



Briefing Paper 3: Challenging leadership in the voluntary sector: the promise of collective leadership theories

Carol Jacklin-Jarvis, Vita Terry and James Rees



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For more information, please contact:
Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership
The Open University,
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
+44(0) 1908 655504
james.rees@open.ac.uk

About the CVSL Briefing Papers

This briefing paper is the third in a series of **three** short papers exploring the topic of leadership in the UK voluntary sector produced by the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership (CVSL). Our aim in preparing these papers has been to set the context for understanding recent debates around leadership in the voluntary sector in order to identify where further research and discussion is needed, and to understand what leadership development resources have been developed within and for the voluntary sector. We also hope to frame and shape future debates on leadership, and to point to new research agendas.

Consequently, **Paper 1** concentrates on reviewing literature that is best characterised as broadly concerning the debate about leadership within the UK voluntary sector, but it goes on to open this up wherever possible to explore the broader influence of debates on leadership which have influenced thinking about leadership in the sector. For instance these tend to be more critical perspectives that challenge ‘person-centred’ or heroic leader models. **Paper 2** describes the recent leadership development ‘terrain’ that has developed for the UK voluntary sector. Finally, **Paper 3** details a (non-exhaustive) group of approaches and theories in the wider leadership literature which are particularly pertinent to understanding, researching and communicating about leadership in the voluntary sector. Each paper is based on a semi-systematic review of the available academic and ‘policy based’ literature.

The underlying questions addressed in **Paper 3** are:

- What are the alternative ways of understanding leadership in the voluntary sector, in particular the balance between individual and collective accounts?
- What are the collective leadership theories and what are their implications for thinking about leadership development and for further research on leadership?

About the authors

Carol Jacklin-Jarvis is a Lecturer in Management at the Open University Business School. Her research focuses on leadership in the context of collaboration between organisations in voluntary and public sectors. She teaches on leadership, collaboration, and alternative approaches to management, and is co-author of CVSL’s two free modules on leadership in the voluntary sector. Carol has extensive work experience in leading and managing service development that crosses organisational and sector boundaries.

Vita Terry is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, the Open University Business School. Her research interests focus on small and medium-sized voluntary sector organisations, public service provision, organisational change, as well as leadership, diversity and migration. She has expertise in qualitative methods and an interest in using research approaches including ethnography, documentary film-making, and participatory methods.

James Rees is Director of the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, and Anthony Nutt Senior Research Fellow at the Open University Business School. His research focuses on the third sector, public service delivery and reform, as well as leadership, governance and citizen involvement.

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1. Introduction

From our previous two briefing papers that took an overview of the voluntary sector leadership literature and the leadership development terrain, it is clear that, in comparison to the public and private sectors, there has been much less attention on understanding the concept and context of leadership, and even less emphasis on building leadership theories and philosophies. There has, we have argued, been an over-reliance on the notion of the ‘charismatic’, ‘heroic’ leader and leadership being perceived as an individual’s responsibility. This is reflected in the relative absence of a deeper conceptualisation of voluntary sector leadership drawing on broader theoretical frameworks, which in turn has created rather imprecise definitions of leadership, and how it applies to the voluntary sector. Such concerns have also been raised in the wider leadership literature, which demonstrates no single or clear definition, but is often overlapping and contested. This raises concerns about how useful it is to talk of leadership – vaguely defined – particularly when applied to an already diverse sector, whose boundaries and scope are contested.

One explanation has been an unwillingness to apply theoretical concepts and models from wider literature due to the perceived distinctiveness of the voluntary sector, and the apparent differences between the voluntary sector ethos and culture to the corporate sector in particular. However, given the commonalities with the public sector – e.g. notions of service, equality, and equity – it is surprising that more work has not drawn out the parallels between voluntary sector and public leadership (Hodges and Howieson, 2017). Thus the focus of the remainder of this report is to illustrate how the substantive gaps, outlined below, in voluntary sector literature not only requires further empirical research but also needs to draw on additional theoretical frameworks developed in the wider literature. These gaps include:

- To not solely focus on the notion of a ‘leader’, but to adopt a more inclusive view of leadership as a process that

involves the contribution of different individuals.

