Social Comparison

Instructor Manual

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The purpose of this instructor resource module is to provide a model for teaching *social comparison* and its consequences. The module was designed to emphasize the inherent applicability of these processes to a wide variety of domains in the students' own lives. Due to the fact that inducing social comparison (particularly upward comparisons) can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as reductions in self-esteem, aggression, and negative social judgments of comparators, the in-class activities have been designed to mitigate these effects while still effectively inducing and illustrating the relevant concepts. The class is designed to be used as presented while allowing instructors to tailor the lesson to their own needs and interests through addition, expansion, or omission of particular class activities/elements.

Learning Objectives

Content-Specific Learning Objectives:

- Understand the reasons people make social comparisons.

- Identify consequences of social comparison.

- Understand the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model.

- Explain situational factors that can affect social comparison.

Relevant APA Learning Objectives (Version 2.0):

- Describe key concepts, principles, and overarching themes in psychology (1.1).

- Develop a working knowledge of psychology's content domains (1.2).

- Describe applications of psychology (1.3).

Abstract

When athletes compete in a race, they are able to observe and compare their performance against those of their competitors. In the same way, all people naturally engage in mental comparisons with the people around them during the course of daily life. These evaluations can impact our motivation and feelings. In this module, you will learn about the process of social comparison: its definition, consequences, and the factors that affect it.

Class Design Recommendations

This module is designed to be presented in one 75-minute class meeting. This design allows both presentation of concepts and ample opportunities, through direct instruction, in-class activities, and a video, to apply these concepts to a wide variety of contexts. The class could be expanded by including more of the discussion options or providing more opportunity for detailed conversation, or could be reduced to fit within a 50-minute class meeting by using an abbreviated version of the in-class activity and omitting the presentation and discussion of the video. Please also refer to the Noba PowerPoint slides that accompany this outline for the lesson materials.

Topic Outline

- Introduction: Social Comparison
- Social Comparison: Basics

  - Relevance and Similarity

  - Direction of Comparison

  - Consequences of Social Comparison

- Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model
- Individual Differences

- Situational Factors

  - Number

  - Local

  - Proximity to a Standard

  - Social Category Lines

- Related Phenomena

  - Frog Pond Effect

  - The Dunning-Kruger Effect

- Conclusion

Module Outline

- **Introduction: Social Comparison:**Social comparison is the process by which people evaluate their own traits or level of performance based upon how it compares with others' traits and performance. The process of social comparison is common, widespread, and affects many aspects of social cognition, including our subjective perceptions, behaviors, and memories.

- **Social Comparison: Basics:**Social comparison was first described by Leon Festinger (1954); Festinger argued that one important way people evaluate and inform their self-concept is through evaluations of the self in comparison to others. This occurs in two contexts—when we are evaluating our opinions and beliefs and how these relate to social norms, and when we are evaluating our level of performance or competence. Comparison of oneself to social norms helps to adapt behavior to new situations and circumstances. Comparison of one's performance to others allows for self-improvement.

- **Relevance and Similarity:**People are more likely to engage in social comparison along traits and performance domains they find to be self-relevant. When a trait or task is not relevant to the self, there may be a lack of motivation to engage in this self-evaluation. Generally, people will compare themselves to similar others (e.g., peers), as these individuals often provide the most useful information with regard to relevant social norms and abilities.

- **Direction of Comparison:**There are two directions through which social comparison can occur. *Upward social comparison* occurs when the person to whom we compare ourselves is doing better than we are; *downward social comparison* occurs when the person to whom we compare ourselves is doing more poorly than we are. Upward comparisons can challenge our self-esteem, particularly when the trait or ability in question is central to the self-concept. In contrast, downward comparisons tend to bolster self-esteem (the self-enhancement effect). The direction of comparison can also impact our view of the comparator, where upward comparisons may lead to admiration for the other person, while downward comparisons may result in scorn for the other or pride in oneself. The ease with which counterfactuals come to mind may make upward or downward comparisons more salient. When we narrowly avoid a worse outcome, we more naturally and spontaneously focus on downward comparisons, while narrowly missing out on some positive outcome tends to prompt upward comparisons.

