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ASCA code of ethics and the relevance of Eastern ethical theories

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ASCA Ethical Standards and the Relevance of
Eastern Ethical Theories

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Abstract

As schools become increasingly diverse through immigration and growth of minority groups, it is important that school counselors incorporate culturally sensitive ethical decision-making in their practice. The use of Western ethical theories in the application of professional codes of ethics provides a specific perspective in ethical decision-making, but may not provide school counselors with a broad cultural perspective. We discuss the use of Eastern theories of ethics (Taoism and Hinduism) and their relevance to the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors to inform school counselors' work with Asian immigrant students.

ASCA Ethical Standards and the Relevance of Eastern Ethical Theories

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the United States has undergone a significant change in demographics over the past several decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), and these changes will continue in the future. Sue and Sue (1999) noted that such changes in the U.S. population may be described as “the diversification of the United States” (p. 8). There are several groups that are predicted to show significant increases, including the Asian population. As of 2006, the Asian population reached approximately 14.9 million, which comprises roughly 5% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). A significant increase in the Asian population in U.S. schools will result from immigration (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), and the pressures immigrant students frequently experience in assimilating to American culture may likely result in the need for school counselor intervention. Consequently, it is important for school counselors to consider whether mainstream counseling theories and practices, which are primarily based on Western theories, are sufficient to appropriately address the needs of Asian immigrant students. Hill et al. (2007) found that Asians’ values strongly influence their preferred type of counseling interventions. What does this mean for school counselors? School counselors working with students who hold Asian values should endeavor to fully understand and implement Eastern ethical theories not only to inform school counseling services but also to maintain respect for Asian students’ and their families’ worldview.

The Asian Counseling & Referral Service (n.d.) [ACRS], (a national Asian counseling organization) also emphasizes the importance of providing Eastern

interventions in addition to Western counseling interventions. The significant recent increase in the number of Asian youth in the U.S. coupled with the projected growth over the next several decades suggest it is essential to understand the philosophical foundations of Asian students' and their families' values and orientation. Houser, Houser, Wilczenski, and Ham (2006) suggested that understanding individuals' philosophical and personal values are significant issues when considering ethical decision-making in counseling. For example, Feldman and Rosenthal (1990) as cited in Roysircan-Sodowsky and Frey (2003) found that Chinese adolescent immigrant students tend to prefer maintaining their traditional culture while adjusting to Western values. Given diverse cultural preferences among Asian immigrant students, it is important to understand how to best prepare and train counselors with respect to increasing their understanding of Asian student values and ethical decision-making.

A primary concern for counselor educators has been how to best teach ethics. The most frequent approach to teaching ethics is through the review and understanding of professional codes of ethics. Professional codes of ethics are generally based upon broad ethical theories, specifically Western theories of ethics (Malloy, Hadjistavropoulos, Douaud, & Smythe, 2002). Kitchener (1984) acknowledged that the use of ethical principles can provide the practitioner with fundamental rules for ethical behavior. These fundamental rules are commonly used in developing professional codes. For example, the concepts and principles of: beneficence; justice; fidelity; nonmaleficence; and autonomy provide much of the foundation for current ethical codes in professional ethics for counselors. Parsons (2007) outlined how four of these principles (autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice) are represented

in several professional codes of ethics, such as the American Psychological Association, the American Counseling Association, and the National Association of Social Workers. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2004) include standards addressing these four principles: beneficence (e.g., Principle A.1. Responsibility to Students); autonomy (e.g., Principle A.3. Counseling Plans); nonmaleficence (e.g., Principle A.4. Dual Relationships); and justice (e.g., Principle B. 1. Parent Rights and Responsibilities and B. 2. Parents/Guardians and Confidentiality).

