Organizations as drivers of social and systemic integration: Contradiction and reconciliation through loose demographic coupling and community anchoring

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Abstract

Sociologists have long thought of the integration of people in communities—*social integration*—and hierarchical social systems—*systemic integration*—as contradictory goals. What strategies allow organizations to reconcile social and systemic integration? We examine this question through 40 in-depth, longitudinal interviews with leaders of nonprofit organizations that engage in the dual pursuit of social and systemic integration. Two processes reveal how the internal structure of organizations often mirrors the ways in which organizations are embedded in their local environments. When organizations engage in *loose demographic coupling*, relegating those who "match" the community to the work of social integration, they produce internal inequalities and justify them by claiming community-building as sacred work. When engaging in *community anchoring*, organizations challenge internal and external inequalities simultaneously, but this process comes with costs. Our findings contribute to a constructivist understanding of community, the mechanisms by which organizations produce inequalities, and a place-based conception of organizations as embedded in community.

Key words

Sociology of organizations, community, social and systemic integration, goal conflicts, organizational inequality, race, nonprofits

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Introduction

Since Tönnies's (1887) famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft,* sociologists have studied whether and how people can be integrated into *community*—interpersonal relationships of trust and mutual support—and *society*—complex systems such as healthcare, education, law, and the economy. Although both are essential for equitable development, scant research has investigated how organizations navigate the potential trade-offs of engaging in the production of social and systemic integration respectively (Marwell & McQuarrie, 2013; Brandtner & Laryea, 2022). Understanding the processes by which people are simultaneously integrated into community and society is critical for addressing the persistent social and economic inequalities we face in contemporary societies. This tension is especially pronounced in global cities, which are often sites of extreme inequality but also sites that create unique social and economic opportunities.

Organizations play a crucial role in facilitating people's integration into community and society in cities, as sites and drivers of social action (Powell & Brandtner, 2016; see paper by King in this volume). Nonprofit organizations, in particular, are often stylized as relieving the urban poor through the knitting of networks among community members and subsidized service provision (Marwell, 2007). Nonprofits and associational organizations such as churches, social service agencies, and recreational clubs have indeed long played a critical role in fostering community and connecting individuals to complex societal systems (Brandtner & Dunning, 2020; Small, 2009). While nonprofits are traditionally theorized as complements or competitors to collective good provision through corporations in the public sector, there is increasing recognition that they play a unique role in driving community cohesion by fostering "institutional completeness" through informal social norms (Marwell & Morrissey, 2020; Sampson, 2012) and

acting as "third places" and "social infrastructures" in which people commune together (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Klinenberg, 2015).

In this paper, we explore how urban nonprofit organizations strive to produce social *and* systemic integration for their members. Classic modernity theory assumes inherent tensions between community and society: as complex bureaucratic and technological systems have been built out to address individuals' basic needs, intimate, spatially proximate communities where resources are shared between friends and neighbors have attenuated (Wellman, 1979; Giddens, 1991). These tensions shape day-to-day life in modern organizations. For example, pressures on nonprofits to extend their work beyond community building and focus on tractable, systemic impact introduces persistent paradox to the field (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Clegg, da Cunha, & Cunha, 2005). These pressures have emanated from institutional funders, including foundations and government agencies, that encourage nonprofits to articulate a formal theory of change; push towards measuring performance and impact on society; and suggest how to develop new, "integrated" sources of market income that allow nonprofit models to be scale beyond the local level (Mair, Wolf, & Seelos, 2016; Mair & Seelos, 2017).

Yet we have limited knowledge of how organizations practically navigate the tensions between producing social and systemic integration, nor how the different practices they adopt may have complex consequences for the (re)production of inequalities (Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020; Marwell & Morrissey, 2020). On one hand, when nonprofits are run by and for the community, for instance by pursuing collectivist-democratic goals, they may lack access to institutional resources that extend beyond the local community (Rothschild, 1979; Chen & Chen, 2021; Baggetta, 2015). On the other hand, when nonprofits become more professionalized, expert knowledge and its highly credentialed carriers are often found outside of the communities that

organizations serve (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Suárez, 2010; Eyal, 2013). The result may be a widening gap between the "whitewashed" expertise of leaders and the "local" expertise of frontline workers (Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun, 2016). This gap highlights the importance of understanding how different and unequal professional groups relate to each other within organizations and when cross-occupational collaboration is most successful (Anteby et al., 2016; DiBenigno & Kellogg, 2014; DiBenigno , 2018).[1]

We focus on how the complex internal structures of organizations mirror the multiple ways in which organizations are embedded in their environments. Investigating organizations' inner workings is indispensable for understanding their integrative potential (Marquis & Battilana, 2009). This approach requires organization-level data on internal structures and practices as well data on organizations' relationships to their urban environments. We collected such data through a survey and interviews with a representative sample of over 200 nonprofit organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area, an urban context marked by extreme economic inequality, due to limited government support (Manduca, 2019; Laryea, Zhao, & Powell, 2022), as well as extreme social inequality, given the longstanding racialized structures of American society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). We first quantitatively identified organizations that display different levels of social and systemic integration. We then conducted and analyzed in-depth interviews with forty leaders from 20 of these organizations to examine the relationship between the organization's internal personnel structures and the practices the organization pursues to achieve social and systemic integration.

Our analysis reveals that many organizations *do* simultaneously pursue social and systemic ends. However, they vary in how they go about reconciling these two orientations. In-depth

[1] Scholars have noted this general trend. Dunning (2019) argues that the nonprofit workforce is "bifurcated between service workers and knowledge workers, with little opportunity for the former to become the latter." While the sector aims to *address* inequality, it can also *produce* inequality. Understanding when and how nonprofits do and do not exacerbate existing inequalities in cities is the puzzle we aim to address.

interviews with leaders demonstrate that this association is often due to a process that we call *loose demographic coupling*: some members of the staff (often women and people of color) are relegated to community work, while the leadership team (often men and White) manage systemic goals. This strategy is problematic, because organizations reproduce inequalities within their organizations to challenge inequalities in their urban environments. A subset of organizations pursued a different strategy, challenging the assumed value of professional expertise and pushing for a *re-anchoring* in local communities and elevating community stakeholders above or alongside experts (Haß & Serrano-Velarde, 2015). These two orientations look similar in terms of organizational outcomes but are very different inside organizations in terms of who has power and voice. We describe both approaches using modal case examples in our findings.