- To move away from the traditional hierarchical perspective that leaders are only those positioned as CEOs or trustees at the top of the organisation, but to adopt a more holistic view that leaders can be located, at different levels within an organisation, the sector, and even across sectors.
- To acknowledge that leadership involves a number of processes, interactions, and interpretations. It is important to focus on the sense-making element to understand how leadership is understood and performed, but also to consider how leadership is created through interactions between people.
- To move away from a normative framing of what a ‘good’ leader should look like, and to acknowledge leadership can be played out in different forms and ways. For example, there is the potential to explore what ‘bad’ leadership might look like.

This work will potentially disrupt dominant narratives of leadership and of a leadership deficit in the sector. In the remainder of this paper, we begin this process of re-framing leadership and leadership development in the voluntary sector.

2. Who are the leaders?

As demonstrated in this review, the study of leadership in the voluntary sector frequently focuses on the elite few in positions of power. Turning to the 'grey' or policy literature provides more insight on how to think about leaders and leadership differently. A trio of reports by Clore Social Leadership have recently been published in response to the increasingly challenging and complex environment, although primarily written through the lens of leadership development. The first report (Harris, 2016a) describes the gaps in leadership development, stating 'whilst notions of the 'heroic leader' are now considered quaintly old-fashioned, replaced by a recognition that leaders can come from all walks of life, there remains little consensus about how to create an ecosystem that successfully identifies and nurtures leadership talent' (p.3). The second report (Harris, 2016b) goes on to argue leadership should be thought about differently, in particular, by targeting leadership development at different demographic groups. The example used here was the millennials, the next generation of leaders who come with their own preconceptions of leadership, arguing they 'are looking for a different type of leadership. Not for the stressed-out, burnt-out 'heroic' leader, with no time for delegation and succession planning, desperately trying to hold back the tides of change washing over their organisations' (ibid: 5). The final report (Harris, 2016c), focused more on constraints and solutions to promoting more effective leadership development, and has been discussed in more detail in Paper 2.

Such thoughts are shared by Dame Mary Marsh (2013) who stresses leadership support should 'not just [be] at the level of directors and chief executives, but for aspiring and emerging leaders across all positions and for trustees and volunteers too.' Previously, most empirical studies have researched the notion of leadership and practice from the perspective of the CEO, typically established within large organisations, or from the bias of national umbrella bodies based in London. Dame Mary Marsh (2013) suggests most support has

subsequently been targeted at those who are already in established roles rather than thinking of how to encourage and develop aspiring leaders. One consequence of this focus on those in a position of power is the creation of limited normative conceptions of how leadership is understood and experienced across the voluntary sector. Such perceptions do not acknowledge the range of leaders, or diversity of organisations, or provide a representative view of voluntary sector leadership.

For example, Marsh's (2013) review highlights the under-representation of specific demographic groups - women, BAME and individuals living with disabilities – as leaders within the voluntary sector. There has been little exploration within the literature as to why this is the case. Teasdale et al. (2011) provide one of the few insights into this underrepresentation, specifically focusing on female leaders in the context of social enterprises. They demonstrate that the sector's workforce is largely formed of women; nevertheless, there is a lack of female leaders in large organisations. In contrast, women are strongly represented in leadership roles within small organisations or in establishing initiatives. As a result of these differences in female leadership roles the responsibility and role they play can often go unnoticed. This demonstrates how additional factors, such as, gender-based barriers and organisational size, can also act as constraints to leadership development and produce a leadership deficit among different groups in particular contexts. Again, this shows that broad brush claims are not helpful in understanding leadership deficits; a more nuanced and in-depth approach is needed to understand why there are differences between different groups, and to emphasise the need for more targeted initiatives to encourage aspiring and emerging leaders from these groups.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether leadership principles and practices found in large organisations, often described by those in significant positions of power, can be applied to the bulk of the sector that consists of small and medium sized organisations. There is a substantial gap in academic literature on leadership within small and medium-sized organisations (Ockenden and Hutin, 2008), which

arguably face exacerbated challenges and conditions within the current turbulent environment (LBF, 2017). Therefore, it is likely that leaders from smaller organisations choose to operate and navigate the environment in different ways to leaders in larger organisations. Highlighting the need for further empirical studies to explore this situation, to challenge dominant leadership narratives, and illuminate the diversity of leadership within the voluntary sector.

