



# Feminist cases of nonfeminist subjects: case studies of women principals

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This article examines the dilemmas involved in doing feminist research with subjects who are not, themselves, feminists. The author begins exploring these dilemmas by investigating the work and experience of women principals and then focusing on their understanding of issues of gender. The author further explores these dilemmas by critically examining her role as a researcher, her interactions with the women principals, and the tensions involved in providing/imposing an analytic frame to the data as she tried to understand and represent the experiences of her participants.

The first time I interviewed Ellen Fried, one of the principals in this study, I realized that there would be inherent tensions in this work. When I asked about the possible influence of gender in her life, she explained how little gender had impacted her experience – and then went on to tell stories that, to me, illustrated the way in which gender had influenced who she was and how she was able to function as a principal. For example, when I asked if she was a feminist, she said:

I don't know. I've never really thought about it too much. When I was growing up my father used to do the vacuuming, you know. He used to say, "I do it better, so I'll do it." ... [In my family] you were going to get educated no matter what gender you were. You were going to do different chores – although, I have to say athletically, I don't think I was encouraged that much, the way I would have [been] if I were a boy. Not so intentionally, a little more subtle. I mean, I did go to play tennis when my dad went to play tennis; he would take all of us along. Maybe the reason my brother plays so well is that he had skill, you know. But I get the feeling he was encouraged. My dad would play with him. (Interview, 8/93)

When I asked about the role of gender in her career, Ellen expressed doubts about its influence on her actions and interactions at the school, but then pointed out that when she first came to Fieldcrest Elementary School as principal a parent said to her, "Well, I wonder what it will be like to have two women in the office," meaning her and the secretary (Field notes, 5/6/93). I heard Ellen's stories reflecting experiences that were clearly affected – not always positively – by gender. She described her experiences as relatively gender neutral. Although I did not immediately provide her with my interpretation of the stories she had told me during our first conversation, I did begin to understand more clearly that taking a feminist stance in this study was going to mean negotiating our relationship as we worked with our different ways of understanding and explaining events and interactions.

The lens I brought to this study, and the findings that emerged from it, suggest that

gender is a powerful dynamic in the experiences of the three women principals with whom I worked. Each of the women, however, tended to examine her own life and job from an individual perspective that rarely included gender as a theoretical or political lens. A number of dilemmas emerged for me as a result of this conflicting set of perspectives. First, a tension existed between my framework of analysis and the stories that these principals each told me, or the stories they believed they were telling me. Where I heard a gendered construction of experience that could fit into a general theoretical framework, they each heard their own individual story, unique to them. Should I present the stories these principals told about themselves or describe the narrative that I heard?

A related tension arose as I realized that, even when the three principals did see and describe issues of gender in their lives and work, they preferred to not credit gender with much influence and to not recognize it as a system for explaining their own and others' experience. Acknowledging the role of gender in one's life seemed to suggest an inability to function as a legitimate leader in the given structure of schools. Such an acknowledgment felt, to these women, like an excuse, an admission that they might not be able to perform their jobs as well as their male peers. In addition, recognizing that gender influenced their experiences sometimes appeared to imply an inability to control their own lives and work. As I listened to their stories I heard a tension between the principals' descriptions of their experiences in the world as women and their ability and willingness to explore the implications of those experiences. This tension influenced my relationships with the principals and my decisions about how to tell their stories and mine.

Finally, I experienced a tension between the goals of feminist research and the actual outcomes of the project. Feminist researchers often aim to carry out research that contributes to social change, in particular the improvement of women's experience and position in society (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1991; Fine, 1994; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Kelly, Burton & Regan, 1994; Lather, 1991; Maynard, 1994; Weiler, 1988). Some feminist researchers have aimed to raise the consciousness of those with whom they work, assuming that this leads to empowerment grounded in the individual's new understanding of and ways of acting in her social world (Lather, 1991; Maynard, 1994; Wolf, 1996). As I developed strong personal and professional relationships with the three women in this study, I began to question the ethics of imposing my framework of meaning on their experience, of raising the consciousness of those who have a different perspective, a perspective that allows them to function effectively in an individualistic, male-dominated system. I ended this study feeling that outcomes such as increased feminist consciousness and individual empowerment were elusive and had to be documented as carefully as the different stories themselves.

In this article I discuss a set of questions about being a feminist researcher working with principals who, themselves, did not necessarily use gender as a lens to frame their own experience. How did these women understand the role of gender in their lives and work? To what extent did my focus, my questions, and my presence change their ways of seeing and acting in their institutions? How did my relationship with each principal affect the research process, my construction of their experiences, and their perceptions of themselves and the structures within which they operated? To what extent did my interpretation of their work and life situations reflect the framework I brought rather than the meanings they constructed? This paper focuses on these tensions in the research process, reflecting on the possibility of being a "critical friend" within a feminist framework and examining how a consciousness of the tensions in that role affects the

research process, the effects of the process on the principals involved, and the research findings.

### **The study**

My overall goal in this study was to use qualitative methods of research to generate case studies of three women principals that would help us better understand the role of gender in school leadership. The life history/case study approaches used provide an opportunity to illustrate, challenge, and expand our views of the styles and experiences of school administrators, placing the behaviors of the individuals within both the particular school and community contexts and the larger social and cultural contexts within which they work. Both my own personal style and my research goals required that I develop relationships with each of the three principals that were founded on trust, mutual respect, and a care for one another's well-being, both personal and professional. We did, indeed, develop such relationships, which have continued beyond the life of the research study. But, as I discuss below, these same relationships create tensions both in the process of carrying out the research and in decisions about what to report and how to report it. (See Burawoy, 1991; Goodson, 1992; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Stake, 1994 for a discussion of these dilemmas in qualitative and case study research and Acker et al., 1991; Chase, 1996; Fine, 1994; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Josselson, 1996; Kelly et al., 1994; Lather, 1991; Maynard, 1994; Oleson, 1994; Stacey, 1988 for a consideration of these issues in feminist qualitative research.)

#### *The three principals*

The three administrators chosen to participate in this study represent some of the issues I wanted to consider as I examined women principals, including interactions between the individual and the community, institutional, and social structures within which she works. All three women are elementary school principals who had been in their current positions for at least five years at the time of the study.

