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**Reception Analytical Group Interview  
A Short Introduction and Manual**

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RECEPTION ANALYTICAL GROUP INTERVIEW  
A SHORT INTRODUCTION AND MANUAL

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This article explains and gives theoretical justifications for a focus group interview technique called Reception Analytical Group Interview (RAGI). The technique is based on theories of reception research especially in media studies. Meanings are not to be found in cultural texts but neither are they freely constructed in the process of reception. They are formed in the interaction of texts and recipients in their contexts. Therefore, if we want to know what kinds of images people hold about relatively abstract things such as addiction, intoxication, consumption of different kinds etc. the best way is to present them a stimulus that has been carefully selected to correspond to the research question. The technique is particularly suited for comparative studies, because it requires that the protocol is carefully designed in advance, and it highlights the real differences between groups, rather than differences in the interview contexts.

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## Contents

Foreword and Acknowledgements	9
1 Introduction	11
2 Two Theoretical Issues	<u>11</u>
3 Action and Interpretation	<u>12</u>
4 The Concept of Images	<u>15</u>
5 Reception Analysis	<u>17</u>
6 The Structure of Images	<u>20</u>
7 Semiotic Modelling	<u>21</u>
8 Some Principles of Data Analysis	<u>21</u>
9 Limitations and Practical Advice	<u>23</u>
References	<u>24</u>



## Foreword and Acknowledgements

In 2006 The Academy of Finland decided to fund a research Consortium “Images and Theories of Addiction” 2007-2010. The Consortium includes three Finnish research teams led by Professor Anja Koski-Jännes (University of Tampere), Dr. Kari Poikolainen (The Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies) and myself. We have collaborating teams at the University of Stockholm, led by Professor Jan Blomqvist, in the Center for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, Canada, led by Dr. John Cunningham, at the State University of St. Petersburg led by Professor Irina Pervova, and at the Université de Paris René Descartes, led by Dr. Laurence Simmat-Durand.

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Since we are quite many in the Consortium, often working on very closely related topics and with methodologies that aim at maximum comparability, we decided to publish some of our work in a series that is mainly diffused through the Consortium site in the internet. In this way we avoid the delays normally associated with other kinds of publication. The series is also available to other researchers who might be interested in our methods and preliminary results, but since many of the papers will also be submitted to journals, we keep them under a password. The user keys can be obtained from [marja.salo@helsinki.fi](mailto:marja.salo@helsinki.fi).

Submissions of manuscripts for publication in this series should be sent to [pekka.sulkunen@helsinki.fi](mailto:pekka.sulkunen@helsinki.fi).

Helsinki, 21.9.2009  
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## 1 Introduction

Sociologists interview people to gain information about facts, their views on things, persons and behaviours, or about more diffuse attitudes and dispositions. In many research designs also qualitative researchers are interested in comparisons, but reliable comparative studies are rare and difficult to make. Some theorists (Firth 1995: 269; Törrönen 2002: 351) even believe that all qualitative information is indexical, i.e. context-bound, and that comparative qualitative research is therefore an oxymoron.

Our position in this issue is that a major distinction must be made between ethnographic studies, where comparisons are possible only at the level of interpretations, and potentially comparative qualitative interviews. The latter can be comparative also at the level of data, but several difficulties stand in the way, involving methods of data collection and analysis, and also some problems of a more theoretical nature. As to data collection, stimulated interview with a standardised protocol with a low degree of interviewer interference is a technical solution, but its use should be justified with theoretical arguments and subjected to some reflected principles of application to serve the purposes it is intended for. In this paper we introduce a stimulated interview technique called Reception Analytical Group Interview (RAGI) that we have developed in the course of several studies on alcohol, addictions, and lifestyle issues in general. We outline the theoretical reasoning on which it is based, present some analytical concepts that are necessary for its use, and discuss some limitations of its application.

## 2 Two Theoretical Issues

Everybody knows that human behaviour is meaningful. But where is the meaning: in the mind of the actor, in the meanings attached to the action by others, or in a “third” instance such as the collective mind shared by participants – in other words, “culture”? To us, none of these commonly taken for granted propositions is correct. Obviously, one’s behaviour arouses interpretations by other people, and these interpretations have consequences for how they in turn behave towards the person, which again will influence his or her own interpretations, and so on. Still it is very common to read sociological studies or research plans that in their introductory passages claim to explain what a given behaviour or practice “means” to participants. Quite the same with the second proposition: although a person’s own ideas about an activity cannot account for its meaning, they cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. Finally, the assumption that “culture” assigns the meanings to social life has done much harm to social science analysis of cultural representations as neglect of their context and as ignorance of the different levels of generality that such representations involve, some being universal, others quite specific to the situation in which they occur.

The Reception Analytical Group Interview -- RAGI -- is a method for avoiding all these three fallacies in empirical social research. It makes explicit that interpretation – the imputation of meanings to reality – is a never-ending process of interaction in a web of contexts and meanings. Research practice is part of this web rather than a distinct scientific procedure beyond the reach of other participants, even when rigorously applied. But research is a privileged part of this web in one respect. It is founded on precise questions arising from previous research and practical relevance, and it has at its disposal research instruments of which stimulated interviews

are one set. As the name of the RAGI technique makes clear, we use the setting of reception research in media and literary studies as a model of data collection, using carefully selected stimuli such as film scenes or advertisements as vignettes in group interviews. This paper will first discuss some theoretical issues related to the analysis of meaning in the social sciences. Then we describe the technique and explain some of the practical advantages of using it in comparative studies. Next we present some analytical tools that are necessary for the disciplined and rigorous application of the technique, and finally we list a number of points to keep in mind in planning research designs using this technique.

The common problem with all the three false propositions mentioned above falls into two parts. The first concerns the concept of “meaning” itself. Many cultural studies –oriented social scientists value objectivity in their work but confuse it with a false fixity of meaning. An objective analysis of meanings, it is said, is one that can be replicated with same results if the same methods of analysis are used, even in a different context. For us, meaning is a process rather than a fixed fact. Following the Peircean tradition, we prefer to talk about understandability instead of meaning, to avoid the objectivist fallacy. Cultural constructs such as speech, text, sounds and images are not pictures of the world, but acts of constructing the world in an understandable way. To avoid any misunderstanding in this direction, we avoid even the use of the term “representation” in other than strictly limited cases, and instead use the word “images” when we discuss the material that social sciences lay their hands on when they attempt at understanding the human experience of the world. Still, this position does not imply that the structure of the text – the image – is irrelevant for the interpretations that can be made of it. The regularities and laws of these structures is the object of textual semiotics, as will be explained in a later section.