- **Consequences of Social Comparison:**In addition to the effects on self-esteem and social judgments mentioned above, social comparison can also lead to other undesirable emotions (e.g., envy, regret) and behaviors (e.g., competitiveness, aggression). This is particularly the case when there is not an opportunity for re-evaluating the self. More positive behaviors, such as perseverance and striving for self-improvement, may occur when the individual anticipates having additional opportunities for evaluation and comparison in the future. Thus, social comparison can lead to either desirable or undesirable consequences.

- **Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model:**The self-evaluation maintenance model, or SEM, describes how people react after social comparison, in order to maintain a positive self-concept. As mentioned earlier, social comparison has a larger impact when considering self-relevant traits. Because these traits are more closely tied to one's self-concept, an upward comparison threatens the self-image and self-esteem. If the comparator is a friend (i.e., someone with whom we share relationship closeness), the sting of upward comparison is even more pronounced. We cope with this by either distancing ourselves psychologically, either from the trait/ability (deciding it's not as relevant to the self, freeing us to admire or bask in the reflected glory of the comparator) or from the comparator.

- **Individual Differences:**Some individuals, who focus on mastery goals and/or have a growth mindset, are more likely to appraise upward comparisons as challenges and opportunities for self-improvement, helping to insulate them from the negative consequences of this type of comparison. Those with a fixed mindset tend to experience upward comparison as a greater threat to their self-esteem.

- **Situational Factors:**Social comparison processes and competitiveness are most pronounced when there are few potential comparators (the N-effect), when the comparators are in close proximity (the local dominance effect) and when one is close to some performance standard.

- **Social Category Lines:**Social comparison effects can occur, not only at an individual level, but also between social groups. This is most likely to occur when the social group identity is salient.

- **Related Phenomena:**Social comparison effects are based upon one's perception of one's performance compared to others, which can lead to biased judgments of the self. For example, even though one may not be doing well compared to some objective criterion, the frog pond effect predicts that people will have enhanced self-esteem when their performance is superior (downward comparison) to a small group of local comparators— we like to be a big frog in a small pond. The Dunning-Kruger effect refers to an inflated confidence in one's abilities, observed among the least competent individuals. These individuals lack the competence to recognize their own level of incompetence, distorting their ability to accurately engage in social comparison. In contrast, the most skilled individuals often underestimate their level of competence, relative to others.

- **Conclusion:**Social comparison can lead to both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, comparison can lead to dissatisfaction with one's performance and challenge one's self-esteem. On the other hand, comparison provides valuable information about one's traits and performance can help inform efforts at self-improvement.

Difficult Terms

Counterfactual thinking
Double-curse explanation
Dunning-Kruger effect
Fixed mindset
Growth mindset
Local dominance effect
Mastery goals
N-effect

Self-enhancement effect
Self-evaluation maintenance model (SEM)

Lecture Frameworks

Overview: This concept is one that can be easily applied to students' own self-concepts and experiences. The lesson, designed to take place in a 75-minute class meeting, encourages students to engage in the processes and phenomena under consideration to help them in learning the material. After an initial brief activity to induce social comparison (5 minutes), students are introduced to the foundational concepts (10 minutes). Students then engage in an activity that prompts social comparison and illustrates many of the consequences and moderators of social comparison in a novel and low-stakes domain (25 minutes). These concepts are then presented and discussed (15 minutes). A brief video illustrates these in a more potentially reactive context (10 minutes). Content concludes with phenomena related to social comparison (5 minutes). Finally, a one-minute paper serves to conclude the class meeting (5 minutes).

- **Warm-Up Activity:**This activity introduces the concept of social comparison in a context that is relevant to students, but relatively nonreactive. The activity illustrates the contexts in which social comparison may be useful and contexts where it may be unnecessary. Please refer to the activity/demonstrations section for a complete description of this activity.

- **Direct Instruction of Social Comparison:**Present the major concepts, including self-evaluation, social comparison, the role of relevance and similarity, and the direction of comparison. Refer to the PowerPoint notes, IM Module Outline and the Noba Social Comparison Module.

