

# Personnel Transfers: Experiences of Botswana Teachers

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## **Abstract**

*This article analyses the findings of a study conducted to investigate the effects of teacher transfers on family well-being. While much concern has been raised about the trauma of transfers on families, this is the first empirical study conducted to investigate these concerns. The primary aim of the study was therefore to understand the experiences of teachers affected by transfers. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire addressed to 361 transferred teachers in selected primary and secondary schools. In addition face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 couples. The findings suggest that transfers are a source of great strain when separate residences have to be maintained as a result of the transfer. In general couples experience enormous challenges in their marriages. They have difficulties parenting at a distance and are financially burdened due to maintaining two separate homes. The study provides much-needed literature on the impact of personnel transfers on families. It also offers policy makers and practitioners with a sound information base for the development of transfer policy that takes family needs into consideration.*

## **Introduction**

The issue of transfers has long been a controversial one for sociologists, counsellors, family advocates, teachers' unions, civil servants, parliamentarians and other groups. There has been much concern about the need to strengthen the marriage institution in light of the high divorce rates as well as the increase in family-related problems such as truancy, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy and high rates of HIV prevalence among young people. This article discusses the findings of a study conducted on the effects of personnel transfers on teachers and their families. It first provides a brief overview of the literature on transfers and their impact on the family. This is followed by a discussion on the methods and key findings of the study. To conclude I make a number of recommendations and highlight this study's implications for future research. For the purpose of this paper 'personnel transfers' mean official appointments that entail a geographic movement away from one's family locale. The terms 'transfer' and 'relocation' are used interchangeably.

Personnel transfers are not unique to Botswana. As a result of rapid industrialisation, global competition and the development of high technology, it has become common practice for corporations throughout the world to relocate employees (Luo and Cooper, 1990; Wiltshire, 1995; Reimer, 2000). In the United States 2.4 million Americans maintain separate residences for job-related reasons (US Census Bureau, 2000). The phenomenon is particularly common among academic couples, company executives and people holding political office (Donald, 1997; Riemer 2000; Kiefer 2000). In Britain, a study conducted by the Institute of Manpower estimates that every year over 250,000 employees there have to move as a consequence of their work (Institute of

Manpower Studies, 1990). In Japan, personnel transfers affect as much as 48 percent of the workforce (Wiltshire, 1995). In Europe personnel transfers have become a common management strategy to respond to the single European market. Consequently relocation there generally affects employees with specialist skills in electronics, engineering and computing (Munton *et al.*, 1993). On the other hand data from Malaysia reveals that transfers largely affect teachers and administrators (Menon, 1987).

Thus, organisations use transfers for a variety of reasons. Other reasons include filling vacant posts quickly to minimise disruptions, grooming junior employees for promotion and promoting or demoting employees while giving them a chance to establish a new reputation (Pinder, 1989). In Botswana transfer policy has been primarily used to address issues of equity in the distribution of human resources. When Botswana attained independence in 1966, it was one of the poorest countries in the world. Through geographic transfers government has progressively expanded the reach of essential social and public services to the rural and remote areas (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 2002). However this has often necessitated the separation of married couples. The dilemma facing government is how to sustain current rural development initiatives with limited professional resources while at the same time keeping families together. This article aims to elucidate this problem by examining for the first time the costs and benefits of personal transfers on the family well being.

### **Overview of Related Studies**

The author is not aware of any other study that has been conducted on the effects of personnel transfers in Botswana. Literature is also lacking for other developing countries. For this reason, the following review is largely based on information obtained from studies conducted in the United States and Europe. By and large these studies reveal that geographic transfers place enormous strain on marital relationships as well as on the overall well-being of the family (Gross and Gerstel, 1984; Taylor and Loundsbury, 1989; Friedman, 1989; Pinder, 1989; Munton, 1993; Wiltshire, 1995; Riemer, 2000). Few studies reveal any positive effects on relationships or families (Gross 1990; Bunker *et al.*, 1992, Hendershott 1995). However, Gross and Gerstel (1984) conclude that geographic separation is likely to be less stressful when: a) couples had moderate to high incomes; b) spouses had intense motivation for career advancement; c) couples had been married longer and had older children; and d) spouses could reunite regularly on weekends. In the same vein Taylor and Loundsbury (1989), focussing on dual career couples, found that attitudes about transfers were significantly affected by the couples' prior expectations as well as by the current experience of a 'commuter marriage'. Most of the 151 executives surveyed did not like the idea of living away from their spouses because they feared that this would lower their productivity. Others feared that a commuter marriage would result in either a divorce or a decision to leave the company (Taylor and Loundsbury, 1989). Similarly Friedman (1989) studied the aftermath of job transfers among executives and their families at a multi-national high technology Fortune 500 firm and found that job transfers had profound and usually negative consequences for the spouses, the marriages, the children and the families. Comparing the transfer group to a promotion group Friedman observed that "promotions seem to correlate with increased quality of marital satisfac-

