiling is based on biased assumptions that women experience as they work to advance in male-dominated fields (Isaac, Kaatz, & Carnes, 2012). In 1991, the U. S. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was created to determine obstacles for women and minorities (Department of Labor, 1995). This paper illustrates the negotiation of successful women through the glass ceiling, via the lens of a women's leadership model (Isaac *et al.*, 2012).

Gendered Leadership within Social Roles

Leadership is a "performance of power" (Isaac *et al.*, 2012, p. 80) that signifies agentic versus communal stereotypes which suggest that women cannot successfully lead (National Academy of Sciences, 2006). Social role theory differentiates individuals into gendered traits (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Mitchell, & Paludi, 2004). Furthermore, sex role inventories, developed by both genders and validated over time, characterize leadership as a masculine characteristic (Broverman, 1972; Holt & Ellis, 1998). The social role perspective of the "think-manager-think-male phenomenon" needs to be deconstructed in reaction to its implicit impact

(Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996).

Although highly debated, the evidence is not clear whether there is a gendered difference in the ability to perform agentic or communal tasks (Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). Social role theory predicts that women in masculine domains will face a 'lack of fit' between the prescriptive feminine traits, and the masculine traits associated with success in male-typed domains. While leadership theory has been criticized for gender blindness (Brewis & Linstead, 2009), a women's leadership model may create new frameworks (Figure **1**). This model provides an outline of barriers—or glass ceilings— within the realm of social psychology that women encounter in leadership positions in male-type professions (Isaac *et al.*, 2012). These constructs were developed within a typology of social role theory. The six specific constructs within the model include: "agentic equals success," "success does not equal competence," agentic/competent women face "reactive opposition," the "parenting penalty," "stereotype threat," and "equality equals greed" (Isaac *et al.*, 2012, p. 81).

While social role theory defines prescriptive and descriptive gender norms (Heilman, 2001), deconstruction is a poststructural strategy that intentionally displaces structural binary narratives of texts (e.g., right over wrong, men over women) (Schwandt, 2015). The more revered the discourse, the more deconstruction attempts to question and destabilize hierarchical power through contextual interaction. For Derrida, "male" and "female" are fixed prisons, trapping men and women within one role (Caputo, 1997). While feminism is a "necessary

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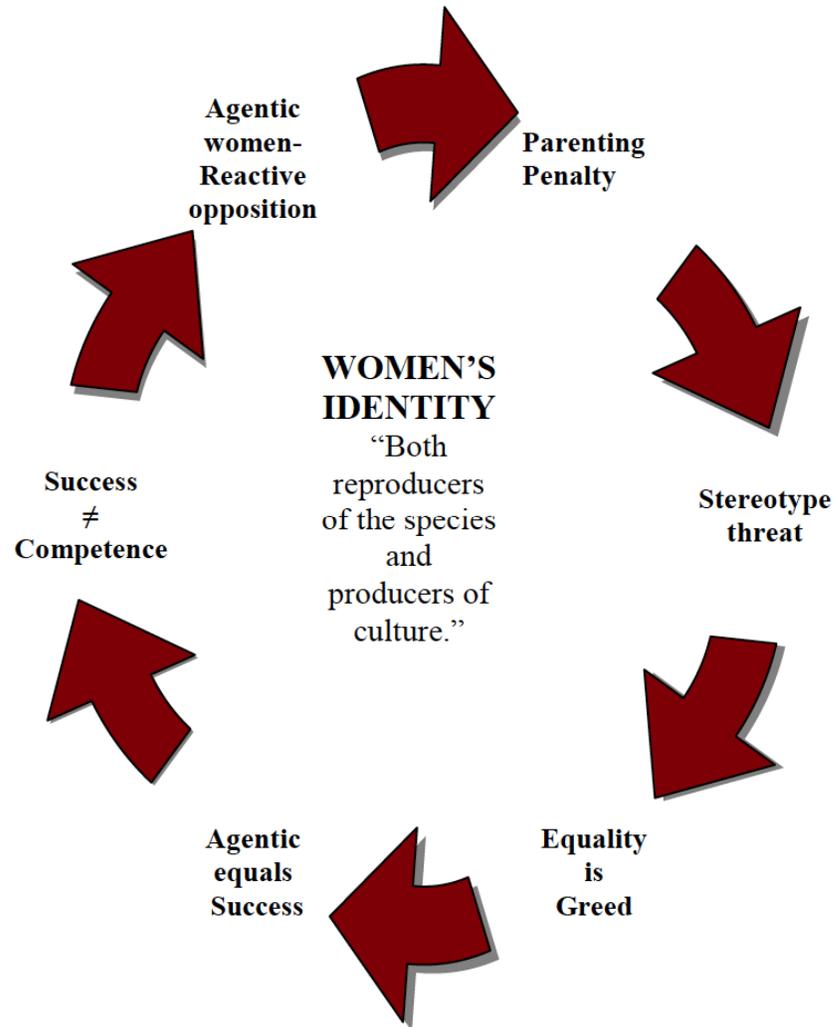

