Abstract and Keywords

This entry discusses the critical and ongoing need for the expansion of competency related to understanding queer identities and issues related to positionality within queer communities. It will examine the evolving terminology and context through which the term “queer” has been defined over the years and relevant challenges with connectedness to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. Age cohort associations and the role of intersectionality will also be explored to underscore the multidimensional discourse necessary to build effective competency with queer communities. Last, this entry will examine implications for best practices related to establishing and maintaining an affirming therapeutic alliance between queer clients and social-work practitioners, as well as the continued need for research related to queer identities and the queer community.

Keywords: bisexual, competency, gay, lesbian, LGBTQ, positionality, queer, queer theory, social-work practice, transgender

Definition of Queer

The definition of queer as noted in the Online Etymology Dictionary is as follows: Queer: circa 1500, “strange, peculiar, eccentric,” from Scottish, perhaps from Low German (Brunswick dialect) queer “oblique, off-center” related to German quer “oblique, perverse, odd” from Old High German twehr “oblique” from PIE base *twerk- “to turn, twist, wind” (related to thwart). The verb “to spoil, ruin” is first recorded 1812. Sense of “homosexual” first recorded 1922; the noun in this sense is 1935, from the adjective (Queer, N.D.).
Introduction

Since the late 1960s and the rise of the gay liberation and gender equality movements, the queer community and queer identity have continued to evolve among members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, as well as within other communities. Since the early 1990s, members of the queer community have been receiving increased attention because of a greater number of individuals primarily identifying as queer, as well as through ongoing discourse throughout the professional social sciences literature and venues related to social media, art, and film. Regardless, the term “queer” remains rather contentious at times, yet one that encompasses “defiance, celebration and refusal within its remit” (Giffney, 2009, p. 2). Compared with other diverse populations such as the LGBT community, embracing queer as one’s primary identity is a fairly contemporary occurrence (Bronski, 2011) and has a broader and more expansive meaning beyond gender, sexual orientation, and sexuality. Similarly, the queer community continues to find its place among the LGBT community, as well as within multicultural international societies. Therefore, there are many misperceptions and assumptions when it comes to effectively and competently understanding the queer community and definitions of a queer identity. The social-work profession remains committed to working with such diverse individuals while continuously expanding practitioner competency, research, and the dissemination of knowledge related to best practices. Expanding professional knowledge and collective competencies related to familiarity with any diverse community typically evolves over time. Often familiarity occurs through direct contact and practice with members of a diverse minority population or via ongoing education to develop an expansive and comprehensive understanding of human behavior, cultural competency, and the understanding of potential risk factors that may impact members of that community. Broadening one’s competency related to queer identities is therefore always timely and relevant to ensure that social workers best meet the unique and specific needs of this diverse community. To develop appropriate competency with regard to understanding queer identities and while working among queer communities, it may be prescient to examine appropriate terminologies along with the historical, political, and sociocultural frameworks. Other significant contexts include the varied meanings, origins, and usage of the term queer among different age cohorts; the development and critical role of queer theory; and the impact of positionality among the queer community and within the larger LGBT community, among others. All of these factors hold significant implications for modern social-work practice and ongoing research related to expanding competency with queer individuals. Furthermore, it may be helpful if social-work practitioners and researchers examine the significance of a queer identity as uniquely separate from politics, theory, an academic discipline, and the inclusivity within—or exclusivity from—the larger LGBT community.
The History of Queer Terminology