The second problem concerns the role of meaningfulness in social life in general. Assuming that meanings exist prior to acts – as intentions, plans or projects – is a common fallacy in the social sciences as well as in everyday life, and the source of countless and often unhappy misunderstandings (e.g. when an evil intention is imputed to action that in the agent’s mind was either neutral or even friendly). Following the Pragmatist tradition again, for us action is always primary to interpretation. Actions are always already meaningful from *somebody’s* point of view, even if they are not articulated as intended or motivated by actors themselves. This has an impact on their course, for example when we call an addicted person a victim of a disease rather than a criminal or guilty of uninhibited vice.

### **3 Action and Interpretation**

Let us start from the second problem described above, that related to the meaningfulness of action. Human behaviour is never determined by encoded patterns, hard-wired in us by the evolutionary process or genetic transmission. Beliefs, reasoning, interpretations of the situation, accounting for and anticipating the reactions by others, and many other cognitive processes are always involved. In behaviours that inexorably presuppose cultural conditioning yet are not the result of rational calculation, such as religion, rituals in general, or intoxication, the symbolic or meaningful elements are particularly rich and complex.

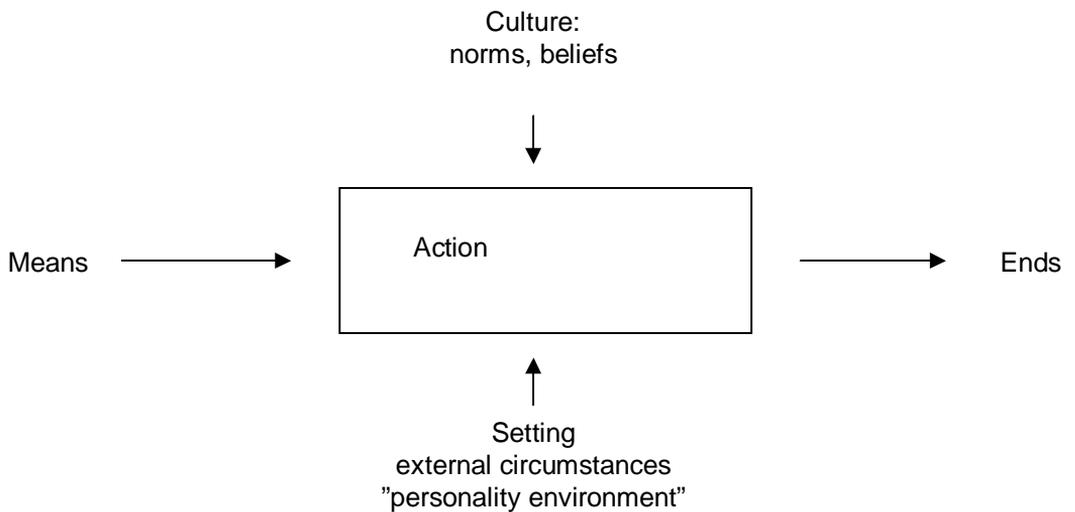
The element of meaning in human behaviour adds to it the dimension of choice, and therefore it becomes action, not only behaviour, to borrow Max Weber’s clas-

sical formulation. The choice is not free, however, but structured by our past experiences and by our awareness of others' reactions and of their choices. Influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, sociologists nowadays prefer to talk about practices rather than meaningful action in order to stress the simultaneous duality of action and structure (Warde 2005; Reckwitz 2002). But since the meaningfulness of action does not depend only on the sense assigned to it by the actor but also on the sense it evokes in others, also things that do not have a "mind" can be participants in action – to be precise they are elements in actantial structures, to use the terminology of Greimassian semiotics (Greimas & Courtés 1979: 4-5; Latour 1999:123, 303). For example, gamblers regularly assume that random series of spins in a gambling machine have a logic and a meaning, and their imageries of the game are centred on this assumption, false as it is (and they know it).

A special set of beliefs concerns the rewards and punishments the consumer expects from indulging in a pleasure known to have problematic consequences. These beliefs may be socially conditioned and sanctioned, for example when young persons start smoking or taking drugs as a reaction to peer pressure or media-induced role models. Even addiction can be compared to any consumer behaviour, and indeed was theorised as such by the economic theorists Gary S. Becker and Kevin Murphy (1988) in their landmark paper. They showed that even fully rational utility maximisers with foresight may end up in a condition that the authors identify as addiction, if we account for *internalities* i.e. the fact that present consumption sometimes increases the satisfactory dose in the future (addiction researchers would call this tolerance, economists call it consumption capital). Additional factors that might be added to choice-theoretical models such as imperfect knowledge about the risk of getting addicted (so called primrose path), personality factors that distort choice making capacity, and the valuation of pleasure that follows soon as against the devaluation of pain that follows later (parabolic discounting) etc. (for review, see Elster 1999), but none of them change the theoretical kernel of the analysis.

This kernel may be called *The Standard View of Social Action*. It is the source of the three fallacies mentioned at the beginning of this paper: meaning as inherent property of action, meaning as outside response to action, and meaning as a property of culture. In each of these fallacies, meaning is supposed to be separate from the action itself. When social action is interpreted in this framework, motives, goals, circumstances and meanings that regulate action are seen as separate elements. An opposition between objective structures and agency is constructed, and at the same time an opposition between the social and the natural is created.

The Standard View is based on the assumption that action always begins from a motive, which usually is understood as an end to be attained by the use of the means at the disposal of the actor. As in addiction theory, however, it accounts for the fact that utility alone is not sufficient to explain the outcome. Cultural norms and beliefs regulate behaviour but also situational factors are important. The situation consists of external circumstances as well as the genetically transmitted personal dispositions modified by the socialisation process (Figure 1).