As schools become more and more diverse through immigration and growth of minority groups, the importance of providing culturally sensitive counseling and professional codes of ethics that are culturally sensitive is critical. While professional standards based upon Western ethical views are helpful in ethical decision-making when working with Asian immigrant students, Eastern views of ethics should also be considered. Using only a Western orientation in addressing ethics has been criticized as promoting “moral neo-colonialism” (Widdows, 2007). Widdows defined neo-colonialism as “covert rather than overt attempts to convert people to one’s own way of thinking” (p. 306). The use of Western ethical and moral views has been seen as an attempt to influence others, in countries other than Western countries, to believe a certain way and that the Western views are most correct. The Western approach to ethical decision-making is founded on an analytical/linear model or cause and effect view. Eastern views of decision-making are strikingly different. Eastern theories emphasize an intuitive approach which is focused somewhat on tradition and discovering the “truth” through experience and internal reactions. Neither view is

necessarily right or wrong, but they approach decision-making from different perspectives which can affect outcomes and courses of action. Cole (2008) cited the importance of cultural knowledge in working with clients from diverse backgrounds. She further suggested that understanding client worldviews are essential to inform treatment. School counselors can benefit from an awareness and sensitivity to Eastern ethical views and values in working with students from Asian backgrounds.

To address the need for sensitivity of students with Asian backgrounds, we will discuss and review the relevance of two Eastern ethical theories: Taoism and Hinduism vis-à-vis the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2004). There will not be an attempt to apply Taoism and Hinduism to every code, but to select codes to ascertain their relevancy and help inform ethical decision-making when working with Asian immigrant students and their families. The following codes will be evaluated using Taoism and Hinduism: Counseling Plans; Dual Relationships; and Parents/Guardians and Confidentiality. However, first there will be a review of basic concepts of both Taoism and Hinduism.

Concepts of Taoism

Taoism has a long history in China dating back over 2500 years. An underlying principle of the theory is that a simple life observing and being in tune with nature is a foundation for living. A model for living in this theory is a farmer and the simple life attuned to nature and the rhythm of the seasons. There are a number of concepts in Taoism that potentially apply to ethical decision-making: yin and yang; the harmony of opposites and relativity; simplicity; reversal and cyclicity; and nonaction (Shanahan & Wang, 2003). Many in the West are somewhat familiar with the basic ideas of the yin

and yang although they may not necessarily be able to define the concepts. The yin and yang are opposites, but the goal is to provide a balance between them. Each of these concepts has characteristics associated with them. For example, the yin is considered to be the weaker of the two and is characterized as calm and cool, but can have a destructive component. The yang is described as: strong; positive; and full of energy. The yang is associated with constructive forces.

Another set of concepts which are relevant when understanding ethics and Taoism are harmony of opposites and relativity. Harmony of opposites concerns the experience of seeing and understanding the opposite of something (Houser, Wilczenski, & Ham, 2006). In other words, if something is done well then the person must see or understand that something can be done not so well. A related concept is relativity. Relativity refers to the relative nature of events. Going back to the ideas of harmony of opposites is that opposites are still within a context. Thus, something that is done well or poorly is relative. The expectations for completing a paper for example, may result in a characterization of the paper being done well for a high school student, but this is relative because the same paper may not be considered to be done well by a college student or a college professor. Counseling a student who is seeking to go to college (and may be in an AP course) may have a different intent than working with one who is seeking to enter the trades in completing such a paper. Simplicity is another important term that refers to the idea of keeping things simple and not adding complexity to life. It involves the way of living that is in tune with nature, following the natural flow of nature (Houser et al.). A counseling example in regards to the concept of simplicity may involve helping a student choose a college. The student may express

a desire to remain close to home, but could get into a college further away which has a good reputation. Should the school counselor encourage the student to pursue the distant college versus one closer to home? Reversal is another concept that is relevant and concerns the process between two opposing forces (Houser et al.). The process can be described for example as a weaker part of the opposites overcoming the stronger side through persistence. The reversal comes when the weaker side through persistence overcomes the stronger and thus is the stronger force. However, a weaker side may not be able to maintain its strength and, therefore, it reverts back to the weaker side and thus the process of cyclicity. A counseling example of the concept of reversal could involve assisting a student with study skills. On the one hand, the student may prefer to spend more time engaging in leisure activities, such as playing video games, (the stronger force), while on the other hand, the student may struggle with the requirement of satisfactorily completing his or her homework (the weaker force). In recognizing that the weaker force can dominate the stronger force and *vs. versa*, the school counselor can address this process of cyclicity in helping the student improve his or her study skills. A final important concept is non-action or *wu wei*. Non-action is focused on not disrupting the flow of nature or interrupting the natural flow of events (Shanahan & Wang, 2003). A concrete example of violating *wu wei* is building a dam which diverts the flow of the water. An example in counseling would be asking an adolescent to totally ignore peer pressure when this is a natural process for adolescents and potentially changes the flow of normal processes.

