

1971

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Recommended Citation

Richard H. Ward, Police Role: A Case of Diversity, The, 61 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 580 (1970)

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THE POLICE ROLE: A CASE OF DIVERSITY*

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The policeman's role has come under considerable scrutiny in the past few years. Unfortunately, much of the writing that deals with the subject is woefully inadequate with regard to a true understanding of the police role in contemporary society. A major failing has been the lack of an adequate definition, and this has led to much confusion. The state that now exists, then, is often one in which the policeman is seen as an individual who carries a gun, wears a badge, and is sworn to "enforce" the law. All too often he is seen, and studied in atmosphere which gives rise to the belief that police attitudes, methods and character are more than similar and do not vary much with respect to geographical location.

Thus, while many of the aims of individual police departments may be the same, there is good reason to believe that the actual roles adopted are markedly different. Germann, Day and Gallati point out that police goals refer to two major objectives:

1. The prevention of crime and disorder and the preservation of peace (for community security).
2. The protection of life and property and personal liberty (for individual security).¹

Undoubtedly, most contemporary police agencies subscribe to such goals. However, the ways in which these goals are achieved vary according to any number of criteria. The following paper attempts to shed some light on the diverse nature of the police role today.

J. Milton Yinger defines the role as a unit of culture referring to the rights and duties, or

* The author would like to thank Dr. Nathan Adler, School of Criminology, Berkeley, and Dr. Kermit Gruberg, consulting psychiatrist to the Berkeley Police Department, for their assistance and comments during the preparation of this paper.

¹GERMANN, A. C., FRANK D. DAY AND ROBERT R. J. GALLATI, INTRODUCTION TO LAW ENFORCEMENT, (Springfield: Charles C Thomas, 1962), p. 25.

normatively approved patterns of behavior for the occupants of a given position.² Looking at the police role in this light it would be difficult to argue that the role of a policeman in a small town is the same as that of one in a large metropolitan city. Recognizing this factor, it would be more apropos to classify the term policeman as a position—referring to a unit of structure.

Another important consideration is the policeman's location within a particular milieu. The tendency to stereotype police is not uncommon. In recent years he has been described as authoritarian, brutal, uneducated, ultra-right in his politics, bigoted, cynical, and a criminal in blue.³ No doubt, some of the labels are applicable, but the evidence to back them up on a broad scale is more than insufficient. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that much police behavior is concomitant with the overall environment in which he works.

Studies of police within the sociological framework of society have been, with the exception of a few recent works, relatively rare. Indeed, "in the twenty-five year period from 1940 to 1965 only six articles remotely concerned with the police were published in the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review*, the two major sociological journals.⁴ The lack of data, combined with recent public interest in the police, has led a number of sociologists, social scientists, and psychologists to take a closer look at police in the United States. To date, their efforts have

² YINGER, J. MILTON, TOWARD A FIELD THEORY OF BEHAVIOR (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965), p. 99.

³ See, for instance, Niederhoffer on cynicism; Reiss on brutality; and Smith, Locke and Walker on authoritarianism. Norman Mailer has described police as natural criminals who happen to turn to law enforcement instead of crime.

⁴ NIEDERHOFFER, ARTHUR, BEHIND THE SHIELD, (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), p. 4.

offered little in the way of a complete understanding of the police field. The primary reason, it seems, is the lack of a clear understanding as to what the police role is in a given community. Needless to say, the problem of role definition is not unique to the police field; Bruce Biddle and Edwin Thomas have written:

Perhaps the most common definition is that role is the set of prescriptions defining what the behavior of a position member should be. But this much agreement is at best but an oasis in a desert of diverging opinion. A careful review of the definitions reveals, however, that there is one nearly universal common denominator, namely that the concept pertains to the behavior of particular persons.⁵

Because of its complex nature, though, the police role has become an almost indefinable concept. In fact, in a recent survey conducted by the author, better than 85% of the officers responding agreed with the statement: "It is difficult to define the role of the policeman in today's society." This lack of consensus, or understanding, leads to innumerable problems; both for the policeman trying to carry out his role, and the sociologist trying to study it. Perhaps Niederhoffer best exemplifies the problem of understanding police when he writes:

The policeman is a "Rorschach" in uniform as he patrols his beat. His occupational accoutrements—shield, nightstick, gun and summons book—clothe him in a mantle of symbolism that stimulates fantasy and projection.⁶

Thus, the policeman represents many things to many people. Beyond listing a number of functions and duties it becomes increasingly difficult to set down a useful definition of the police role. Bruce Smith, author of *Police Systems in the United States*, says of the policeman:

The policeman's art consists of applying and enforcing a multitude of laws and ordinances in such degree or proportion that the greatest degree of protection will be secured. The degree of enforcement and the method of application will vary with each neighborhood and community. There are no set rules, nor even general guides, to the policy to be applied. Each patrolman must, in a sense, determine the standard to set in the area for which

he is responsible. . . Thus he is a policy-forming police administrator in miniature.⁷

A number of sociologists disagree with this view, however. Jerome Skolnick, for instance, maintains that the rule of law is far from important in the police role:

Five features of the policeman's occupational environment weaken the conception of the rule of law as a primary objective of police conduct. One is the social psychology of the police work, that is, the relationship between occupational environment, working personality, and the rule of law. Second is the policeman's stake in maintaining his position of authority, especially his interest in bolstering accepted patterns of enforcement. Third is police socialization, especially as it influences the policeman's administrative bias. A related factor is the pressure put upon individual policemen to "produce"—to be efficient rather than legal when the two norms are in conflict. Finally, there is the policeman's opportunity to behave inconsistently with the rule of law as a result of low visibility to much of his conduct.⁸

Skolnick further contends that the police "are increasingly articulating a conception of professionalism based on narrow views of managerial efficiency and organizational interests."⁹ Ed Cray, on the other hand, postulates the theory that the police field is deteriorating:

For 100 years, police officers have been recruited from the lowest social classes because the job has little to offer people capable of other work. The pay is poor; the hours are long; the work is hazardous. As a result the cause and effect have been spiral. The job has low status in the community; consequently it attracts only the poorest candidates. In turn, these men go out into the community and by their actions reinforce the poor image commonly held of the cop, flatfoot, or fuzz.¹⁰

These are but a few of the views put forth by those concerned with the police field, but they are representative of the diversity of opinion. Perhaps, the best definition of the police role as an aggregate is set down by James Q. Wilson:

⁷ SMITH, BRUCE, *POLICE SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES*, rev. ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 18.

⁸ SKOLNICK, JEROME H., *JUSTICE WITHOUT TRIAL: LAW ENFORCEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1966), p. 231.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁰ CRAY, ED, *THE BIG BLUE LINE*, (New York: Coward McCann, 1967), p. 196.

⁵ BIDDLE, BRUCE J. AND EDWIN J. THOMAS, *ROLE THEORY: CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1966), p. 29.

⁶ Niederhoffer, op. cit., p. 1.

In sum, the order maintenance function of the patrolman defines his role and that role, which is unlike that of any other occupation, can be described as one in which sub-professionals, working alone, exercise wide discretion in matters of utmost importance (life and death, honor and dishonor) in an environment that is apprehensive and perhaps hostile.¹¹

Nevertheless, the disparity between individual policemen, individual police departments and individual geographic locations makes this definition, at best, a guideline with which to better understand the police role.

ROLE EXPECTATION AND POLICE CONFLICT

A primary consideration which, heretofore, has been grossly overlooked in police research is the relationship between police service and the total community.¹² The tendency to study police in a microscopic, rather than macroscopic, light is prevalent, thus creating a vacuum-like setting in which outside stimuli are overlooked or ignored. Furthermore, there is a proclivity toward generalization of findings to the whole police sphere. Thus, if a study shows policemen in New York to be "authoritarian" it is often assumed that all policemen are authoritarian.