Jeanne Greer is an African-American woman who, after having taught for over 20 years, became principal of a predominantly White, middle-/upper middle-class suburban public school, the same school in which she had taught for 18 years. She had been principal for five years at the time of the study and had just turned 50. I knew Jeanne prior to the study through work I had done in her school and our work together in a summer program for middle school students several years earlier. I considered her both a friend – we talked about our children and about schools over lunch or dinner – and a colleague – I frequently used her school for my own students' field placements. When I contacted Jeanne about being a part of the study, she asked for a day to think about it and then, the following day, said yes. We slipped easily into a new working relationship that was built on prior trust and experience with one another. Our personal and professional relationship has remained strong since the time of the study.

Ellen Fried is a 45-year-old White, middle-class, Jewish woman who had been principal of Fieldcrest School for eight years at the time of the study. Fieldcrest serves a predominantly White, lower working-class community on the outskirts of a large city. My prior contact with the school was relatively limited; I had placed a group of students

at Fieldcrest several years earlier to do a research project for a course, and a former student of mine had also taught there. I had heard that Ellen was a dynamic, effective principal, but I had never met her before calling to ask if she would be interested in participating in the study. At our first meeting she agreed to be a part of the study. Several months later she admitted that she panicked after making this decision, wondering what she had gotten herself into. She was somewhat formal and reserved during our initial interview and the first several weeks of the study, differing from the fairly direct, outgoing person I observed in action in the school. Over the course of the year, however, she gradually opened up to me about personal and professional matters, even as I shared my own work and life with her in our many informal conversations. Ellen and I have remained in contact since the study, meeting for lunch or dinner on occasion and drawing on each other's professional skills when appropriate. I have, for example, written job references for her; she has helped me place student teachers and has spoken in one of my classes.

Ann Becker, a 67-year-old White woman from a working-class, rural community in the Midwest, had been head of Pepperdine's lower school for five years at the time of the study. Pepperdine, an elite private preparatory school, serves a predominantly White, wealthy clientele. My only prior contact with the school was, again, placement of a group of students to do a course-based research project. When I contacted Ann about participating in the study, she was pleased to be considered. She later told me that she agreed to participate because: "She liked my research and she was just used to helping out, like with graduate students who needed a place to work; she was flattered to be asked; and it could only be good for the school to get people to reflect on what they were doing" (Field notes, 9/8/93). Ann immediately explained that I could come to any meetings or ask any questions; once she had committed to the process and to me she committed entirely. She was not so open with her colleagues; she both implicitly and explicitly told me that she shared things with me that she would not tell anyone else (Field notes, 4/6/94). Ann and I have remained in touch since I left the school, although she no longer lives and works in the area.

The three principals, therefore, differ in age, race, and class. They serve different communities and work within quite different institutions. Each case stands alone as the story of how that particular person negotiates her life and work in that particular school. In each setting, my relationship with the principal differed, the result of personalities, prior experiences, and context. And yet, some themes, described briefly later in this paper, resonate across the individual stories.

### *Data collection and analysis*

To collect data for these case studies, I spent one day a week in each of three schools as a participant observer "shadowing" the school principal. Data were collected for Jeanne's case during the 1991–92 school year and for the other two cases in 1993–94. I took notes in the field (and was teased about my yellow pad in all three schools) and wrote extensive field notes each night following the observations. I also attended and documented Home and School organization meetings, Back to School nights, district administrative council meetings, faculty meetings and some committee meetings. In addition, I conducted four or five two- to three-hour semi-structured interviews with each principal and interviews with 15–20 teachers and 8–10 parents in each school. Most but not all of the interviews occurred in the school and were taped and

transcribed; for those who preferred not to be taped I took notes and wrote them up within the same day.

In order to construct a detailed description of each principal's life history and school experience and effectiveness, I analyzed the data both during and after data collection using processes described by Becker (1951), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Schatzman and Strauss (1973). During the course of data collection, I kept reflective notes about themes and patterns that emerged in the data and my own thoughts and feelings about the research process. These continuous reflections served as initial data analysis, often providing questions and ideas that led to future data collection via observations and interviews. Following the year of data collection and preliminary analysis, I developed codes based on key issues and themes observed in the data, and coded all field notes and interviews. A computer program, HyperResearch, helped me to organize the coded data in a way that contributed to the clarification and modification of patterns I had seen. In addition to themes in the data, I also identified one or two key "stories" (Acker, 1990) that developed during the course of the year for each principal. These stories help to illustrate the more general trends within each principal's life and work and across the three principals' experiences.

Finally, I showed the materials in each case to the principal involved. While I debated whether or not to do this, as have other researchers before me (Acker et al., 1991; Chase, 1996; Datnow & Karen, 1994; Lieblich, 1996), I felt that each participant deserved to hear and respond to my presentation of the meanings they constructed in their social world. This was an extremely difficult part of the process; when I met with each of them to discuss their reactions, all three principals described to me how hard it was to read about themselves, and each tended to focus on the comments that others made about them that sounded and felt negative. I continue to work on how to integrate their responses into the narrative while maintaining my own interpretive framework.

### **Gender and the principalship**

My findings suggest that gender did indeed influence the three principals' personal and professional lives. While I discuss these patterns in much more detail elsewhere (see Smulyan, 2000), I will summarize some of them here, to illustrate the ways in which gender did seem to impact their lives and work. In addition, however, I need to make clear that while gender influenced the experiences of these principals, it did so as a part of a process of principaling that was also affected by the principal's race, class, personal and professional background, and the context within which she worked. Gender served as one of several dynamics, albeit a powerful one, which played a part in the process of leadership carried out by these three women. In particular, it seemed to affect four aspects of their work: their entry into the principalship, their relationships with the community they served, their role within the larger institution within which they worked, and the ways in which they balanced continuity and change in their school.

#### *Entry into the principalship*

The literature on gender and administration suggests that gender influences access and entry into positions of school leadership as a result of discrimination, lack of access to information and mentoring, internalization of status, and role and skill expectations

(see, e.g., Bell & Chase 1993; Biklen, 1980; Clement, 1980; Edson, 1988; Fauth, 1984; Marshall, 1984; Miklos, 1988; Wheatley, 1981). All three of the women in this project described being “pushed” into the principalship by others (Ozga, 1993; Pavan, 1991; Yeakey, Johnston, & Adkison, 1986). All three had taught for a number of years, and two of the three did required graduate work in administration after taking their first administrative position, which parallels the paths of other women who enter administration (Bell & Chase, 1993; Coursen, Mazzarella, Jeffress, & Haddreman, 1989; Wheatley, 1981). All three hesitated, wondering if they had what it took to be an administrator in a system in which leadership tended to be defined in male terms of authority and power.