The definition of the term queer has evolved since the 1500s through a multitude of relations and meanings. As early as the 16th century, origins of the term queer were defined as meaning “odd,” “quaint,” or “suspicious” depending upon its use and context. Toward the beginning of the 18th century, the term acquired the meaning of “bad” and “worthless” (Bronski, 2011). Notably, the term queer was not initially associated with a specific community or embraced as one’s personal identity, but rather was utilized as an adjective to describe behavior or the unusual. Since the 1920s, mainstream British and U.S. vernacular has used the term queer in a typically derogatory context to describe the homosexual community (Bronski). Ironically, the use of queer within the homosexual community itself was often utilized as a purely descriptive term and not embraced as an identity. The use of queer in the disparaging and pejorative context continued through most of the 20th century until the late 1980s and early 1990s in the midst of the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic. During those years, the activist group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) rallied publicly on behalf of the HIV/AIDS community. ACT-UP focused on raising awareness for continued advocacy and education, greater access to treatment and experimental medications, and a call for a substantial increase in federal funding and research related to HIV/AIDS. ACT-UP would utilize various forms of public and social protest methods, from demonstrating at the New York Stock Exchange to shutting down the Food and Drug Administration, to decry the inaction of the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations, all on behalf of the HIV/AIDS community. It was through the membership of ACT-UP that a separate organization was soon formed and aptly named Queer Nation. This new and evolving organization held a similar mission related to ACT-UP, yet Queer Nation’s often defiant purpose was to create visibility and celebrate unique and cultural differences (Fox, 2007) among the various sexualities. In fact, Queer Nation’s aim was to lend power and voice to all those disempowered, while creating unity and demanding the proliferation of social differences (Siedman, 2011). Thus, the term queer was reclaimed (Dilley, 1999) by Queer Nation and its members, embracing the term’s positive context and meaning while exuding power and authority over homophobia and other forms of oppression within society.

As queer identities evolved and associations with queer were used in a more empowering context, the term “queering” soon came to refer to perspectives, ideas, and behaviors that might resist or reject heteronormativity by contesting binaries of gender, sexuality, and even those of the typical or nuclear family system (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Notably, the evolving queer movement ultimately positioned the term queer in a uniquely relevant context within the postmodern and poststructural cultures of the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, from the 1990s through 2013, many embrace the term queer as their primary identity, conceptually traversing gender and sexuality (Walters, 1996) while rejecting categorization in contemporary or normative forms. Members of the queer community often define themselves as committed to working in coalition to create change, increase visibility, and promote tolerance and equality, while rejecting oppressive
or stigmatizing aspects of the larger heterosexist culture. The sociopolitical impact related to the establishment of Queer Nation is an important framework through which to explore evolving queer identities and understand the larger queer community, as well as to underscore the rejection of heteronormative constructions of sexuality and reappropriation of the term queer. Social workers would benefit from considering the multitude of historical, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts that influence the development of competency related to understanding queer identities and the queer community at large, rather than through reliance upon social constructs or assumptions.

Queer Theory

Queer theory affords a unique lens through which social workers may gain further insight related to queer identities and best examine potential implications for ongoing practice and research. Queer theory has an expansive scope related to the exploration and understanding of myriad sexual identities and human behaviors, often insisting that all such behaviors and identities are social constructs (Gamson, 2000). Although it is assumed that queer theory and queer studies solely have a Western connection, emergence within the broader literature and academia has an international origin. Similarly, queer communities have been established as integral parts of diverse societies across the globe, often spanning generations. Coined during a conference at the University of California in 1990, queer theory was used for deconstructing gay and lesbian sexualities (Giffney, 2009) as well as to expand the binary nature of gender and sexuality. Whereas queer theory can be applied as a theoretical framework, it also seeks to deconstruct the often constrictive binaries including male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and so on (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009). This deconstruction of binaries is an important fact to consider when understanding the queer identity. Queer theory challenges normality while recognizing that arbitrary boundaries (Hill, 2004) can often be placed around sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. This queer theoretical framework is crucial to understand because those who identify as queer can belong to a number of subgroups, personal preferences, gender expressions, identities, or sexual orientations (Kuvalanka & Goldberg). Further, queer theory assists with a reconceptualization of traditional concepts related to identity, gender, and sexuality, thus challenging the status quo within social systems (Frank & Cannon, 2010; Tierney, 1997). Queer theory further assists with an inquiry and understanding of how we know, and do not know, what is queer and what is “normal” (Frank & Cannon) such that we can find normality in queerness and vice versa. Similarly, queer theory often challenges gender hegemony to make theoretical and political space for more substantive notions of intersectionality (Walters, 1996). In that regard, queer theory affords a unique lens through which to understand queer issues and diverse identities because it also provides context for an expansive dialog related to the intersectionality of identity categories (Turner, 2000) that may include sexuality, race, class, ableness, gender, and age, among others. Ultimately, queer theory provides a
strong theoretical and useful framework for practitioners and researchers to ensure queer affirming services for the diverse communities through which they interact (Frank & Cannon).