Figure 1: Model of women's leadership.

Note. Adapted from Isaac, C., Kaatz, A., & Carnes, M. (2012). Deconstructing the glass ceiling. *Sociology Mind, 2*(1), 80-86.

moment of "reversal," it must be "displaced" (Caputo, 1997, p. 105).

Kristeva (1995), a poststructuralist, described three generations of European feminism as "less a chronology than a signifying space" (p. 222). The first space, located before 1968, was where women sought equal rights because of a lack of difference between genders. Women wanted their accomplishments to be inserted into "the linear timeline of human history" versus women's cyclical time - cleaning, birthing-where nothing new is created, just recreated (McAfee, 2004, p. 93). After 1968, the second generation revalued all that was feminine, rejecting the male linear timeline and embracing motherhood as the "upholders of the species" and demanding equality (McAfee, 2005, p. 98). However, the second generation challenged the gendered social bond because, "by fighting against evil, we reproduce it" (Kristeva, 1995, p. 214). The

poststructural intention of the third generation was to reconcile women's need to be "both reproducers of the species and producers of culture" (McAfee, 2004, p. 100). Rather than focusing on the gendered hierarchies, the goal is to recognize rivalry. This is consistent with literature that both genders are responsible for implicit bias (Isaac, Lee, & Carnes, 2009) deconstructing the polarities.

Previous research analyzed interviews using grounded theory of 28 (13 male, 15 female) medical faculty within three departments and their female chairs (Isaac & Griffin, 2015; Isaac, Griffin, & Carnes, 2010). Findings found consistency with research confirming that female leaders are most successful when they "artfully" negotiate stereotypic male behaviors with stereotypic feminine behaviors. This analysis deconstructed their narratives through the lens of an empirical leadership model (Isaac *et al.*, 2012).

Deconstruction contextualizes the oppositions and laughter highlights these chairs' path through the deconstructive middle (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

METHODS

Using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), 28 faculty and the three female chairs (tenure of 12 to 48 months) participated from a Research 1 academic medical center in the U.S. (Isaac, *et al.*, 2010; Isaac & Griffin, 2015). All participants gave written informed consent. Chair interviews (ranging from 60 to 74 minutes) included questions about leadership and negotiating power. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed, de-identified and were member checked by participants. Participant observation with reflective memos of three department meetings was performed for triangulation. All three participants have been in their current roles for over ten years.

Data Analysis

Interviews allow researchers to obtain rich narrative for iterative analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). All textual data from the interviews with the chairs and faculty underwent line-by-line coding incorporating an inductive grounded theory analysis for the initial research (Hesse-Biber & Nagy Leavy, 2011; Isaac & Griffin, 2015; Isaac, *et al.*, 2010). Grounded theory analysis is an iterative cycle of data collection and comparison until no new codes occur (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the initial study, the inter-coder agreement for the initial codes ranged between 82 to 100% (Isaac *et al.*, 2010). A qualitative software program was used for data organization and analysis (Richards, 2006). Initial codes from the original studies were incorporated into deductive thematic analysis for determining categorical and thematic patterns within the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane,

2006), specifically within the model of six barriers within women leadership (Isaac *et al.*, 2012).

