

# RETHINKING TOKENISM: *Looking Beyond Numbers*

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*The purpose of this article is to assess Rosabeth Moss Kanter's work on tokenism in light of more than a decade of research and discussion. While Kanter argued that performance pressures, social isolation, and role encapsulation were the consequences of disproportionate numbers of women and men in a workplace, a review of empirical data concludes that these outcomes occur only for token women in gender-inappropriate occupations. Furthermore, Kanter's emphasis on number balancing as a social-change strategy failed to anticipate backlash from dominants. Blalock's theory of intrusiveness suggests that surges in the number of lower-status members threaten dominants, thereby increasing gender discrimination in the forms of sexual harassment, wage inequities, and limited opportunities for promotion. Although Kanter's analysis of the individual consequences of tokenism was compelling to researchers and organizational change agents, continued reliance on numbers as the theoretical cause of, and as the solution to, gender discrimination in the workplace neglects the complexities of gender integration.*

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977a, 1977b) analysis of tokenism has been so popular that, since 1983, tokenism has been a subject category in *Sociological Abstracts*. The purpose of this article is to assess Kanter's work on tokenism in light of more than a decade of research and discussion. I will argue that Kanter's description of the negative personal consequences of being a token was, and continues to be, invaluable. However, her theory of tokenism, which identified numbers as the primary cause of the negative effects, did not reflect the complexities of gender discrimination in the workplace, and number balancing, her key to eliminating these effects, was overly optimistic (Blum and Smith 1988). After a brief discussion of her

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findings, I will present three additional factors that may account for these findings, along with the research evidence related to each factor.

### KANTER'S FINDINGS

Kanter's (1977a, 1977b) work included a case study that she interpreted as a token situation, basing her analysis on the small number of those in a minority category. She offered a theoretical discussion of the consequences of tokenism and policy-oriented strategies to reduce the negative effects of tokenism. The case study involved 20 saleswomen in a 300-person sales force at a multinational, Fortune 500 corporation, dubbed Indsco. Analyzing interview data from these women, their colleagues, and superiors, Kanter described three common experiences shared by these women. First, they received heightened attention or visibility that exacerbated pressures for them to perform well. Second, they felt isolated from informal social and professional networks, and they also felt that their differences from male peers were exaggerated, a situation Kanter called boundary heightening. Finally, they reported a variety of incidents indicating that they were encapsulated into gender-stereotyped roles.

Kanter's findings have been replicated across a variety of settings. The first women to enter the U.S. Military Academy at West Point reported feeling visible, socially isolated, and gender stereotyped (Yoder, Adams, and Prince 1983). Similar patterns were experienced by enlisted women (Rustad 1982), by the first women to serve as corrections officers in male prisons (Jurik 1985; Zimmer 1986), and by the first policewomen on patrol (Martin 1980). The first surge of women coal miners reported strong feelings of camaraderie, strengthened by the danger they shared with their male co-workers, if, and only if, they remained in a deferential feminine gender role (Hammond and Mahoney 1983). In the professions, women physicians (Floge and Merrill 1985) and academics (Young, Mackenzie, and Sherif 1980) showed similar effects of their minority status.

Kanter explained her findings with the concept of numeric (proportional) gender imbalance. She defined tokens as members of a subgroup that composed less than 15 percent of the whole group, and dominants as the majority, and argued that the experiences reported by the women at Indsco resulted from the skewedness of their work group. Because women were numerically few, they stood out (creating performance pressures), were isolated by the majority (who exaggerated their differentness), and were encour-

aged to act in gender-defined ways (hence their role encapsulation). The primacy of numbers in her analysis led Kanter to regard number balancing as the key ingredient for organizational change. If equal numbers of women and men worked together, Kanter argued, the negative work characteristics that her respondents at Indsco described would disappear.

### CONFOUNDED FACTORS

Kanter's original work and subsequent replications confounded four factors: numeric imbalance, gender status, occupational inappropriateness, and intrusiveness. *Tokenism*, as used by Kanter, refers to the *numeric skewedness* of one's work group. However, she, as well as later researchers, examined only women workers (*gender status*) in occupations stereotypically defined as masculine (i.e., *gender-inappropriate* for women). And, in all of this research, the women workers studied represented either the first group of women ever admitted to the institution or a first-time, significant numeric surge, both of which could be regarded as *intrusive* by the higher-status dominant group of male workers. After defining each of these factors, I will examine how each may have contributed to Kanter's findings of visibility and consequent *performance pressures*, *isolation* resulting from boundary maintenance, and gender-stereotyped *role encapsulation*.