- **"Build the Best Structure" Group Activity/Discussion:** This activity prompts students to complete a simple, but ambiguously described, task with classmates. The activity, described in detail below, encourages students to engage in many of the comparison processes in a context that is novel, nonreactive, and low-stakes. The discussion will anticipate many of the concepts from the module, which can then be formalized in direct instruction. Please refer to the activity/demonstrations section for a complete description of this activity.

- **Direct Instruction of Consequences of Social Comparison:**Having completed the activity should facilitate student understanding of concepts related to the role of self-enhancement, counterfactuals, and the self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model. Students sometimes struggle with the SEM model, but the activity provides a concrete domain in which to discuss this model. Refer to the PowerPoint notes, IM Module Outline

and the Noba Social Comparison Module.

- **Direct Instruction of Individual Differences and Situational Factors:**Discuss moderators that make social comparison processes and consequences more or less pronounced. Additional examples are provided on the PowerPoint slides that build on the material from the module. Refer to the PowerPoint notes, IM Module Outline and the Noba Social Comparison Module.

- **Video: "The Mirror in My Mind: Body Image and Self-Esteem":**Given that the activities in the class meeting have been designed to be nonreactive, to avoid genuine threats to students' self-concepts, this video illustrates applications of these concepts in a higher stakes context, with more impactful consequences. See the description below and refer to the PowerPoint notes for description of possible points for discussion.

- **Direct Instruction of Related Phenomena:**Describe the frog pond effect and the Dunning-Kruger effect, both of which are based upon social comparison processes. Refer to the PowerPoint notes, IM Module Outline and the Noba Social Comparison Module.

- **One Minute Paper Activity:**Complete the class with this in-class assessment of student learning. This will allow review of students' understanding of the material, identify areas of remaining confusion, and encourage metacognition in students. Refer to PowerPoint notes. Please refer to the activity/demonstrations section for a complete description of this activity.

Activities & Demonstrations

Warm-Up: Are you Tall? The purpose of this activity is to introduce the concepts of social comparison and induce comparison processes in students along a self-relevant dimension.

- Time: 3-5 minutes.
- Materials: PowerPoint slide with activity questions.
- Directions:

    - Tell students to consider their answer to the question, "are you tall?"

    - Ask them how they determined their answer. Many will base their judgments on how their height compares to similar others (e.g., their classmates, same-aged peers), demonstrating social comparison.

- Ask them to answer the question, "are you taller than 5'6" (1.68m), and whether they used the same process to answer this question as the more general question. Here, there is no need to engage in social comparison, as it is an objective question with a clear external criterion. Social comparison occurs in the absence of objective external criteria.

- Conclude the activity by formalizing these student comments and insights by introducing the term "social comparison". The PowerPoint slides build on this activity by introducing the relevant terms and related phenomena, to reinforce these initial observations.

"Build the Best Structure" Activity and Discussion: The purpose of this activity is to induce social comparison and explore its consequences. Many domains in which students naturally engage in social comparison (egs. athletic performance, academic performance) may be idiosyncratic to each student's self-concept. Also, due to the potential for to threats to self-esteem, using existing traits/abilities for a comparison activity could lead to discomfort and reactivity. This activity introduces a new, temporary, and low-stakes performance domain in which students can more safely engage in upward and downward comparison and observe firsthand the consequences of comparison in ways that are consistent with the self-evaluation model

- Time: 25 minutes
- Materials: PowerPoint slide, building blocks (enough for students to build structures in groups of 4-5; approximately 15-20 blocks per group; best if blocks are varied in size and shape)
- Directions:

  - Separate students into groups of 4 or 5 and give each group a set of blocks.

  - Instruct them to build "the best structure" they can. It is important to be intentionally vague about what constitutes "best". If students ask for clarification, tell them to discuss it with their group and decide amongst themselves what defines "best". Give students about 5-10 minutes to build their structures.

  - While groups are working, walk around and listen for evidence that the groups are engaging in social comparison. The students may not spontaneously discuss any ways in which their structure compares to other groups at this point; if they do, this can be used as examples to illustrate concepts during the discussion portion of the activity.