Hinduism

Hindu ethics is closely connected to spirituality and philosophy, and its origins date back to approximately 2500 BCE (Shanahan & Wang, 2003). Hindu philosophical thinking is based on numerous complex works, and the earliest of the Hindu texts is the Vedas, which literally translates to “knowledge” or “wisdom.” Hinduism is believed to have no primary author, and it is based on oral maxims received by the “great sages” of the times (Monius, 2005). In the earliest forms of the Vedas, recognition of the enormity of the universe and complexity of life is described. Brahmanical tradition and society (from 1500 BCE – 800 BCE) view the Vedas as the ultimate edict and, in doing so, law makers developed a particular social ordering to reflect what is considered the natural ordering of the universe. There are four social classes inherited at birth, which were believed to reflect the innate differences among individuals: *brahmana* or priest/teacher; *kshatriya* or king/warrior; *vaishya* or farmer/merchant; and *shudra* or laborer/servant. These social classes are divided into subdivisions of castes to reflect what was believed as the just distribution of power for the benefit of all (Bilimoria, 1993). The degree of self-control, intellectual, and spiritual attainments (greatest for the Brahmana class) determines the level of hierarchy. Those in higher positions among the social classes are required to help those in lower positions (Houser et al., 2006). The presence of hierarchy in terms of relationships between individuals is relevant in counseling. The school counselor would likely be perceived as holding a position of power, and in respecting this position students and families would likely treat the counselor with veneration. In addition, each social class has a life-cycle of obligations

(*ashrama*) to achieve: studentship, householder life (marriage), retirement, and renunciation (withdrawal from material and worldly experiences) (Monius).

In later periods of the Vedas, two important moral concepts emerge: *dharma* and *karma* (Bilimoria, 1993). Dharma connotes various meanings, including duty, moral obligation, and way of life based on the natural order of things, and it consists of engaging in actions that is expected of one's inherited social class (Heim, 2005). In other words, being moral is realizing "one's place in the ritually constituted cosmos" (Monius, 2005, p. 331). An example of *dharma* in counseling may present itself when assisting a student with course selection. The parent(s) may have communicated to the student that he or she needs to prepare to become a doctor in order to meet the family's expectations. However, the student may be interested in pursuing classical studies and would prefer taking fewer science and mathematics courses. What types of courses should the school counselor encourage the student to take? Karma consists of accumulated actions that have an effect across lifetimes, and one can achieve an improvement of karma through striving toward a higher re-birth. In addition, the Vedas set forth various moral ideals and virtues, including: truthfulness, giving, restraint, affection, austerities, gratitude, fidelity, forgiveness, non-cheating, non-thieving and *ahimsa*—avoiding injury to all (Bilimoria).

Another concept that is central to classical Hindu ethics is called *purushartha*—human ends or life goals. These consist of the following life pursuits: *artha*—material interests, *kama*—pleasure and affective attainment, *dharma*—duty, and *moksa*—liberation and renunciation. Similar to *ashrama* (life-cycle of obligations), individuals strive to reach these life goals within the limitations of their social role (Bilimoria, 1993).

In other words, each individual should strive to reach the highest human ends possible that are within one's circumstances. Therefore, it is up to the individual's own determination or intuition to endeavor toward these goals. In counseling students regarding career goals, the school counselor would strive to support and cultivate students' life goals to the fullest while concomitantly recognizing that students may be restricted due to their *dharma* or life circumstances.