Jeanne, for example, gave little thought to entering administration during her 20 years of teaching. She had returned to graduate school several years before in order to get a salary increase and chose graduate work in administration through a process of elimination; she did not want to be a counselor and did not know she could do library work and still get the salary increase. She purposely took the minimum number of graduate credits required, however, “‘Cause it wasn’t my intention to be a principal” (Interview 11/91). Once hired, she had to return to school to complete the hours necessary for principal certification. In retrospect, Jeanne suggested that she never exactly chose to apply for the principalship but was propelled into it by others. For example, one administrator commented:

I don’t really know how many candidates there may have been, but Jeanne was definitely the person I was interested in seeing in that role, with her elementary experience. And I thought the signals that it sent were all good: taking a master teacher who happens to be a Black woman and making her principal. Obviously I was looking for someone who was talented and had spark and could do the kinds of program things that I thought would be valuable for the district. (Administrator interview, 4/92)

Once the wheels started to move, Jeanne found it difficult to stop them, both physically and emotionally:

I really didn’t think they were going to choose me. I did it to get a lot of people off my back. And at one point, you know, it occurred to me when the numbers started getting fewer that, you know, I might get chosen. And I really was scared. I mean, I was so frightened. I became disoriented, I cried at night. ... The people that I had been in love with, who supported me, said I could do it. But what the hell do they know? ... So that’s how it was with [becoming] the principal. I couldn’t turn back after I got that close. ... What credibility was I going to have by turning back? So I had to go through with it. It was like labor. You can’t turn back once you’re pregnant. You can’t turn back once it hurts. You just have to go through it. And once you get through it, it’s like bad pains, stomach, digestional problems, once you get through it you think, “Whew! Shit, I can do that!” (Interview 11/91)

Jeanne saw the principalship as “a chance to give back to a community that had given me my womanhood ... a chance to give back to a lot of people who were going to be really pleased.” She did not have a clear vision of what she wanted to do or be as a principal or the experience or skills that would make the transition to this position an easy one. She had not thought about what aspects of her teaching or prior work in the

district would transfer to the principalship, what challenges she would face, what style of leadership she might try or where she might turn for support. Unlike many men, and some women, who plan their career paths into administration and use networks and mentors to help them acquire the skills and attitudes that will help them succeed, Jeanne became a principal because others told her she could do it and do it well; she therefore entered with feelings of support but few plans or ideas of how to proceed. Her path to the principalship reflects gendered patterns: an extended teaching career, a lack of administrative preparation, and a push into the principalship by a male mentor. But Jeanne's experience is also influenced by race and context, as the examples above suggest.

### *Relationship to the community*

Gender also influenced the expectations others had of these principals and the relationships they developed with the parents and teachers in their school communities. Both historically and in the present, descriptions of school leadership emphasize hierarchical control and efficiency and focus on issues such as organizational size and structure, teacher productivity, and budget and management rather than teaching-oriented issues such as pedagogy and the goals of schooling (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Yeakey et al., 1986). While some recent studies begin to challenge these definitions and provide descriptions of new kinds of leadership (Astin & Leland, 1991; Hurty, 1995; Irwin, 1995), much of a community's expectations are formed by the norms experienced during the past two hundred years of schooling in this country. Women in the principalship present a challenge to the norm, since the characteristics traditionally associated with women conflict with those associated with leadership. All three of these principals developed relationships with teachers and parents that both supported and challenged these traditionally gendered norms of women and leaders. For example, some teachers suggested that Ellen drew on her femininity in her work with the male-dominated central administration. One teacher said that Ellen "beguiled" other administrators, and another talked about her acting like a "goofy schoolgirl." Others said that she used her gender in this predominantly lower class community to surprise parents with her strength, to establish relationships with mothers, or to say things that a man could not get away with, such as telling parents to wash their child's clothes.

I think she's wonderful with parents. I think that she can get away with saying what we would like to say oftentimes to parents, in her communication with parents. And they perceive it not as a threat for the most part. I mean, I know there's been isolated incidents, but I don't think for the most part that it's perceived as that. She is the authority, and she's very fair to a lot of the parents. A lot of them are her girlfriends – she has so much contact with them. (Teacher interview, 12/93)

Teachers and parents commented that, because Ellen is a woman, they found her more sensitive to their needs, more responsive, and more able to work with children. Parents often assumed that she could relate to their children well because she is a woman and a mother, without realizing that Ellen had no children of her own.

Gendered expectations also undermined the effectiveness of these principals. Because some teachers and parents expect that leaders will be men, or will, at least, exhibit traditional authoritative styles of management, they may question women leaders'

actions and behaviors. Parents and teachers in Jeanne's school, for example, sometimes explained that Jeanne was not a "true leader" or a "real administrator" when they described her warmth, her focus on children, and her disinclination to make unilateral, authoritative decisions. Conversely, Ann's directness and personal distance led some teachers and parents to describe her as cold and unfeminine. Expectations such as these imposed gendered characteristics and behaviors on these administrators and influenced the interactions they had with teachers and parents.

### *Role within the institution*

Those studying issues of gender in schools, particularly gender in teaching and administration, frequently refer to the school as a culture dominated by masculine language, values, patterns of interacting, definitions of knowledge, and standards of appropriate behavior (Ballou, 1989; Marshall, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1989; Weiler, 1988). Women may be unaware of these constraints, or they may choose to adapt to or challenge the requirements of an institution that do not necessarily match their own normative ways of working with others (Marshall, 1985; Marshall & Mitchell, 1989; Ortiz, 1982).