*Figure 1: The Standard View of Social Action*

The Standard View of Social Action is episodic: it purports to explain isolated events or sequences of action. The agent of these episodes is the intending and planning motivational individual, placed under the constraints of socially produced beliefs, and steered by partly biologically hard-wired dispositions, partly by socially conditioned circumstances.

However, most of human life is a continuous stream of indistinct habit-based practices that we are hardly aware of, occasionally reoriented by perceptions, reflected evaluations, influences from others, and expectations that we form of others' expectations. Habits and emotions are by far more important than calculative cognition in piloting our conduct. We are hardly aware of these guides, even in activities that involve extremely complex cognitive competences such as driving a car or speaking our native language. Only when something extraordinary happens and we face a crisis, for example the engine stops or our voice breaks down, do our perceptions and more complex cognitive resources get activated. Sometimes, like when someone is driving towards us on the wrong lane, our perceptions evoke a direct emotional (fear) and behavioural reaction; when we have more time, we start looking for causes and interpretations of the situation, come to a conclusion, and find a solution. If the situation is repeated sufficiently, we build up confidence in our conclusion and develop a new routine of our solutions (Figure 2).

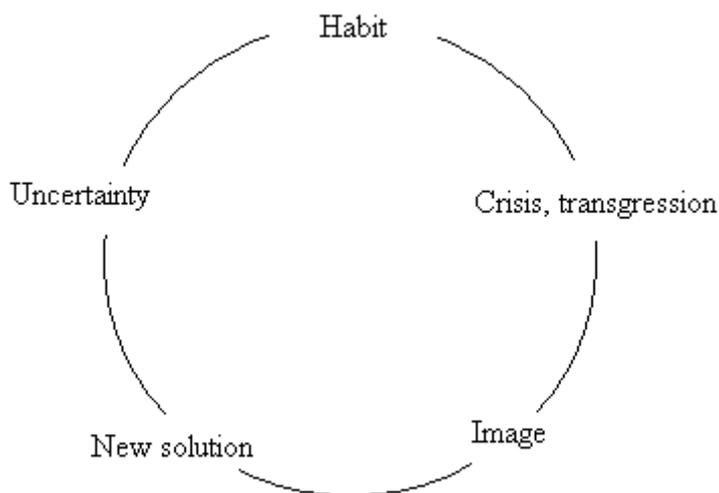


Figure 2: The habit cycle

Habit, not intention or motive, is “the enormous flywheel of society”, as William James put it (Kilpinen 2000: 13), and emotions are the engine that drives this flywheel forward. Not only individual lives and traditional communities but also modern institutions and large social systems depend on the predictable and energy-saving use of human intelligence and complex cognitive capacities that habits provide. Intentions, motives, utility calculations and planning are of course part of the process of social action, but they come more often *after* the action than *before* it, they occur only in non-routine situations, and are only a special case of our perceptive and cognitive functions.

#### 4 The Concept of Images

Many different approaches and theoretical vocabularies have been developed to analyze the cognitive moments of behaviour. The most traditional approach involves the idea of norms and values that *regulate* behaviour. Another approach, often associated with the term expectancies (Paglia and Room 1999), refers to beliefs, motives and *preferences*. *Representation* is a concept that has been used in many different senses. Criminological theory talks about *vocabularies of motive* (Gerth and Mills 1954), or about *neutralizations* (Sykes and Matza 1957). More generic terms such as *constructions* include another dimension of meaning-making, namely that the behaviour itself and the way it is thought and talked about may refer to things that are quite indirectly related to the immediate reference, for example drinking or substance use. These terminological families involve bundles of background assumptions of which we should be aware when we choose our language.

How we account for our own and of others' actions is not always directly related to what we apparently do and observe. A famous example comes from the Ameri-

can anthropologist Clifford Geertz. According to his account, a Balinese cockfight is not just a cockfight, and talk about it is not just talk about the cocks, fights and the people around but a symbolic and emotional representation of the reality of the Bali society and its social structure (Geertz 1973, 448). Another example is that drinking is often used as a symbol for masculinity, gender relations in general, the relationship between social classes etc. Also recreational drug use often articulates values such as competence, individuality, freedom from conventions or other feelings of superiority of users vis-à-vis the “ordinary society”.

For this reason the term *images* describes better the perceptive-cognitive moment in action than more goal-oriented or normative. This term was first used in a sociological sense by the founder of evolutionary economics and systems theory, Kenneth E. Boulding (1956). His idea was that in order to act meaningfully we need to have a holistic image of the world around us that extends far beyond what we currently observe. New information will change our image of the world according to its relevance and deviation from what we expect on the basis of past experience.

Unlike “construction”, the term image does not imply an author, neither does it imply arbitrary determination. Unlike “representation”, the term image does not imply that users or observers are articulate and clear about what is representing what. We use the term representation only in the limited sense that a sign or an expression is intended to refer to a particular object (independently of the fact that the reference also is a kind of construction or a conceptual object, i.e. representations of one’s self). The terms “images” or “governing images” imply that our thoughts, feelings, ways of speaking, as well as the acts and gestures related to behaviour may “stand for” or give meaning to the behaviour but at the same time signify quite different things such as age, gender and class relationships. Images are both embodied and culturally embedded in that they reflect corporeal feelings while they also articulate cultural experiences far beyond the experience of a drug, for example.

Images are important in giving meanings to practices and in rendering them interpretable to others. Images are inevitably interactive – they communicate our experiences to others, and others “make sense” of them. Their meaning is not fixed but can change and be changed even in the same context. We can play with images, so that for example expressions of grief can be intended as amusing (irony). Images always have several layers of meaning, ranging from simple perception-emotion relationships to extremely complex forms of representation that require large investments of cultural capital and high degree of reflexivity to produce and to interpret them. Images, like beliefs (which are a special type of images), have “real” effects on experience and on behaviour.