Our paper makes three contributions. First, we contribute to a sociological understanding of community, which is pregnant with meaning (Hill Collins, 2010) and frequently racialized (Levine, 2017). Second, our paper furthers understanding of organizations as racialized entities (Ray, 2019) that may reproduce inequality internally even as they aim to reduce inequality in their urban environments. Finally, we provide insights on how locally embedded organizations have the potential to both hinder and advance social and systemic integration in cities and communities (Marquis & Battilana, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Tensions between pursuing social and systemic integration

The question of integration is a core concern in sociology: how are shared social worlds built across lines of difference? Tönnies first introduced the question in *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (1887) where he distinguishes community, which has "real organic life," from society, a "purely mechanical construction" (pg. 17). Our conception of community is informed

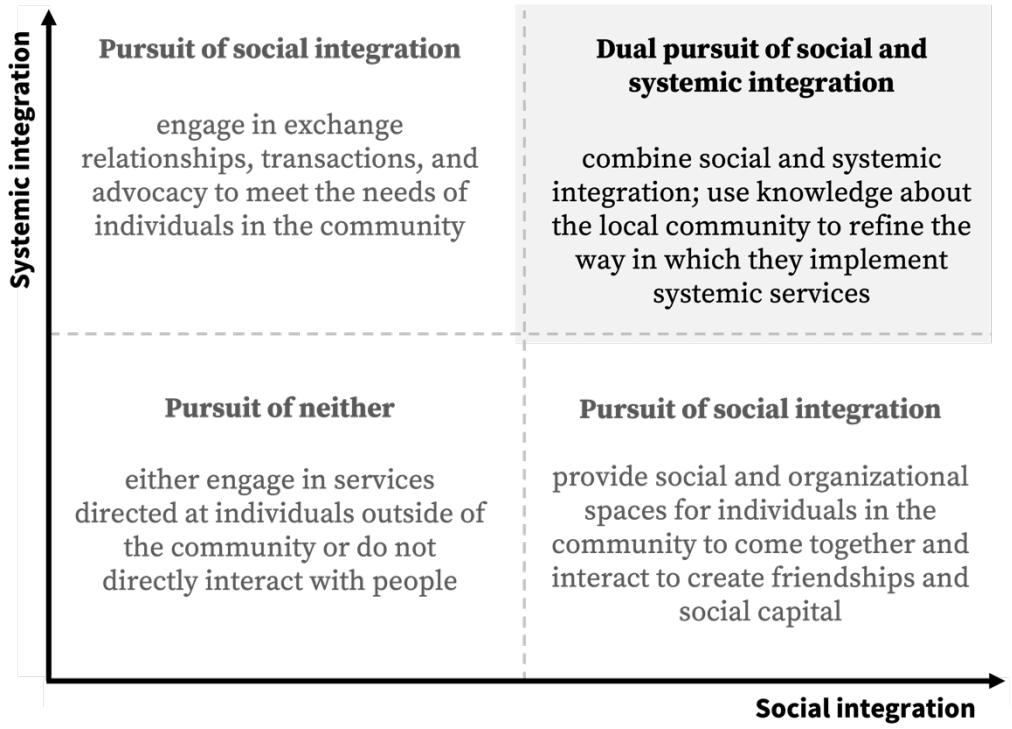
by communitarian theorists (Etzioni, 1996; Sandel, 1981; Taylor, 1989) who view people as communal beings and are skeptical of the modern liberal focus on individualism. As such, communitarian theorists have long understood community as "a goal to be achieved and a moral state to which we can aspire" (Levine, 2021:17). Communal bonds bounded by such spaces as neighborhoods and cities afford social organization and are, resultantly, a resource for community members (Sampson, 2012). At the same time, Levine (2021) argues, community is a social construct with symbolic boundaries that can become the subject of political contestation (Hill Collins, 2010). Our conception of society, on the other hand, aligns with a Weberian view that modern nation-states and cities are marked by complex bureaucratic, institutional systems that are often agnostic about interpersonal aspects of well-being. While we share the communitarian aim in finding ways to protect and promote valued forms of communities of place, memory, identity, and interest (Bell, 2020), such an aim is not mutually exclusive with a well-functioning society. Complex institutions often systemically disadvantage the poor and marginalized (Lara-Millan, 2021) and tend to foster bureaucratic mazes that are extremely difficult for individuals to navigate (Paik, 2021). But society can be (re)formed in ways that enable its institutions to advance equity, provide crucial resources, and ensure social order. Without systemic stability and rules of fairness, community can devolve into despotic conditions or favoritism.

These conceptions align with Marwell and McQuarrie's (2013) distinction between organizations that primarily produce *social* integration and those that produce *systemic* integration by connecting communities to the complex system of society. *Social integration* is the work of fostering community. It is often based on face-to-face interaction and occurs in small group settings. Social integration can alleviate, but also deepen, existing inequalities by fostering social capital, networks of social support and trust, and collective efficacy (Small, 2004; Sampson, 2012).

At a basic level, organizations contribute to social integration by acting as holding spaces for individuals with shared interests or identities to come together. *Systemic integration* refers to "relations that connect people to one another through formal organizations, representative systems, information flows, economic production, or markets" (Marwell & McQuarrie, 2013:130). According to Tönnies, society consists of "separate *individuals* who *en masse* work on behalf of society in general, while appearing to work for themselves, and who are working for themselves while appearing to work for society" (1887: 57). Organizations contribute to systemic integration by connecting their constituents to resources and complex systems – including social services, healthcare, education, politics, housing, and the economy.

We do not suggest that the integration into one, community or society, should take precedence over the other. Rather, we argue that a crucial aspect of addressing inequality in cities is ensuring that all people can experience both forms of integration. Organizations play a crucial role in producing both social and systemic integration (Marwell & McQuarrie, 2013). While many organizations may focus exclusively on one form of integration or the other, the capacity to produce both forms of integration may be especially valuable for serving marginalized populations and mitigating inequality through integration. Figure 1 summarizes the potential of a single organization to generate either form or both forms of integration.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of dual pursuit of social and systemic integration (figure adapted from Brandtner & Laryea, 2022)



While many organizations do strive to foster hybrid forms of integration for their members and communities, developing the organizational capacity to simultaneously produce social and systemic integration is challenging, because these two forms of integration are linked to different organizational goals, practices, and forms of expertise (Brandtner & Laryea, 2022). Our analysis thus focuses on the upper right quadrant of figure 1. The purpose of our analysis is to examine how this dual pursuit is achieved. But first, we outline existing work that addresses how contradictory aims are pursued in organizational contexts and discuss how contradictory aims can foster the reproduction of internal inequalities among organizational members.