Evolving and Fluid Queer Identities

The term queer, when used as an identity, often refers to an entire collective of individuals spanning diverse sexualities (Hill, 2004) and expanding the constructs of homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality, among others. However, it should be noted that the queer identity continues to evolve and hold multiple meanings based on individual association or affiliation. Queer individuals comprise a social group and identity fundamentally unlike others, a status group only insofar as they are not a class (Warner, 2011). Queer is often embraced by individuals to point to fluidity within their own identity, recognizing the “historically-contingent and socially-constructed fiction that prescribes and proscribes against certain feelings and actions” (Giffney, 2009, p. 2). The problem of finding an adequate description of a queer identity can be challenging for many social workers because most individuals within the community have unique definitions of their own identity. Some examples of queer identities may include youth who embrace queer throughout their school-age and adolescent years while physical maturation and sexual identity are forming simultaneously. Queer may be their primary identity and define their gender and sexual orientation alike, whereas their heterosexual peers may embrace a queer identity as a form of solidarity. Similarly, an older adult may embrace a queer identity while in a heterosexual relationship with an opposite-sex partner or while in a homosexual relationship with a same-sex partner. Typically individuals such as those described prefer to be called queer rather than heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and so on. Similar to members of the transgender community, some queer individuals may also reject male and female gender pronouns and prefer gender-neutral alternatives including “ze” or “ve,” among others. These examples definitively speak to the fluidity of gender and sexuality in a queer discourse because an individual who previously identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual for a period of time may later evolve and identify as queer or vice versa. Such examples and definitions not only underscore the fluidity of a queer identity but also highlight where some confusion lies for members of the general public or for social workers related to developing competency in the field of practice and research. Ultimately, in framing and understanding evolving queer identities within the elements of social positioning, it is important to avoid assumptions that all individuals who share similarities in gender or sexual orientation share a common or identical history or social experience (Siedman, 2011). Additionally, such uniqueness holds implications and consequences for how the queer community mobilizes, creates visibility, finds acceptance, and seeks representation among those within the LGBT community and within society at large.
Positionality

The concept of positionality infers that power, privilege, and access vary depending upon one’s identity and countless other circumstances. Discussion surrounding the role of positionality among diverse and minority communities such as those identifying as queer is not only relevant, but also important because it impacts all people on a daily basis. In fact, most, if not all, aspects of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions and memberships (Hill, 2004) that traverse gender, sexual orientation, age, class, status, and so on. An individual’s positionality relates to the power inherent in their immediate social position and influences difference with regard to access within society (Misawa, 2010). Issues related to positionality arise often, are typically related to oppression, discrimination, and marginalization, and are particularly inescapable issues for most minorities, such as the queer community, within contemporary society (Misawa). Positionality can be strongly aligned with the concepts of oppression or “othering”—whereby one group of individuals designates another group of individuals as different, or less than equal to the other. Othering often places individuals or groups outside of the legal, social, and moral framework granting full citizenship (Bronski, 2011), such as what has historically occurred with communities of color, women, immigrants, the LGBT community, and other minority populations. Martine and Gunten (2002) underscore that the concept of positionality acknowledges that we are “raced, classed, and gendered, and that these identities are relational, complex, and fluid positions rather than essential qualities” (p. 46). Similarly, members of most minority communities, such as those identifying as queer, typically hold less status, power, and privilege than members of nonqueer communities. Regardless, whether we identify as queer or another identity, many parts of our identities are chosen or inferred by others within society and are often shaped by socially constructed positions or through groups with which we affiliate (Misawa). A queer identity ultimately demarcates a positionality not restricted solely to lesbians and gay men (Halperin, 1995). Queer is an identity that remains available to all those who feel marginalized or different without having a need for explanation (Halperin). Such marginalization underscores the impact of positionality as an important construct holding significant relevance for queer individuals within the broader queer community, the LGBT community, and society at large.
Positioning and Aligning Queer within the LGBT Community.