Images always involve an existential dimension, which defines social relationships between persons engaged in the activity we are talking about. Such relationships are embedded in three modes of historicity. First, they involve abstract categorizations between “Us” and “Them”, whatever the categorizations are, e. g. gender, nationality, class, parent/child. Often it does not matter how the division between “us” and “them” is made, because the important thing is a value. When people say, for example: “They do not know how to handle alcohol”, this implies that themselves they do, or at least that knowing how to handle alcohol is a valuable thing (competence). It may even be irrelevant what they “know how to handle”, because the point is to make a distinction between competent<sup>1</sup> and incompetent people. Secondly, such values usu-

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<sup>1</sup> *Competence* defines one particular type of value, which is acquired by somebody by experience or held as an innate capacity (in myths it is often described as of divine origin). Other groups of values are related to *obligations* (someone is considered a hero/traitor for keep-

ally are constructed in images of change, either to the better or to the worse. When politicians or journalists wish to draw public attention to an issue (such as drinking problems) they seek to argue that the evil aspect “is increasing”, or that it must be “prevented” or reduced somehow. The time involved here is not necessarily historical, its sole function being to articulate the values of the speaker. Thirdly, real historical configurations are also involved, for example when people use (drinking) images to define themselves as members of a group and the relationships of their own groups with out-groups.

Since images always involve values, they also involve an evaluating subject who has an *interest* in the matter. Interest can be a plan or a programme of action, but it can also be a matter of organizing hierarchies in the social world. Very often the subject is implicit, for example when the image is constructed as a story with a neutral narrator. Even in those cases, however, the narrator tends to tell the story from a point of view, for example stressing the incompetence of the drinker and articulating this value by attributing the eventual harmful consequences to this fact. The evaluating subject constructed in such images is itself an image, not of the “real” narrator but of a narrator built into the image itself, and is therefore called the speaker image (Sulkunen and Törrönen 1997b). Whatever the case, interests have an impact on our perceptions of the world and our interpretation of those perceptions. Interests result from the fact that images have an impact on the life-world and they are shaped by the stock of prior images we have about it (Figure 3).

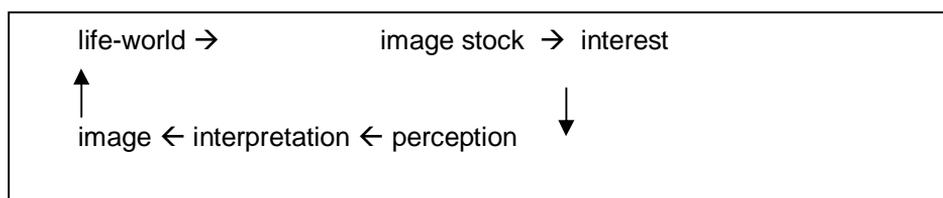


Figure 3. The cyclical nature of images

## 5 Reception Analysis

The RAGI technique is an interview procedure that follows logically from these considerations. We cannot assume to draw true conclusions on what people mean by a practice, or what kinds of meanings they associate with it, from asking them directly. This procedure would fall prey to the first fallacy discussed above, namely taking meaning to reside in the actors’ minds. For a similar reason, we cannot take cultural artefacts such as films, media material, literary texts etc. as representative samples of the culture from which they emerge. This applies also to questions that interviewers commonly ask in sociological

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ing/failing to keep a promise, for example), *abilities*, which are gained through an alliance with a helper, or a *will*, which is an innate capacity to control oneself. Competence, obligation, will and ability are called modalities, and they have a fundamental role in constructing values in images. (Sulkunen and Törrönen 1997a).

inquiries. There is no reason we should assume that even precisely formulated questions have a commonly and uniformly understood meaning. For example, the question: “What do you consider to be an appropriate way of drinking alcohol by teen-agers?” already includes terms and associations -- appropriate, drinking, alcohol, teen-agers – that may acquire different meanings in different contexts. This is why we need to make qualitative instead of quantitative research in the first place. Finally, we cannot simply rely on viewers’ or audiences’ interpretations of such samples or questions as the true meaning they associate with a practice.

In media and literary studies the issues about interpretation gave rise to a major debate in the 1980s and 1990s between “structuralist semiologists” and reception researchers, the former (being accused of) attaching meanings directly to the structures of texts, which gain their expressive power from being part of a linguistic system; the latter looking for meanings in the contextual and interest-bound interpretations of participants (only, as their critics alleged). According to critical structuralists, media texts could be studied from the point of view of their structures, keying on their way of “encoding” the world, whereby they were potentially constructing a hegemonic representation of reality, which “critical discourse analysis” (Hodge and Kress 1988; Fowler 1991; Fiske 1991; van Dijk 1987) was supposed to reveal. On the other hand, ethnographic or interactionist reception researchers insisted that media processes should be studied ethnographically, focusing on how users “decode” texts corresponding to their own interests arising from the contexts of using them (Hall 1980; Fish 1980; Jensen 1995). Given the rapidly globalising mass media world at the time, it was natural to ask whether, for example, some of the television soap-operas distributed world-wide such as *Dallas*, actually contained much “meaning” at all, at least in their stories and décor. Some extreme reception-analytical positions argued that the text itself was a “blank slate” on which audiences could insert whatever meanings were appropriate and relevant for their interests (Fish 1980).

The opposition between semiologists and ethnographic reception analysis was fierce and stemmed from two different intellectual backgrounds, the first from the French tradition, the second from an Anglo-Saxon context. It was – and sometimes still is – construed as a contrast between Saussurean and Peircean philosophies of language, but the heat to the debate probably stemmed more from the moralities of power involved, some arguing for the critical role of media studies and others assigning this role to media audiences themselves.

Theoretically, the positions were in fact not as far apart as would seem at first sight. As the American literary theorist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist Jonathan Culler (1982) pointed out, the question of the recipients’ role actually arose from the founding principle of structuralism itself: once a text is issued it starts to take on a life of its own independently of the intentions of its author or of other contexts of its delivery. Roland Barthes, a key French figure in structuralist literary criticism wrote that the text is a “stolen letter” and argued in his essay “The Death of the Author” that: “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination... The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 1977: 148). Texts are stimuli that evoke images, activate interests structured by image stocks accumulated in the life-world from prior, more or less habituated images (see Fig 3). At the same time they are surfaces on which recipients project their conceptions of the world as interpretations of what they find as relevant in the text from their point of view in the particular reception context.