#### Gender Status

The gender of the token affects the status of the token; token men may not share the negative experiences of token women. Although Kanter (1977b, 969) acknowledged that gender is a master status that permeates almost every human interaction, she minimized the gender of her subjects in discussing the negative effects of being in a numerical minority in a workplace. Believing that numbers were primary, she argued that "the same pressures and processes can occur around people of any social category who find themselves few of their kind among others of a different social type" (Kanter 1977a, 240).

The empirical resolution of this question is easy: compare token men with token women. However, the implications of a difference here have pervasive theoretical and practical import. If the experiences of token women and men diverge so much that the negative consequences of tokenism extend only to women, then what Kanter regarded as the result of numbers has as its basic, root cause sexism — the denigration of women qua women. Reskin claimed,

“Men resist allowing women and men to work together *as equals* because doing so undermines differentiation and hence male dominance” (1988, 65). Boundary maintenance, then, as well as performance pressures and role encapsulation, are consequences of women’s gender status, not just their numerical status.

From the research that followed Kanter’s, there is no doubt that gender status is a necessary ingredient in producing the negative effects of being a token and that Kanter’s theory was substantially limited by her failure to acknowledge the extent of organizational and societal sexism (Fairhurst and Snaveley 1983a; Zimmer 1988). There is overwhelming evidence that token men avoid the negative consequences of numeric imbalance reported by women (Benokraitis and Feagin 1986; Fairhurst and Snaveley 1983b; Fløge and Merrill 1985; Fottler 1976; Johnson and Schulman 1989; Kadushin 1976; Ott 1989; Schreiber 1979). In fact, the visibility afforded token men may work to their advantage, enhancing their opportunities for promotion (Grimm and Stern 1974; Yoder and Sinnett 1985). Additionally, men may use settings in which they are in the minority as stepping stones to otherwise inaccessible positions (Schreiber 1979).

In short, the negative consequences of tokenism seem to occur only for members of social categories that are of lower status relative to the majority (Alexander and Thoits 1985; Dworkin, Chafetz, and Dworkin 1986), with gender status as one example (Unger 1978; Wagner 1988). Minority members of lower-status racial (Taylor and Fiske 1976), ethnic, class, and educational groups probably experience similar performance pressures, isolation, and role encapsulation, while upper-status tokens often rapidly achieve positions of authority, are socially central, and are allowed innovative role behavior (see Webster and Foschi 1988).

### **Occupational Inappropriateness**

Kanter’s subjects were working in an occupation defined at the time as inappropriate for women. Laws (1975) defined token academic women as double deviants: women who deviate from gender norms by their commitment to a career and who deviate a second time by aspiring to succeed in a domain defined as appropriate for men. In studying high-level saleswomen, Kanter confounded both aspects of double deviance: gender status and occupational inappropriateness.

The conceptual differentiation of gender status and occupational inappropriateness is important. If occupational inappropriateness is unrelated to the findings we are trying to explain, numeric imbalance and gender status may

interact such that scarce women in a gender-neutral or gender-appropriate occupation will experience performance pressures, isolation, and role encapsulation, but men will not. That is, we could expect a woman nurse on a Veterans Administration hospital staff of mostly male nurses to experience these three effects, but we would not expect a male physician in practice with several women physicians to do so. On the other hand, if occupational inappropriateness is more influential, we would expect these findings only for scarce women working in gender-inappropriate occupations; in the example of a VA hospital, token effects would be found only for scarce women physicians, not for the few women nurses.

The gender typing of an occupation involves two aspects: normative and numerical. Occupational gender typing establishes norms about what is and what is not appropriate work for women and men. Deviations from normative expectations evoke negative consequences—a classic social psychological finding (Schachter 1951). The impact of occupational inappropriateness is underscored in a study by Cherry and Deaux (1978), which was designed to refute the assumption that women's career performances were limited by their "fear of success" (Horner 1968). Cherry and Deaux (1978) found that women and men denigrated both a woman described as first in her medical school class and a man who headed his nursing class. Since both women and men can be belittled for achieving success in gender-inappropriate occupations, the work outcomes Kanter described may have been influenced by her saleswomen's deviation from occupational gender norms, not just from their numeric imbalance or gender status *per se*.

