

Attachment anxiety in mentoring: the role of commitment

Attachment
anxiety in
mentoring

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the mediating role of commitment in the relationship between protégés' anxious attachment styles and feedback behaviors of both mentors and protégés.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 100 academic protégé-mentor dyads, and reports from both members of the mentoring relationships were used to test hypotheses.

Findings – The results suggested that protégé perceptions of mentor commitment and self-reported protégé commitment mediated the relationships between protégé anxious attachment style and protégé feedback seeking and feedback acceptance. Additionally, mentor perceptions of protégé commitment played an important role, mediating the relationships between protégé anxious attachment and quality and quantity of mentor feedback.

Research limitations/implications – Taken together, the results reveal the important role of perceptions of partner commitment in high-quality mentoring behaviors.

Originality/value – This study was among the first to examine feedback and commitment in academic mentoring relationships, particularly taking into account commitment of each member of the dyad as well as their perceptions of the other person's commitment.

Keywords Commitment, Protégé, Mentoring, Career development, Attachment style, Feedback

Paper type Research paper

Mentoring has been associated with a variety of positive outcomes across different contexts, such as in academia and the workplace (Eby *et al.*, 2013). However, not all mentoring relationships are as effective as others, and researchers have sought to determine how various factors may influence the quality of these relationships. In response to calls for research examining the role of individual differences in mentoring (e.g. Turban and Lee, 2007), some scholars have started to investigate the influence of attachment styles (e.g. Allen *et al.*, 2010; Germain, 2011; Goldner and Scharf, 2014; Scandura and Pellegrini, 2004; Wang *et al.*, 2009). Results of these investigations have shown attachment style to be associated with important mentoring outcomes, such as willingness to mentor in the future (Wang *et al.*, 2009) and feedback behaviors (Allen *et al.*, 2010). However, additional research is needed to increase our understanding of the processes by which attachment styles may influence mentoring relationships (Chandler *et al.*, 2011; Germain, 2011).

The current study addresses this need by examining one such process. Specifically, we examine the mediating role of relationship commitment in the association between



protégé attachment anxiety and the feedback behaviors of both protégés and mentors. A visual representation of relationships examined in the study is presented in Figure 1. Relationship commitment has been recognized in the interpersonal relationships literature as an essential relationship property, predicting important outcomes such as relational persistence and pro-relationship behaviors (e.g. Le and Agnew, 2003; Rusbult *et al.*, 1991; Van Lange *et al.*, 1997). Within the mentoring domain, researchers have also found commitment to be associated with measures of relationship quality and processes (Allen and Eby, 2008; Allen *et al.*, 2009; Ortiz-Walters and Gilson, 2005; Poteat *et al.*, 2009; Poteat, 2013). Therefore, it seems fruitful to examine the role played by commitment in explaining the relationship between attachment style and mentoring relationships.

Through this investigation, we aim to obtain a finer-grained understanding of the mentoring process, and thereby contribute to both the theory and practice of mentoring. With regard to theory, Chandler *et al.* (2011) outline an ecological systems approach to the study of mentoring. At the microsystem dyadic level, they highlight the need for increased attention on relational processes and behaviors. The inclusion of commitment in the present investigation addresses a relational process and feedback-seeking and acceptance behaviors align with the behavioral component. Additionally, Chandler *et al.* (2011) argue for a general need to incorporate adult developmental and relational schema theories as a means to advance mentoring theory, noting that such lenses “offer insights into how people approaches relationships and what relational perspectives they brings to interactions with others” (p. 530). Examination of attachment styles aligns well with this concept. From a practical standpoint, academic mentoring relationships play a pivotal role in graduate school success (Schlosser *et al.*, 2011) and high-quality mentoring is associated with beneficial career outcomes (Eby *et al.*, 2013). Understanding the processes (e.g. commitment) that drive beneficial outcomes, such as quality and quantity of feedback, can help students (and mentors) gain the most from their relationships.