From the reception analytical point of view, the text – even the apparently neutral interview question – is not a blank slate, nor is the readers’ context empty or uni-

versally constant. One fruitful outcome that emerged from the debate on literary and media studies was the concept *interpretative community* (Fish 1980; Jensen 1995). Interpretations of texts are not completely free of the text which is the object of interpretation, but they are not free of the context of interpretation either. Meaning-making is a collective affair and requires a minimum common ground for communication; in some cases considerable degree of familiarity and experience of the “laws of the text” are required for access to an interpretative community. It is this variation in the interpretations that the Reception Analytical Group Interview is designed to tap. It aims at identifying meaningful variations in the interpretation of images that have already been interpreted in the stimuli and re-interpreted by the investigators.

In stimulated interviews the vignettes bring ‘not-now’ moments and ‘not-here’ events to the here-and-now of the interview interaction. (Törrönen 2002). The RAGI technique aims to maximise the respondents’ freedom from the here-and-now, to focus on their interpretation of the vignettes. But it also stresses the importance of the research design and the questions that the research is designed to answer. All interview situations are handled in the same way, giving a written description of the aims of the study to participants already at the point of invitation, and once again at the beginning of the interview section. Also instructions about the interview session are given in writing. The interviewing itself is carried out with a sheet placed in front of each participant, containing the following questions:

- What happens in the scene and who are the persons in the film?
- What happened before this event?
- What happens immediately after it?
- How does the same person appear ten years later?
- Can something like this happen in real life?
- Should someone do something about the shown matter?

In this way, all four elements in the R-A-G-I technique are pertinent and need to be stressed in comparison with other kinds of interview techniques.

- First, it emphasises that interviews are always not only occasions of production and expression but also instances of *reception*. There are no innocent interview questions, and it does matter what kinds of stimuli are used as a start-off for interview responses.
- Secondly, the technique puts great stress on *analysis*, both of the interview responses and the stimuli that are used to elicit them. Vignettes or cues, whether they are scenes from films, advertisements, pictures or short texts, must be analysed by the researchers before they are presented to interviewees. Especially in comparative research it is indispensable to make sure that the “questions” we ask are well considered and remain the same from one interview context to the next.
- Thirdly, the technique is based on the idea of interpretative community. *Groups* are better than individuals in cases where the issue being researched can be assumed to be commonly shared at least to some extent. The technique is not very useful in analysing individual biographies, for example, but it is powerful and efficient when we are interested in different collective points of view on common issues such as causes of crime, addictions, lifestyle issues etc. But since group interviews are interested in variation, it is one of the key elements in any research

design that the selection and recruitment of groups correspond to the research questions that are relevant to each study.

- Finally, the technique is intended as an *interview* in more than just a technical sense. Meaning-making is interaction; thus it presupposes that investigators pose and formulate meaningful questions and are prepared to make meaningful interpretations of the responses they get. However, interview is *not* intended to be interaction in vivo: the role of the interviewer as well as of other elements of the context should be kept as constant as possible, if we want to focus on the interaction between the vignettes and the respondents. The interaction should be placed at another level. Group interview studies should be construed not only as data “collection” but as a phase in a continuing stream of mutual interpretations, beginning approximately when the first research idea starts to develop, to an analysis and construction of the interview protocol, interpretation of the responses, and informing the interviewees about these interpretations.

## 6 The Structure of Images

Although “meanings” cannot be captured by the analysis of texts – such as pictures, film scenes, journal articles or advertisements – alone, they are not “blank slates” either. All images that appear in the vignettes have structures that condition the interpretations which can be made of them. In turn, also interviewees’ interpretations of them are also “texts” (transcribed or not) that have structures as conditions for their interpretation by the investigators.

One class of these structures was already referred to above as the existential dimension of images. Claude Lévi-Strauss has in his work shown (see Sulkunen 2002) how cultural images such as myths have a strange but intuitively very understandable reflexive characteristic. As cultural representations of our experience of being humans, they reflect our awareness of the difference between culture and nature. For example in myths about food, nature is represented as the raw material from which food is processed and elaborated through cultural classification and techniques of preparation. On the other hand, food may return to nature by rotting, getting spoiled or dirty, or because it already has been used for food before (excrement). (Lévi-Strauss 1964; 1965). We regularly observe similar distinctions in representations of morally precarious experiences such as intoxication. The “other” is depicted either as raw, for example a child or a savage who has not yet acquired the competence of being intoxicated and the status required for it, or as rotten, such as a dirty, stinking and irresponsible alcoholic who has engaged in too much of the cultural practice of drinking but lost hold of the imagery and rituals that distinguish the experience from the mere visceral fact of being drunk.

The stimulus texts in RAGI studies can be any kinds of images, texts, advertisements, cuts from television programmes or anything else. We prefer to use scenes from films, because they are very powerful stimuli for group discussion even on abstract topics such as intoxication or addiction. In order to construct theoretically sensible interview protocols one has to have a large amount of material to choose from, and given that selecting, cutting and editing enough clips is time-consuming we have stored our findings into an archive and a data-base called the Helsinki University Addiction Clip Collection – HUACC (see Appendix 1).

## 7 Semiotic Modelling

All such existential images involve classifications, values, interests – or more generally – speaker images, but they also can be seen as elements of a narration. Very often, for example, when values are expressed in terms of competence – the Finns do not (yet/any longer) know how to ... – a time element is implied, and the time element stands for some obstacle in the way of this competence to develop or to be maintained. Classifications, values, speaker images involving interests, and narrations are all properties of what and how the text, tells about the world. Recognizing these properties in the stimulus texts and in the material that results from the interviews is called *semiotic modelling*.

Semiotic theory that concerns the classifications, values, speaker images and interests as they are described in texts deals with what is called the pragmatic level of texts. However, all texts involve another dimension as well, namely from whose point of view the world is looked at, and where the “narrator” stands with respect of this point of view. (Sulkunen and Törrönen 1997a and 1997b) For example, addiction is often described in films by narratives that focus on the emotional suffering of the near ones rather than the feelings of the addict (Sulkunen 2007). The narrator, although apparently neutral behind the camera describing the events without commentary, actually reinforces the potential alliance of the viewers with the sufferers by its very aloofness. This is often the case in persuasive texts: in contrast to what Fowler (1991) has argued, the strongest ideological impact is often gained by neutral rather than explicitly persuasive copy. In semiotic theory, the aspects concerning the point of view are called *focalisation*, and in general the structures related to the relationships between the narrator, the focalisation and the potential viewer-recipient, are called the *enunciative dimensions* of textual structures (Sulkunen and Törrönen 1997b).