The fallacy in this approach is twofold; first of all, police work does vary quite considerably from area to area and, especially and most important, the role expectation, or culture, within communities varies markedly. Role expectation is best described as the way an individual, or community, believes an individual will or ought to act in a given situation. Culture, as defined by Yinger, can be thought of as the system of *norms shared* by the members of a society, the prescriptions and proscriptions indicating how things should be done or should be appraised.¹³ The difference between role expectation and culture can best be thought of in terms of individuals and individual groups—with their own expectations—in contrast to the larger society which establishes the community norms. For example, a group of drug addicts might have different expectations than the local Chamber of Commerce with regard to the way policemen institute searches; and the

culture, in effect, establishes the norms in which the policeman is expected to conform.¹⁴

The policeman, then, in any given situation, is expected to react in a certain way by a number of persons; i.e. the supervisor, the public, the adversary, etc. Often these expectations lead to a situation in which the officer must choose between one or more alternatives at variance with the expectations of those concerned. Should he make an illegal search? Should he follow the letter of the law? Should he make an arrest to satisfy a businessman, although he knows the sergeant will be angry? Should he slug a prisoner who is "asking for it"? Such problems lead to role conflict. Yinger defines four types of role conflict:

1. Internal role conflict occurs when an individual has internalized a role that includes contradictory expectations or when he occupies two or more positions that carry incompatible role expectations.
2. External role conflict occurs when an individual is confronted with incompatible expectations from two or more persons in his position network or networks.
3. Intrarole conflict occurs when an individual perceives that others hold different expectations for him as the incumbent of a single position.
4. Interrole conflict occurs when an individual perceives that others hold different expectations of him as the incumbent of two or more positions. (In any of these conflict situations they may or may not be perceived or recognized by the individual.)¹⁵

The various categories of role conflict are not necessarily separate entities, and the expectations that lead to role conflict may be legitimate or illegitimate. Thus, on the basis of these four variables there are sixteen types of role conflict that can possibly be designated.

One other designation is deemed noteworthy, and it is what Yinger defines as internalized role¹⁶—which refers to that part of the self which represents a given individual's tendencies to perform a role in a given way. This designation differs from role in that it is more closely connected to the individual's predisposition to carry out his role in a certain way.

¹⁴ As Yinger notes, these norms may be covert and poorly verbalized, but not lacking in power to influence behavior. Thus, while Supreme Court decisions prohibit illegal searches, there may be local norms which permit them.

¹⁵ Op. cit., pp. 115-117.

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 99.

¹¹ WILSON, JAMES Q., *VARIETIES OF POLICE BEHAVIOR*, (Cambridge, Md.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 30.

¹² Skolnick, and especially Wilson, are two exceptions.

¹³ Yinger, op. cit., p. 74.

Turning now to a discussion of these factors and their influence on the police, it becomes necessary to qualify them as being general observations which could have varying degrees of validity with respect to individual police departments. No doubt, all policemen, as are all people, faced with role expectation and role conflict. It would appear, however, that multitudinous expectations placed on police have contributed, in no small part, to the confusion that now exists in literature about them.

A great deal has been written and said about the reaction of police at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. Out of the maelstrom has emerged the term "police riot," and it has now become a common phrase in many newspapers across the nation. The result of this publicity has been to link other police departments with Chicago and make comparisons therefrom.¹⁷ Furthermore, many of the critics who have deplored the Chicago violence fail to consider the overall implications and interrelated network surrounding the action taken by police. For instance, there is some reason to believe that the police, for the most part, were living up to role expectations in taking a firm stand against demonstrators; not only by the citizenry and the city government, but by the demonstrators as well.¹⁸ Also, according to a Gallup poll taken right after the incident, 56% of the nation's adults approved of the way Chicago police dealt with protestors.¹⁹ True, there may be a different public attitude now, but there is some reason to believe that, perhaps, the Chicago police were reacting to something entirely different than prejudice against demonstrators, notably role expectation.

It is to this premise that many observers of the police fail to look. There is, within a system, a given culture which defines, for the most part, the manner in which police operate.²⁰ These are not necessarily written rules (laws, ordinances, procedure, etc.) but, rather, "unwritten" expectations for a particular action. Often they are in conflict

¹⁷ Police work is one of the few occupations in which a "share" of the guilt for something must not only be borne by those involved, but often by others who have no connection other than the occupational title policeman.