Conflicting goals and the production of inequality within organizations

A large body of scholarship has considered how organizations manage conflicting goals (Cyert & March, 1963; Pache & Santos, 2013; DiBenigno, 2018; March & Simon, 1958). This work highlights that integration *within* organizations is an ongoing achievement (Bechky, 2011).

As noted above, there is often a gap between the expertise of leaders, who have training in management and social networks that connect them to other leaders in business, politics and philanthropy, and the expertise of frontline workers, who have deep knowledge of the local community and social networks that connect them to beneficiaries, volunteers, and community members (Brandtner & Laryea, 2022).

The divergence between these groups is not power-neutral. A large body of work in organizational sociology highlights the fact that organizations reproduce inequalities, both through their internal structures and through their effects on the broader institutional and geographic environments they are embedded within (Amis et al., 2020). Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey and Skaggs (2010:226) argue that "organizations are the *primary* site of the production and allocation of inequality in modern societies" (*emphasis ours).*

A wide body of research documents how gender, race, and class differences are maintained and strengthened within organizations through macro-level inequality regimes, interlinked organizing processes that produce patterns of complex inequalities (Acker, 2006). She identifies the organizational practices, structures, and logics that contribute to gender inequality in the workplace (Acker, 1990; see also Ridgeway, 2011; Correll et al., 2020). Empirical research on race likewise highlights ongoing racial disparities (Carton & Rosette, 2011; Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun, 2016; Mithani & Mooney Murphy, 2017). Ray (2019:27) argues that organizations are fundamentally racialized structures that "reproduce (and challenge) racialization processes." Finally, a large body of work demonstrates that class differences shape recruitment (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016), hiring (Rivera, 2012; 2017), promotion (Bull & Scharff, 2017; Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015), and levels of compensation (Cobb, 2016).

Relative to these advances in understanding how macro-sociological inequalities are justified and reproduced in organizations, we know less about the meso-level processes that challenge inequalities and promote equity within organizations. Nonprofits are a particularly generative context to study these dynamics because they often aim to challenge and combat inequalities in their broader environment, but they are not immune to inequality regimes and racialization processes within their midst (Baggetta, 2015).

Recent work, for example, highlights the uneasy tensions of addressing inequalities in nonprofits and social movements. For example, Radoynovska (2018) theorizes discretion work as a mechanism that explains how service workers justify providing beneficiaries with unequal resources. Likewise, Reinecke (2018) examines the relationships between activists and homeless people in Occupy London, showing how "macrolevel inequalities that protestors set out to fight resurfaced in the day-to-day living of the camp itself." Finally, Levine (2017; 2021) highlights how the term "community" is often invoked by those with power (such as local politicians), which enables them to retain ultimate authority while seeming to empower neighborhood residents.

Contributing to this line of work, we argue that one of the meso-level mechanisms that reproduces social inequality in organizations is the management of conflicting goals, which often occurs through assigning divergent goals to organizational members with different forms of expertise. Recent theoretical progress has been made in understanding how goal conflicts are transcended: through superordinate identification with an overarching goal or identity (Besharov, 2014; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994), anchored personalization practices (DiBenigno, 2018), and dyadic toolkits that promote shared meanings and emotional scripts (DiBenigno & Kellogg, 2014). But these processes are often assumed to be race, gender, or class neutral, not attending to what identities gain the status of superordination identification, what practices are

prioritized, and whose meanings are buried in the creation of dyadic toolkits (Ray, 2019). Moreover, such practices may reduce conflict but entrench inequality within organizations, leading to a thin celebration of collaboration across difference in ways that devalue discussions of continuing inequality (Douds, 2021).

We therefore suggest that the dual-pursuit of social and systemic integration may come at the cost of internal *dis*-integration. Drawing on our empirical cases, we identify two processes through which the dual pursuit of social and systemic integration is achieved. The first is *loose demographic coupling,* which we define as a bifurcation within a staff team wherein frontline workers (who "match" beneficiaries in terms of demographic characteristics) are responsible for the work of social integration, while executive leaders (who "match" powerful systemic actors in terms of demographic characteristics) are responsible for the work of systemic integration. This seemingly neutral process reproduces internal racial and gender inequalities when there are significant differences in salary and decision-making power between these two groups, and especially when executive leaders benefit from the work of social integration that frontline workers carry out, while limiting opportunities for their advancement to positions of power and leadership.

This raises the question: how can organizations resist loose demographic coupling while still pursuing social and systemic goals? As Ray (2019) notes, organizations not only reproduce racialization process – they also can challenge these processes. Yet little is known about how such challenging works in practice. Our empirical findings reveal a second approach that we call *community anchoring*, which we define as elevating leaders with street-level, community-based expertise to positions of authority that are equal to (or above) leaders with suite-level professional expertise (Laryea & Brandtner, 2022). We expect that this process is not without costs, in terms of how organizations are perceived in their broader environment (which is also racialized) as well as