tion whereas transfer events are more stressful and correlate with diminished satisfaction” (Friedman, 1989: 175).

Supporting Friedman's findings is Munton's study *Job Relocation, Stress, and Family* (1993). Using a sample of employees throughout the United Kingdom, Friedman found that 75 percent of the respondents rated relocation as a highly stressful life event. Families moving longer distances reported more difficulties. Likewise Pinder (1989) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the financial, social and psychological effects of transfers on a sample of 800 managers and their spouses across the United States and found that transfers have strong negative effects on family life. Most of his sample reported that their marriage suffered because of the transfer, and there was a consensus that transfers were also disruptive to the extended family structure. Pinder argues that a combination of three factors seems to be particularly harmful: (a) a sudden transfer late in one's career; (b) pre-existing marital discord; and (c) the forced resignation of the spouse from a desired job as a result of the transfer (Pinder, 1989: 55).

Nevertheless, a few studies suggest that there can be some benefits from geographical transfers. For dual career couples the most rewarding aspect is the ability to maintain their commitments to their own careers (Gross, 1990, Bunker *et al*, 1992; Hendershott, 1995). Unlike their counterparts living in a single residence, these couples tend to more time to devote to their respective work. Closely connected to this is the ability to have more flexible time for relaxation or attending to personal interests (Bunker *et al*, 1992; Hendershott, 1995). Women in particular are freed from many domestic responsibilities such as cooking for the family, doing laundry, organising the house and other chores. Thus, according to Hendershott (1995), women transferees tend to be more positive in their evaluations of commuter marriages.

Although scholarly literature is not available on the effects of transfers in Botswana, the issue has been widely debated. The press has often commented in particular on the misuse of transfers, such as in the following editorial in the *Botswana Gazette*:

The public service has a growing list of officers who have been frustrated because they are either too honest to provide certain services demanded by their bosses, or because they are the wrong tribe . . . [or belong to] the wrong political party. . . . [T]hese officers are . . . sometimes transferred to departments where they cannot exercise their skills. Thus, the public is robbed twice; robbed of scarce skills and an officer who is not allowed to use his training and expertise (*Botswana Gazette*, 1996:10).

Politicians have also voiced their concerns regarding transfers. For example, during a heated debate in Parliament regarding the negative effects of transfers, one politician remarked:

Like all right-thinking people, I cannot excuse government for separating married couples through transfers. I do not believe that it is in order that a marriage, being a sacred and divine contract for life, should be spoiled by transfers. Once you separate the two, you are creating social and family problems . . . . [G]overnment is therefore guilty of a serious crime (*Botswana Hansard*, 1995: 33).

The negative effects of transfers are even acknowledged in *Vision 2016*:

[T]he strength of the family is threatened by the pace of change, particularly by the rapid urbanisation that has taken place, accompanied by the high degree of migrant labour and Government transfers (Presidential Task Force, 1997: 61).

### **Methods and Data**

Although this study triangulated both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this article is based on the findings from the qualitative interviews. These were conducted in 1996 with twenty teachers and their spouses in southern Botswana. The sample was selected using a multi-stage probability sampling design. This strategy was made possible by a computerised list of teachers who had experienced transfers in this region produced by the Department of Teaching Service Management. The selected teachers were then approached with a request to participate in the study. Access to spouses was obtained once respondents agreed to participate in the study. Most interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. This gave me a chance to observe extrinsic factors such as the nature and character of the neighbourhood and the family environment and to observe family interactions. Members of couples were interviewed separately to promote openness. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. HyperResearch was used to analyse the data.