## 8 Some Principles of Data Analysis

The strength of the RAGI technique consists in applying the same conceptual tools to the analysis of the stimuli (vignettes) presented to the groups and to their responses (see also Törrönen 2002). For example in our ongoing study of general practitioners' and social workers' images of addiction in Finland, Germany and France (Appendix 2), we compare these groups showing them nine clips that are based on three models of addictions that we have identified from the literature and from an extensive review of images of addictions in films (Sulkunen 2007). The classical image of alcoholism as a disease of the will is represented by a scene (*The Happy Alcoholic*) where an alcoholic sakes up in a hangover and creeps to a secret bottle to cure himself. A similar scene about gambling is from *Own-ing Mahowny* where the gambler gains back his losses yet cannot stop and loses everything again. Another type of addiction focuses on the addict's failure to meet his or her obligations. This is presented with a scene from *Once Were the Warriors* where an alcoholic man drops in a bar leaving his family waiting in the car, disappointing them deeply. As is usual, this filmic description of addiction is focalised on the frustration of the near ones, leaving the addict's behaviour unexplained. A similar scene on gambling is taken from *Bord de mer*. Finally, a third characteristic of addiction is the tendency to relapse at the slightest suggestion. In addiction theory this is called cue dependency: the behaviour is unreflectively instilled by the sight of a bottle or a gambling machine. This type is represented in our protocol by a scene from *16 Years of Alcohol* and a scene from *Going for Broke* where the addicted mother spends her grocery money on a machine she sees in a

supermarket, leaving her children hungry. Furthermore, we have selected three similar scenes presenting eating disorders for comparison.

The purpose of the study is to see if the interviewees recognize these addiction models and in what way. The analysis so far suggests that French doctors pattern their images of addiction by their long tradition of experience in dealing with alcoholic patients, whereas Finnish general practitioners emphasize the failing obligations and the suffering of others. This reflects the long Nordic tradition of dealing with addiction as an object of social control rather than a disease. Surprisingly, Finnish social workers also have adopted the medical model in terms of the reasons but not the cure of the problem, which they would trust in the hands of wives and friends.

In this way we are using the same basic structure of semiotic modelling in the analysis of the interview results as we used in constructing the protocol, but being sensitive to the potential variation in the interview responses.

However, it must be observed that the analytic apparatus is quite abstract and sociological. Ordinary people would not speak of modalities, focalisation, narrators, pragmatic and enunciative dimensions, and not even classifications or narratives. Even when these are narrowed down into something more concrete, like feelings of disappointment and suffering, the value of keeping one's promise etc., these might not be the kinds of language our respondents would use in their commentaries of the film clips. The very purpose of using vignettes in any kinds of focus group studies is, precisely, to avoid imputing abstract sets of categories to respondents' minds, but to leave them room for forming and articulating their own interpretative community.

Research is a form of cognition that attempts to see order in the world – to make interpretations of interpretations in the case of qualitative sociology. Order requires abstract concepts, but useful abstractions are sensitive to what they are abstractions of. Already this very basic principle supports the procedure known from what by its authors is called grounded theory: a principle that to arrive at scientific conclusions from material articulated in everyday language, we must start from the level of the latter (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Scientific analysis of everyday thought must be *data-based*. However, it cannot, if it is meant to see order in the world, be *data-driven*. Any study of everyday images of the world must be driven and guided by theoretical possibilities, and these can only be expressed in abstract terms. We should, for example, be interested in the kinds of values that people seem to host and cherish as regards alcohol use, consuming fashion or whatever practice we are interested in studying. It is most unlikely that their concrete thoughts and discussions about these issues leave them cold about their relationships to other kinds of people, appear indifferent in terms of values, or leave the neutral in terms of the points of view concerning happiness and misery. But these more abstract structures in their concrete thoughts and articulations must be *seen and pointed out* by the interpreters with their more abstract concepts that are motivated by theoretical understandings of the world and the ways it can be interpreted.

The guiding principle of any qualitative data analysis is therefore clear. One should start to organize the data from categories that are concrete and close to what the respondents would understand if told to them (we might not wish to bore anyone with these, however, and certainly not the respondents themselves because they already "knew all this"). Only after the data have been organized in a concrete way into themes and sub-themes with clearly understandable concepts, which may not – and indeed never do – divide the data into separate and unique segments that can be classified only in one way, is it possible to start looking for more abstract structures within each theme and sub-theme.

It must be emphasized at this point that qualitative data analysis is no less a form of art than quantitative data analysis is. The possibilities of theoretical interpretations are unlimited; the crux of the matter is that only very few of them are interesting and relevant, and among these very few are interesting and relevant from the point of view of somebody who already knows what already is known about the subject.

## 9 Limitations and Practical Advice

Stimulated interviews are at the opposite end of the scale between non-interactive and interactive social observation, i.e. ethnography. Ethnography is most powerful when it brings the alien close to us, and therefore makes ourselves understandable to us through the other (Geertz 1973). Stimulated interviews are most powerful when they mirror to us something we already think we know about our own images of the world, but make that taken for granted knowledge pass through the process of reflection through the stimulus texts.

In the particular case of RAGI the critical element of the method is the preconstruction of the protocol. It has to be based on critical reviews of theories of the subject matter; it should be aimed at relatively well-formed hypothesis concerning how the context of the subjects to be interviewed should be reflected in their images. Therefore also the recruitment plan of the interviewees must be justified and controlled: we do not believe that simply being part of (the same) culture dictates how people construct their reality and organize their experience of it. To researchers with an anthropological background this may sound excessively "positivistic"; on the other hand if we aim at accumulating our knowledge of social reality, there is no alternative to founding our research designs on what already is there in the literature. In this way, stimulated interviews and RAGI in particular is closer to theoretical sociology than to ethnographic case studies.