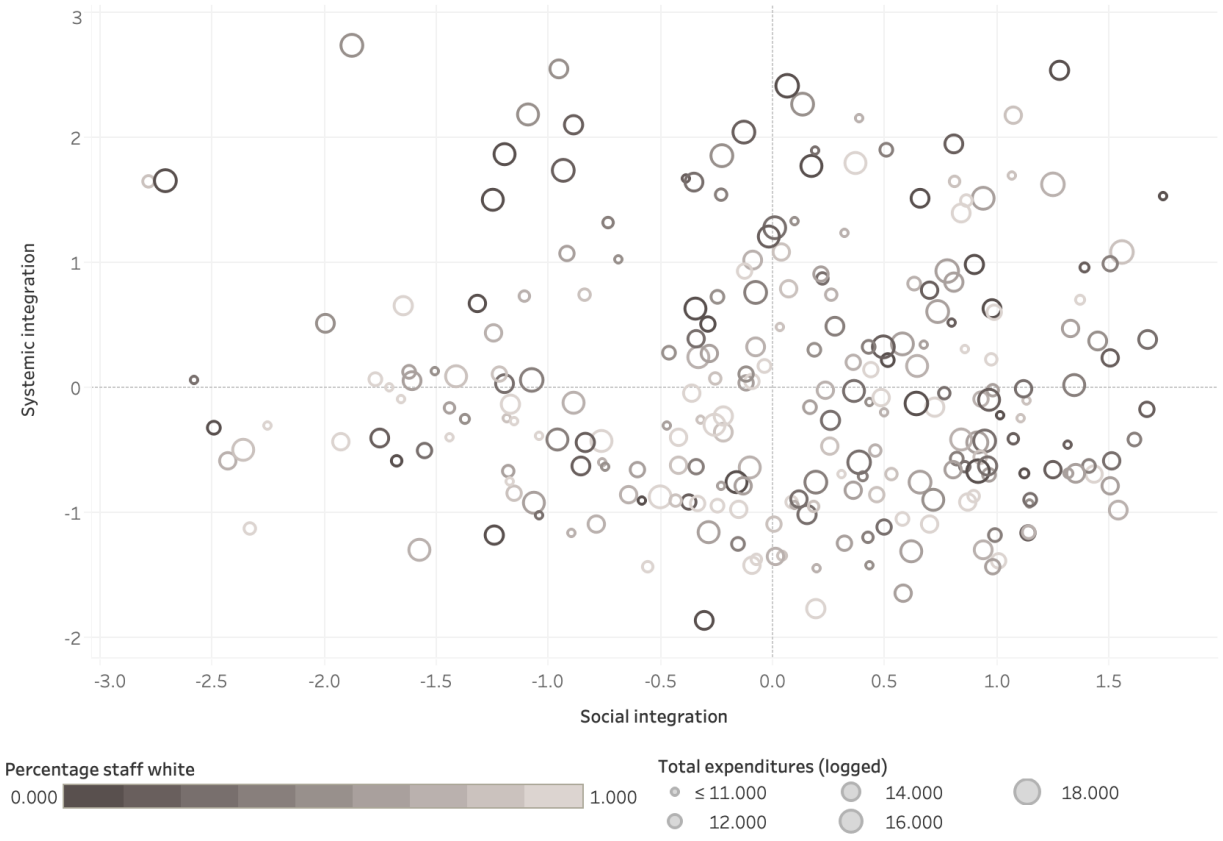
ongoing tensions within organizations that are not marked by a rigid decision-making hierarchy. Yet, these costs may be essential to bear if organizations are deeply committed to challenging social inequalities, which entails challenging inequalities in urban environments as well as among organizational members. In the findings to follow, we further unpack these two approaches to the dual pursuit of integration.

Methods

Our data stems from a longitudinal research project that examines a representative sample of nonprofits in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2019 (completed in 2020 before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic) to understand the organizational dimension of civic life in cities (Laryea, Zhao, & Powell, 2022). The project involves a comprehensive survey and selected interviews with nonprofit leaders—typically executive directors or board presidents if the organization had no manager. The goal was to examine the practices and people involved in nonprofit organizations and their relationship to the places where they are located relative to other cities (Brandtner & Powell, 2022) and relative to research conducted in the same area using similar methods in 2004 and 2014 (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Brandtner, Powell, & Horvath, 2023). To understand how organizations navigate the challenge of simultaneously pursuing social and systemic integration and how this plays out in day-to-day organizational life, the in-depth qualitative interviews with leaders were essential. Drawing on rich survey and interview data for 254 organizations, we engaged in theoretical sampling (Small, 2009b) to choose a set of organizational cases with whom we conducted firsthand interviews focused on how they relate to their communities and the organizational practices they utilize to pursue and produce integration.

We first developed quantitative measures for the pursuit of social and systemic integration, using an exploratory factor analysis, which allowed us to locate each organization in a two-dimensional space in terms of their social and systemic integration practices respectively. The indicator is based on the extent to which the organization has adopted practices aimed to further community-building, such as by strategically building trust among constituents, putting on recreational events, and interacting with constituents on a personal level, or to further individuals in the system, such as through informational events, formal advocacy, or collaborations with other organizations. We describe the measurement and validation of the qualitative indicators of social and systemic integration using survey data in detail in Brandtner & Laryea (2022). Based on these measures, Figure 2 shows each organization's location on the two-dimensional space of social and systemic integration, with great variation with respect to two crucial organizational properties highlighted as the size and shade of the data point: the organization's size indicated by the total annual expenditures and the racial composition of its staff; we will return to these aspects later.

Figure 2. Systemic and social integration by racial profile of organization's staff



Based on the extent such practices were present in organizations, we then chose a subset of organizations to interview based on their pursuit of social integration, systemic integration, or both. For this paper, our emphasis lies on the latter category of organizations that combine practices related to social and systemic integration— our particular attention is again the top right quadrant of Figure 2, identified as dual integration in Figure 1. We sought to identify matched pairs, cases where organizations were doing similar kinds of work but diverged in terms of internal structures and practices, so we could assess variation in organizational approaches to pursuing both forms of integration without confounding differences in the types of programs they offer or clients they serve. Overall, we conducted 22 interviews with leaders of 20 organizations in 2020 (in a few cases, we interviewed more than one leader). For most organizations, previous team members had interviewed their leaders in 2004, and for a few, our team conducted intermediary interviews in

2014. While we focus on the interviews, we conducted firsthand in 2020 in the findings, the longitudinal dataset (40 interviews in total) enabled us to understand how these twenty organizations evolved over time.

Before conducting each interview, we read through the organization's 2019 surveys, their former 2004/2014 interviews, and researched information available through their website and other public sources. We used a general interview guide in all interviews but added additional contextual questions for each organization based on past interviews and survey data. The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended, and lasted between 60–90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In total, 22 interviews were conducted by either or both authors (primarily via Zoom), while the remaining 18 interviews were conducted by research team members in prior years.