3. Approaches to collective leadership

One way of exploring a more inclusive approach to leadership in the voluntary sector is via a number of theories that we group together in this paper under the heading ‘collective leadership’. Our interest here is in exploring the application of leadership theories that highlight the plurality of leadership – including shared, distributed, collaborative, and relational leadership. These leadership theories come from significantly different theoretical perspectives, and each have different emphases. However, here we highlight five key themes that recur in discussions of collective leadership practice. Collective leadership is:

- Shared between two or more people (Pearce and Conger, 2003);
- constructed relationally between people (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), and through everyday practice and interactions (Raelin 2016a), rather than through individual actions and attributes;
- enacted at all levels of an organisation (Bolden, 2011; Raelin, 2003);
- and across organisational boundaries (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Huxham and Vangen, 2000);
- concerned with ‘making things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000) in a way that

takes account of and draws on the diverse interests and resources of multiple stakeholders and partners (Chrislip and Larson, 1994).

For the purposes of this paper, we do not unpick the differences between relational, shared, distributed and collaborative leadership, but instead focus on how and why this set of theories is of particular relevance to the voluntary sector context. We then comment on the implications for leadership development, and for future empirical research on VO leadership.

Leadership as shared

First, in spite of the prevalence of the narrative of the unique individual in the sector literature, a shared approach to leadership is embedded in the structure and governance of VOs. The shared responsibility of trustee boards, and the ambiguity of their relationship with chief executives (Cornforth, 2015), focuses attention on the interactions between trustees, and between trustees and chief executives and senior staff. Leadership is distributed (Gronn, 2002) between volunteer trustees and employed staff, raising questions about the processes and practices through which people in these roles interact with one another to set the direction of the organisation (Cornforth and Edwards, 1999). At the simplest level, this reflects Petrov’s (2006) definition of distributed leadership as shared between people with different skills:

‘a model that is based on the idea that leadership of an organisation should not rest with a single individual, but should be shared or ‘distributed’ among those with the relevant skills’ (Petrov 2006, cited in Gill, 2008).

However, this poses important questions as to the processes and practices through which this sharing takes place. For example:

- to what extent are these processes formalised or enacted informally?

- how do individuals who share leadership coordinate and integrate their practice?
- how do they practice mutual accountability?
- and who is finally responsible?

Such questions have been brought to wider attention by recent high profile cases, such as the collapse of Kids Company (see for example Mance 2017). In structural terms, the sharing of leadership between trustees and chief staff is a matter of regulation, and embedded in organisational structure charts, policies and procedures. However, in day to day practice sharing leadership is more fluid and ambiguous, a continuing process of negotiation that responds to contextual change (Cornforth and Macmillan 2016). The collective leadership literature points us towards the potential for understanding such mutual influence through the lens of relationship (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011).

Leadership as relational practice

Relational leadership theory (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien 2006) goes beyond purposeful sharing of roles and responsibilities to highlight the relational processes through which individuals influence one another to set the direction of an organisation. This understanding of leadership as embedded in relationship is useful for exploring interactions between trustees and staff, but also has a wider relevance to understanding leadership practice in VOs – particularly smaller VOs.

Small VOs often rely on a small group of committed well-networked individuals, (volunteers, trustees, and staff) who wield considerable influence within the organisation and beyond (McGovern, 2014). Their roles are ambiguous and multi-faceted, with individuals adopting different roles – sometimes simultaneously (ibid). Understanding the ways in which these individuals influence one another relationally (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), and the micro processes through which they influence and are influenced by external stakeholders offers a

different perspective to the more traditional focus on the individual skills and characteristics of formal leaders. It draws our attention to the interactions between people – ‘talking together, acting together, thinking together, fighting together, playing together’ (Raelin 2016a p.129). Seen through this lens, leadership is a practice through which people together set the organisation’s direction, and engage other people through a multiplicity of continuing everyday interactions that extend far beyond the formal activities of a trustee board or a chief exec’s strategizing. As Grint (2005b) explains, leadership does not boil down to one dramatic action by a key player, but involves an accumulation of small actions.