Theory and hypothesis development

Brief introduction to attachment theory

Attachment styles refer to individuals’ working models of relationships, and they reflect views about the self and others in relationships (Bowlby, 1980). These styles develop early in life and refer to an emotional bond to a specific, emotionally important person (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), referred to as a caregiver. The level of security

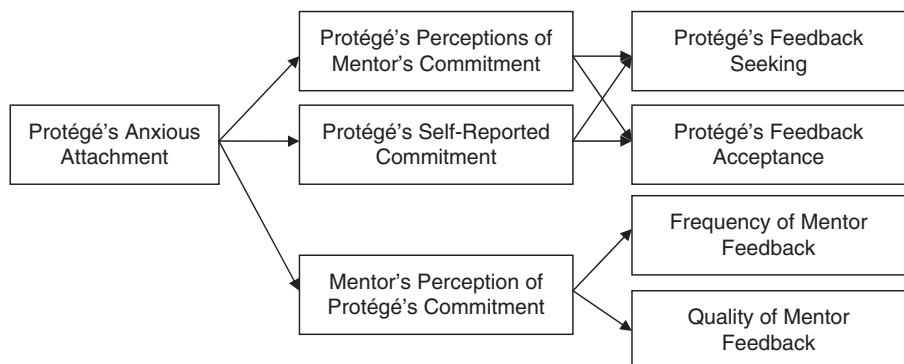


Figure 1.
Visual representation
of study hypotheses

experienced in early caregiver (typically parental) relationships sets a schema for patterns of relationship experienced later in life with other “caregivers,” such as romantic partner, counselor, mentor, or supervisor (Germain, 2011).

Two attachment styles exist: secure and insecure, the latter containing two additional dimensions, anxiety and avoidance. Individuals with secure attachment styles are comfortable with close relationships and tend to have stable relationships characterized by high levels of trust, commitment, and interdependence (Bowlby, 1988). With regard to insecure attachment styles, attachment anxiety refers to the extent to which an individual worries about whether partners will be available in times of need. This stems from negative views of the self and doubts about one’s worthiness as a relational partner, resulting in hypervigilance toward threat, rejection, and partner unavailability. Attachment avoidance refers to the extent that an individual distrusts partners’ intentions and seeks to maintain emotional distance from others. In the current study, we focus exclusively on the anxious attachment dimension.

Protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback behaviors

Allen *et al.* (2010) found that protégés having a more anxious attachment style were less likely to seek feedback from their mentors and were less accepting of the feedback provided by their mentors. The explanation provided for these results was that anxious protégés are likely to view the receipt of feedback as a threat to the self. Because attachment anxiety involves negative views of the self, anxious protégés may be particularly averse to the threats posed by feedback (e.g. Crommelinck and Anseel, 2013; Bose and Gijssels, 2013). Therefore, they may be reluctant to seek and accept feedback from their mentors.

In addition to Allen *et al.*’s (2010) explanation for their findings, it is possible that commitment plays a role in the association between protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback behaviors. More specifically, we propose that the protégé’s perceptions of a mentor’s commitment, and the protégé’s own commitment, mediate the relationship between protégé anxiety and protégé feedback behaviors.

Mediating role of protégé perceptions of mentor commitment. Theory and research support a negative association between anxious attachment and perceptions of partner commitment. As explained by Shaver and Mikulincer (2006), anxious individuals have a tendency to be hypervigilant of any potential signs of partner rejection. Therefore, they are likely to perceive their partners as being less committed to the relationship. In support of this argument, Shaver and Mikulincer describe a study by Himovitch (2003), in which anxious individuals more quickly recalled episodes where a partner decreased commitment to them. By contrast, secure individuals more quickly recalled episodes in which a partner increased commitment to them. Thus, this study supports the notion that anxious individuals search for cues from their partners signaling possible rejection and reduced commitment. Further empirical evidence for a negative association between anxious attachment and perceived partner commitment comes from a study by Arriaga *et al.* (2006), in which they report a negative correlation between the two variables. Wieselquist *et al.* (1999) also provide indirect support for this association. These researchers argued that it is adaptive for individuals to monitor partners’ commitment levels, and they describe trust as an implicit gauge of a partner’s commitment. Given this characterization of trust, their finding of a negative association between anxious attachment and trust lends indirect support to the proposed anxiety – perceived commitment relationship.