Ann, for example, spent the year of the study struggling with the head of the school, a male administrator 30 years younger than herself, about if and when she should retire. While many of their conflicts were based on substantive issues such as curriculum, teacher development, and management approaches, the way in which they dealt with these issues was both dictated by the head of the school and, in many cases, influenced by gender. One teacher described, for example, how the head of the school often kissed women in public when he met them (including Ann). The school head was also very open in saying – both to Ann and to others – that he "adored" her. This made Ann uncomfortable, especially in conjunction with the power dynamic between the two of them. A teacher pointed out:

But on the other hand, I think he's got to realize he's not [supposed to do that], and it's sort of condescending to kiss a woman in public. It's like, he's not going to do it to the males, you know. And I think there's a lot of that that Ann feels that he isn't quite aware of what is and isn't professional. "And here I am, a woman, trying to tell him, this isn't professional." It's very bizarre. (Teacher interview, 5/94)

Ann's attention to propriety, to doing what the boss (especially the male boss) asked her to do and doing it well, may have stemmed in part from her sense of needing to play by the rules of the existing system in order to succeed as a woman in a man's profession. She was used to having male superintendents and school heads, used to responding to their authority, and for the most part, accepting of it. Perhaps this led to some of her conflict with the head of the school; she wanted to respond, to do what he asked of her, to gain his approval, but she found it increasingly impossible to do so since his demands conflicted with her style, her knowledge base, and her ability to communicate openly with him. She said at one point, "I have never worked for someone who I really felt didn't like me" (Field notes, 3/94) and later commented on feeling incompetent for the first time in her career. Even as she described women needing to be independent and to give up their more female tactics, she had difficulty escaping from the need to please her male superior in order to feel both liked and competent. Ellen and Jeanne also faced

constant tension between adapting to and resisting a social system predicated on male-oriented norms and power structures.

*Balancing continuity and change*

The bureaucracies of schools, like all bureaucracies, resist change. Women administrators may be less likely than their male counterparts to initiate change, given that others may already see their very presence as a challenge to the norm. Expectations about acceptable behavior for women principals may also deter actions that appear authoritative or that challenge the status quo. In order to be accepted in the system, be effective in their daily work, and maintain relationships that aid them in the process, women may, consciously or unconsciously, choose to adapt rather than resist (Marshall & Mitchell, 1989). On the other hand, their positioning as an “outsider within,” someone whose presence itself seems like an aberration, may allow them to question, challenge, and at times create changes not attempted by others (Collins, 1991).

Two of the three principals studied in this project do create change in their schools. Although it is not change related to issues of gender, it does stem from their strong beliefs about equity and the centrality of the lives of children in their work. Jeanne, for example, challenged the accepted approach for working with a particular African-American child in her school who needed a special academic program. At the same time, she worked to develop a school ethos that appreciated and encouraged diversity in its students, its curriculum and its community. Ellen simultaneously carried out a mandated district-wide implementation of a new math program (fairly universally disliked by teachers) and did the work needed to dismiss an incompetent veteran teacher in her school. Even as they implemented change, however, these principals were constrained by the structures and expectations of a system and the people in it, sometimes recognizing the ways in which they had to balance their own goals and visions and the demands of the system. Jeanne described the process of balancing her own views and the requirements of the structure within which she worked:

I gave very little thought as to what it meant to be a principal. I had an idea about schools and how they should work, but that idea can't be carried out in the structure I work for, so I've had to back off of my ideas and that sometimes makes me very unhappy. On the other hand, when I'm faced with wanting to escape it or to say, "I'm not compromising my stuff," I look at the positive that's happened or the positive input that I've been able to get. And pride. And I won't let go, so then I figure, "All right. I'll be this kind of principal and then I'll just run around and do the other stuff." (Interview, 10/91)

Ellen wondered if the change processes she used reflected those that were appreciated and accepted by the central office – or even by herself. She described feeling “pushy,” “emotional,” and “guilty” when she insisted on being heard by the administration in situations like those surrounding the teacher’s dismissal (Field notes, 6/8/94). Following another run-in with a central administrator she explained that she felt “she was acting more like a mom” (Field notes, 6/8/94).

These principals respond, unconsciously for the most part, to their experiences in dealing with a system that functions using norms and values that may differ from those that feel most comfortable to them. And when that process feels uncomfortable, they tend to blame themselves for the discomfort instead of examining the larger structures

of power, some of which are gender determined, which influence that experience. This discomfort does not prevent them from making change; it does affect how they carry out that change and how they feel about themselves and the process.

### **Feminist research on nonfeminist subjects**

When I presented this project to each of the three principals, I explained that I was interested in looking at the lives and work of women principals. I said that I wanted to investigate how the past lives and experiences of teachers and administrators affected their current work and response to school change. In addition I noted that some literature suggested that women administrators had management styles that differed from men; I wanted to see how those patterns of leadership looked in real school situations. Given that these principals were not chosen because they had strong feminist leanings or an awareness of gender issues in their lives and work, part of the research process became an examination of the effect of my research question on their experience and understanding. In the sections that follow I explore how each of these women viewed themselves when they looked through the lens of gender, how our relationship influenced the research process and outcomes, and how this study may have influenced the women's perceptions of themselves and their work.

#### *Self-definition: the principals' views of themselves as women*

When presented with my plans for the study, all three principals commented that they did not think gender had made much difference in their lives and work. Often, after explaining that she was not a feminist or that gender made little difference in her experience, each principal would go on to explain how, in fact, gender did influence her life. At our first meeting, for example, when asked about the role of gender in her life and career, Ellen said she always thought of herself as a principal, not as a female principal, and then made fun of a statewide meeting of women administrators which focused on how to dress for success (Field notes, 5/6/93). At our next meeting, however, she held an index card on which she had written down a number of incidents or events in which gender had played a part, brought to consciousness by my question. For example, Ellen told me that as a reading teacher, she told her reading supervisor that she thought she should get some experience teaching in a lower elementary grade classroom before considering administration in order to gain more legitimacy. Her supervisor responded, "How many men do you know that have taught a lot or taught all these levels? Do it if you want. It's not necessary" (Interview, 8/93). Ellen recognized the truth of this comment, using it to illustrate how she had not always seen how her own path was influenced by the gendered expectations of herself and others.