Our analytic method was abductive in nature (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012:169), which is a "a qualitative data analysis approach aimed at theory construction" that is gaining traction among qualitative sociologists due to its theory-generating capacity. Abductive analysis is a process of double-fitting data and theory by focusing on puzzles that arise in the data and pragmatic challenges that people face. In this case, we focused our analytic gaze on the practical challenge of pursuing social and systemic integration simultaneously and, specifically, on how leaders think about this challenge in relation to the structure and management their staff teams. As we began interviewing leaders, it became clear that they had very different approaches to managing the tensions they experienced that came with the dual production of social and systemic integration. While some organizations clearly had racialized practices and approaches (Ray, 2019), others elevated local and underrepresented leaders and distrusted consultants and MBA-trained

executives. A few sought to include both ideal types of workers at each level of their organizational hierarchy.

After categorizing organizations by these different approaches (and considering organizational change in approaches over time as staff and leaders turned over), we went back through the interviews to develop first and second order codes (e.g., axial coding) that highlighted the different internal processes organizations used as well as the leaders' justification of their processes (a form of meaning-making). We were especially attuned to when and how leaders invoked the idea of "community" as well as their efforts to build connections to politicians, business leaders, and philanthropies (e.g., "society"). The first author developed a coding scheme which was implemented with the help of an undergraduate research assistant (to ensure interrater reliability) and organized and categorized codes to examine trends across organizations and over time. Both authors met regularly to discuss key themes that emerged from the coding process. Our analysis revealed two overarching strategies that organizations used to manage the dual production of integration, which we outline below.

Findings

Pursuing social and systemic integration simultaneously is challenging because it requires divergent strategies, relational networks, and expertise. We identify two processes by which this dual pursuit is carried out, which we term *loose demographic coupling* and *community anchoring.* We highlight how each approach works, as well as its implications for the relationship between social inequalities internal and external to the organization, by focusing on a subset of empirical cases that are representative of the trends we identified in our broader interview sample. As noted

in the methods, all quotes come from interviews conducted in 2020 by the two authors, but our understanding of these cases is informed by our longitudinal analysis of each case.

Loose demographic coupling

In this section, we draw on two organizations that combine social and systemic integration to highlight the process of loose demographic coupling, wherein women and minorities are assigned to pursue social goals while leaders (who are typically male and White or Asian) focus on systemic goals. We also consider the implications of this process for reproducing and challenging inequalities.

Lonnie, an Asian American man, leads the Jones Center, an organization that provides for the needs of low-income families through early education and childcare, workforce development, and family support services. Their goals are primarily systemic – to support and empower poor families by offering critical resources at a reduced price. But given that a substantial portion of their work focuses on early childhood development, there work has an inherently social aspect, not unlike the daycare centers Small (2009a) studied. When we asked Lonnie about the demographics and backgrounds of his staff, he replied:

> I'd say that most people, probably 85% of our staff are women of color, maybe half immigrant. This may be the highest they're going to go, in some ways. The handful of professionals that we have – many have master's, so the 10% of people that are professionals here, we can have a little better living. But the staff, they are of the community or newer immigrants. This is not necessarily their perfect career, but some people have been with me for 30 plus years.

Lonnie suggests that for his frontline staff, the vast majority of whom are women of color, "this is the highest they are going to go." The comments are notable because, as the executive director, Lonnie makes decisions about career ladders. It is a not given that his staff are "stuck" career wise, but rather the result of lack of internal pathways for frontline staff to become leaders, which is within Lonnie's power to develop and implement as the Executive Director.

He went on to say: “I wouldn’t recommend this to my daughter, the career that they have, because there’s not necessarily a ladder up. We’re the poorest cousin of the education system, K-12, college, unionized, better benefits, more time off. We are asked to do the most with the least amount of resources, especially in early childhood education.” Lonnie justifies the lack of a “ladder up” by highlighting their center’s lower-tier position in the broader system that they are embedded within. Early childhood education may be an institutional field with limited resources in the U.S., but the bifurcation between “professionals,” who have master’s degrees, and the staff, who he described as “of the community” is not a given. He did not explain why “professionals” deserved a higher wage than those who have been in the organization for 30 years.

Frontline staff play an essential role in fostering social integration. Lonnie described one of their childcare sites where:

> Sometimes we have grandmothers working for us, the mother’s a teacher, and the child comes, maybe the great-grandchild comes to us now. It's the place to go because we’re close, we’re good, and we know people there. So that is kind of a community.

In short, the Jones Center’s ability to produce social integration is not due to Lonnie or the executive team living in the neighborhoods they serve or connecting with neighbors, yet their work relies on these relationships being built. Ultimately, is the (underpaid) mothers and grandmothers who are responsible for cultivating deep community relationships. While this fact will not surprise those who have long argued for a view of organizations as gendered and racialized entities, the justification that Lonnie offers is noteworthy: the staff are “of the community” and they themselves form “kind of a community” with beneficiaries. Community is lauded as an end that is valuable in itself. This aligns with Hill Collins’ (2010:7) argument that community “constitutes an elastic political construct that holds a variety of contradictory meanings” which we discuss more below.

The second case we highlight is an organization that runs after-school programs for disadvantaged youth (“Kids Club”). We spoke with their CEO, a former business executive who

had been hired to expand the systemic dimension of the organization, primarily through cultivating new funding streams and attracting high net worth donors. Sam (White man) was explicit in his commentary on how he believes the dual pursuit of social and systemic integration depends on the bifurcation of two levels of staff:

> The executive team, myself and others, as we go out and try to raise funds and do things, I don't want to ever let the team that's focused on serving the youth, the team that's focused on actually interacting with young people speaking into their lives, helping them with their studies, helping them develop as leaders, all of our different priorities as an org, I don't want those people to focus on anything other than their work.

He went on to say, regarding the frontline staff:

> That's what they're gifted at. That's their role. They're trained in that. They're qualified for that. The kids connect with them. I don't think we should broaden their scope of expectations to where they're more worried about a pitch to Amazon to get a new grant than they are about Albert that's sitting in front of them who they need to mentor, right?

Sam frames this separation as positive; he doesn't want to burden the youth-focused team with anything other than "their work." Of course, most organizations are marked by a division of roles and responsibilities based on position. But what is notable about this division is that frontline staff do not get to participate in broader decision-making processes.