Although members of the LGBT community created significant visibility and public awareness for diversity and equality related to gender and sexuality during the late 1960s and the uprising at the Stonewall Inn, positionality remains an inherent, yet rather challenging aspect of the movement. It is typically assumed that members of the queer community are strongly aligned and hold affiliations with the larger LGBT community. However, the LGBT community can at times be insular and struggles with positionality related to gender, gender expression, physical appearance, masculinity, and femininity, as well as with accepting or rejecting members of the queer community. Positionality remains entangled within the LGBT community, as much as it does within other minority groups, and therefore holds evidence for the need to explore implications related to power and access. Quite often, whether in the professional literature or within general discourse, the acronym describing the LGBT community is expanded to include queer in addition to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and is often represented as LGBTQ. Social-work practitioners and researchers alike should be cautious in assuming that the addition of Q to LGBT infers a strong and clear alignment among the various communities. Interestingly, members of the LGBTQ youth community often use the letter “Q” to denote “questioning” of one’s self-identity, sexual orientation, or gender identity (Savin-Williams, 2005), further complicating any discussion of the use of Q within LGBT. Regardless, queer identities and politics have not attempted to replace existing definitions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identities or the larger movement. Rather, the queer identity has come to exist alongside the larger LGBT community while creating complementary and diverse possibilities along with new challenges (Warner, 2011). Such challenges may underscore why queer remains a term widely used by those with a varied range of sexual, social, and gendered identities, which may or may not include those within the LGBT community.

Struggles for power, access, and privilege within the LGBTQ community related to race or ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, socioeconomic status, or level of education, for example, may also hold implications for inclusiveness or exclusiveness of queer individuals. Such discussion surrounding intersectionality affords an opportunity to further examine oppression, discrimination through the multiple dimensions of social relationships related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender, for example, and how each intersect, interact, and impact issues of power, equality, and inequality. The acknowledgment of oppression within and among communities can be further examined through this discussion of how the queer community fits within or alongside the LGBT community. Ultimately, inclusiveness of queer issues and identities should not be assumed to be an inherent aspect of the larger LGBT community at all times. Understanding the impact of intersectionality may also hold insight in relation to how queer individuals are included within or excluded from the LGBT community. Therefore, positionality is an important and useful concept that holds relevance for developing social-work practitioner
competency, understanding the impact within therapeutic relationships, and with regard to ongoing research of queer issues.
Age Cohort Associations

A discussion surrounding age cohort differences may also be insightful in relation to understanding queer identities. Significant differences remain among various age cohorts with regard to affiliation with a queer identity and association with the larger queer community. Younger age cohorts are more likely to embrace a queer identity, whereas individuals within older age cohorts may completely reject the queer identity. Background surrounding such distinct differences may lie within age-based discrimination and fractures that already exist within and among members of the LGBT community. Such differences often cause misconceptions and negative stereotyping and impact collective interactions among the various age cohorts, sexual orientations, and gender identities. The projected shame that many members of the LGBT community felt over the past decades—especially those cohorts before the time of Stonewall—for being “different” is precisely what underlies the need of younger generations to embrace visibility and celebrate a queer sensibility and identity (Warner, 2001). Since the early 1990s, members of younger age cohorts may self-identify as queer and openly reject other classifications such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Similarly, they may define their family or peers in the same manner, by more closely identifying with family of choice rather than family of origin, all while not adhering to traditional gendered or sexual classifications. Thus, it is relevant to also consider the more recent association with “genderqueer,” which youth use as an identity within the larger queer umbrella (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009) of identities. Genderqueer refers to individuals who completely reject the gender binary of male and female and may have a combination of masculine and feminine traits; the term is typically unfamiliar within most of Western culture (Kuvalanka & Goldberg). In a unique and starkly different contrast, older age cohorts typically reject a queer identity because many associations with the term queer hold a pejorative or derogatory meaning. Many members of the aging LGBT community worked diligently throughout the gay rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to assimilate as members of the mainstream heterosexual community, rather than to outright reject their straight counterparts (Grube, 1991). Additionally, the aging LGBT community often finds embracing the word queer particularly troublesome because of an associated history of subjugation and negative usage (Fox, 2007). For many members of the aging LGBT community, keeping one’s sexual identity a secret (Fox) was, and may continue to be, a way to avoid stigma, bias, and oppression. Unfortunately, the divide between younger and older members of the LGBTQ community appears to be widening with regard to strong associations or contempt for use of the queer label or identification as queer. Furthermore, perceptions of queer theory, politics, and identities are often perceived to be influenced by White, educated, upper-middle-class men who can more easily blend into the heteronormative culture and embody social stigmas that have historically oppressed the LGBT community (Fox). Such age cohort associations and challenges related to identification with the queer identity
Social-Work Practice and Research