At other times she said she was not sure whether gender made a difference. Again, she tended to follow a statement of uncertainty with an example of how being female had made some difference. When asked if gender affected the way in which she ran the school, she said:

Not really. That may just be a bad sign of an inflated ego. I think there are times when, now, I'll give you an example, but I do think there are times when being a woman makes a difference. For example: I think the work with the architects and the construction people [during her school's renovation] was beneficial

because I can talk the lingo a little bit now and I'm not intimidated by it. At the beginning I was. But if I walk into room full of men and there are construction people there, I think it does matter that I'm a woman there because I have to establish myself a little bit. (Interview, 8/93)

Despite being unsure about the role of gender in her own life and work, Ellen worked hard to raise her colleagues' awareness about gender issues with students in the classroom. Since 1983, when the district formed an Equity Committee, Ellen has been the most active member (and usually co-chair) of the committee, going to training sessions outside of the district, finding and developing materials (worksheets, videos) and doing workshops for teachers throughout the district, not a common practice for most of the district's principals. Yet she resisted applying a similar gender equity framework to her own experience. Connell (1985) points out that many women teachers are stated or unstated feminists in their insistence on equality of opportunity for students, but fewer see feminism in terms of power issues for themselves. Susan Chase (1995) discovered in her study of women superintendents that women spoke easily and confidently about their professional lives, accomplishments, and dilemmas, but when asked about the role of gender in their experiences they hesitated, became more guarded, and found it difficult to generalize from their own personal examples of discrimination or conflict. The desire to be judged by their competence and to be accepted as professionals overshadowed the experience and language of inequity: "In this larger story, the individual struggle for equality is essential, but also secondary, to the primary commitment to professional work. While professional commitment is an end in itself, the struggle for equality is a means to that end" (Chase, 1995, p. 183). Women administrators may, then, either ignore the issue of gender or develop individual solutions to inequities they and others experience rather than take an activist stance that makes addressing inequality a part of one's work, because the institutional, ideological and social structures within which they operate do not support a collective, activist approach.

Like Connell's teachers and other women in administration, Ellen shied away from comparing herself with other women administrators or describing her experiences as the result of gendered discrimination, focusing instead on ideas of individual success, power and accomplishment (Chase, 1995; Schmuck & Schubert, 1995). She and her female colleagues in the district interacted fairly regularly, often gathering informally before or after meetings or occasionally going out for dinner. Their conversations ranged from shoptalk about curriculum or policy, to descriptions of interactions with their male colleagues, to more personal topics. While their conversations often indicated that they considered themselves a cohort distinct from the larger group of administrators, they tended to focus on particular events or issues rather than on more generalized theories or gendered explanations for what went on. This unconscious strategy of providing mutual support without naming the larger issues may have allowed them to negotiate the institutional hierarchy more successfully given their relative isolation and lack of power.

Ann, like Ellen, tended to first deny the role of gender in her life and then expand on how it may have influenced her perception of herself in the role of principal. When asked explicitly if she was a feminist, Ann said:

I don't believe so. I don't really know, Lisa. Number one, because I have three daughters, because my oldest one at [a large corporation] has faced a lot of things that I think could come under the discrimination kind of thing. I do feel that as

a woman in whatever time in your life that you have to work awfully hard to prove that you can do something. And, you know, it's accepted that there are more women principals – whatever you want to call us – in lower school than there are in middle and there are more in middle than in high school. And oh my god, heaven forbid that you should be a high school principal. ... But you know, I guess I don't really know what all would be involved in the women's movement. I think that women have to be very careful as to what kind of image they portray. I think that you've got to have that balance between yes, you're feminine and how sexy you want to be seen, if you're going to play that game with men, you're going to take the consequences. And so I do feel sorry, especially for women that are very good looking and are trying to climb up any kind of ladder. It's better if you're homely, frankly, then because you cannot associate the two. (Interview, 8/93)

Ann initially describes feminism as a response to discrimination. She moves quickly, though, into a description of how women need to monitor their femininity in order to succeed. Ann seems to associate being female with needing to overcome gender stereotypes, or, at the least, learning how to use them to one's advantage. She explains that she works to keep her emotions under control, and that she is very conscious of how she dresses (often in suits) in order to manage the impressions (Marshall & Mitchell, 1989) she gives as a woman head of school.

And you know, I've been accused – I've had one teacher tell me that I expected everybody to be in suits. Well, you've seen me lately out of suits rather than in suits. And I think that maybe during the time when I first started this that I was always in heels and stuff like that. And it means a lot to me, the way somebody looks. I think it does matter – you don't have to have expensive clothes or anything – but you can look neat. (Interview, 2/94)

Ann implies here that to be principal you may have to control external manifestations of femininity, although, again, she describes this in personal and individual rather than structural or political terms.

Jeanne's references to the role of gender in her life tended to be more implicit. One day, early in the year, I walked into Greenfield School and Jeanne said: "I'm in good spirits – I have a *Sweet Honey* song going in my head – 'Tote that barge, lift that bale, Everybody knows I can work like Hell. Lord I'm a woman!'" (Field notes, 10/7/91). In addition, for Jeanne, race, gender, and class intertwined in a dynamic that influenced her experience, her actions, and the responses of others to her. For example, Jeanne was aware of the symbolic and political role of all three variables in her selection as principal; she knew that one central administrator wanted her to have the job:

Because he admired me. Because he's smart, you know, he's no dummy. That's a lot of tickets I bring in. I'm a Black female principal. And I live in this town. And the people love me. But underneath it he's a poor, blue-collar person too. And it makes him feel good that I've made it because of him. (Interview 10/91)

During the year of the study, Jeanne referred several times to her growing awareness of her position as a Black woman in the community, and the role she felt she could play, given that position. Again, her emphasis was not on gender alone, but on the interactions of gender and race in her sense of who she was and what she wanted to do.

Now staying here [in Greenfield], it felt right. ... I know enough about being Black that I can be Black, you know. I can talk the jive I need, if I need to. I can survive. Nobody's going to hurt me walking into town or anywhere else. And I've

figured out what I can do here. I had to figure out why – there was a crisis at some point about staying here and I chose to stay teaching here. Because there are enough Black kids here ... and there were enough White kids who needed to know about me. ... And I know how I can be helpful here. ... These kids are going to make decisions about a lot of people. For a lot of people. You know, that's input. It's powerful for every new kid that comes here [to see a Black woman principal]. (Interview, 11/91)

Even though Jeanne's comments suggest that she is conscious of the larger dynamics of race, class, and, to some extent, gender in her work as a principal, she, like Ann and Ellen, focuses primarily on her own personal roles and interactions.