Further, this distinction aligns with racial and class differences. Sam said, in comparing on-the-ground staff to the executive team:

> You'd find that [staff in the clubs] have very different backgrounds, very different levels of proficiency in English or bilingual capabilities, very different education backgrounds, very different socioeconomic status, culture, ethnicities, everything.

Just as Lonnie was, Sam is explicit about the demographic division of the staff team, which has clear consequences for representation and voice in the organization. When we asked Sam how he thinks about issues of representation, he quickly replied: "Very humbly, especially as a privileged White male," but was unable to elaborate on any concrete ways that this recognition shaped the

opportunities he created for staff to move into positions of power or any efforts to address internal inequalities within the organization.

In both these cases, leaders indicated surface-level awareness of positionality differences and the ways that their organizations are gendered and racialized (Ray, 2019). But they justified these divisions as essential for connecting with "the community." The divisions between frontline staff and leaders were not only positional, they were also spatial. In both organizations, leadership teams worked at an office headquarters while frontline staff worked at community-based sites. This physical segregation of staff (and of leaders from beneficiaries) is a further indicator of demographic coupling in organizations that has implications for how different organizational members and stakeholders interact and form ties with one another (Small & Adler, 2017).

As Levine (2017; 2021) notes, those in power often evoke the notion of "community" as an abstract ideal, thus retaining ultimate authority while seeming to empower neighborhood residents. The two cases presented here highlight a parallel process wherein frontline staff are assumed to have an esteemed, even sacred role, of community building which justifies "protecting" them from the burden of participating in broader organizational decisions or taking on more lucrative positions that are reserved for professionals. Ultimately, loose demographic coupling is not solely attributable to executive directors. Another leader at Kids Club, who also applied to the CEO role, discussed with us how the board of directors chose Sam over him because of his fundraising potential and relational network, which included local politicians and the executives of large tech firms.

Overall, these cases reveal how loose demographic coupling works and its consequences. The work of social integration is treated as separate from the work of systemic integration, which is manifest most clearly in the division of organizational members who are responsible for each

form of integration. Frontline staff are responsible for the morally valorized work of community building and are seen as uniquely capable of carrying out this work because they "match" beneficiaries in terms of demographic characteristics. But frontline staff have less power, make less money, and have fewer opportunities for professional growth. When community building is kept distinct from systemic work, this produces professional precarity and internal social inequalities (Dunning, 2019), even as organizations see themselves as challenging inequality in their urban environments.

Community anchoring

A subset of organizations in our sample developed an alternative approach to loose demographic coupling. What distinguished these organizations was their commitment to diversity in demographics and expertise *across* the organizational hierarchy. These organizations prioritized street-level expertise and rejected a division between frontline staff and leaders. For example, Greg, a White man leading a nonprofit that provides shelter and programs for homeless people, told us:

> This one of those organizations where you can crawl in through the front door on your hands and knees drunk and then retire 30 years later as the executive director. It's kind of an amazing, weird thing.

John, the Asian leader of a community center, discussed the importance of demographic diversity at all levels: "N2N is not led by Asian folks, it is mainly Brown and Black leadership." Micah, the director of a program for underrepresented college students and the only White person on staff, told us: "we don't hire anybody from the outside." When Micah retired in 2021, he chose David, a Black man on his staff team and first-generation college student, to be his successor.

Across organizations that adopted the community anchoring approach, there was strong resistance to bifurcating social and systemic goals. Staff at all levels of the organization were

involved in both forms of integration: leaders fostered relationships with beneficiaries' alongside frontline staff, and frontline staff played a role in organizational decision-making. To highlight how this approach works, we focus primarily on two organizational cases: Hope Arts (a dance school in a historically Black, gentrifying neighborhood) and College4All (a nonprofit focused on educational equity and college access in a historically Latinx, gentrifying neighborhood).

Salome, a Black woman and the artistic director and former executive director of Hope Arts, explained to us how her organization has always prioritized being embedded in their local neighborhood:

> The school had been in the neighborhood for a long time…It's *embedded*. And what our founder was good at was engaging the folks that were in the immediate neighborhood…So her community spirit laid the ground for the way we could do this, and she never made it about money. Which - when she left after being there for nine years I was like, well, we've got to make it about money *somewhat*, because it must be financially sustainable for the people who are teaching.

In order to "make it about the money somewhat," Salome explained how she eventually gave the executive director position to her White development director, Rina, in order to be the artistic director. This change was not without challenges:

> When me and Rina flipped and she was my boss, I'm not going to lie, there were difficult moments about that. Our office, we were in a bullpen basically, with no dividers and no privacy. And she'd be going 'oh my God, these files,' and I would be like 'can you come here for a second. Let's have a conversation.' Violence prevention and conflict resolution, right? I was like 'Do you see me sitting right here? I don't need all that. I know that I didn't do everything perfectly, but you need to just calm down.' She was like, 'oh, yeah, I feel you. I'm sorry.'

This quote highlights that transcending loose demographic coupling requires significant relational work and distinct organizational practices, including spatial proximity of staff and an openness to conflict and tensions. Further, it shows that while Salome gave up the position of Executive Director, she did not lose her authority in the organization. At Hope Arts, the executive and artistic director positions both have equal authority as senior leadership roles but different responsibilities.

In short, Hope Arts has never had a predominantly White or male leadership team overseeing a multiracial team of (mostly women) dance teachers. Further, both social and systemic integration efforts and expertise are seen as essential to the organization. As Salome noted, "we've got to make it about money somewhat" - to pay teachers well. Rina had the fundraising skills and social network that allowed Hope to expand and grow. The ability to acquire resources – which, for nonprofits, involves building relationships with donors, philanthropies, and corporations – depends on cultural and social capital that is distinct from the kind of cultural and social capital needed to build trust in urban neighborhoods.

But even though there was clear recognition that Hope's organizational members have different forms of expertise that shape their roles, all members were spatially and relationally proximate. On the former, Salome said: "the secret sauce of an intimate organization is – all the admin team were in one office. The hard part was overhearing everybody's conversations. But the *great* part was overhearing everybody's conversations." When they moved to a larger building with separate offices, they worked hard to mitigate the risk of bifurcation: "we were proactive about creating systems, developing protocols of cc'ing each other on email. We meditate with each other. We check in before handling business in each meeting." Even when everyone does not in a single room, the leaders prioritized organizational practices that enabled open communication between organizational members with different roles, identities, and expertise.