¹⁸ See, for example, *The Walker Report, RIGHTS IN CONFLICT*, (New York: Signet Books, 1968), especially pp. 17, 38, 72.

¹⁹ GALLUP, GEORGE, *A Well Done for Chicago Police*, *SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER*, September 18, 1968, p. 5.

²⁰ This is prescribed by the community, the Department, and an individual's peers.

with other rules or laws. Thus, we may find that such things as free meals, gratuities, and overlooking certain violations, while against formal rules, are within the confines or norms of a particular system. Indeed, a policeman is often *expected* to abide by them, and may be considered "deviant" if he does not. The use of firearms is another interesting case. A great deal has been written and said about indiscriminate shooting by police, yet, for the most part,²¹ a policeman generally fires his weapon in a situation that is within certain limits. For example, while it may be permissible for a police officer, legally, to fire at a stolen auto, where it is a felony offense, most police officers would not do so because there is the recognition that usually a youth is involved, and shooting a youngster is generally outside expected behavior. The same situation exists on college campuses; where police are faced with situations in which they might otherwise shoot, they are *expected* not to shoot. However, they may be expected to react in other ways, such as with clubs or chemical agents.

There is, however, another side to the coin. Albeit, police are expected to act in a certain way by a number of individuals, usually those with the most say or political power. In virtually every instance there are those who expect the police to act in another way. Thus, the campus dissident may expect the police to rough him up; the newly elected candidate may expect the police to be thoroughly honest; and the local citizens group may expect the policeman to take a strong stand when handling minority groups. These factors contribute to role conflict. There is also the policeman's inner feelings about his role. He may not feel that it is professional to accept free meals; he may not want to make a certain arrest; or he may not feel that it is proper to shoot looters in a riot situation. With regard to the rule of law, Edwin Lemert notes:

... It can also be held that professionalized police today generally play regulatory roles which are more directly pointed to the end of maximum protection for the community than they are to enforcement of the criminal law. This is due in no small part to *value dilemmas the policeman experiences*, coupled with the limited time and energy he has available for the task. (emphasis added).²²

²¹ This would exclude those officers who do get involved in shooting incidents which are not "acceptable"—such as getting drunk and shooting someone. It is the author's opinion that these incidents are, on the whole, rare.

²² LEMERT, EDWIN M., *HUMAN DEVIANCE, SOCIAL*

The concepts of intrarole and interrole conflict add another dimension. In intrarole conflict the officer may, or may not, perceive that others hold different expectations of him as a policeman. His supervisor, his family, the businessman, the kids on the corner, and the person he is arresting may all have different expectations of him. Given a hypothetical situation, let us assume that a police officer is told by his superior to clear a certain corner of youths, who have caused the local businessman to make a complaint. The police officer is expected to obey the order but realizes that the youths have no place to go. He must satisfy the business man, who expects the policeman to make an arrest; he must handle the youths, who expect him to be tough; and if he does make an arrest the suspect may expect him to lie in court.

Also, interrole conflict may be apparent, or non apparent to the individual. The policeman may be a father, a member of the youth council, and a college graduate; and in the above situation all these factors may have some bearing. As a father he may identify the youth's actions with those of his own family; he may feel that the court will only hurt the youth; and he may be expected to have a better understanding of the situation because of his education.²³

Finally, as noted, the various conflicts are not separate entities but, rather, react in a conglomerate way to produce role conflict. As Yinger notes, "Distinguishing clearly between role, internalized role, and role behavior entails difficulties,"²⁴ and the same is true with regard to role conflict. Nevertheless, too much of the literature that deals with the police fails to recognize the variable influences that create role behavior and, instead, focus upon a reification of such terms as "authoritarian," "prejudice," "cynical," etc. to explain police behavior.²⁵

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH

What is needed, then, is a methodological model designed to study the police as a part of the total system.

PROBLEMS, AND SOCIAL CONTROL, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 23.