Drawing from the feedback literature, there is support for an association between protégé perceptions of mentor commitment and protégé feedback seeking and acceptance. For example, Vancouver and Morrison (1995) found that the accessibility of the source of feedback and the quality of the relationship between the feedback source and recipient had positive effects on the likelihood of feedback seeking. Similarly, Chen *et al.* (2007) and Chun *et al.* (2014) report that followers with a higher quality leader-member exchange relationship are more likely to seek feedback. Applying this to the current study, protégés who perceive their mentors as committed to the relationship may view their mentors as more accessible and may tend to view their relationships as higher quality. As a result, these protégés may be more likely to seek feedback from their mentors. With regards to feedback acceptance, research supports a positive association between source credibility and feedback acceptance (Ilgen *et al.*, 1979). Protégés who perceive their mentors as more committed are likely to place greater trust in their mentors' motives and believe their mentors to be familiar with their performance, both of which are aspects of credibility. Therefore, protégés' perceptions of mentor commitment should be positively associated with protégé feedback acceptance. Taken together, the above discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1. The relationship between protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback seeking is mediated by protégé perceptions of mentor commitment.
- H2. The relationship between protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback acceptance is mediated by protégé perceptions of mentor commitment.

Mediating role of protégé's own commitment. In addition to perceived mentor commitment, we propose that the protégé's own commitment to the relationship mediates the association between protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback behaviors. According to Shaver and Mikulincer (2006), anxious individuals' negative working models can bias their beliefs about their relationships and partners, thus inhibiting their own commitment to their relationships. Empirical evidence supports a negative association between anxious attachment and commitment (cf. Hadden *et al.*, 2014). Protégés who are less committed to their mentoring relationships are less likely to engage with their mentors, and therefore less likely to seek and accept feedback from their mentors. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- H3. The relationship between protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback seeking is mediated by protégé's own commitment.
- H4. The relationship between protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback acceptance is mediated by protégé's own commitment.

Protégé anxious attachment and mentor feedback behaviors

Not only may protégé attachment anxiety affect the protégé's behavior, but it may also relate to the behavior of the mentor. A potential mediator of this relationship is the mentor's perception of the protégé's commitment. As discussed earlier, research suggests that anxious protégés may be less committed to their relationships. Mentors may detect this lower level of commitment through observation of the protégés' behavior. Researchers have found relatively high correlations between an individual's self-reported commitment and partner's perceptions of that individual's commitment (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch, 2014; Wieselquist *et al.*, 1999), which

suggests that mentors may be able to assess their protégés' levels of commitment with some degree of accuracy. In addition, indirect support for an association between protégé anxiety and mentor perceptions of protégé commitment comes from research suggesting a negative association between anxious attachment and partner's trust (Givertz *et al.*, 2013; Wieselquist *et al.*, 1999). According to this research, partners of anxious individuals are less trusting of the anxious individual, and trust is conceptualized as a gauge of partner commitment. Taken together, these findings suggest that protégé anxious attachment is negatively associated with mentor perceptions of protégé commitment.

In turn, a mentor's perceptions of a protégé's commitment may influence the frequency and quality of feedback provided by the mentor to the protégé. Support for this proposition comes from research by Wieselquist and colleagues (Wieselquist, 2009; Wieselquist *et al.*, 1999). According to these researchers, individuals who perceive that their partners are committed are more likely to trust their partners. Individuals who trust their partners are willing to invest more in their relationships (Wilson and Patent, 2011). Therefore, mentors who perceive that their protégés are committed should be willing to invest in their relationships by providing their protégés with more frequent and higher quality feedback. Research by Wang *et al.* (2010) provides additional support for this prediction, in that they found a positive association between mentor trust in a protégé and the amount of mentoring functions received by the protégé. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H5. The relationship between protégé anxious attachment and frequency of mentor feedback is mediated by mentor perceptions of protégé commitment.
- H6. The relationship between protégé anxious attachment and quality of mentor feedback is mediated by mentor perceptions of protégé commitment.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 100 pairs of doctoral student protégés and their faculty mentors from a large southeastern university. Participants came from a variety of academic disciplines. In the protégé sample, there were 34 males and 64 females (two did not report gender), and the majority were Caucasian/white ($n = 67$). The mentor sample consisted of 67 males and 31 females (two did not report gender), and the majority were Caucasian/white ($n = 80$).