The advantages of putting the stress on the protocol are not only of a theoretical nature, however. Once the protocol exists and the recruitment is done, the interviews pose only minor work and can be done after very brief interviewer training by nearly everyone. This provides as well the opportunity to delegate the realisation of the interviews to project partners in other cities and/or countries.

The UHACC is a useful resource for selecting stimulus texts in any studies concerning intoxication or addictions, particularly because the database helps to identify potential candidates without viewing a large number of films, advertisements or reading a huge amount of text. Of course the UHACC cannot fulfil all research needs, and looking for new material might be necessary. On theoretical bases one has to establish parameters, which have to be fulfilled by the chosen clips. In the gate keepers' study for example one parameter was neglect of family obligation, which was part of the image of three different clips. Several possible clips should be selected and tested or at least discussed between colleagues.

According to our experience, one has to be aware of what we call genre effects. This is a general issue in media studies, for example in research using newspaper editorials as material. The format of the editorial is relatively fixed by genre conventions, and the same is true of news reports, advertisements, and films. Researchers who are not aware of these conventions take the risk of reporting these conventions rather than what is transmitted within them as their results. The same problem appears in RAGI studies. If the genre is very strongly marked, as for example in Westerns, cartoons, or well known Hollywood films, interviewees focus their attention on the genre or on the particular film

itself rather than on the subject matter. At least for our purposes we found best to use relatively low-profile “realistic” films, and we also decided to avoid scenes with excessively dramatic events such as raving or hysterical outbursts.

Information on the movie from where the clip was taken and a short plot and scene synopsis helps to avoid long discussions about the movie. Depending on original language and place of interview one may need to add subtitles. The clips should be stored on a DVD (for example using DVD StudioPro) or another highly compatible and easy to handle format. The design of the protocol has taken into account that after one and half, latest after two hours, interviewees start to get tired and the discussion “runs dry”. Not more than three clips (better only two) should be shown at a stretch, as interviewees (seeing the clips in comparison to the researcher, the first time in their lives) tend to forget about clips’ content easily.

During group interviews speakers change quickly and parallel talk is not uncommon. Therefore using a video camera helps in the transcription. Particular attention should be taken towards the audio quality of the taped interview. A wireless microphone has proven to be best for that purpose, since it avoids the deterioration of quality with an extension cord and can be placed close to the interviewees.

During the interview the participants should be clearly identifiable by a number in front of them. This place number has to appear on the short questionnaire on background data such as sex, age, profession and a brief indicator of how and why the interviewee has previous knowledge about the subject matter. Besides the questionnaire the participants receive a short interview instruction and one paper listing the guiding questions suitable for the research purpose.

The obtained video material can be analysed directly for example with Atlas.ti, Transana, or Elan, which are programmes for qualitative research. When using data from different countries in different languages it is a good idea to use the original transcripts, and make translations only for the reports.

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## Appendix 1.

### UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI ADDICTION CLIP COLLECTION – UHACC

Finding the right stimuli is one of the most difficult parts of designing stimulated interviews. Screening movies, reading texts or selecting pictures needs a lot of time and not all films might provide the clips you hoped for. Therefore a “ready made” archive is a big help. The University of Helsinki Addiction Clip Collection (UHACC) is an example of such an archive on addiction-related themes. It consists of about 450 clips from about 140 films that are described in the “CARHU” database accessible via the internet<sup>2</sup>. The description gives a short plot synopsis of the movie, a short description what happens in the particular scene, some keywords and the chronological place inside the movie. The themes of the clips cover alcohol, tobacco, illegal drug use, abuse and addiction in general. Non-substance addictions, such as gambling behaviour (normal and problematic), sex addiction, workaholicism and eating and eating disorders are also covered by the archive.

Suitable clips were identified from the literature, by using internet search engines ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) and by researching the Finnish Film Archive (Kansallinen audiovisuaalinen arkisto). All in all more than 160 movies have been screened. Clips are between 30 seconds and 4 minutes long and collected for the purpose of using them as vignettes in different types of studies related to addictions. The collection is an offer for all interested researchers, but it still does not serve all research designs. Therefore, the size and the content of the archive is intended to grow by adding further clip descriptions to ensure a usability for the biggest possible amount of researches.

The UHACC keywords are designed to facilitate selections from the clips for specific purposes. The clips are categorized by the main substance or behaviour (alcohol/drugs/eating/ gambling/tobacco/other) and by the main characters' sex (female/male/mixed) and age (children or adolescent/adult). Alcohol, tobacco and drug scenes have keywords for the specific types of these substances are used; keywords for gambling scenes specify the games; and keywords for eating disorders indicate the kind of problem (bulimic eating/indulging/fasting). Other clips are classified by keywords for sex, work, sport and other. There can be more than one of these keywords attached to each clip. Substance use is often a matter of transgressing the borders of normal everyday life, and this is marked with a keyword when appropriate. Problematic consumption or behaviour is indicated with a keyword for the kind of problem described (money/psychological distress/health/social). Finally the sociability of the consumption or behaviour is described by a keyword (solitary/in company).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/22>