For the most part, these three women rarely used gender as a category of analysis when examining their own experience or actions, although when asked directly they often found ways in which it did affect them. Like the women in Chase's (1995) study of women superintendents and Schmuck and Schubert's (1995) study of women principals, they tended to focus on their own individual experience rather than the more generalizable experience of women as a framework for understanding that experience. In all three cases, this stance may have resulted from a lack of opportunity and support for this kind of reflection, but it may also be an unconscious strategy for negotiating their interactions and experiences in a male-dominated profession and institutional structure. Dismissing – or not noticing – the role of gender may make it easier for principals to adapt psychologically and act independently in a system that emphasizes individualism and hierarchy. For me, the tension between my gendered framework of analysis and their more individualistic perspective became one aspect of the relationship I negotiated with each principal. To what extent could and should I challenge their strategies for defining themselves and succeeding within their given work contexts?

### *Researcher–researched relationships*

Feminist researchers, in particular, have examined the dilemmas involved in establishing trusting, mutual relationships as a part of the research process (Acker et al., 1991; Chase, 1996; Fine, 1994; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Josselson, 1996; Kelly et al., 1994; Stacey, 1988). They argue that these tensions may be more salient for feminist researchers because the conflicts involved challenge some of the underlying goals and values held by those who define themselves as feminists (Wolf, 1996). Stacey's (1988) classic essay, "Can there be a feminist ethnography?" raises questions about whether it is truly possible to avoid an exploitative relationship between researcher and researched and whether, in fact, a feminist approach creates a "delusion of alliance" between women researchers and their subjects. She asks if these approaches actually mask a kind of exploitation, and she argues that researchers' reflexivity about their own frameworks and constructions does not resolve the conflict between a collaborative process and a unilateral product within which the researcher imposes her own meaning on the situation and events. Others, too, examine the contradictions involved in trying to recognize and acknowledge the subjectivity of the participants (researchers and researched) and provide an analytic framework for interpreting that experience (Acker et al., 1991). Feminist researchers have come to recognize that the multiple positions they and their participants hold will always affect their relationships. Issues of power and control before, during, and after the research project must be continually reexamined and negotiated (Wolf, 1996).

My relationship with each of the three principals differed, depending on prior interactions, our personalities, and the school situation. In all three cases, though, we became both friends and professional colleagues. Although I think that my “research” remained an abstract concept for all three principals, they seemed happy to help out. They would say, on occasion, “Here’s an interesting situation for your book” (Field notes 4/7/92), or would ask when the manuscript would be done. For my part, I made somewhat amorphous contributions to their daily work. Principals do not have a peer, a companion, or a sounding board on a regular basis; I was in the unusual position of knowing about their work and personal lives and could be present for them in a way that no one else was. I liked and respected them, and I was willing and able to listen and sympathize and, when necessary, respond to their concerns. At the end of the year, Ellen said:

See, next year I’ll probably lose my sanity ‘cause you won’t be here. I’ll feel lonely. No really. You were a highlight, to have you here. Like I said Monday, I think every principal should have one [a shadow]. ... I’ve loved it. I’m like sad that you’re going. Can you stay? (Interview, 6/94)

I was struck, on occasion, by the eagerness with which each principal often welcomed me when I arrived at the school. “You picked a good day!” Jeanne said to me. Or, “I’m glad you’re here; I wanted your opinion on something,” Ann would say. I frequently reflected in my field notes on the fact that each of the principals seemed to appreciate my presence as a support, someone who knew enough to be able to empathize with and appreciate their experiences. Sometimes, I would comment on the generous amount of time each woman shared with me at the school. Each insisted that she looked forward to those times, that without me there she would never take the time out to reflect or talk through some of the events and issues of the day. I was pleased that my presence did provide something for the principals; I wanted my research to give something back to the people and the schools within which I worked, even if the “something” was rarely concrete or immediate. I also wondered, though, if I occasionally allowed myself to become complacent with the little I seemed to contribute, accepting our comfortable, apparently reciprocal relationship as enough (Wolf, 1996). In addition, the positive and personal relationship I shared with the principals made it more difficult to create and sustain analytic distance. The sense of responsibility I experienced within these relationships may have influenced both the data I collected and the way I have chosen to interpret them, as the examples below illustrate.

At Greenfield-Weston, my prior relationship with Jeanne made our research-based relationship a relatively comfortable one from the start of the process. When the assistant superintendent asked her about how she liked being shadowed, Jeanne responded (with me there) that she “loved it. It’s nice to have someone to bounce things off of.” When I remarked, teasingly, that I made myself useful by getting markers and things when she needed them, she added, “She even knows I need things before I ask” (Field notes, 12/12/91). We did not have many explicit conversations about the fact that we were friends and supported each other; we just did it. A couple of times during the year, after a difficult experience, I would ask Jeanne how she was. She would share her feelings of discouragement, or frustration, or determination to make things better, sometimes crying a bit in the process and apologizing for “letting down.” In each of these situations I was glad that Jeanne felt comfortable enough with our friendship to “let down,” that she trusted me to provide a sympathetic ear. I do not think much of what I said was immediately useful; I rarely, if ever, saw Jeanne follow up on an idea

I had provided. My willingness to be a knowledgeable and sympathetic listener seemed to be more important than any specific advice I could give. And the process worked both ways. I would often share my own stories with Jeanne; the year during which I shadowed her I went through the process of adopting a second child, and Jeanne was frequently there for me as I lived through the ups and downs of that experience. I found, though, that while the research process asked Jeanne and the other principals to open up all aspects of their lives to me, I could choose what parts of my life and work to share and what parts of theirs to emphasize: another example of the power and control the researcher wields in the process (Wolf, 1996).

Ellen was the most reserved of the three principals at the beginning of the project. More than the other two, it seemed as though she felt my presence as a responsibility, at least at the beginning of the school year. In her first interview, Ellen was relatively reserved, although once the tape recorder went off she loosened up a bit and told me I was “easy to talk to.” At the end of the first several weeks of observing, I asked her how she was doing with my presence. She commented, “We’ll get used to each other.” Earlier that day she had also commented, in a half-teasing way, that she must have been “brain dead” when she agreed to do the project (Field notes, 9/13/93). I know that she thought about the project and my visits when I was not there because she would often save something to show me or write down ideas to tell me based on a prior week’s conversation. She would sometimes call me during the week to tell me her schedule or let me know what was coming up. Although I do not think that Ellen felt she had to entertain me, I do believe that, of the three principals, she was most conscious of wanting me to have a good, well-rounded experience.