  - After building phase, tell students that the class will now determine which group's structure is best. Ask for suggestions on criteria to determine which structure is best

(e.g., tallest, used the most blocks, most stable, most creative). If available, these could be listed on the board; otherwise, instructor can simply note the criteria that are suggested. Depending on class size and number of groups, you could have each group suggest a single criterion. Ideally, the list will include 3-5 criteria.

- Have the students determine the winner for each criterion; this can be done through a formal vote (you may wish to allow groups to lobby for their structure prior to a vote) or an informal discussion. The important point is that students be prompted to compare their structure to other groups' structure.

- Discuss the activity. Questions and potential connections to concepts include:

  - Did most groups vote for criteria that are *relevant* to their group's definition of "best"? Comparison processes occur along self-relevant dimensions, with similar peers.

  - When groups "won" or "lost" for a particular criterion, what type of comparison were they engaging in? Winning for a particular criterion reflects downward comparisons, whereas losing for a particular criterion reflects upward comparison.

  - How did students feel when their group won or lost? The students are likely to feel more positively when they won (downward comparison) than lost (upward comparison). If they won for a particular criterion, did they emphasize the importance of that criterion (self-enhancement effect)?

  - Did any group lose on a criterion that they, themselves, nominated? How did they react? If the group selected the criterion, and then did not perform well on that criterion, did they change their focus to another criterion (distancing from trait, in self-evaluation maintenance model)?

  - How do individual differences and situational factors impact these processes? Did some students care more or less about how their group's structure compared to other groups' structures? Did this relate to mastery goals and mindset? Did the number of students in the class or close physical proximity to the other groups impact this? Were there more debates about which group should win for a particular criterion when it was a close-call between groups (relates to proximity to a standard, counterfactuals)?

- If time permits, you could give students a final 2 minutes to improve on their structure (or just have them imagine having this opportunity). What would they do to improve their structure? It is likely they would focus on whichever criterion sets their group's structure most apart from the other groups. This illustrates the self-evaluation maintenance model and speaks to the differences in consequences resulting from anticipated opportunities

for additional evaluation (e.g., less negative competition with others, focus on improvement rather than derogation of the comparator).

One-Minute Activity: The purpose of this Classroom Assessment Activity (CAT) is to…

- Time: 2-3 minutes
- Materials: PowerPoint slide, writing materials
- Directions:

  - Project the PowerPoint slide and ask students to answer both of the questions on the slide. The questions ask students to reflect on the material presented during class to identify the most important concept and any concept(s) about which they are still confused. Give students approximately one minute to record their responses and collect these.

  - Review the responses outside of class time. Examine the responses to the first question for accuracy and examine responses to the second question for repeated themes across students. If there are any inaccuracies or concepts about which a large number of students are expressing confusion, you may wish to contact the student(s) individually with additional feedback or review these concepts in the subsequent class meeting.

Additional Activities

Eastwick, P. W., & Buck, A. A. (2014). Too much matching: A social relations model enhancement of the pairing game. *Teaching of Psychology, 41,* 246-250. doi:10.1177/0098628314537980.

- This activity has students play a variant of the Pairing Game. While this activity is generally used to illustrate assortative mating and other mate selection phenomena, the basis of this mating depends upon evaluations of the self that are inherently based upon social comparison processes. The basis of this social-relations-based expansion of the Pairing Game lends itself well to a focus on social comparison.

Discussion Points

- On what do you compare yourself with others? Qualities such as attractiveness and intelligence? Skills such as school performance or athleticism? Do others also make these same types of comparisons or does each person make a unique set? Why do you think this is?

  - This can be a useful question to introduce the topic of social comparison, as the list students generate will likely illustrate many of the concepts in the module, including a focus on traits/abilities that are self-relevant and on which the students perceive themselves to have strengths (downward comparisons, self-enhancement). The discussion could be extended to consider with whom students compare themselves (likely people who they perceive to be similar to themselves).

- How can making comparisons to others help you?

  - Students will likely be able to intuit that engaging in upward comparisons may facilitate efforts at self-improvement and that downward comparisons may reinforce the self-concept. The discussion could be extended to consider negative potential consequences of social comparison, as well.