The gender typing of an occupation also is operationally defined by the ratio of women to men workers. These numbers can be derived from the occupations as a whole (with, we have seen, normative consequences), from the immediate work group of the people studied, or by counting women and men across the work flow, thus including superiors, peers, subordinates, clients, and so on (Guttek and Morasch 1982). Although Kanter did describe the overall occupational gender typing of upper-level managers and administrators earning more than \$15,000 annually, over 96 percent of whom were men at the time of her study (Kanter 1977a, 17), and described incidents of saleswomen's interactions with male customers, her primary emphasis was on the numeric imbalance of her participants' immediate work groups.

Her narrow numeric definition of tokenism as skewed numbers within a work group ignored the broader numeric definitions. Although all three numeric ratios are likely to be consistent (work occupationally and organizationally dominated by one group is likely to have imbalanced work units), it is possible to tease these apart. For example, a woman may work in an

occupation that is dominated by men (and hence is gender inappropriate) but have an immediate work group in which women are numerically dominant, such as a woman surgeon in an all-women medical practice. If norms involving occupational appropriateness are operating, we would expect a woman surgeon to experience gender discrimination from patients and other physicians despite the fact that she is not an anomaly among members of her immediate work group.

All the studies of women and men tokens involved gender-inappropriate occupations. For women, these occupations included managers (Fairhurst and Snavelly 1983b); academic faculty (Toren and Kraus 1987; Young, Mackenzie, and Sherif 1980; Yoder, Crumpton, and Zipp 1989); physicians (Fløge and Merrill 1985; Lorber 1984); law students (Spangler, Gordon, and Pipkin 1978) and lawyers (Cook 1978; Epstein 1981); engineering students (Ott 1978); group leaders (Crocker and McGraw 1984); police officers (Martin 1980; Ott 1989); coal miners (Hammond and Mahoney 1983); corrections officers in men's prisons (Jurik 1985; Zimmer 1986, 1988); rapid transit operatives (Swerdlow 1989); autoworkers (Gruber and Bjorn 1982); union representatives (Israeli 1983) and professionals (Macke 1981) in male-dominated occupations; and steel workers (Deaux and Ullman 1983). For men, the occupations studied included nursing (Fløge and Merrill 1985; Fottler 1976; Greenberg and Levine 1971; Segal 1962; Ott 1989); non-college teaching (Dworkin, Chafetz, and Dworkin 1986); social work (Kadushin 1976); child care (Seifert 1973); and clerical work (Schreiber 1979). In fact, the assumption that Kanter's work is applicable only to gender-inappropriate occupations is so pervasive that one study eliminated clerical women, even though they may have fit the numeric definition of tokens, because "they do not belong to the types of work groups to which Kanter's theory applies" (South et al. 1982).

Varying the gender of the token in gender-inappropriate occupations has shown that numerically scarce women in gender-inappropriate occupations experience performance pressures, isolation, and role encapsulation, but men do not. Male nurses, even in skewed groups, did not report social isolation or role encapsulation (Ott 1989). Although raters in a pencil-and-paper assessment of men succeeding in a gender-inappropriate occupation (again, nursing) may write negative stories (Cherry and Deaux 1978), these attitudes do not appear to translate into on-the-job difficulties for token men. In contrast, both the evaluations of women in gender-inappropriate occupations (Cherry and Deaux 1978) and on-the-job experiences of token women are negative.

One small-scale case study did examine gender and numbers in a gender-neutral occupation—concession stand worker at a seasonal amusement attraction (Yoder and Sinnott 1985). This job was not gender typed overall or at this particular setting. It offered minimum-wage, summer employment to mostly young workers. When a woman was assigned to a formerly all-male work group, she experienced social isolation and role encapsulation, as Kanter would predict. Although this study suggests that occupational inappropriateness may not be necessary to produce the effects of token status, evidence from one study involving one subject cannot be used as the basis for this conclusion. Studies that systematically vary gender of worker, gender appropriateness of occupation, and workplace gender ratio are needed to tease out which factor creates which effects.