Qualitative interviews enabled me to solicit in-depth descriptions, explanations and narratives of how transferred teachers and their families felt about geographic transfers and why relocation was a source of strain for these couples. Concerns raised by respondents often brought about emotional feelings as some couples were indeed experiencing major challenges as a result of the induced separation. When this happened, I stopped the interview and requested to come back the next day. Being a social worker I experienced dilemmas maintaining the 'researcher's role', especially in situations where I was asked to intervene by my respondents. However I was careful not to fall into this trap but instead linked respondents with available service providers.

### **Results and Discussions**

Out of the forty respondents selected, half were males and half females. The spouses of the teachers came from different professional backgrounds, including the teaching field. Two-thirds of the respondents had completed at least three years of university or college education and hence were teaching in either community junior secondary schools or senior schools. On average the couples were living 300 km apart.

### **Motivations**

Respondents were asked what motivated them to accept a transfer that separated them from their spouses. The three main motivations that emerged (in order of importance) were career advancement, improved educational opportunities for children and financial independence. These factors are discussed in turn below.

### **Career Advancement**

Although family commitments were a strong consideration, the desire for career advancement was

a critical motivating factor for agreeing to transfers. Most respondents felt strongly that the rejection of a transfer would have automatically jeopardised their prospects for career advancement. Since participants in the sample were mainly teachers employed in the public service, there was a strong feeling that government offered a more secure and stable working environment than the private sector. Consequently the decision to turn down a transfer was perceived as posing a threat to job security and a good working relationship with the employer. In addition women expressed the desire to fight cultural stereotypes that act as barriers to participate fully in economic development. One woman described her career goals in these words:

I feel that my career should advance. The family should not be an excuse. Our culture makes us feel that we should and must take care of the family. Most women are not prepared to go anywhere because this will ruin their family life. . . . [T]hey believe *mosadi ke mosalagae* (a woman's role is in her house). I used to feel that I'm the only one who can hold the family together. I felt that my career shouldn't advance at the expense of my family. I don't feel that anymore.

Another woman spoke in similar terms about the importance of her job:

My job and family are equally important. However in the final analysis I wouldn't compromise my job for my marriage. I don't know what will happen to this marriage. I don't even understand the extent to which my husband is investing in this marriage. . . . [T]he marriage might break . . . so I need to concentrate on my job.

### ***Better Education for Children***

The second most frequently cited motivation for accepting transfers concerned the education of children. Most respondents agreed that, although tremendous progress has been made in providing universal access to education, remote areas still lag behind in terms of qualified teachers, good teaching facilities and other resources. When a transfer involved moving to a remote area, spouses were therefore willing to live apart in order to ensure a good education for their children in urban private schools.

### ***Financial Independence***

The desire to become financially independent was the third most frequently cited motivation for agreeing to live apart. Women in particular resisted the idea of leaving their jobs simply to join their transferred husbands. Summarising this common response among women, one respondent said:

I feel that I need to be financially independent. I may want to suggest certain things that my husband feels are not important such as buying new furniture, curtains or other household goods. A woman needs to feel that she is making a contribution. My salary makes a big contribution in the home. . . . [O]ne needs to have pocket money to do her own things.

Besides wanting to be financially independent, most women also wanted to assist their spouses in providing for the family. For example several women in the study mentioned the need to keep the family going and the risks of depending on only one income.

In view of this I asked respondents whether living apart really made them financially better

off. Surprisingly the majority of the respondents who were transferred on promotion expressed concern that despite the salary increase, living apart drained family resources. The following costs were cited as the most burdensome: travelling expenses, telephone bills, rent, food, utilities and domestic services. As a result keeping two separate homes also makes it more difficult for families to save adequately. This finding confirms studies that show that living apart puts a strain on the economic well-being of the family (Gershel and Gross, 1985; Shakee 1989; Pinder, 1989; Herdeshott, 1995; Donald, 1997; Kiefer, 2000).

### **Experiences and Concerns regarding Transfers**

The findings of this study are consistent with studies from abroad that show that personnel transfers have a generally negative impact on the family, despite a small number of positive effects. The following discussion highlights three areas where this study shows that transfers have an especially important impact: sexual relationships and marriage stability; parenting issues and challenges; and HIV and AIDS issues.