Leadership is then a social process that draws on the different expertise and knowledge of multiple actors, with and without formal position (Heifetz 1994). Furthermore, viewed as a practice, leadership is not only inherently relational and collective, it is also embodied, situated in a specific context, and played out in day-to-day experience (Carroll et al 2008).

Leaderful organisations

Raelin’s (2003) concept of the ‘leaderful organisation’ builds on the idea that leadership comes from multiple levels and sources. It highlights the importance of becoming a learning organisation, and encourages leadership development throughout an organisation.

This conceptual lens is a particularly attractive one for researching and reflecting on VO leadership for several reasons. First, in focusing attention away from top leaders, it offers a different perspective on the sector narrative of leadership deficit, and activity to address that narrative. This is in line with Howieson and Hodges’s (2014) suggestion that there is not a lack of leaders in the sector, but rather a need for more leadership at different levels. Second, the development of leadership at multiple levels of an organisation offers a more participative, democratic, and inclusive approach to leadership –

values that resonate with VOs and are significant for their legitimacy. For example, understanding a service-user 'led' organisation as full of leadership will lead the researcher to explore the everyday interactions and conversational processes (Moore and Sonsino, 2003) through which service users, trustees, and employees together construct a user-focused narrative that impacts on the organisation's priorities and direction. It may also give insight into how everyday interactions can 're-frame' what the organisation does away from its user focus and participative values – intentionally or otherwise.

Leadership across organisational boundaries

Theories of collective leadership also provide insight into how leadership happens beyond and across the boundaries of organisations and sectors (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). These theories give insight into how leadership enables the achievement of 'collaborative advantage' (something that no organisation can achieve alone), and minimises the potential for failure and inertia (Huxham and Vangen 2005; Vangen and Huxham 2003). This is particularly significant in an environment in which VOs are encouraged to collaborate with one another and with public agencies to survive and thrive (see for example Broomhead et al., 2016; Localgiving, 2015). The policy push from successive UK governments towards collaborations within and across the sectors now has a lengthy history since at least the 1990s. Inter-organisational collaboration has been promoted in policy and practice as a mechanism to share resources and address complex social problems and environmental concerns. However, this push towards collaboration has been amplified by the economic climate and austerity measures, with the intention of maintaining levels of welfare service delivery. Voluntary sector leaders also view this as a strategic response to external pressures to 'make efficiency savings in order to protect services, jobs and in some cases their very existence' (Stafford, 2012: p.262).

However, whilst collaborations and partnerships may appear to be a viable and favourable solution to the external environment, they involve considerable time, resources and capacity to ensure they are undertaken effectively (Stone et al., 2014). Furthermore, research shows that leading across organisational boundaries is full of tensions, posing dilemmas of ideology and pragmatism, and giving rise to practices of politicking and manipulating the agenda alongside more facilitative and enabling leadership practices (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). This gives some insight into the process of leading in a context in which there are necessarily differences between collaborating partners. Indeed, the paradox of collaboration is that it depends on these differences (of resource, knowledge, insight and so forth), but differences can also pull the collaboration apart (Huxham and Vangen 2005). Although the challenges, tensions, and dilemmas of leading in collaborative contexts are extensively discussed in the public administration literature, there is as limited discussion as to how these tensions play out in the VS context (Jacklin-Jarvis, 2015).

If leadership is viewed as a social process that is enacted by multiple actors across and beyond the organisation, then leadership is best understood by attending to the experiences, interpretations and interactions of those involved (Badaracco, 2001). As explored further below, this has implications for thinking about the ways in which we research leadership in the VS. It suggests that such research should focus not only be on the decision-making actions of individuals, but rather on the interpretation and sense-making of the those involved, and the relational processes of negotiation between different actors. Grint (2005a) recognises that 'this 'negotiated' or 'distributed' or 'deep' leadership is often overlooked precisely because it remains informal and distributed amongst the collective rather than emanating from a formal and individual leader' (p.20). This raises further important questions about how power is shared or moves between individuals at different organisational levels or across organisational boundaries.