Participants were recruited by sending doctoral students an invitation e-mail containing a link to an online survey. A total of 705 e-mails were sent based on e-mail addresses obtained from university web site listings. In cases where doctoral students' contact information was not listed on the department's web site ($n = 74$), the head of the department was contacted and asked to disseminate the e-mail soliciting participation. Given this method and lack of knowledge of number of department heads who actually disseminated the e-mail, a precise response rate cannot be calculated. A total of 211 students responded to the survey, with complete data from 178 students. Within the survey, students were asked to provide the name of their faculty mentor. Mentors were then sent an e-mail inviting them to complete a separate online survey. Code numbers were used to match student protégés with their faculty mentors. Of the 211 mentors contacted, 100 responded to the mentor survey, resulting in the 100 dyads used for analyses.

Measures

Protégés completed measures assessing protégé anxious attachment, protégé commitment, perceived mentor commitment, frequency of mentor feedback, and quality of mentor feedback. Mentors completed measures assessing perceived protégé commitment, protégé feedback seeking, and protégé feedback acceptance. With the exception of items assessing protégé anxious attachment, all item responses were made on a five-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In all cases, scale scores were calculated by averaging item responses, with higher scores indicating greater standing on the variable.

Protégé attachment anxiety was assessed using 15 items from the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney *et al.*, 1994). An example item is “I worry a lot about my relationships.” Responses were made on a six-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree).

Protégés reported their own level of commitment to the relationship by responding to four items (e.g. “I am committed to developing an effective and productive working relationship with my major professor”). Protégés and mentors indicated how committed they perceived their mentoring partner to be by responding to four items (e.g. “My major professor (This student) is committed to developing an effective and productive advising relationship”).

Protégé feedback seeking was assessed with one item reported by the mentor (“This student seeks out feedback”). Protégé feedback acceptance was assessed with three items reported by the mentor (e.g. “This student is receptive to feedback regarding his/her performance”).

Frequency of mentor feedback was assessed with one item reported by the protégé (“My major professor provides me with frequent feedback regarding my performance”). Quality of mentor feedback was assessed with four items reported by the protégé (e.g. “The feedback provided by my major professor is accurate”).

Results

Table I presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient α 's for the study variables. To test the mediation hypotheses, we used bootstrapping methods for testing indirect effects suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004). Bootstrapping is a preferred method to the causal steps approach based on linear regression (Baron and Kenny, 1986) because it has significantly greater power to detect effects, allows for quantification of the indirect effect, and does not require assumptions of normality distributions for the indirect effect, allows for smaller sample sizes because of the lack of distributional assumptions, and has been shown to be more valid in simulation research (cf. Hayes, 2009; Williams *et al.*, 2009).

For all analyses 5,000 bootstrap samples were used and significance of the indirect effect was determined by whether or not the 95 percent bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals contained zero. As illustrated in Table II, bootstrapping analyses revealed that for all hypotheses the confidence interval around the indirect effect of the protégé's anxiety attachment on the relevant dependent variable did not include zero, suggesting a significant indirect effect. Thus, all hypotheses were supported.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to increase our understanding of the mechanism by which protégé attachment anxiety relates to the feedback processes that occur within

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Protégé anxious attachment ^a	(0.87)							
2. Protégé self-reported commitment ^a	-0.22*	(0.72)						
3. Perceived mentor commitment ^a	-0.27**	0.75**	(0.84)					
4. Perceived protégé commitment ^b	-0.28**	0.44**	0.44**	(0.87)				
5. Protégé FB seeking ^b	-0.18	0.35**	0.32**	0.68**	-			
6. Protégé FB acceptance ^b	-0.23*	0.35**	0.40**	0.77**	0.65**	(0.87)		
7. Mentor FB frequency ^a	-0.17	0.59**	0.70**	0.31**	0.26**	0.38**		(0.88)
8. Mentor FB quality ^{a,c}	-0.09	0.58**	0.69**	0.36**	0.22*	0.36**	0.67**	4.24
Mean	2.93	3.84	3.88	3.96	4.03	4.29	3.63	4.24
SD	0.80	0.76	0.84	0.83	0.92	0.72	1.06	0.71