It also took longer for Ellen and me to share personal as well as professional conversations and insights. During the course of the year, Ellen’s mother became quite ill and, in December, she died. In October, when her mother entered the hospital, Ellen asked me to leave the room when she had phone conversations with her father, sister and brother. For some time she did not speak with me directly about her mother’s illness; I surmised it from other things I had heard. Eventually, she did begin to tell me about it and we talked about how her mother’s illness and death and her father’s adjustment to the loss influenced her and her work. In the same way, Ellen kept to herself a new romantic relationship that started in late September. We eventually began to have conversations that included these more personal aspects of our lives, but they came a bit more slowly with Ellen than they had with the other two principals. By midyear, our conversations about our work and home lives seemed very comfortable and open, the reserve replaced by a mutual respect and care for one another. Ellen’s case seemed relatively easy to write; I respected her work and felt that she knew the pros and cons of her own actions and interactions. It seems possible that a relationship grounded first and perhaps foremost in professional agreements and respect might have created an easier path for me as a researcher. In addition, I, like Ellen, am White, middle class, Jewish and an educator. These common characteristics may contribute to shared perspectives and attitudes that influence how I interpret and present her case.

Ann, more than either of the other two principals, used me as a sounding board for ideas and looked for advice and support. Her year-long struggle with the head of the school about her job and her tendency to distance herself somewhat from teachers and other administrators probably contributed to Ann’s interest in my views. Like Jeanne, though, she sometimes solicited my perspective but then used our conversations more as an outlet than as a resource for ideas to put into action. She mentioned on several occasions that I was a valuable support to her, or that she told me things that she never

shared with anyone else about both her work and other aspects of her life. Again, this openness felt like a gift, a valued part of friendship, but also a responsibility.

In Ann's case, I had the most mixed feelings about my roles and our relationships. I liked Ann and admired her work; she cared a great deal about the people she served and she set high expectations for performance – her own and others. On the other hand, I listened to administrators and teachers and knew their reasons for asserting that she should leave within the next year or two. As an educator, I agreed with several aspects of their arguments. I also knew how badly treated Ann felt, how much she needed someone to talk to, and how difficult the whole process was for her as a person and a principal. In this situation, I sometimes felt that I was being less than candid, not saying all I knew to anyone. When asked or told something controversial about Ann, I accepted it as that person's perspective and tried to mirror back to them what I heard being said rather than adding in my own complicated view. In most situations, people just wanted to hear that I could understand and empathize with their assessment of the situation. I did, at times, try to help Ann think about ways of handling situations which would make her more comfortable (e.g., if she chose not to sign her evaluation letter, she could write an explanation to accompany it), allowing her to deal with what seemed like her inevitable departure and maintain her own sense of self-respect. She had one other confidant in the school who gave her more direct advice; I however, was with her on such a regular basis that I probably heard more specific incidents and concerns, and I wanted to support her.

I brought to these relationships an honest respect for the work the three women carried out. Because at one point in my career I had thought I might become a principal, this project allowed me to look at what I might have done. I talked with Jeanne, Ann, and Ellen about their work, my own teaching and past experiences, education in general, and the education of my own children. I left the field in all three cases extremely impressed with the work of the three principals and connected to each of them by bonds of friendship, professional respect, and mutual care. During the course of the data collection and analysis, and as I wrote the cases, I reflected on these relationships. I thought about how they affected me and the people with whom I worked, and how they had shaped what I could see and report. I wondered about the extent to which these relationships themselves reflected gendered norms and patterns of interaction and friendship. I do believe that the connections the principals and I developed allowed me to have much richer insights into these women's personal and professional lives, the meanings they constructed, the actions they took, and the choices they made. In my experience, the collaborative, trusting relationships called for by life history, case study and feminist researchers contribute a great deal to the meaning and depth of a research project. Because these relationships raise questions about roles, ethics, and interpretation, I tried to collect enough data through a variety of means – interviews, observations, documents – to generate a view of the principalship that is grounded in the experiences and voices of these three women. Still, that view remains inevitably colored by the values, analytic perspective and political stance I brought to the project.

#### *Impact of the study on the principals*

To what extent did my openly stated interest in gender at the beginning of the project frame what the three principals told me? To what extent, if at all, did it change the way in which they came to see and interpret their experiences? To what extent is Patti

Lather's expectation of feminist research, that it "encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched as least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge" (Lather, 1991, p. 60) an imposition of a way of understanding the world as much as it is the first step toward social change? What should researchers do "when our understandings and interpretations of women's accounts would either not be shared by some of them, and/or represent a form of challenge or threat to their perceptions, choices and coping strategies" (Kelly et al., 1994, p. 37)?

There were some indications that my own framework contributed to the three principals' ideas about gender, providing them with a new perspective on their experience. As I mentioned, each, when asked, would say that gender had little influence on her life. Each usually followed this statement with reflections on ways in which gender had affected her past experiences. These principals probably would not have generated those examples if not asked directly about gender; it was not a lens they generally used as they thought about their lives and work. Middleton (1989) and Weiler (1988) explain how women educators become politicized, gradually learning to use feminist ideas to articulate their own concerns as social and political issues rather than personal problems. Both note that feminist women teachers have all personally experienced discrimination or marginality. These experiences prepare them for later openness to feminist educational theories. They also suggest that women teachers who take this stance have had access to feminist social and educational theories in a form that helps them to explain and articulate their own experiences.

Each of these three principals had experienced what I would identify as discrimination or marginality as a result of gender. Issues of race, class, and age also influenced their perspectives, however, perhaps making them less likely to focus on gender as a single explanatory framework. In addition, although Ellen had some familiarity with issues of gender equity as it applied to students, neither she nor either of the other two principals were familiar with feminist theory that might have provided a framework for explaining their experience as part of a larger system or pattern of experience. All three principals usually preferred to attribute actions and behaviors to specific individuals and contexts rather than to larger social patterns such as gender.