- One way to make comparisons is to compare yourself with your own past performance. Discuss a time you did this. Could this example be described as an "upward" or "downward" comparison? How did this type of comparison affect you?

  - Students may feel uncomfortable considering, or openly discussing, upward comparisons, whether compared to others or to one's past behavior, because these upward comparisons represent a challenge to the self-concept. Encouraging students to consider traits/abilities for which they have a growth mindset (i.e., on which they believe they can improve in the future) may help to mitigate this concern.

Articles, Links, and More

This American Life: In Defense of Ignorance

- Overview: This episode of the podcast *This American Life,* titled, "In Defense of Ignorance," describes the Dunning-Kruger effect and some of its implications. Includes real-world applications of the concept, including story of Wheeler, a bank robber who failed to wear a mask due to a mistaken (but confidently held) belief that wearing lemon juice on his face

would obscure it to video surveillance. Describes classic study establishing Dunning-Kruger effect, including inaccuracies in self-evaluation at both ends (bottom and top) of the distribution and explanation of the "double curse". Then, the podcast returns to applied implications of the effect and addresses the fact that all individuals are vulnerable to the effect, in particular domains, and that the very nature of the phenomenon blinds us to awareness of our vulnerability and opportunities for correction.

- Link: **http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/epi...** Dunning-Kruger effect is discussed in Act Two (10:00).

Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory

- Psychology Notes HQ: "Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory"

- Overview: This is a brief overview of the foundational elements of social comparison theory. The website summarizes the hypotheses and findings from Festinger's seminal 1959 article proposing social comparison, and outlines the differences between upward and downward comparisons, as well as briefly addressing implications for self-evaluation. This would serve as an additional resource for students, particularly those who are struggling with the fundamental concepts.

- Link: **http://www.psychologynoteshq.com/leonfestinger-soc...**

- Social Comparison in Applied Contexts:

Garcia, S. M., Tor, A., & Schiff, T. M. (2013). The psychology of competition: A social comparison perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 8,* 634-650. doi:10.1177/1745691613504114

- This article elaborates upon traditional social comparison concepts, advocating for additional person and situation variables that may moderate or mediate the effects of social comparison. The article integrates concepts such as proximity to a standard, number of competitors, and the role of social categories into the more basic concepts of social comparison (e.g., those outlined by Festinger in his original article), relating well to material in the module.

Martin, M. C., & Kennedy, P. F. (1994). Social comparison and the beauty of advertising models: The role of motives for comparison. *Advances in Consumer Research, 21,* 365-371.

- This article describes an empirical study to examine the processes and motivations underlying adolescents' social comparison of physical attractiveness, using models in

advertisements as comparators. The authors argue that research on social comparison has overemphasized the role of self-evaluation in social comparison processes, and advocates for additional focus on self-improvement and self-enhancement as motivations for social comparison. This article relates to the content of videos described elsewhere in this IM module, which focus on social comparison in body image.

Suls, J. (2011). Social comparison processes: Implications for physical health. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 269-280). New York: Oxford University Press.

- This chapter, part of a handbook on health psychology, focuses on social comparison processes in physical health contexts. The chapter addresses the role of social comparison in adjusting to and interpreting one's health diagnosis, differentiating acute and chronic conditions; social comparison effects on interpretations of one's prognosis, coping, and treatment options; and describes implications of these processes for health promotion campaign design and for medical practice. These concepts relate to the content in the PowerPoint slides on comparison in cancer patients and describes how both downward and upward comparisons can be adaptive and beneficial, in certain contexts.

Taylor, S. E., & Lobel, M. (1989). Social comparison activity under threat: downward evaluation and upward contacts. *Psychological Review, 96,* 569-575.

- This article is a high-impact and oft-cited article applying social comparison to health outcomes. Taylor and Lobel describe the tendency of patients to engage in downward comparison for evaluation purposes and to engage in upward affiliation and information-seeking behaviors. Both of these divergent strategies have been associated with benefits in coping and outcomes for patients.