### **Intrusiveness**

The gender typing of an occupation within our society is confounded with the value of the occupation, in terms of both compensation and prestige. The more skewed an occupation is in favor of men, the higher that occupation's pay and prestige (Coser 1981). Even within an occupation, the presence of disproportionately large numbers of male workers is associated with better pay (Zimmer 1986). Men in male-dominated occupations have more to lose by the intrusion of women in great numbers than do women in the less prestigious female-dominated occupations, which may actually increase in status when they are infiltrated by men.

The occupation selected by Kanter offered both higher prestige and better pay than women with comparable credentials would expect to attain in traditionally female occupations. Kanter's saleswomen represented a significant surge in the number of women employed at the managerial level at Indsco. Although the absolute number of women was small (making them tokens), their numbers reflected a major increase. At Indsco, "women held less than 10 percent of the exempt (salaried) jobs starting at the bottom grades—a 50 percent rise from a few years earlier" (Kanter 1977a, 206).

Theory (Blalock 1967) and research (Brown and Fuguitt 1972; Frisbie and Neidert 1977) on racial minorities suggest that numeric surges threaten the majority, who then react with heightened levels of discriminatory behavior in order to limit the power gains of the growing lower-status minority. Discriminatory treatment can be manifest as on-the-job harassment, wage inequities, and limited opportunities for promotion. Blalock (1967) hypothesized that the majority's reaction would be harshest when the minority is small. "For example, an increase of 10 per cent Negro should produce a

greater increase in degree of competition when this involves a change in per cent Negro from, say 10 to 20 per cent than would be the case with a change from 50 to 60 per cent" (Blalock 1967, 148). However, additions to even large minority groups may be met with some resistance from the majority.

Laws recognized the importance of intrusiveness and its threat to dominants in her theoretical discussion of marginality and tokenism:

The Token is a member of an underrepresented group, who is operating on the turf of the dominant group, under license from it. The institution of tokenism has advantages both for the dominant group and for the individual who is chosen to serve as Token. These advantages obtain, however, only when the defining constraints are respected: the flow of outsiders into the dominant group must be restricted numerically, and they must not change the system they enter. Tokenism must therefore be regulated. (1975, 51-52)

In Kanter's research setting, a numerically small minority group was growing significantly. While Kanter suggested that there is a tipping point beyond which additional numbers of women will reduce the negative effects of tokenism, the opposite may be true. Kanter's saleswomen may have felt the negative effects not of their small numbers but of their *increasing* numbers. However, intrusiveness, like occupational inappropriateness, implies an interaction with gender status. It is considered intrusive when members of lower-status groups start entering an occupation in greater numbers, not when the members of higher-status groups do so, even though the effects of the latter phenomenon can be devastating to lower-status workers (compare tipping and gentrification in real estate).

The effect of token numbers must be separated from the effect of intrusiveness in tokens' experiences. If, as Kanter (1977a, 1977b) argued, numbers are the key ingredient, then number balancing becomes the goal of increasing occupational opportunities for women (and for people of color). As Kanter said:

Organizations with a better balance of people would be more tolerant of the differences among them. In addition to making affirmative action a reality, there would be other benefits: a reduction in stress on the people who are "different," a reduction in conformity pressures on the dominant group. It would be more possible, in such an organization, to build the skill and utilize the competence of people who currently operate at a disadvantage, and thus to vastly enhance the value of an organization's prime resource: its people. (1977a, 283-84)

In contrast, if what Kanter regarded as the effect of disproportionate numbers was really the effect of intrusion of lower-status workers into a formerly all-dominant-status work group and the competitive threat it created (Blalock



1967), then these negative consequences would continue to grow as the numbers of lower-status workers increased. Numbers and intrusiveness both explain Kanter's findings when the intruding group is small, but these predictions diverge as the size of the lower-status subgroup increases.