For the results, representative text from the initial codes was placed into the six categories of the leadership model (Table **1**). Disrupting binary oppositions (i.e. male versus female) and revealing multiple identities unfolds within deconstructive analysis (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The women chairs' strategies disrupted the barriers described by the empirical research discourse illustrated by the leadership model (Isaac *et al.*, 2012). Resistance to discourse is a hallmark of deconstruction and skews the patriarchal leadership discourse (Isaac, Behar-Horenstein, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2009).Their strategies deconstructed the hierarchy of opposition thus creating a path through the middle a path through the middle (Caputo, 1997).

RESULTS

Open coding from the original studies identified 49 initial codes (Isaac, *et al.*, 2010; Isaac & Griffin, 2015) which were integrated into the six specific constructs within the women's leadership model including 1) "agentic equals success," 2) "success does not equal competence," 3) "agentic/competent women face reactive opposition," 4) "the parenting penalty," 5) "stereotype threat," and 6) "equality equals greed" (Isaac *et al.*, 2012, p. 81). The center of Figure **1** illustrates the deconstructive elements of women's need to be "reproducers of the species and producers of culture" (McAfee, 2004, p. 100).

1. Agentic Equals Success

This barrier illustrates the status that male-gendered agentic traits have over female-gendered communal characteristics (Rudman & Glick, 1999). This mainly pertains to women who have stereotypical male or

Table 1:   Leadership Model Categories with Example Initial Codes

Leadership Model Categories from Social Psychology Research	Example Initial Codes
Agentic Equals Success	Characteristics Chair-Decisive, Tough, No Nonsense, Transparent
Success Does Not Equal Competence	Consensus Building, Selflessness, Support, Shepherd Vision into Reality
Agentic/Competent Women Face Reactive Opposition	Establishing Role-Example, Interaction, Strategies, Communal Actions
The Parenting Penalty	Difference, Gender Difficulties, Gender NOT (an Issue)
Stereotype Threat	Fairness, Goals, Leadership Style, Mentoring, Motivation, Paradox, Self-reflection, Understanding, Value or Worth
Equality Equals Greed	Ideal Leadership, Power, Power Through Consensus, Selflessness

androgynous leadership attributes (McConnell & Fazio, 1996; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Each participant in this study displayed these characteristics. Dr. Valient described her leadership style:

> I hope that I'm flexible, generative, not afraid of making decisions, and standing by my choices. I feel strongly that the department or the unit, whatever, benefits from a diversity of opinions. However, somebody has to accept responsibility… the buck stops here.

Valient's description demonstrated her decisiveness, a masculine or agentic trait. Dr. Woodruff described herself as the "natural" leader as opposed to two male leaders as she was advancing in her career as chair:

> I worked in two divisions, (…) each of those divisions had a leader without leadership capability. Neither of them were very good leaders. And I think I became the natural leader, the de facto leader in both divisions, even though I wasn't the leader and then I became the leader. You know what I'm saying.

In the early eighties, Dr. Woodruff's agentic qualities were apparent despite an era of male-dominance in medicine. To the question of how she "negotiated and produced power," Dr. Rose reflected:

> I think, going back to the real problem- this issue of power, I've had to come to the altar of learning that, 'yeah I actually do represent power to people' and if I want to come across as consensus building and not intimidating- that's not a passive process (pause).

She was aware that her agentic attributes were so abrupt that she had to actively and intentionally soften them to avoid violating social norms. During these interviews, all these agentic women stated that "gender was not an issue," and rose into leadership because of their competence in these masculine-typed positions (Carli, 2001; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004).