Notes: FB, feedback. Numbers in parentheses represent coefficient α 's. $n = 100$. ^aReport provided by the protégé. ^bReport provided by the mentor. ^c $n = 98$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table I.
Means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient α 's for study variables

Table II.
Bootstrapping
results: test of
mediating role
of commitment

	Protégé's anxious attachment→commitment	Commitment →DV	Direct anxious attachment→DV	Indirect anxious attachment→DV (95% CI)	Model summary
H1. Protégé anxious attachment→protégé's perception of mentor's commitment→protégé's feedback seeking	-0.28**	0.33**	-0.11	-0.09* (-0.24, -0.02)	$R^2 = 0.07$, df = 1.98
H2. Protégé anxious attachment→protégé's perception of mentor's commitment→protégé's feedback acceptance	-0.28**	0.32**	-0.12	-0.09* (-0.21, -0.02)	$R^2 = 0.07$, df = 1.98
H3. Protégé anxious attachment→protégé's own commitment→protégé's feedback seeking	-0.21*	0.29**	-0.14	-0.06* (-0.16, -0.01)	$R^2 = 0.13$, df = 1.98
H4. Protégé anxious attachment→protégé's own commitment→protégé's feedback acceptance	-0.21*	0.40**	-0.12	-0.08* (-0.21, -0.01)	$R^2 = 0.05$, df = 1.98
H5. Protégé anxious attachment→mentor perceptions of protégé's commitment→frequency of mentor feedback	-0.29**	0.37**	-0.11	-0.10* (-0.24, -0.03)	$R^2 = 0.08$, df = 1.98
H6: Protégé anxious attachment→mentor perceptions of protégé's commitment→quality of mentor feedback	-0.29**	0.31**	0.01	-0.09* (-0.18, -0.03)	$R^2 = 0.13$, df = 1.96

Notes: Coefficients listed in table are standardized β weights. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

mentoring relationships. We accomplished this by examining the mediating role of commitment – a fundamental relationship property. Based on our results, it appears that mentor and protégé perceptions of partner commitment as well as protégé's own commitment play a role in the association between protégé anxious attachment and feedback behaviors.

Both protégé perceptions of mentor commitment and protégé's own commitment mediated the association between protégé anxious attachment and protégé feedback behaviors. These findings suggest that it is not only one's own personal affective reactions to the relationship that drive behaviors but that perceptions of a partner's commitment are also influential. This is consistent with both theory and previous research. Anxious individuals are characterized as being hypervigilant of partner rejection and unavailability (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2006), and they may therefore monitor their partners' commitment closely and respond more strongly to perceived declines. Furthermore, empirical studies support such a link between anxious attachment and perceptions of partner commitment (Arriaga *et al.*, 2006; Himovitch, 2003).

As predicted, our results suggest that mentor perceptions of protégé commitment mediate the association between protégé anxious attachment and mentor feedback behaviors. Anxious protégés may act in ways that signal to the mentor a lack of commitment. This perceived lack of commitment may then lead to decreased trust in the protégé and a reduced willingness to invest in the relationship, resulting in the provision of less frequent and lower quality feedback.

Taken together, results of the current study contribute to our understanding of the relational processes that occur within mentoring and reveal the importance of considering perceptions of partner commitment. Not only may perceived partner commitment play a mediating role in predicting mentoring feedback processes, but prior research from the interpersonal relationships domain has found perceived partner commitment to be predictive of relationship persistence (Arriaga *et al.*, 2006). Thus, this variable may play an important role in predicting the effectiveness of mentoring relationships. Future research focussed on additional outcome variables would be useful. Moreover, we focussed exclusively on the mediating role of commitment, operationalized in three distinct ways, in the present study. In line with Chandler *et al.*'s (2011) recommendation for focus on microlevel dyadic processes, we urge future researchers to consider other mediating mechanisms, such as level of identification with the mentoring partner or feelings of reciprocity, for example.