The social-work profession, whether providing therapeutic services, conducting research, or preparing students to practice with the queer community, should attempt to strengthen ties at every avenue. There remains room for the expansion of competency related to queer identities, participatory collaboration regarding research methods, and a need to work collectively toward the elimination of oppression and disparities among such minority populations. Such a commitment to advocacy is essential because a history of tension and mistrust exists between the queer community and the mental-health profession regarding the pathologizing of queer identities. Such history is fraught with the medicalization of problems that were not medical (Iasenza, 2008), as well as the assumption of risk factors, often to underscore pathology where it may not be present or relevant. In 1973 the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality as a psychological illness from the second Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II) (Iasenza). More recently changes have been made and included in the DSM-V regarding altering the existing diagnosis of gender identity disorder to gender dysphoria. Since the 1990s, the emergence of LGBTQ affirmative topics within the professional literature has greatly expanded and shown great promise. Similarly, social-work academia has made slow, yet steady gains with infusing LGBTQ issues in the curriculum and field, ultimately attempting to effectively prepare social workers for practice with queer clients. In that regard, many social-work practitioners, researchers, and other mental-health professionals receive little, if any, competency training about sexual minority issues (Israel & Hackett, 2004) during their undergraduate or graduate studies or quite often during their tenure in the field.

It may be helpful to examine three central concepts related to developing competency while working with queer communities, which may hold implications for social-work practice and ongoing research. These three concepts by Winslade, Monk, and Drewery (1997) include the following: (a) an understanding of effective discourse, (b) one’s evolving and fluid positioning, and (c) deconstruction. The first concept relates to the need for an effective discourse related to understanding the role of power dynamics inherent in language, visibility, and invisibility among discussions related to working among queer communities. The power dynamic is an inherent aspect of the therapeutic relationship and must be constantly assessed and interpreted (Frank & Cannon, 2010) to ensure client empowerment. Positioning refers to the hierarchical status that may or may not be apparent for a queer individual based on their social situation. Practitioners and researchers should be sensitive to differences among age cohorts, gender, race and ethnicity, and other factors that impact positionality within the queer community. Social workers might also benefit from continued self-evaluation and conscious awareness of
their own positionality with regard to working with queer clients, which can lend great potential for countertransference. Last, the concept of deconstruction relates to the belief that privilege must be evaluated and challenged, therefore disrupting traditional power structures and ensuring awareness of the role of oppression (Winslade et al.). In that regard, future research related to queer identities would benefit not only from complementing and expanding existing LGBTQ studies, but also by forming an extensive body of knowledge related to sex, gender, sexuality, and identity and how they are uniquely individual and experienced on a daily basis (Warner, 2004).