Most work on tokenism describes a skewed group; only five studies compared subgroups of varying proportions (Dworkin, Chafetz, and Dworkin 1986; Izraeli 1983; Ott 1989; South et al. 1982; Spangler, Gordon, and Pipkin 1978). As Zimmer (1988) concluded, evidence from all but the most recent work is mixed. Dworkin, Chafetz, and Dworkin (1986) found evidence of alienation and reduced work commitment among tokens, and Izraeli (1983) reported that women felt role encapsulated and isolated. A smaller minority of law students studied by Spangler, Gordon, and Pipkin (1978) had lower grades, spoke less in class, and thought more about quitting school than did a larger minority at another school. However, the higher prestige of the more skewed school also can account for these findings.

South et al. (1982) attempted to pit hypotheses derived from Kanter's (1977a) and Blalock's (1967) theories directly against each other. They related the proportional representation of women in respondents' subjectively defined work groups to two dependent variables: "social support" and contact with co-workers and supervisors. Hypotheses derived from Kanter's theory drew upon her findings of boundary heightening and the consequent social isolation of token women. Social support was operationally defined as perceived encouragement for promotion from co-workers and supervisors. The findings here most clearly support intrusiveness theory. "The greater the proportion female, the less the encouragement for promotion females receive from their male supervisors" (South et al. 1982, 598).

For contact with co-workers and supervisors, the key prediction derived from Kanter's theory was that token women would have less contact with male co-workers than women in work groups with more women. A direct comparison of token versus nontoken women showed slightly less contact for tokens, but the difference did not attain statistical significance. In fact, looking across the full continuum, a significant, negative correlation between numbers of women and contact was found; the more women there were in a work group, the less frequent was their contact with male co-workers.

A recent study of policewomen more directly tested Kanter's hypotheses by comparing skewed (less than 15 percent) and tilted (between 15 percent and 35 percent) work groups (Ott 1989). Ott studied 50 fifteen-member police teams in the Netherlands: 24 skewed teams (an average of 6 percent women; most with only one policewoman) and 26 tilted teams (averaging 26 percent women). Three members of each team were interviewed: a woman

patrol officer, a male co-worker matched for age and seniority, and the woman's supervisor. Token policewomen from skewed teams reported greater visibility, more social isolation, greater role encapsulation, less peer acceptance, and more sexual harassment (defined as coarse remarks) than did women on tilted teams. There were no significant differences in absenteeism and psychological complaints about organizational stress.

Ott's (1989) data were collected in 1982-83, when policewomen in the Netherlands composed less than 5 percent of patrol officers, although women were first eligible to become patrol officers in the 1960s. Hence this study examined the effects of numbers for women in an occupation defined as appropriate for men, where the minority was holding its numbers to a small, nonthreatening proportion of the occupation as a whole. Ott's data give us a chance to examine increasing numbers in a specific workplace without the confounding effects of occupational intrusiveness. These findings suggest that negative effects are mitigated to some degree when numbers of women increase in a particular work setting, as long as their overall representation in an occupation is not seen as intrusive.

The experiences of the first class of women to graduate from West Point and serve as officers in the army are negative with and without intrusiveness. At the academy, women cadets were both tokens and highly intrusive, going from 0 percent to 10 percent of the academy from 1976 to 1980, when the first coed class graduated (Yoder, Adams, and Prince 1983). These women were highly visible, pressured by high performance standards, and socially isolated. They were encouraged to act in stereotypically feminine, nonassertive ways that reflected badly on their leadership potential (Yoder 1989).

When these women graduated and assumed their obligatory positions as officers in the regular army, they remained numeric tokens in their units but did little to swell the ranks of women officers (no intrusiveness). In 1985, Adams and Yoder (1986) surveyed 1,669 women and 2,099 men worldwide from five cohorts who entered the army from 1980 to 1984 and were commissioned through West Point and other sources. They found evidence of the negative effects of tokenism among all the women. On ratings of assistance from peers, getting to know one's unit, congeniality of one's unit, and acceptance by troops, men's ratings were significantly higher than women's, suggesting that the women officers were isolated. The first class of women graduates from West Point, as well as subsequent West Point graduates, did not differ from the other women on these ratings.

The West Point and army findings suggest that token numbers of women in male-dominated occupations experience negative effects whether or not they are perceived as intrusive. The ingredients necessary to create conditions

of performance pressures, isolation, and role encapsulation then seem to be token numbers of women in male-dominated occupations, regardless of whether women are perceived as "taking over." Hence tokenism effects are the result of being a woman, being numerically scarce, and working in an occupation normatively defined as men's work.