²³ An example being the New York City Police Department, which recently required a college background for those assigned to the Youth Aid Bureau.

²⁴ Yinger, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

²⁵ Which is not to say that they have no value as variables in a system network. But to say that police may be prejudiced, without studying the system, offers little useful information.

To understand the influence of a position or behavior, we need to relate it not only to the personalities of the occupants and to the network of reciprocal positions with which it is connected, but also to the larger community and society structures within which it operates.²⁶

The task is by no means simple, but is primary to a full understanding of police behavior. The terms "field theory" or "systems analysis" relate to such an approach and, while a number of theoretical problems continue to exist in these theories, they are becoming more widely accepted by sociologists, social scientists, and psychologists.

As Herbert Blumer has pointed out, a major problem of the variable analysis technique is the lack of rules, guides, limitations, and prohibitions with regard to selecting variables. He also cites the absence of generic variables (variables that stand for abstract categories) and a "here and now" relationship (which would include a picture or understanding of the total context).²⁷ Nevertheless, as Yinger notes:

When human behavior in a natural situation is under analysis, studies concerned with the interplay of several variables are particularly valuable as complements to more abstract research procedures.²⁸

The problems of choosing variables, and assigning weight to them, are manifold, and beyond the scope of this paper; however, table 1 indicates a theoretical approach to a study of the police. It should be noted that this is a theoretical model and open to question.

In any study of this nature care must be taken so as not to lose focus on the system under study. A recent newspaper article headlines, "Science Now Screens Out Men Who Will Be 'Bad Cops'." The article claims that scientists working with the Chicago Police Department have perfected tests to screen out bad cops.²⁹ The findings, according to the project director, could be used to predict which patrolmen would lose control in a riot or in the face of obscene taunts or other provocation. The report "rejected a widely held theory that an aggressive patrolman who makes many arrests is a

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 128.

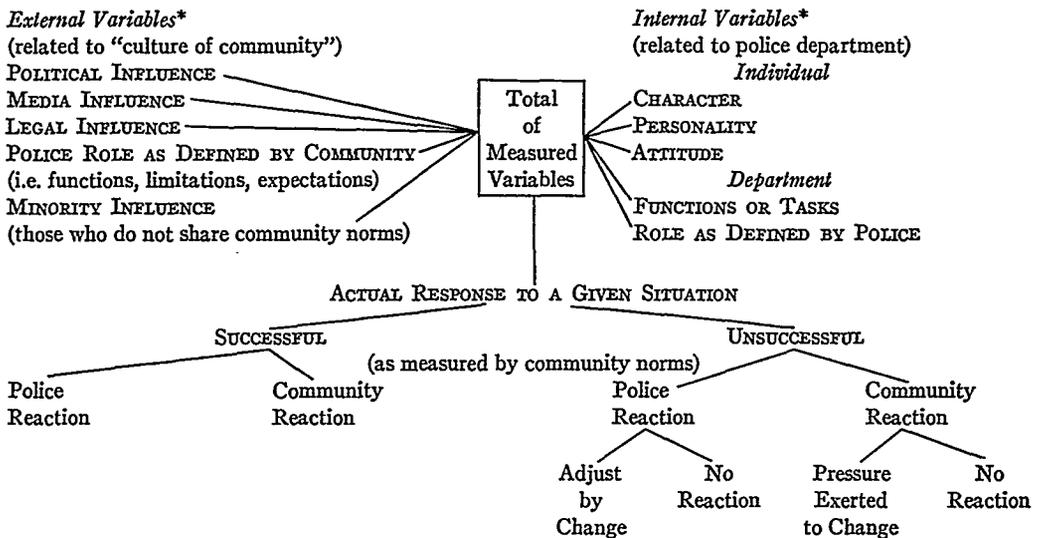
²⁷ BLUMER, HERBERT, *Sociological Analysis and the Variable*, AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW, December, 1956, pp. 683-4.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

²⁹ Science Now Screens Out Men Who Will Be 'Bad Cops', SAN FRANCISCO SUNDAY EXAMINER AND CHRONICLE, Feb. 9, 1969, p. 9.