### ***Sexual Relationships and Marriage Stability***

Marital sex is obviously a vital ingredient for a successful relationship. Through intimacy married couples are able to express emotional commitment and support for one another. I therefore asked participants to discuss the quality of their sexual relationship with their spouses before and after transfer. I was particularly interested in whether geographic separation increased sexual passion and attraction or instead made the hearts to “stray yonder”. Not surprisingly most respondents (65 percent) revealed that living apart had adverse effects on their sexual relationships. The most commonly cited problems were the intense loneliness and lack of regular physical contact. One husband typically described the effects as follows:

Transfer entails separation from families, and this had a negative effect on the relationship. My wife was moved four times, and we have not had a chance to stay together. The relationship is not as close as it was before. There’s a lot of mistrust and suspicion. Certainly, this separation has been costly to my relationship with my wife. It decreases the love I have for her. I’m maintaining the marriage because we need to keep the vows. There’s no close and active relationship. Only children and the property we’ve acquired together keep us close. The children keep us going, but the love is gone.

Another husband echoed these opinions:

This is a hard time for us. We used to be very close friends, [but] now we are slowly drifting apart. Separation puts a marriage under enormous strain. This begins with the emotional gap -- the only strength is that we love each other and we have the fear of the Lord. A common good is that we have children as well. Separation brings intense things to the marriage. I don’t want this to ever happen to a family. I love my family, [and] I find it difficult to stay separated. I cannot cope with this kind of experience. When I’m at work, I get absent-minded. This makes me feel very bad. The difficulty is that my wife is my best friend -- no one wants to part with a best friend.

These concerns were not only expressed by husbands, but were also articulated by some wives. One said:

The effects on the relationship are basically emotional ones -- I miss him a lot, and this is quite painful. We try very hard to keep the communication going, but this is not the same as when he was around. Travelling strains him. He makes it a point to be here at least once in a week and even during week days. I'm just hopeful that he will be home for good next year. We all can't stand the fact that he's not here. I really detest living in this kind of relationship.

Within this group of respondents there was a variation across the sample with respect to the frequency of social contact. For example, whereas weekly commuters did not experience a major decline in their sexual contact, those who visited monthly or bi-monthly reported that they experienced a sharp decline in the quality of their intimate relationship. For a minority, however, geographic separation rekindled their love. One respondent said, "The fact that we don't stay together increases the longing for one another. When we meet, it is always romantic." Another similarly revealed that "our relationship gets renewed each time my husband gets home. When he comes home after some weeks of separation, our relationship gets rekindled."

### ***Extramarital Relations***

Although couples living together are hardly immune from being unfaithful, distance and isolation greatly increase the likelihood of one or more partner having extramarital affairs. An overwhelming majority of this sample (80 percent) agreed that geographic separation contributes to extramarital affairs. More than half (58 percent) stated that they feared succumbing to the temptation of having an extramarital affair. With further probing, half of these (30 percent of the sample) revealed that they were currently involved in extramarital relationships. In all these situations the intense need for love, affection and belonging seemed to be the overriding cause for marital infidelity. One male respondent explained that "if you are far, you can't see the family regularly. . . . You then find yourself a girlfriend, and there's a tendency to neglect your home." Another man justified himself by blaming women:

We [men] are human; we can't discount that we cannot be involved in adulterous relationship. . . . [T]here are many temptations when you are alone. Women approach you with genuine feelings of wanting to be helpful. . . . [T]his tends to result in a relationship growing.

In order to overcome this problem, respondents used various tactics and strategies. One man told me that he had to literally stay away from his lonely house:

I have fears that I will fall into temptations. As a result, I don't spend a lot of time in the house: I make sure that I'm always with friends and family. . . . [M]y wife was told that I was engaged in an affair. [T]his traumatized our relationship.

Another man said he simply tried not to focus on this issue:

Temptations will usually come, and I fear that I will be unfaithful to my wife. I try as much as possible to resist. I try to have the willpower to stand by my vows. But this is difficult. If I were staying with my wife, I would not be thinking this way, but now with separation, a lot of thoughts come through your mind. Separation breeds insecurities. . . . [T]he best way to survive is not to think negatively about the other person [and] pretend as though everything is OK.