Outside Resources

Video: Downward Comparison
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3gGkiWSzvg

Video: Dunning-Kruger Effect
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htEMitphv8w

Video: Social Comparison overview
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIRAQvP0ABg

Video: Social Media and Comparison
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mobWMwryKY

Video: Upward Comparison
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlBKORVcyGk

Web: Self-Compassion to counter the negative effects of social comparison
http://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/

Evidence-Based Teaching

Bensley, D. A., Rainey, C., Lilienfeld, S. O., & Kuehne, S. (2015). What do psychology students know about what they know in psychology? *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, 1*, 283-297. doi:10.1037/stl0000035

- This study demonstrates that, consistent with the Dunning-Kruger effect, students who performed least well on an objective test of psychology knowledge were the most overconfident of their knowledge. In addition to effectively illustrating the Dunning-Kruger effect in a self-relevant domain, the article also makes suggestions for mitigating this overconfidence.

Reddy, P., & Parson, V. (2007). Student response to a pub quiz style first year psychology assessment. *Psychology Learning and Teaching, 6*, 154-159.

- This paper describes how a pub trivia-style quiz can be used to support learning in an introductory psychology class. Among other benefits, the activity encourages positive social comparison with classmates to facilitate metacognitive development and improve learning.

Tablante, C. B. & Fiske, S. T. (2015). Teaching social class. *Teaching of Psychology, 42*, 184-190. doi:10.1177/0098628315873148

- Many dimensions for which individuals engage in social comparison are culturally or personally sensitive and potentially reactive. This article discusses one such dimension, social class. This dimension naturally leads to social comparisons and discussing this topic

in class poses a number of challenges. The authors describe strategies for managing a class discussion of this topic, which also has implications for discussing other potentially sensitive concepts related to social comparison processes.

Links to ToPIX Materials

Discovering Psychology: The Self (26:36). An overview of many concepts related to the self, including self-esteem, sources of the self-concept/self-knowledge, self-efficacy (related to growth mindset and focus on self-improvement)
http://www.learner.org/series/discoveringpsychology/15/e15expand.html

From Clips for Class: "Girls' Self-Esteem"—this short video (2:41) shows adolescent girls discussing their perceptions of how their bodies compare to others and the implications of these assessments on their self-esteem.
http://clipsforclass.com/social.html

From Clips for Class: "The Mirror in My Mind: Body Image and Self-Esteem"—discusses how upward and downward comparisons to peers and to (often unrealistic) media images impact self-esteem (4:06)
http://clipsforclass.com/social.html

Samsung Galaxy S3 Ad (1:30): This video portrays smart phone customers engaging in social comparison to others and to past circumstances.
http://youtu.be/QR8A3T6sPzU

Teaching Topics

Teaching The Most Important Course
https://nobaproject.com/documents/1_Teaching_The_Most_Important_Course.pdf

Content Coverage
https://nobaproject.com/documents/2_Content_Coverage.pdf

Motivating Students
https://nobaproject.com/documents/3_Motivating_Students_Tips.pdf

Engaging Large Classes
https://nobaproject.com/documents/4_Engaging_Large_Classes.pdf

Assessment Learning
https://nobaproject.com/documents/5_Assessment_Learning.pdf

Teaching Biological Psychology
https://nobaproject.com/documents/6_Teaching_Bio_Psych.pdf

PowerPoint Presentation

This module has an associated PowerPoint presentation. Download it at https://nobaproject.com//images/shared/supplement_editions/000/000/218/Social%20Com-parison.ppt?1475602011.

About Noba

The Diener Education Fund (DEF) is a non-profit organization founded with the mission of re-inventing higher education to serve the changing needs of students and professors. The initial focus of the DEF is on making information, especially of the type found in textbooks, widely available to people of all backgrounds. This mission is embodied in the Noba project.

Noba is an open and free online platform that provides high-quality, flexibly structured textbooks and educational materials. The goals of Noba are three-fold:

- To reduce financial burden on students by providing access to free educational content
- To provide instructors with a platform to customize educational content to better suit their curriculum
- To present material written by a collection of experts and authorities in the field

The Diener Education Fund is co-founded by Drs. Ed and Carol Diener. Ed is the Joseph Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the University of Illinois. Carol Diener is the former director of the Mental Health Worker and the Juvenile Justice Programs at the University of Illinois. Both Ed and Carol are award- winning university teachers.

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