Adopting the collective leadership lens

This very brief review of theories of collective leadership highlights their potential for understanding and researching VS leadership as a practice that is social, collective, and collaborative, rather than individual. As Gronn (2002) argues, these theories shift the focus away from traditional concepts of hierarchical leadership, and point towards a more inclusive and participative practice. And as Grint (2005a) points out, these critiques do not say that key leaders do not play an essential role, but do acknowledge that there are other factors that come into play.

For example, collective leadership focuses attention on the role of followers, “without whom a leader cannot exist” (Grint 2005a, p.46). This is not in a traditional leader-follower sense that reinforces the idea a ‘heroic’ and ‘charismatic’ leader, but through varying notions of distributed leadership, such as, institutional leadership (Washington et al. 2008), co-leadership (Heenan and Bennis 2000), shared leadership (Pearce and Conger 2003), multidirectional leadership (Edwards et al. 2002) and rotated leadership (Erez et al. 2002). Although different concepts and models of collective leadership, they all “relax assumptions that leaders and followers are always distinctively different actors with fundamentally distinct characteristics and behaviours, and focused increased attention on the interactive relationship at the core of the leadership process” (Bligh, 2011 p.427). This moves from a view of the passive and compliant follower to a more inclusive viewpoint, namely followership. To explore this concept of followership further it is essential to take into account both the interactions between people, and the context in which those interactions take place (Howieson and Hodges, 2014).

4. Collective leadership theories: implications for leadership development and research

Adopting the lens of collective leadership has some implications for the ways in which we think about leadership development and the production of resources to enable that development. At the most basic level, these theories suggest that leadership development opportunities should be opened up to a much broader group of people beyond those individuals with formal leadership roles. Furthermore, they suggest that the traditional model of extracting formal leaders from their context for ‘development’ is somewhat disconnected from the social reality of leadership practice (Grint and Holt 2011).

Understanding leadership as a social practice raises issues for the mechanisms of leadership development (for example, delivered face-to-face, online, or blended; in the workplace or outside), but also more fundamentally for its content and focus. Leadership development academics Brigid Carroll and her colleagues frame leadership development as identity work that engages with issues of power, participation, and democracy (Carroll 2010, Carroll and Simpson 2012, Carroll and Smolovic Jones, 2017). This approach implies that participants are not simply engaged in acquiring a fixed set of skills and knowledge about how leadership works, but rather in a process through which they together constitute the nature of the leadership being developed (Carroll and Smolovic Jones, 2017). The implications of this are that leadership development opportunities are in effect co-produced by facilitators and participants, through practices, discourses, and relational experience (ibid). The practices of leadership development are therefore likely to include story-telling and narrative development, questioning and challenge, and to focus on discourse and everyday relational practices.

We pose three questions for further reflection in terms of adopting a collective leadership lens to leadership development for voluntary organisations:

- First, how do we open up access to leadership development for individuals at all levels of voluntary organisations and with and without positional leadership roles?
- Second, how do we provide development opportunities that are embedded in the social interactions that are at the heart of leadership practice?
- Third, how should a more inclusive and social approach to leadership development reflect the specific challenges of the current voluntary sector context – eg. focus on cross-boundary working to tackle complex social problems; focus on the particular challenges of austerity, or the consequences of Brexit?

Arguably a more relational, democratic, and inclusive approach to leadership development is particularly relevant for those parts of the voluntary sector that are focused on social outcomes, such as inclusion and community wellbeing. In addition, a focus on social interactions reflects the need for high level social skills in a context characterised by collaboration and continuing negotiation. In addition, this more inclusive approach to leadership development suggests that leadership development opportunities must be accessible to all, and indeed may often best be accessed by whole teams or groups, rather than by individuals.

Adopting insights from theories of collective leadership also has implications for framing a research agenda, and for the selection of research methodologies to explore a practice of VO leadership empirically. Four issues arise for research design:

- First, to understand practice, it is important to observe leadership as it happens in the interactions between people – their actions and conversations.
- Second, such observation will not be focused on specific ‘leadership acts’, but

rather on everyday practice – the meetings (formal and informal), communications, routines, and micro-interactions of organisational and inter-organisational life.