2. Success ≠ Competence

The second barrier indicates when gender stereotyping is activated, attributional rationalization

defines gendered success as "he's skilled, she's lucky," (Swim & Sanna,1996) with the assumption of men's competence over women (Heilman & Haynes, 2005; Ridgeway, 2001). These assumptions effects contextual standards as individual group members are assumed to have more of some attributes than others (i.e., men more competent as leaders) (Biernat, 2003; Biernat & Fuegen, 2001).

These agentic women fought hard for their departments, yet knew when they did not get the credit from their male colleagues, "But now you would think it was their idea (Laughter)." Research illustrates that women are granted less credit when working in a mixed-sex dyad for masculine tasks (Heilman & Haynes, 2005). Dr. Rose used and produced power "wisely:"

> As the department chair, I have power because the Dean invests energy. (…) If I don't support my faculty, I'll lose their support and therefore their ability. (…) So I would hope that power is less invested in an individual than it is channeled through that individual on behalf of the Department. I'm not powerful as an individual. I'm powerful because I represent an organization. (…) So if I'm able to make a political connection that advantages the Dean, then I have more power. So that's how you produce it. (…) So, you exercise it on behalf your Dean, your faculty, your group.

She was careful to wield her power through the dean. When she first began her chair position, she described "an all-day retreat, and one of [my] two mentors, the man, flew in to spend the day with the department during that retreat, and that was incredibly helpful." Whether she realized it or not, she used male influence to produce power, which in turn did not violate social norms. Although she was skilled in her agentic role, she utilized others (senior males) to validate her competence as a leader. This is due to attributional rationalization as men are assumed to be more competent (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001). She delegated power through a steering committee:

> It was more than just a selling job, it was the culmination of months of work, of creating core values, mission, vision, goals, and the actual work; and at the end of it, even the most pessimistic people in the department realized, 'oh, okay.'

Not violating social roles was part of her success.

3. Agentic → Reactive Opposition

The third barrier illustrates that despite the fact that likeability is essential for assessment and compensation, agentic women face reactive opposition (Heilman *et al*., 2004). While competent women are promoted, they violate social roles and are rated as less likable, even hostile, in male-dominated positions (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Bransititer, 2005). Reactive anger multiplies a women leaders' problems (whether male or female) of men's superior competence (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008).

Dr. Woodruff learned to be "less abrasive" from her previous job. Dr. Valient highlighted the nuanced gender differences by saying, "if a man says it, it's 'assertive' and if a woman says it's 'bitchy' (Laughter)" or "strident." Dr. Rose learned to be "extraordinarily sensitive" to subordinates because she "represents power." In one instance, she was accused of coercing trainees' answers, so she immediately responded with both an e-mail and personally to them as a group saying, "Gee, I realize I could've done a better job with that." Agentic women encounter reactive opposition from subordinates (Ridgeway, 2001) and may increase likeability and influence by providing evidence of communality (i.e., nurturing homemakers or mothers) (Carli, 2001; Correll, Benard, & In, 2007; Drogosz & Levy, 1996; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Managing reactive opposition to social role violation was the norm for these women.

4. Parenthood Penalty

"Parenthood penalty" illustrates barriers "spill over into the family, or the reverse, the family spills over into the job" (Ceci, Williams, & Barnett, 2009, p. 231). Parenting may create self-selection away from career advancement (van Anders, 2004). Also, the rigors of academia may increase divorce and delay childbearing for women academic (Mason & Goulden, 2004). These decisions violate prescriptive norms, straining the social bond between genders (Kristeva, 1995). These gender-stereotypic prescriptive violations can double penalize women leaders if they show communality by being a mother (Correll *et al*., 2007).

Dr. Woodruff who went to medical school years earlier than the other chairs reiterated that "[gender] was not an issue" in conjunction with an ended love relationship that "really freed" her to consider medical school. Later she did become a mother and was "a little bit more involved with my children than my husband.