The next period of Hindu ethics is based on the texts *Upanishads* (approximately 500 BCE). These works emphasize metaphysical knowledge rather than worldly endeavors, and the ideal individual is one who is able to attain self-restraint of emotions and feelings through withdrawal of self-interests (Bilimoria, 1993). Intuition, rather than reason, is the path toward reaching truth (Shanahan & Wang, 2003). During this same period until 200 CE, philosophical narratives were passed on through epic poems, such as the *Mahabharata*. The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most important and influential works within the *Mahabharata* that teaches particular social rules of conduct and promises liberation for those who carry out virtuous actions with disregard for gain (Houser et al., 2006; Bilimoria). This performance of duty with disregard for consequence is in support of maintaining the natural order of the cosmos, including people, animals, nature, etc. It is not a deontological ethics (as is the basis of Western theories—particularly Kantian ethics) in which there is a universal knowledge of what is right versus wrong. Rather, one acts in accordance with his or her nature to preserve the proper order of things and to maintain the path of dedication to God (Bilimoria). Again intuition, not reason, is central to achieving the path toward the Gita (God); thus, cultivating one's inner experiences is primary. In counseling students who

endorse Hindu philosophy, the school counselor may be tempted to encourage students to use reason in decision-making when it may be more helpful to support the development of students' intuition or inner experiences.

Although classical Hindu ethics continues to influence philosophical thinking and morality today, some traditions have become more flexible with changes in political ideology and increased economic and social mobility between classes (Prabhu, 2005). For example, marriage is permitted among the different social classes, and members of lower castes can access greater education opportunities and can be employed in once restricted government jobs (Houser et al., 2006). Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), who was highly influential in his ethics of non-violence and leading India towards its independence from British mandate in 1947, expressed his strong disapproval of the injustices caused by the caste system and oppression of women (Bilimoria, 1993; Prabhu). In Gandhi's ethics of non-violence, he extended the concept of *ahimsa*—do not harm others, to include the importance of loving others, including one's enemy. His ethics of love consists of striving for fairness, justice, truth, and peace (Prabhu).

Ethical Standards: Counseling Plans

In this section we want to discuss specific ethical codes and how both Taoist and Hindu concepts potentially apply. One code that may apply is the Principle A.3 Counseling Plans. Principle A.3. Counseling Plans of the American School Counselor Association Ethical Standards for School Counselors states:

The professional school counselor: a. Provides students with a comprehensive school counseling program that includes a strong emphasis on working jointly with all students to develop academic and career goals. b. Advocates for

counseling plans supporting students' right to choose from the wide array of options when they leave secondary education. Such plans will be regularly reviewed to update students regarding critical information they need to make informed decisions. (ASCA, 2004, p. 2).

The concept of “wu wei” or non-action in Taoism is relevant to this code. Wu wei concerns not changing the natural flow of events. Thus, in working with students on academic and career goals, the school counselor should take care not to impose certain prescribed academic or career paths as this would be in violation of the concept of wu wei. Rather, as the ASCA standard emphasizes, “working jointly” and honoring students' preferences fit well with the concept of wu wei. The school counselor should support students in discovering and exploring their particular academic and/or career path. Working collaboratively with students permits the natural flow and development of students' preferences. The concepts of the yin and yang may also apply. The school counselor needs to discover a balance and not pressure students to choose a particular career path. The school counselor should find a way to work with students in exploring their future studies and/or employment aspirations. Thus, the school counselor may initially take the lead in this discussion and guide students to discover what they endeavor to do. A violation of wu wei would be the strong pressure by the school counselor of attending college when a student, despite having the ability to complete college work, wants to enter the trades.

There are two concepts of Hindu ethics that can be applied to the code of Counseling Plans. The concept *ashrama* (life-cycle of obligations) refers to the notion of attaining certain life goals through developing one's own determination rather than

relying on outside sources, such as a school counselor. As such, in working with a student that values Hindu philosophy, it is important for the school counselor to respect the student's choice to decline support from the counselor. On the other hand, because it is acceptable to receive help from those in higher social class positions, a student born into the lower classes (*vaishya* or farmer/merchant; *shudra* or laborer/servant) may perceive the school counselor to be like that of a teacher (a higher social class position) and, as such, may wholeheartedly agree to pursue particular academic courses even if it is under pressure by teachers, support staff, parent(s), or caretaker(s). Furthermore, given the ethic of *dharma* and the importance of carrying out one's duty, students would be likely to follow the school counselor's suggestions if they perceive it as the right path toward improving their *karma* and reaching their life goals. Therefore, it is important for school counselors to consider their own position of power as well as understand students' preferences.