Table 1

THEORETICAL MODEL OF A POLICE RESEARCH DESIGN



A variable measure would be used at each level and an effort made to establish criteria for successful police operations, with a view toward modifying the police role where necessary.

* This is an incomplete list of variables, and merely highlights the approach.

good patrolman;" that "a man who needs a 'badge' and a 'gun' as a symbol of authority and prestige is a bad policeman"; and concluded that the "essential attributes' for a patrolman were found to be stability and cooperation."

Nowhere in the article is the term "bad policeman" defined, and the newspaper account fails to take cognizance of the fact that Chicago police may be quite different from New York or California police; indeed, such a warning is made in the report. Furthermore, there is a question as to the usefulness of the report in the totality of the system. If a policeman should not be aggressive and make many arrests, who will make them? Will the public stand still if crime rates rise because of a lack of "aggressiveness" in a police force? What kind of a job do those men who do not "blow up" do? These are, of course, rhetorical questions, but point up the problems of limiting research to a group. Theoretically, if one wished to reduce police harassment of homosexuals he might hire them. It might reduce harassment, but would it cure the overall problem or be accepted by the public.

Police operate within the framework of a system and their actions are, generally, the result of community norms, or at least peer group norms.

As human beings we act singly, collectively, and societally on the basis of the meanings which things have for us. Our world consists of innumerable objects—home, church, job, college education, a political election, a friend, an enemy nation, a tooth brush, or what not—each of which has a meaning on the basis of which we act toward it. In our activities we wend our way by recognizing an object to be such and such, by defining the situations with which we are presented, by attaching a meaning to this or that event, and where need be, by devising a new meaning to cover something new or different. This is done by the individual in his personal actions, it is done by a group of individuals acting together in concert, it is done in each of the manifold activities which together constitute an institution in operation, and it is done in each of the diversified acts which fit into and make up the patterned activity of a social structure or society.³⁰

The police system is no different. Michael Blanton, writing on police discretion, notes that, "The police officer's judgement is usually based more on the popular morality than on the law; he sees his office as having moral authority as well as legal, which often leads to emotional involvement in the

³⁰ Blumer, *op. cit.*, p. 686.

case.³¹ What Blanton, and a good number of other police critics, fail to recognize is that the policeman is not an automaton capable of being completely unemotional or impartial. His particular occupational role often prescribes certain actions which, as Yinger notes, "... often involve privileges or licenses to perform acts which are deviant and forbidden outside these roles. (emphasis author's.)"

Within a societal myriad the policeman functions, his role ill-defined and open to broad speculation. In order to establish an adequate field construct one must be aware of functional equivalents

³¹ BANTON, MICHAEL, *Police Discretion*, NEW SOCIETY, Vol. 2, No. 48, 1963, p. 6.

(the relationship between roles) and specify conditions under which various individual responses are made. Further, noting the ways in which individual responses lead back into the social system should lead to an exploration of the range of these effects in a given setting. Thus, "positions and roles can be compared and contracted along a number of dimensions that are related to the direction and strength of the position and role influence."

The need for such an approach in studying the police cannot be overstated. If police service is to be improved, and the ambiguity of the police role clarified, we must begin to look at it in its perspective to society.

Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation required by the Act of October 23, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code.

1. *Date of Filing:* October 1, 1970.
2. *Title of Publication:* Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology & Police Science.
3. *Frequency of Issue:* Quarterly.
4. *Location of known Office of Publication:* 428 E. Preston St., Baltimore, Md. 21202.
5. *Location of the Headquarters or General Business Offices of Publisher:* 428 E. Preston St., Baltimore, Md. 21202.
6. *Publisher:* The Williams & Wilkins Company, 428 E. Preston St., Baltimore, Md. 21202.
Editor: Fred E. Inbau, Northwestern University, Chicago, Ill. 60611.

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C. Free Distribution (including samples), by mail, carrier delivery or by other means	74	84
D. Total No. of copies distributed.....	3281	3241

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