A second organization, College4All, showed similar patterns in their efforts to integrate socially and systemically oriented staff. The organization's director Greg, a White man, told us:

> It's an intentional thought on our part to seem professional so that we can partner with individuals and corporations that we think can help support our community. But most of our students or our parents have different [online] portals. I feel like it's our job to do the code switching. We want to make sure that young people and parents are getting support, and so we want to make it as easy as possible to get people in to make that happen. And so we're going to help translate and be that go-between.

Likewise, in terms of staff dynamics, he said:

> There's a push and pull in terms of the professional or corporate culture, and what that looks like, as opposed to people doing this work because they're focused on the values and the social justice aspect of our work. That's one of our growing pains.

This tension though, arose within each team, including the leadership team: "there's a couple of us that ran, and tend to be more grassroots, and then we've got people that are from corporate culture that are helping us to build our infrastructure so that we can continue to scale." As with Hope Arts, College4All has distinct "cultural strains," but these differences cut across the organizational hierarchy rather than aligning with organizational positions.

Community anchoring, like loose demographic coupling, has important implications. For example, Micah told us that his organization serving underrepresented college students "operates under the radar" where they are neither "a threat to the university" nor do they get "much recognition." He sees this as a strength, because they do not have to deal with "the shit and the politics." But operating under the radar may limit their ability to help marginalized student populations integrate into broader systems of university resources, networks, and opportunities.

Overall, our interviews suggest that community anchoring has positive effects on the organizational capacity to produce social integration and mixed effects on the organizational capacity to produce systemic integration. John, the director of Neighbor2Neighbor, explained that their community anchoring approach means that county officials turn to them as a trustworthy organization for the distribution of resources. During the pandemic, for example,

> The county said, "We need organizations that are good at distributing food to those who most need it, we don't want this to be the regular, 'we give millions of dollars, and then we get complaints from the community." We *need* people not hungry.'"

But on the other hand, John also discussed his frustrations with the dominant practices associated with systemic integration and accruing resources from funders. On evaluation, he said:

> For us the most powerful thing – even though folks are getting more into results-based accountability – but for us, the most powerful way to share our work is through stories and anecdotes. And I just wish that folks would - instead of wanting aggregated numbers of the impact that we made, based on these surveys…I'm not – I get research methods and all that, but it's just, I see the surveys after surveys, and I am just like, wow, you know, because that's not very trusting. Anyway, so I feel like stories you can, they're powerful, they're not only reliable, but they're also powerful.

In part because N2N resists professional practices and networking (which John associates with "networking"), they operate on a relatively small budget. Achieving scale often requires formal expertise and social connections to powerful actors in business, government, and philanthropy. Community anchoring is an approach that puts the local community first, not only in terms of the organization's priorities, but also its internal structure. This approach can be costly, especially in terms of gaining external support and organizational growth but may be essential for holistically challenging inequalities – both in the broader urban environment and within an organization's own operations. A community anchoring approach typically involves embracing tensions as a fundamental aspect of organizational life and prioritized physical proximity of the entire team. Both practices can lead to inefficiencies that a more rigid division of labor could reduce. But organizational leaders saw this as a small price to pay compared to the benefits of cultivating more socially and economically integrated organization.

By contrast, the organizations that adopted a demographic loose coupling approach prioritized organizational efficiency and productivity, and typically kept leaders and frontline workers spatially as well as divisionally separated. This approach had benefits: organizations that adopted this approach tended to grow more quickly and accrue more resources to funnel into their programs, potentially enabling them to produce more social and systemic integration in their urban environments. But this comes at a high cost: the maintenance and reproduction of internal inequalities are justified by the pursuit of greater integration, especially systemic integration, in relation to broader urban environments.

Of course, these two processes are ideal types, and many organizations adopt approaches that combined elements of community anchoring and loose demographic coupling. As such, the two processes can be viewed as a continuum rather than a duality. That said, they are opposing in that they prioritize different values and goals: community anchoring prioritizes local community participation, representation, and internal integration and equity, while loose demographic coupling prioritizes expert participation, efficiency, productivity, and measurable impact. These distinct orientations and processes may be relevant in a wider array of organizational contexts, which we address in the discussion and avenues for future research.

Discussion

Our primary goal in this paper has been to answer the question: how do organizations simultaneously pursue social and systemic integration? Through the production of social and systemic integration, organizations can challenge and counteract inequalities, especially in urban environments. But a key part of doing sociology in organizational studies is recognizing the ways that inequality in terms of macro-sociological categories such as race, gender, or class can simultaneously be produced *and* challenged in the day-to-day life of organizations (Amis et al., 2020; Baron & Bielby, 1980; Powell & Brandtner 2016). Our findings suggest that organizational structures and processes, particularly in terms of how staff are tasked with managing conflicting goals, is one of the central ways in which organizations may reproduce inequalities—even as they seek to counteract them.

Our paper identifies two meso-level processes by which organizations dually pursue social and environmental integration, with different implications for how inequalities are reproduced or counteracted. Although organizations *do* manage to pursue contradictory integration goals, the

resulting tensions underscore the longstanding sociological insight that organizations are racialized, gendered, and classed (Wooten, 2006; Ridgeway, 2014; Ray, 2019; Hirschman & Garbes, 2021). Our analysis sheds light on the complex, multifaceted ways through which demographics come into play within organizations that specifically aim to reduce inequality in their cities through the production of social and systemic integration. Internal inequalities can be legitimized by the external pursuit of equality. Further understanding when this happens in different kinds of organizations and institutional contexts is a critical avenue for future research.