Over the course of the year, my presence and occasional questions may have prompted them each to think about gender as at least one way of conceptualizing their experience. Perhaps this serves as an example of what Kelly et al. (1994) describe as "challenging methods" (p. 38), approaches to research that both create knowledge and question oppressive attitudes and behaviors by raising with participants different ways of understanding their experiences. Without any prompting from me, one of them would occasionally ask me a question about issues of gender or comment on the gendered nature of an experience. Ann, for example, one day asked me about the pros and cons of coed versus single-sex schools for students both K-12 and in college, and we talked about some of the issues raised by research in the field. At an administrative council meeting, Jeanne explained to the assembled principals, assistant superintendent and the superintendent (all men) that she needed to talk about the use of rooms, including the library, in her school. When the superintendent said she should not expect to move the library to an adjacent building during his tenure, she said she wanted to start working on it under his tenure so that when the new man - or woman - came along she would be ready. There was general laughter around the room at her addition of woman (Field notes, 10/7/91). I wondered at the time if Jeanne would have added - "or woman" - if I had not been present or doing the study with her. Ellen began to

use gender to analyze more of her interactions with the other administrators in her district, most of whom were male. Although she did not theorize about what was going on, she would describe the “old boys’ network,” or comment that she felt a little strange about being the only woman *and* having a different viewpoint or way of operating. On a day when she shared her office and adjacent conference room with her new head teacher, a visiting school social worker, and me, Ellen stopped midsentence, looked at us, and asked if we thought a man could have shared his phone and space with so many people that day. She then went on to describe how she and two other women administrators had recently shared a hotel room at a professional conference. She commented that they had a great time staying up late talking – but they wondered if the male administrators would have shared a room to save the district money (Field notes, 1/25/94). Although she did not necessarily draw consciously on this understanding in the course of a day’s work, there is a suggestion here that, perhaps as a result of my questions or presence, she recognized that gender affected her administrative experience.

Still, it was not just the lack of a theoretical framework that kept the three principals from using gender to analyze their experience. For example, while Ellen sometimes recognized that gender seemed to make a difference, she shied away from that explanation; it seemed to place interactions beyond her control. Gendering a situation was something others did to you, or, worse yet, you did to yourself. In any case, it limited your agency, your autonomy to act.

I do think sometimes. I do worry. I get, that whole gender thing. I mean, I guess sometimes if I have a conflict with somebody, then I do stick to myself and think, Oh, gosh, I hope this isn’t a female thing or that maybe I don’t think it’s with me, but what if the other person is interpreting it to be female or they don’t see it. I wonder: is it more difficult for another woman to see a woman as an authority figure? (Interview, 8/93)

When you did that first interview with me and I was – not exactly defensive, but I would say I was strident with you, and [I said] “Oh, well, no, you know, my father vacuumed, and I grew up in a household where” – you know, I even said to the class the other day, I said, “I always pull back a little from the word ‘feminist’, but yet I think there are gender issues.” And then I had that sort of myriad of little experiences where it was only the men, and I thought the men were sort of getting overbearing, and I thought to myself how could I ever – ‘cause the truth is even when they don’t do it to you, you do it to yourself. (Interview, 6/94)

When the three principals read and commented on a draft of the case studies I had written about them, they tended to focus almost entirely on the particular comments and issues raised by others about them in quotes I had used. They often wanted to refute what they heard as a misunderstanding on the part of another person, and so would reexplain their perspective to me. They rarely, if ever, commented on the general argument that gender had contributed to the shaping of their experience. Their primary common concern was that no one would want to become a principal if they read these cases. This reaction suggests, again, that a socially constructed perspective felt more negative and perhaps more paralyzing than the particularistic and individualistic lenses they used to explain and cope with their daily lives and work contexts. Using gender as a frame for analyzing their own experience might undermine their own sense of legitimacy in the power structure. It may also give them a political agenda in the eyes of others, making it more difficult to carry out their plans and goals.

If the three principals asked me, and they did on a few occasions, whether or not I saw gender operating in their experiences, I would say that I did, in addition to many other variables and issues. I might give them an example of how I saw their actions or responses influenced by the gendered expectations of others, or repeat back to them their own stories of how gender seemed to influence a choice they had made. I made decisions in the research process, based on our relationships and my goals, about whether or not, and how, to impose this frame on their thinking. My general stance was to keep gender as a frame for analysis, to offer it when asked, to ask questions that might encourage the principals with whom I worked to consider it as one lens through which they could see their experience, but not to insist on that lens as the only possible explanation. I did not believe that the “disjuncture” (Chase, 1996) between my analysis and interpretation and the stories the principals told me reflected a disjuncture in our relationship, nor did it keep me from maintaining their voices in the stories.

To some extent, the respect and trust we developed over the course of the year of the research allowed us to share with one another these sometimes different perspectives, to keep them in dialogue, believing that we could learn from one another about different ways of seeing and knowing without feeling that we needed to convince one another of a particular truth. In this way, this research project maintained the goals of critical, feminist research and educational research that contributes to the people and schools within which it occurs. Although the principals themselves experienced no great epiphanies about their lives and work, nor did they completely accept the gendered framework I provided of their stories, they came to understand and respect my perspective as a way of seeing their world and, perhaps, began to see it as a way of understanding some of their own experience. And I respected their relatively atheoretical, context-based process of making decisions that allowed them to be responsive, effective, and self-confident administrators.

## Conclusions

The dilemmas I faced in carrying out this research included balancing multiple roles, negotiating relationships with the three principals, and maintaining the integrity of the principals’ voices while telling my own version of their stories. It is not coincidental that similar terms – balance, negotiation, roles, and relationship – emerge both when I describe the project’s methods and when I frame its outcomes. The methods I chose simultaneously reflect and influence the story I tell about the dynamic process of the principalship. Methods and outcomes in this project depend on an understanding of social life as constraining of and created by individuals who construct meaning and relationships in multiple contexts. This understanding leads us, as researchers, to use methods that allow us to find and consider those various perceptions of reality and to present findings that reflect a consciousness of our own voice as one of many.

Life-history and case-study approaches, used within a feminist framework, allow for this individual, context-based approach in which the complexities of people’s daily lives can be represented and examined as a part of larger institutional and social systems of power and interaction. Each relationship, each setting, each set of interactions changed over time, influencing decisions made by the principals and by me as researcher. Although such methods create the dilemmas described in this article, they also allow a researcher to reflect on those inherent tensions in the research process that ultimately contribute to our understanding of the complicated fabric that constitutes individual

and social life. For this reason, we must continue to recognize and document the tensions that exist between the various stories, frameworks, and goals in the research process, allowing the voices of researcher and researched to emerge, overlap and, when necessary, conflict. By describing both the research process and product we emerge with a richer understanding of the relationship between individual and social context and between theory and practice.

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