Another man had a more “realistic” strategy:

I’ve conditioned myself psychologically. I’ve created room for disappointments. If I hear that she has committed adultery, I will be hurt, but I will forgive her. If you over-trust, you create problems for yourself. My attitude is that my wife is not an angel; she’s capable of making mistakes.

Mature couples seemed to be more confident about their relationship than younger couples. Overall they were less anxious about the possibilities of extramarital affairs and more trusting of their mates. One mature woman expressed her feelings this way:

I’ve come to a stage where I trust my husband. I do not have fears that he has a relationship. We are mature. If being apart is too costly, we will make a radical decision to stay together. My long-term goal is to stay in this relationship.

Another woman explained that “we have not reached a stage where we are saturated. I don’t have fears that my husband is cheating. I’m very comfortable because I communicate with him a lot. I know that he is taking this marriage very seriously.”

### ***Personnel Transfers and Divorce***

Mindful that the great majority of respondents were concerned that living apart made extramarital affairs more likely, I asked respondents to tell me if they were concerned about the possibility of divorce. Surprisingly a very small minority (13 percent) felt that living apart was a potential threat to their marriage. However during the course of data collection five female teachers (not part of this study) informed me that they had got divorced as a result of geographic transfers. In addition, during interviews, respondents told me numerous stories of other couples who divorced as a result of job-induced separation. Given these secondary sources, one cannot rule out the potential effects of transfers on the prevalence of divorce in Botswana. Further inquiry in this area is needed.

### ***Parenting at a Distance***

Due to parents’ desire to provide the best education for their children, nearly all of the dual career families decided not to uproot their children to remote areas. Only four children in the sample had experienced relocation to a remote area. For most of these children the mother took responsibility for daily emotional support, discipline, training and socialisation. It was also mothers who generally had to make sure that children were settled at school, helped with their homework and adequately fed, clothed and kept healthy. Fathers generally played a minimal role in child rearing. The only support usually provided was through long distance telephone calls (for those who could

afford this). I therefore asked mothers to share with me how their spouses' absence affected the well-being of the children. As expected all the mothers expressed concern about their children missing this important interaction. There was a consensus that the resulting lack of bonding had negative effects on father-child relationships. For example one mother said:

The children miss their father a lot; they feel his absence. But obviously they're closer to me than their dad. There is a distance between them and their father. Sometimes they make remarks like '*wa ba a tsile*' (he has come to bother us). When he is home, he is considered an outsider by the children."

Another woman expressed how her young son misses his daddy:

My four-year-old is very sad that my husband is not around all the time. He complains and cries every day. He doesn't understand why his father is away for too long. I think this is really affecting him. Sometimes he asks 'please get me another daddy because my daddy is not coming back'. This really makes me feel overwhelmed.

A particularly challenging area for mothers was the handling of teenage children. As one said: "He [a teenage nephew of her husband] refuses to obey, and I'm finding it difficult to handle him. If my husband was here, it would be much better." Another mother expressed similar concerns:

I don't think my children understood why I had to move to another place. The two teenagers have been very difficult, especially my 17-year-old son. His school work has dropped so much that I'm very doubtful whether he will make it in his final Form V examinations.

Keeping in mind these concerns, I asked fathers how they evaluated their parental responsibilities. They all missed their children a great deal. As one father said, "it's hard to stay away from the children. I miss them a lot. We used to do a lot of things together, every single day. Now I don't have that luxury." Several of the fathers expressed intense feelings of guilt. One put it this way:

I don't have personal contact with my three children. My children are going to blame me for not being a good father. Now I'm forced to divide my time between work and taking care of them. Before, I was always home. We could play every time. Children depend on us for comfort, love, and security.

It is clear that the physical absence of fathers creates enormous strain on the mothers. Moreover it denies the children an opportunity to develop a close relationship with their fathers. As articulated by Corneau (1991) the father helps children to establish an internal structure, to develop their sense of exploration, growth and self-esteem, and also to make the transition from the world of the family to the world of society at large. He argues that the fathers' absence automatically hinders the influence of the mother, who is thus burdened with a responsibility that will become heavy for her to bear.