### RECONCILING NUMBERS AND INTRUSIVENESS

Blalock's and Kanter's predictions may describe different aspects of the process of gender segregation. Token numbers, low status, and occupational inappropriateness may combine to produce the initial token effects as described by Kanter (1977a, 1977b). However, as the lower-status group's numbers increase throughout the occupation, the perceptual processes created by small numbers diminish, and reactions to intrusiveness by the dominant, powerful group are escalated (Blalock 1967; Reskin 1988). The dominant group can effectively restructure the workplace to reduce the competitive threat posed by the growing minority.

Epstein acknowledged the possible interplay of both theories in her description of women in the legal profession. While she supported Kanter's view by referring to the increasing acceptance of women in law school and in law firms as their numbers grew, she noted that seemingly open systems may move toward closure as the numbers of newcomers increased:

Like white cells surrounding offending matter, the dominant group may continue to regard women as something different and unacceptable, perhaps tolerated but not assimilated. The new entrants may be sabotaged as the majority group, protecting its community . . . , musters its forces to control its culture and its boundaries. When outsiders manage to establish themselves, strong but subtle forces may come into play to keep them from taking positions of command. (1981, 194)

For the individual in a particular workplace, all these factors *plus* the gender ratio may combine. The initial effects of being a token, or one of a small group of low-status newcomers, seem to be performance pressures, social isolation, and role encapsulation, as well as, for women, sexual harassment and limited opportunities for promotion. Gradually, as the novelty wears off and the minority group increases a bit, the work situation becomes more comfortable. However, when numbers of a low-status group increase substantially across the occupation, the reaction is stepped-up harassment, blocked mobility, and lower wages.

## CONCLUSION

Kanter's (1977a, 1977b) work was a descriptive case study and a theoretical discussion of the importance of balanced numbers to achieve gender equality in the workplace. At this point, the value of Kanter's work may be her identification of numbers as *one* of several restrictive forces for women and other low-status workers. The proportion of types of workers in a work setting has been confounded with gender status, occupational inappropriateness, and intrusiveness of growing numbers of low-status newcomers, suggesting that these factors should be kept separate theoretically and in research designs. Kanter's findings generalize only to settings where token numbers of women are engaged in male-dominated occupations.

Women who enter gender-inappropriate occupations and numerically skewed work groups experience the negative consequences of tokenism: performance pressures, social isolation, and role encapsulation. To attribute these experiences to tokenism helped counter the long-standing and continuing bias in the popular and scholarly literature on the gender integration of the workplace, which has leaned toward blaming women for the difficulties they encounter. Realizing that what she is facing is the product of tokenism — not her “fear of success” (Horner 1968), her Cinderella complex (Dowling 1981), the “impostor phenomenon” (Clance and Imes 1978), or her inadequacies on the fast track rather than the “mommy track” (Schwartz 1989) — is essential. But, in attributing these negative consequences to token numbers alone, Kanter diverted attention from their root cause, sexism (Zimmer 1988), and its manifestations in higher-status men's attempts to preserve their advantage in the workplace (Reskin 1988).

The danger of Kanter's thinking is apparent in policy questions. Kanter's focus on a limited set of examples of discrimination, all at an individual level, ignored more insidious forms of gender discrimination predicted by intrusiveness theory: sexual harassment, wage inequities, and blocked mobility. Another discriminatory reaction to the intrusion of women into prestigious male-dominated occupations may be the channeling of women into less prestigious subspecialties or female-dominated “ghettos” within the occupation (Lorber 1991; Reskin 1988).

I have argued that Kanter's work, and much of the subsequent research on tokenism, has confounded workplace gender ratios with gender status, norms of occupational inappropriateness, and intrusiveness. Ideally, a factorial design crossing these four independent variables is needed to tease apart their individual and combined influences. Additionally, dependent measures of workplace discrimination must be expanded to include both Kanter's

findings of performance pressures, isolation, and role encapsulation and Blalock's emphasis on sexual harassment, wage inequities, and blocked mobility, which we now term the "glass ceiling." Unfortunately, such an undertaking is unlikely, given the need for large samples in order to fill all the cells of the design adequately. However, pieces of this design can and should be undertaken, so that we might better understand the effects of gender segregation in the workplace.

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