**Empowerment Perspective and Affirming Models of Practice.**

Practitioners and researchers alike may benefit from the examination of integrative models utilizing an empowerment perspective for social workers working with queer clients. Such interventions and assessments should ultimately result in an ongoing positive experience and affirming model of practice (Crisp & McCave, 2007) for all queer clients. Practitioners utilizing affirming models of practice should clearly understand the unique stages of queer identity development; assist with strengthening self-esteem and self-acceptance issues; commit to working with relevant family, cultural, racial, and religious systems; be keenly aware of school, peer, residential, and work environments; assess a queer client’s prior counseling experience; and locate access to queer supportive networks (Matthews & Salazar, 2012) when necessary. Social workers approaching their work with queer individuals should access myriad sources to assist their clients in developing a healthy sense of selfhood that embraces and affirms their unique identity. Such practitioner skills and sources include the facilitation of connections to others to reduce isolation; assisting clients with the exploration of fears, anxieties, and self-perceptions; managing secretiveness of identity and issues of coming out with a queer identity; assisting in weighing the pros and cons of coming out to different individuals and within unique settings; evaluating the history or presence of coping skills, adaptation, and resiliency; and helping clients to realize that the process of establishing a queer identity may take months and even years (Stone, 2003). Social-work practitioners can best utilize and underscore an affirming model of practice through encouraging a client to openly define their own identity; using a client’s preferred pronouns; utilizing strong clinical insight and ethical judgments; and managing their own unexplored or internalized phobias, stigmas, or assumptions. In that regard, a number of mental-health practitioners continue to utilize and advocate for the use of reparative therapeutic treatments (Shidlo, Schroeder, & Drescher, 2001) despite empirical evidence of its harmful effects and rejection by most professional organizations, thus only perpetuating the pathology of health and mental-health issues among queer clients.

In contrast, it is more affirming to approach the therapeutic alliance from a strengths-based perspective in which social-work practitioners take into account all protective factors unique to that individual. Such factors may include a queer client’s faith or religiosity, their intellectual strengths, hardiness, sense of self-worth and self-confidence,
inherent resilience, and ability to cope and adapt and should not assume that a client is solely at risk for issues such as substance use, suicide ideation, sexually transmitted infections, or related health and mental-health challenges. Furthermore, social workers can demonstrate openness to their client’s diversity related to sexual orientation, gender expression, or queer identity by ensuring inclusive, nonbiased, gender-neutral language on all agency forms (Morrow, 2006) as well as through providing other visible signs of a “safe” and inviting office space, such as through displaying a rainbow flag or pink triangle. Although these may seem like minor details, such environmentally appropriate adaptations can provide a welcoming environment. Ultimately, such measures may lead to a more productive and genuine therapeutic relationship between a queer client and social worker.

Ongoing training and professional development are essential for social workers related to tuning in and contending with potential barriers to their work with queer clients and associated client systems. Such barriers may present as fractured support systems including family, peers, and school or work environments. Practitioners should appropriately assess a client’s current definition of family—insuring evaluation of one’s “identified” family of choice as a potential support or barrier to the work, in addition to assessing one’s family of origin in the same regard. Social workers must also manage personal and professional roles, duties, and obligations to treat; identify and address countertransference; and evaluate boundaries and use of self-disclosure. Practitioners may deny that they have prejudicial feelings or biases; however, quite often homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia, or underlying heterosexist positions may negatively impact a client’s experience or a practitioner’s ability to treat. Therefore, social workers should abide by the NASW Code of Ethics and mandates to treat all clients fairly with regard to diversity (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004) and seek supervision or ongoing training to increase knowledge and competency related to working with the queer community. Ultimately, social workers must continually promote social justice and advocacy for their queer clients, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of their needs and available systemic supports; in addition, they must seek consultation as necessary to insure continued growth and positive well-being throughout the working relationship.

Contribution

The queer community is uniquely diverse and expansive. Queer identities are similarly diverse and often fluid with regard to gender, sexual orientation, and sexuality, as well as by self-definition. Therefore, associations with a queer identity may also vary based on age cohort, culture, or location, among other factors. It is important to understand that members of the queer community typically face a number of unique challenges influenced by societal oppression, heteronormativity, the history of the LGBTQ advocacy movement, and queer theory. All of these factors impact the expansion of competency regarding queer communities, as well as understanding the critical role of positionality. Thus, social-
work practitioners and researchers alike must work arduously to support and advocate for the queer community because they are often marginalized; in addition, they must remain committed to expanding and disseminating culturally competent knowledge. Ultimately, there remains much work ahead for the social-work profession related to increasing advocacy, expanding competency, understanding positionality, and ensuring that the profession best assists with the creation of a more accepting and affirming environment whenever possible for queer communities.

**References**


Queer Communities (Competency and Positionality)


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