(…) But in any event, I don't think it affected me in terms of career development at all." This contrasts the literature, and Dr. Woodruff even specifically stated that she saw "this struggle for both young faculty genders." Dr. Valient was less ambivalent about the pervasive sex-role differences as "I still go home and do laundry" as opposed to her male counterparts. In summary, while their success might "spill over into the family," they did not describe direct consequences to their careers.

5. Stereotypic Threat

The fifth barrier illustrates that stigmatized individuals, sensing the devaluation of their social identity in certain roles, can potentially undermine their success (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Stereotypic threat for women is accentuated in male-dominated positions (Davies, Spencer, Gallagher, & Kaufman, 2005; Spencer, Steele, Quinn, Hunter, & Forden, 2002). However, research has shown that creating an "identity-safe" environment can eliminate stereotype threat's effects (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Stereotype threat can be challenged with tools that mitigate these cognitive distortions (Dasgupta, 2011).

Dr. Woodruff thought that being a medical technologist was an "attainable" aspiration when she was a teenager; however, in college she met a former female classmate who was going to medical school, "and I said 'wow!' That's really a good idea,' and that's how I decided to do medicine." Her friend provided an "identity-safe" situation that allowed different choices. While these women primarily had male mentors, threatening situational cues did not constrain their leadership. Dr. Rose was especially self-effacing, "God they're smart here. (laughter) I'm the dumbest person here I'm sorry to say. No, but you know what, they're smart, hard-working and dogged. Meaning there's no slouchers." Self-effacing behavior is a strategy that may increase likeability for women in certain situations (Rudman, 1998). However, when faced with a publicly challenging faculty member, Dr. Rose reflected,

> But he's also very smart. I mean, so that you can object to the way he says things, and some of what he says, because some of it is somewhat self-serving, (laughter) but he also brings some good ideas. (…) I think I've dealt with him pretty well. Some people would say I've not been hard enough publicly, some would say I've just held him at bay and not really dealt with him enough, and we'll see.

She actively reframed the threat as someone who "brings some good ideas," and deferred directly challenging him. While she is agentic, she is also self-effacing and does not combat threat with defensive behavior. These women do not meet with each other, do not attend women's groups and had male mentors. Despite stereotype threat, they somehow engendered the resources for success deconstructing leadership through displacement and deferral (Caputo, 1997).

6. Equality Equals Greed

The sixth barrier illustrates the power of gender norms (Valian, 1998). Research indicates that men assess their performance higher, and are more likely to claim success as due to skill rather than luck (Correll, 2004; Deaux, 1995). For women, challenge is more likely to create self-doubt in masculine domains (Fiorentine & Cole, 1992). These constructs may impact career aspirations for women because of competence beliefs (Correll, 2004).

Furthermore, self-promoting women suffer social consequences (Blackmore & Judyth, 2007; Rudman, 1998). Studies also show that women allocate themselves less compensation for the same work than men (Desmarais & Curtis, 1997; Major, Shaver, & Hendrick, 1987). Women may not be responsible for discrimination; however, they need awareness of self-abnegating behavior and finding constructive solutions.

These female chairs found resilience in their roles. Dr. Valient stated, "(Laughter) I can reflect and say I'm much more comfortable, using the word 'I,' or my idea, and then accepting criticism or accolades for that." She argued with her dean for pay equity as these three chairs are in departments:

> That is less well-paid and [have] generally less power. (…). I get paid less than the chair of [surgery] that has nine faculty. Because he's a [surgeon], which gets paid clinically more.(…) Now [the dean] comes back to that with, Well, I can't pay you so much more because you would be so far out of the range for your people. And there is some truth to that. I would challenge however that organizationally medicine is not where it should be.

Dr. Valient supervised well over 500 faculty across the state.