Dual Relationships

The Taoist concepts of yin and yang may be applicable to the ASCA code addressing dual relationships. The code, Principle A.4. states:

The professional school counselor: a. Avoids dual relationships that might impair his/her objectivity and increase the risk of harm to the student (e.g., counseling one's family members, close friends or associates). If a dual relationship is unavoidable, the counselor is responsible for taking action to eliminate or reduce the potential for harm. Such safeguards might include informed consent, consultation, supervision and documentation. (ASCA, 2004, p. 2).

The concepts of yin and yang are relevant in reviewing this code. If the school counselor exerts too much yang and acts too strongly towards the student then this can overwhelm the student. A relationship may result where the school counselor is dominant (exerts too much yang) and the student and his or her family are submissive (expresses yin). The school counselor should be aware of this potential dynamic and not contribute to dominance. This may be particularly true for students who come from countries such as China and who may be susceptible to a strong dominance by those in authority. The school counselor should not exert too much yang or influence within the family as this could result in the counselor taking over the decision-making. Conversely, the school counselor may need to be aware of acting with too much yin or passivity, in advocating on behalf of a student who may be experiencing abuse or witnessing domestic violence in the home.

A second concept that potentially applies to this code is wu wei or non-action. It is helpful for the school counselor to be cognizant of overly influencing the natural flow of personal development the student is experiencing. Too much influence and the school counselor may significantly alter the student's development and not necessarily in a positive way. An example is working with an adolescent and determining the involvement of the family through consultation. Often school counselors collaborate with parents in supporting students' academic achievement. However, the natural dynamics of the parent/child relationship could potentially be compromised or altered when a parent is invited to participate in the counseling meeting. For example, if the school counselor advocates too strongly for the student, the parent potentially loses control and parental authority with the school counselor taking over.

Hindu ethics are also applicable to the code of Dual Relationships. The Bhagavad Gita makes reference to the importance of social order and the natural ordering of all living things. As such, it is imperative that the school counselor avoid fostering dual relationships to prevent potential imbalance among individuals and the universe. For example, when working with a student who is under the custody of social services, the school counselor should take care not to encourage dependency despite the child's need for parental love and attention. Doing so could blur the boundaries of the counseling relationship and disrupt the natural ordering of people and relationships that is described in the Bhagavad Gita.

The concept of fidelity among other virtues is an essential moral ideal to uphold within Hindu philosophical thinking and may be relevant to the code of Dual Relationships insofar as school counselors should avoid exploiting their students' trust. Furthermore, engaging in dual relationships increases the risk of harm to students, and according to Hindu ethics, exemplified by the concept *ahimsa*—do not harm, school counselors should refrain from any behavior that could potentially result in harm towards the student.

Responsibility to Parents/Guardians

Another issue addressed in the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors is Parents/Guardians and Confidentiality. The Principle B.2. states:

The professional school counselor: a. Informs parents/guardians of the counselor's role with emphasis on the confidential nature of the counseling relationship between the counselor and student. b. Recognizes that working with minors in a school setting may require counselors to collaborate with students'

parents/guardians. c. Provides parents/guardians with accurate, comprehensive and relevant information in an objective and caring manner, as is appropriate and consistent with ethical responsibilities to the student. d. Makes reasonable efforts to honor the wishes of parents/guardians concerning information regarding the student, and in cases of divorce or separation exercises good-faith effort to keep both parents informed with regard to critical information with the exception of a court order (ASCA, 2004, p. 3).

A concept that applies from Taoism is simplicity. Simplicity refers to following the natural flow of nature and keeping things simple. The importance of collaborating with students' parents/guardians carries the potential for increasing complexity and jeopardizing the relationship with the student, especially with older students. Older adolescents are seeking independence and collaborating with parents may be seen as hindering or interfering with the adolescent's pursuit of independence. As such, the school counselor should be cognizant of the potential for the student to feel apprehensive about potential disclosure of confidential information. When there is a scheduled meeting with parents/guardians, it is helpful for the school counselor to talk to the student about the upcoming meeting, informing him or her of the content to be discussed.