In terms of practical implications, our findings provide insight into possible ways of improving mentoring relationships. For example, knowing that protégé anxious attachment may affect feedback behaviors through perceptions of partner commitment suggests that one possible way to enhance relationship effectiveness is for mentors and protégés to clearly demonstrate their commitment to the relationship. By clearly demonstrating their commitment, mentoring partners may be able to reduce the negative effects of anxious attachment on feedback processes within the relationship. In the case of formal mentoring programs, administrators may wish to emphasize the importance of commitment, and demonstrating one's commitment, during program orientations.

Our study is not without limitations. One limitation is that the cross-sectional nature of the study inhibits our ability to infer the causal direction of some of the relationships examined. For example, it is possible that a mentor's provision of more frequent and higher-quality feedback may serve to enhance a protégé's commitment, which is then

perceived by the mentor. Therefore, additional research is needed using a longitudinal approach. Another potential limitation is the possibility of relationships being based on common method variance. However, our use of both mentor and protégé reports reduces the likelihood of this explanation. In addition, by collecting data from matched mentors and protégés, we answer the call for more research that examines the perspectives of both mentoring partners (Allen *et al.*, 2008). Third, the amount of variance explained was generally small, meaning that although we have shed light on some predictors of feedback-seeking behaviors, there are likely other significant drivers of these relationships.

A final limitation of our study stems from our focus on mentoring in one context: doctoral student protégés and their faculty mentors. This raises issues concerning generalizability. For example, we refer to the faculty professors as mentors but some of the relationships investigated may have been more supervisory than mentoring-like in nature. There are both reasons to suspect that these findings generalize and reasons to question the transportability. In a general sense, research conducted in organizational settings has found that adult attachment style has relational implications in a variety of work-related relationships (see Harms, 2011 for a review), speaking to the notion that attachment style should also impact workplace mentoring relationships. Moreover, given that the association between commitment and feedback seeking is grounded in the general principles of commitment and relational interaction (i.e. a person fearing their partner's commitment or being less committed themselves is likely to engage in withdrawal-related behaviors), there is no apparent reason that these links would vary by context. On the other hand, Wu *et al.* (2013) found that attachment style affects feedback inquiry within workplace peer relationships in a different manner than was found in the present study. Specifically, they found a positive association between attachment style and feedback inquiry from peers within a team. Given the increasing prevalence of peer mentoring in organizations, it is important to understand which characteristics (whether it be the workplace setting or the power distance between mentor and protégé) account for the opposing results. As a final point of consideration, employees with an anxious attachment style may be less likely to actually have a mentor. Doctoral programs rely heavily on the mentor model as a part of training, whereas this is much less often the case in organizations. Thus, unless an anxiously attached individual has access to a formal mentoring program, he or she may be less successful in initiating mentoring relationships in the first place. Overall, additional research is needed to clearly ascertain the generalizability of results.

In conclusion, our study represents an important step toward a more in-depth understanding of how individual differences can influence the interpersonal processes involved in mentoring relationships. In addition to those noted above, there are many promising directions that future research may take. For example, researchers may wish to examine both mentor and protégé attachment styles simultaneously when investigating the effects that this individual difference may have on mentoring processes and outcomes. Examining other attachment styles, including secure attachment and avoidance attachment would also give a fuller picture of the role of attachment styles. In addition, recent theoretical perspectives have emphasized the importance of recognizing mentoring as a mutually beneficial relationship in which mentors may not only provide benefits to their protégés, but may also be the recipients of benefits from their protégés (e.g. Ragins and Verbos, 2007). Therefore, future research may build on our study by examining

such behavioral outcomes that are beneficial to the mentor, such as protégé support provision and mentor support seeking. Finally, given the important role that commitment appears to play in mentoring relationships, future research should investigate ways to enhance both mentor and protégé commitment to the relationship.

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