Dr. Rose, the agentic but self-effacing chair, uses communal behavior to her advantage. Her mandatory

retreats with faculty propelled them into deciding their mission:

> And then having it be so that they don't recognize that you're the leader. (pause) I think that's actually critical. That thing of, having so much ownership at the right level that this isn't Dr. [chair] driving this at all. And then when the end product is there, the department's working and things are going, it's like almost like I was never there. I mean it's not being self-effacing or modest or anything.

These women avoided social penalties generated by self-promotion (Rudman *et al*., 1998; Rudman, 1998; Carli, 1999) by being collaborative and "self-effacing," generating a perception of humility with "less ego" (Sinclair, 2007). While doubt and self-abnegating behavior were present in the interviews, it was also used in advantageous ways.

DISCUSSION

The results illustrate how these women all challenged the evidence-based barriers in the model. While "agentic equals success" but also creates "reactive opposition," active communal behavior through consensus building was leadership. However, the success of collaboration "does not equal competence" as it can also be seen as weakness, compromising women's power or influence (Brunner, 2005). These women laughed even when not getting the credit from male colleagues, and even pursued "equality equals greed" by self-effacement and declining the spotlight "almost like I was never there." All three were aware of gender, but did not see it as an issue, mitigating the family or "parenting penalty."

These women did not have "identity-safe" environments from their stories and the author's participant observation, but apparently, they did not notice a gendered "threat in the air" (Steele, 1997). They did not meet with each other, avoided women's groups and had male mentors. The literature is full of leadership strategies for these barriers (Carnes *et al*., 2015; Isaac, Byars-Winston, McSorley, Schultz, Kaatz, & Carnes, 2013; Isaac, Kaatz, Lee, & Carnes, 2012; Isaac *et al*., 2009). Kanter (1977) describes "role traps" for women with metaphors such as the "pet," the "mother," the "battle-ax" and "the seductress". While these may still be metaphors for women in leadership, there are new metaphors such as the "Labyrinth"

(Eagly & Carli, 2007). These women dismantled the model in Figure **1**. They overcame the barriers in their own unique ways with laughter resounding throughout the interviews, especially while discussing sensitive and gendered issues. Since laughter was a frequent response during these interviews, perhaps laughter is a strategy of resilience (Carnes, 1996).

There is too vast a body of research about barriers for women to deny that reality. However, "deconstruction is the relentless pursuit of the impossible, which means, of things whose possibility is sustained by their impossibility, of things which, instead of being wiped out by their impossibility, are actually nourished and fed by it" (Caputo, 1997, p. 44). These three women sustain those of us who write about leadership rather than do it. Deconstruction is "a respectful, responsible affirmation of the other" (Caputo, 1997, p. 44), and there are no easy metaphors to describe these women who are still in their positions after ten years.

Peters and Beistra (2009) suggest deconstruction is the affirmation of what is unforeseeable. A deconstructive view suggests that women leaders will be both masculine and feminine, that gender is not an issue although it was identified through laughter, that communal behavior is a weakness but also strength, and that threat may be in the air but not noticed or at least not reacted to in anger but mitigated by laughter. Anyon (1983) argued that women must engage simultaneously in accommodation and resistance. Some women do not know how to create a professional discourse as competent professionals and need a societal, familial conversation (Young & Skrla, 2003). However, these women were both producers and reproducers for readers to understand and emulate.

In contrast with other writings, women may not expect fragmentation in their internal lives (Isaac, 2007); women can be both reproducers and producers (Kristeva, 2001) and avoiding oppositional binaries is a deconstructive view of women's leadership (Isaac *et al.*, 2009). Women's demands "cannot be met by identifying with the system or by asking the system to identify with them" (McAfee, 2004, p. 93), but leadership is an affirmation of what is to become that exceeds policies, rules, or expectations (Caputo, 1997). These women represent "symbolic vanguards" who "seem to come out of nowhere" (Eagly, 2018, p. 184). Examining these individuals through a deconstructive lens may suggest that those that laugh may be the ones that last.

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