The yin and yang concepts also apply when we consider collaborating with parents/guardians. How does one achieve a balance in collaborating with parents/guardians when school counselors may not be able to maintain confidentiality? The school counselor may need to exert more yang with the student and use more of a yin approach with parents/guardians in order to achieve an appropriate balance while

advocating for the student's best interests. This differential treatment may result in conflict with the student feeling that he or she is not being fairly treated. However, when situations of concern for the well-being of the student arise, the school counselor may need to assume a position of yang. In order to re-establish and promote balance, it is helpful to behave more with a yin response.

Although Hinduism does not suggest maintaining simplicity—in fact, the rules of dharma and appropriate behavior are quite complex, it does however emphasize the importance of maintaining the order of the cosmos. Disruption of the proper ordering of a family unit could result when the school counselor collaborates with parents/guardians. For example, let us say that the school counselor meets with a student who endorses Hindu philosophy, but perceives the student's parent to be overly restrictive with regard to the student's career goals. The school counselor should be mindful that the student may be concerned about his or her parents' reaction. More specifically, the student may be worried about his or her parents' reaction when they learn the student is meeting with the school counselor, given that Hinduism values developing self-determination on one's own rather than through seeking outside assistance. Furthermore, the student's mother, father, or caretaker could perceive the school counselor's actions as being disrespectful since Hindu traditions prescribe certain societal roles for women and men. Should there be a discrepancy in life goals for the student vis-à-vis the family's goals, school counselors could find themselves at risk for further introducing conflict within the family and the student's future. Therefore, it is important for school counselors to fully consider the potential for conflicting roles that could develop when collaborating with parents/guardians, particularly if the roles

are consistent with the counselor's own Western perspectives, i.e., encouraging student free choice.

In addition, Hindu ethics emphasize the moral values of truthfulness and fidelity. When working with students who are minors there could be times that it is necessary to include the parents or caretakers in the counseling sessions. In doing so, it is essential to be straightforward with the student regarding any possible disclosures to parents. Although this is similar to Western ethical theories, there is the added complexity of respecting the student and family's cultural background when determining what can be shared with parents.

Summary

A review of concepts from Taoist and Hindu ethics shows there is consistency between ASCA Ethical Standards. Counselors' understanding of such Eastern perspectives can help with interpreting the ASCA Ethical Standards when working with students and families of Asian origins. In fact it may be helpful to use similar terminology from these perspectives in working with students from Asian backgrounds. In regards to the ethical principle of autonomy, both Eastern theories emphasize the importance of promoting student decision-making. However, through the application of Taoism and Hinduism, there is evidence for potential conflict when collaborating with parents on students' behalf. A key foundation of Taoist belief focuses on maintaining simplicity and collaborating with parents/guardians carries the potential for adding complexity. Similarly, Hinduism suggests the importance of respecting the natural order within the family but does not necessarily discourage collaboration with parents/guardians. Both Taoism and Hinduism suggest the importance of being clear

with students about limitations of confidentiality to maintain simplicity and trust, while recognizing the need to involve parents/guardians to benefit students' academic and emotional well-being.

Considering the use of Eastern ethics in interpreting and understanding the ASCA Ethical Standards can provide a more culturally relevant application for school counselors. We have presented a review of Taoist and Hindu ethics as a means to interpret the ASCA Ethical Standards to assist school counselors in assisting students. However, there are limitations to this review. It is critical for school counselors to be sensitive to individual student needs, but an automatic use of Asian ethics or values may not be appropriate with every student from an Asian background. School counselors should consider the cultural background and specific context of the situation and match the ethical perspective to the situation and the student. For example, a student from a fourth generation immigrant family may have assumed a Western orientation to personal values and ethics; this should be considered in determining which perspective to emphasize. Additionally, school counselors should consider expanding their understanding of other theories relevant to the various populations such as those students who hold ethical views in Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, or other views. More research in reviewing the application of additional ethical theories is needed so that school counselors can better assist students from various cultural backgrounds. Lastly, future changes in ASCA Ethical Standards may consider additional ethical views beyond typical Western views in identifying ethical behavior for school counselors.

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