- Third, as a practice approach is closely intertwined with experience, empirical research should continue to include interviews. However, these interviews are likely to be conversational in style, and to focus on participants’ retrospective sensemaking of the interactions of organisational life, rather than on their individual actions.
- Four, to understand leadership as a contextualised practice, voluntary sector researchers also need to understand the ways in which leadership interactions are enabled and constrained by an environment of power relationships, culture, and discourses (Raelin 2016b).

It is likely that research that offers substantive insights into leadership practice in voluntary organisations will need to address all four of these issues, and will draw on data collection from different sources, including observation of everyday organisational life. This suggests ethnographic methodologies will be most appropriate for future research, posing challenges of access and time commitment for researchers.

In spite of these challenges, a focus on collective leadership as social practice offers an attractive proposition for future voluntary sector leadership research, and offers the opportunity of understanding the everyday reality of small and informal organisations in particular. However, as Collinson et al. (2017) point out, there is a danger of simply transferring a romanticised view of heroic leadership to a similarly romanticised adoption of the collective leadership lens. It is important therefore to retain a critical stance towards the collective leadership perspective, and not to underplay the roles played by key individuals.

6. Conclusion

Leadership is a topic that can divide opinion: while some appear to see it as a magic bullet to organisational and system improvement, others as a dangerous diversion from a focus on more structural or systematic change. Arguably attitudes to leadership divide along ideological lines: in a contemporary context many on the Right see it as a traditional hierarchy-reinforcing approach that values individual heroic leadership, while those on the Left – at least those who stress community and democratic practices in the third sector – tend to decry what they see as a wrong-headed approach that plays down the need for, alternatively, investment, radical disruption, or more ‘democratic’ or networked relationships. These attitudes appear to play out in the voluntary sector, where there can be suspicion of hierarchical structures, elitism, ‘quick fixes’ and a focus on personality. Nevertheless, a key contribution of academic discourses on leadership is to draw attention to the idea that there are different approaches to leadership, it is not always located in the ‘heroic’ individual, and that it can be distributed and collaborative, and invested in different kinds of practice.

Admittedly, this task is not made easier by the difficulty of neatly defining leadership; even in the extensive wider literature, academics do not agree on what it looks like and consists of. There also tends to be ambiguity over the distinction between management and leadership – though the likelihood is that individuals and groups perform both so there is therefore a need to look at leadership behaviour rather than attempts to identify individual leadership characteristics (Jackson and Parry, 2011)

CVSL Briefing Paper 1 outlined the shape and scope of the literature on voluntary sector leadership, highlighting the prevalence of an often unacknowledged normative narrative that effectively homogenises the notion of leadership in the image of the ‘leader’ in a hierarchical position, and seeking therefore to identify the necessary traits and characteristics required to perform ‘good’ leadership. This Paper develops and extends this critique by exploring and drawing on a much wider

set of theories and principles that could develop knowledge on voluntary sector leadership.

The ideas presented here show that leadership can be a collective act, that involves multiple actors, and individuals can be located at different levels, within organisations, and across the sector. These approaches provide the space to think about the messiness and fuzziness of leadership boundaries, and how it consists of numerous dynamic social processes, rather than being static in nature. This may be particularly relevant in a shifting and turbulent policy and practice context.

Although not directly addressed in the paper, using alternative theories opens up the conversation to discuss different forms of leadership, how individuals can take on multiple forms of leadership depending on situational factors, and to not shy away from addressing what ‘bad’ leadership looks like. However, there is also an air of caution in drawing on wider theories, due to the previous argument outlined on whether the sectors are in fact comparable, or whether there is a ‘distinctive’ voluntary sector context that leaders are operating in. However, what is evident is the need for more empirical studies, to tackle head on the messiness and complexities that are involved in understanding leadership, not only in turbulent times, but also encapsulating the diversity of the sector. One approach could be to focus on the gaps in empirical work, such as: particular demographic groups, or smaller sized organisations, or the development of hybrid leadership. This paper proposes by exploring the lived experiences of those performing leadership, will highlight the everyday practices involved, how and why leadership is played out the way it is, whilst also recognising the diversity in responses and approaches.

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