### ***Transfers and HIV/AIDS***

Botswana has one of the highest incidences of HIV infection in the world, and the virus has now

spread from urban and peri-urban areas to the most remote communities. I asked respondents to share with me their concerns or fears about the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As expected most respondents acknowledged that they were concerned about the rapid spread of the disease. More interestingly there was a consensus that geographic transfers could exacerbate the spread of the virus. One respondent pointed out that the government's anti-HIV messages stress that partners should stick together and be faithful, yet transfers force couples to separate. HIV/AIDS, she said, "should give us an alert signal that transfers should be discouraged." Another agreed that "transfers increase chances of the spread of HIV. When couples are separated, there's a lot of temptations, [so] promiscuity is rampant."

I therefore asked whether couples talked about HIV issues, but less than one-third of respondents in the sample (30 percent) said they talked with their spouse about the implications of transfers for the spread of the disease. Two couples informed me that they had decided to use condoms both as a method of birth control and for HIV/AIDS prevention. Although condom use is now well-known as an effective HIV/AIDS prevention strategy, married women are still reluctant to ask their husbands to use them, even when they feel they are at risk. Some women told me that even when they suspect that their husbands are having extramarital affairs, they feel uncomfortable talking about condoms or HIV/AIDS, fearing that this could lead to further suspicions and conflicts in the marriage. Several studies have confirmed that the position of women in Botswana, particularly their lack of power in negotiating sexual relations, may explain why the HIV virus has spread so rapidly (McDonald 1996; Ntseane and Ncube 2000; Government of Botswana/UNDP 2000).

At the policy level the Botswana government acknowledges that geographic transfers have the potential to play a role in HIV transmission (Ministry of Health 1998; Republic of Botswana 2001). The government's position on HIV prevention and care is outlined in the *National Policy on HIV/AIDS*. With respect to transfers this policy proclaims:

Personnel regulations and policies which potentially contribute to the spread of HIV, such as transfers separating spouses and families, will be implemented to reach a workable balance between provision of essential services country-wide and disruption of families (Ministry of Health 1998: 7).

The government's commitment is commendable, given the far-reaching effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic both at the household and societal levels. Botswana has a relatively small population (1.7 million), yet according to recent HIV sero-prevalence studies an estimated 258,192 adults (15-49 years) are infected with HIV (NACA, 2001). Unless HIV/AIDS prevalence and related death rates can be brought down, especially among the best-educated and most productive sectors of the population, this country is heading for a major social and economic catastrophe.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has shown that the most significant predictor of transfer decision is the intense desire on the part of transferees to advance in their careers. Women in particular feel that they have to fight the cultural stereotype that makes them "homemakers". On the other hand, while the need for career advancement is paramount, the findings of this study show that the human cost of job

relocation is high. Consistent with several studies (Gross, 1989; Brett, 1982; Taylor and Loundsbury, 1988; Friedman, 1989; Hendershott, 1995; Kiefer, 2000; Reimer, 2000) the majority of respondents in this study reported that living in separate residences put great strain on their marital relationships. Inevitably confessions were made about extramarital relationships and fears of divorce. Couples also acknowledged that being away from their spouses put them in a more vulnerable position with respect to HIV/AIDS.

While it is evident that transfers are an effective tool to ensure the delivery of government and other services, there is need to take into account the unintended negative consequences on the family. Government departments as well as the private sector must do everything possible to discourage the unnecessary separation of spouses. The public service code of conduct on HIV and AIDS should be implemented fully to protect the interests of the family and the nation as a whole. In situations where the skills of public officers are crucially needed, attempts should be made to ensure that these officers are transferred within commutable distance. Older employees who are near retirement should be transferred closer to their hometowns to maximise productivity. Most significantly fairness and open communication should be applied in the implementation of transfer decisions.

Further research is required to address certain unanswered questions. For example the impact of transfers on children needs to be investigated, focusing on the voices of children themselves. It is also vital to study how transfers affect job productivity. Finally, given that this study was necessarily restricted in scope, a follow-up study at the national level, focusing on all professionals in the civil service, is needed in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the impacts of geographic transfers.

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