We theorize one process that may be especially relevant in nonprofit and social movement contexts: *loose demographic coupling,* wherein organizational members who "match" beneficiaries are relegated to the work of social integration ("community building") and receive less compensation and are given less decision-making power. By contrast, those who "match" donors and powerful city actors are given positions on the executive team that are better compensated and come with more decision-making power. This process both underscores and extends Rivera's (2012) finding that cultural matching is one of the ways in which inequalities are reproduced in hiring processes. Boards of directors often chose leaders based on their cultural match with local elites – which often entails choosing leaders who are White and/or men with prestigious credentials but little to no understanding of the communities that their organizations serve. To be clear, loose demographic coupling did sometimes enable significant organizational growth and impact, highlighting the fact that individual organizations always operate in broader institutional fields that are themselves marked by persistent inequalities (Ray, 2019). Future work therefore ought to consider how changes among various field actors may shape pressures to pursue loose demographic coupling. For example, Barrett Cox (2021) examines how a philanthropic foundation sought to transfer grant-making decisions to a community-based board, theorizing the

interactional practices they used to do so. More broadly, changes in who has grant-making decision power can have ripple effects on local organizations, disincentivizing loose demographic coupling. A broader consideration of how our argument links to theorizing on the (re)distribution of power in organizations is a promising area for future work. Finally, we note that loose demographic coupling is evident in organizations broadly, as the highest-paying positions of leadership in firms, schools, hospitals, and other fields are consistently held by men and Whites. That said, the justifications for these divisions will vary across institutional contexts. Notions of "community" and "meaningful work" are valorized in the nonprofit sector; understanding the "accounts" for loose demographic coupling across other organizational contexts is a crucial avenue for future research (Scott and Lyman, 1969).

We also theorize a second process that supports the dual pursuit of social and systemic integration, which we call *community anchoring.* Organizations that adopted this process intentionally resisted loose demographic coupling, and placed leaders with community expertise at the top of the organizational hierarchy – typically alongside leaders with systemic expertise. This approach strives to foster interactions across the organizational hierarchy by prioritizing physical office layouts where staff members at all levels work together in the same building (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004; Kellogg, 2009) and often led to tensions within teams (such as the leadership team) where team members had different priorities and identities. Rather than seeing conflict as something to be avoided, a community anchoring approach typically involved embracing disagreement as a fundamental aspect of organizational life (DiBenigno, 2018; Shah et al., 2020). The implications of community anchoring were complex: acquiring systemic resources was more difficult but deep community relationships often led to a high degree of trust with local government officials, as the Neighbor2Neighbor case revealed. Theorizing community anchoring

is a significant contribution of our paper, given that most existing work focuses on how inequalities are reproduced, rather than how they are challenged in contemporary organizations. An important avenue of future research is to understand why some organizations are able to pursue community anchoring and to better understand the potentially ambivalent implications this process has in terms of an organization's overall capacity to produce social and systemic integration. The presence of community anchoring in our nonprofit sample also suggests that there may be a broader cultural turn away from professional expertise, at least in some aspects of the nonprofit sector, which aligns with a broader turn towards self-styled experts (Sheehan, 2022) and resistance to elite institutions and knowledge (DeCoteau, 2021). More work is needed to determine whether community anchoring approaches will grow in prominence or remain a niche within overall professionalized spheres. But if we consider other trends, whether the rise of self-help expertise (Sheehan, 2022) or or local parent groups that challenge broader medical institutions (DeCoteau, 2021), it seems plausible that we may see a shift away from professionalized nonprofits that resemble modern organizations (Bromley and Meyer, 2015) towards those that are more profoundly anchored in the community.

Our data on the racial composition of organizations' staff does not allow us to directly quantify and analyze what determines strategies for dual integration. Figure 2 indicated that organizations in the mid-range of racial heterogeneity (indicating diverse staff) run the gamut in terms of their integrative strategies. Future work may compare different levels of management more directly to examine the effects of alignment or mismatch of social and systemic integration. Furthermore, we imagine that demographic characteristics of the neighborhood and city context in which organizations interact with their constituents would influence the extent to which these practices translate into desirable outcomes for organizations and their communities. Our paper

offers a theoretical framework and some language for how to investigate the nexus of community affiliations within and outside of organizations, which we hope will lead to greater cross-over between organizational sociology and the sociology of social inequality, gender, and race.

We make two additional contributions. First, we contribute to scholarship that examines "community" as a political construct (Hill Collins, 2010). Levine (2017; 2021) highlights how the term "community" is invoked to obscure who has power in local contexts, where politicians often claim they are working on "behalf of the community" to advance their own interests. In our case, community is invoked in a different sense. Professional leaders of nonprofits, like Lonnie and Sam, told us how their (underpaid) frontline workers were engaged in the sacred, priceless work of engaging with the community, which was used to justify their lack of participation in broader organizational processes and decision-making. As Sam put it, "I don't want those people to focus on anything other than their work." Community is a multivocal term (Hill Collins, 2010; Padgett and Ansel, 1993) – and participation in and the cultivation of local communities is often seen as deeply meaningful (Vaisey, 2007). But when marginalized organizational members are the ones relegated to community-building and social integration, "community" proves thin, acting as a veneer for justifying the reproduction of inequality rather than a genuine pursuit to connect people across lines of difference. How notions of community are mobilized towards diverse (and potentially contradictory) ends is a process worthy of further analysis. In-depth ethnographic observations within organizations have the potential to provide much deeper insights on how this process works.

Finally, our examination of the dual pursuit of integration also contributes to a place-based view of organizations as embedded in their local community (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Kim, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021; Brandtner & Powell, 2022; Schneiberg, Goldstein, & Kraatz, 2023).

Organizational scholarship has long recognized that organizations have the potential to contribute to the integration of cities and communities, without distinguishing between different forms of integration (Marquis & Battilana, 2009; McQuarrie & Marwell, 2009; Marwell & McQuarrie, 2013). Integration is, in fact, a pathway through which imaginative organizations are contributing to more democratic, collectivist futures (Chen & Chen, 2021). Our paper shows that many organizations strive to contribute to both social and systemic integration, but not at the same rate. Further, internal dynamics highlight how social and systemic efforts are often bifurcated within organizations, which limit organizations' ability to advance the integration of those who are marginalized in relation to community and society. Loose demographic coupling can turn nonprofits into sources of new precarity for those low in the organizational status hierarchy; community anchoring can serve as a countermeasure against such divisions. Our findings show how internal organizational structures can create new divisions if there is dissonance between these structures and the organizations' efforts to embed in their environment. But our findings also highlight the pragmatic and creative ways through which some organizations strive to produce internal and external integration and equity. Overall, our study underscores how social categories seep into organizations – both in terms of their personnel and structure – and shape how organizations relate to their institutional environments and their ability to foster more equitable communities *and* societies.

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