## Appendix 2

### EXAMPLE: IMAGES OF ADDICTION AMONG PROFESSIONALS

The study purports to find out what kind of images general practitioners and social workers in Finland, France and Germany have of addiction. Our subjects are not specialised in addictions but are important gate keepers in handling the problem. The clips included in the protocol show scenes involving alcohol, gambling and eating. They were selected to represent three different categories: loss of will-power and alienation, neglect of obligation towards the family, and cue dependency. The first two categories are included in diagnostic manuals (DSM-IV and ICD-10). Cue dependency and relapse are often included in screening tests for addictive behaviours. Each category was filled with one clip for each addiction (i.e. alcoholism, excessive gambling and eating disorders). Hence we chose altogether nine clips: *The Happy Alcoholic*<sup>3</sup> shows the typical morning after a night of drinking. Heavily coughing Alun lights up a cigarette goes down to the yard and finds there his hidden bottle. In *Once were warriors*<sup>4</sup> a father spoils the family trip by stopping by a bar and getting drunk with his friends. The story of the *16 Years of Alcohol*<sup>5</sup> clip is about a young man, who has a relapse after his girlfriend has left him. The first gambling clip is from *Owning Mahowny*<sup>6</sup>, where Mahowny first wins at one table a huge amount, but then continues at another table and loses everything. Neglect of duty is pictured by *Bord de mer*<sup>7</sup>: After having won the jackpot Rose promises her son that she quits gambling. She breaks her promise, continues to gamble, and loses her property that was meant to be her son's heritage. Finally, the third gambling clip (*Going for Broke*<sup>8</sup>) shows, how Laura cannot pass by a slot machine in a grocery store without gambling away nearly all her money. She has to leave her full shopping trolley before the cashier. The alcohol and gambling clips are shown in pairs of the same category. After each pair a group discussion of ca. 20 minutes follows. The three eating disorder clips are left to the end of the interview. All three are presented in a row, followed by another discussion of ca. 20 minutes. In *Pullahiiri*<sup>9</sup> a teenage girl first eats a whole cream cake and then goes to the bathroom and induces herself to vomit. Because of her obesity the mother in *Gilbert Grape*<sup>10</sup> cannot fulfill her duties as a mother. Last clip is from *I want someone to eat cheese with*<sup>11</sup> where James starts to eat candy alone on the hatch of his car, after his girlfriend quits him.

Up to now (2009-03-18) we have interviewed in Finland seven groups of general practitioners and seven groups of social workers. The interviews were videotaped. Altogether, 35 general practitioners and 27 social workers participated. Most of the interviews were conducted in Helsinki Metropolitan area; two interviews in Tampere and one in Turku. Some interviews were done at the Department of Sociology, others

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<sup>3</sup> 1984 (UK) Director: Karl Francis; Main Cast: Dafydd Hywel

<sup>4</sup> 1994 (NZE) Director: Lee Tamahori; Main Cast: Temuera Morrison, Rena Owen

<sup>5</sup> 2003 (UK) Director: Richard Jobson; Main Cast: Kevin McKidd, Laura Fraser

<sup>6</sup> 2003 (CAN) Director: Richard Kwietnowski; Main Cast: Philipp S. Hoffman, Minnie Driver

<sup>7</sup> 2002 (F) Director: Julie Lopes-Curval; Main Cast: Bulle Ogier, Ludmila Mikaël

<sup>8</sup> 2003 (USA) Director: Graeme Campbell; Main Cast: Delta Burke

<sup>9</sup> 1989 (FI) Director: Lauri Törhönen; Main Cast: Sari Puimalainen

<sup>10</sup> 1993 (USA) Director: Lasse Hallström; Main Cast: Johnny Depp, Juliette Lewis

<sup>11</sup> 2006 (USA) Director: Jeff Garlin; Main Cast: Jeff Garlin, Dan Castellaneta

at municipal social and health centres. Two groups of general practitioners were recruited from student health centres, where the interview took place, too. The group size varied between two and eight participants. An interview with only two participants (3 groups of this size) is problematic for a group discussion. Nevertheless, we conducted the interviews instead of sending the participants home. For two of these groups the length of the discussion was about the same as with bigger groups, which assists the assumption that these small groups are not necessarily useless for analysis.

The analysis consists of two phases: (a) the preliminary organization of data according to concrete topics, and (b) a close semiotic analysis of thematic topics. Phase (a) combines three different approaches: First conventional categories biological, psychological and social factors contributing to addiction were applied to structure the material. With this first overview the transcripts were analyzed again a second time to identify views on the responsibility for entries and exits (Brickman et al. 1982). Brickman distinguishes four different models of coping and helping. The models are based on the responsibility for getting the disorder (entries) and the responsibility for getting rid of it (exits). If one considers for example a bad childhood as the reason for alcoholism the alcoholic is not responsible. Still he/she might be considered responsible to overcome the dependency. Then it would be after Brickman et al. (1982) an Enlightenment model, which is for example strongly supported by Anonymous Alcoholics. Consequences of addictions make up a significant part of the image of addiction. The coding distinguishes between the conventional biological, psychological and social consequences and then concentrates on who bears the consequences: the addict or his/her surrounding. At this point the analysis already moves towards the second phase, as, via focalization (Sulkunen & Törrönen 1997b) the addicts' sufferer is identified. The primary code list is as follows:

## **Alcohol/Addiction in General/Gambling/Eating: Finland/France/Germany: General Practitioners/Social workers:**

### Consequences:

Biological:

Person primarily concerned: health problems like liver cirrhosis or death

Environment: public health problems and accidents

Psychological:

Person concerned: psychological problems like depression or suicide

Environment: public psychological health like suicide rates

Social:

Person concerned: social problems, like loss of status, prison and alienation

Environment: social problems of the people around the alcoholic, like violence and family/work problems

### Reasons:

Biological:

Body: changes in brain and the body of the alcoholic

Genes: genetic predisposition of the alcoholic

Psychological:

Emotion: fun

Compulsion: non specific mentioning of compulsion or a “have to do”  
Character: psychological problems like depression, but as well character traits like extrovertism  
Social:  
Culture: modernity and country specific cultures  
Economy: economic interests  
State: laws and availability  
Media: images and stereotypes  
Family: childhood, present family structure, but as well peers, class and poverty  
Competence: of proper use of alcohol/gambling/eating

Therapy:

Biological:

Person concerned: consume less

Environment: doctors, medication and health centres

Psychological:

Person concerned: own willingness of addict to quit

Environment: therapy with psychologists, treatment and psychoanalysis

Social:

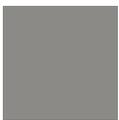
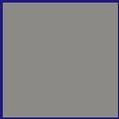
Person concerned: integration into new “lifestyle” e.g. AA/GA; religion; hobbies like sports

Environment: social workers, prison, family/friends, employer, availability, advertisements, stigmatization

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Atlas.ti. Using transcripts instead of the original audio-visual recording is a loss of information. This loss is a price to pay for efficiency, especially in comparable cross-cultural (or better cross-linguistic) study. Nine interviews were double coded for reliability. The content analysis showed a correlation of  $r=0,93$ <sup>12</sup>, i.e. for the nine interviews. 93% of the two coders' codes matched.

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<sup>12</sup> Significant at 0,01 level (2-tailed).



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