

Cognition, Numbers, and Narratives

Analytical review of demographic motifs in folktales and mythologies and their implications for human mind and memory

Sonal Pandey¹

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Abstract

Narratives are cultural universals. A comparative analysis of folktales and myths cross-culturally reveal commonality in demographic motifs. Interestingly most of the tales globally exhibit similar male-female ratio in the pattern seven males and a female besides the other characters. This resemblance in the gender configuration i.e. 07 males and 01 female, immediately left me wondering whether it was coincidental or deliberate? This recurring pattern of gender distribution posed innumerable associated research questions? The first question: is this demographic pattern due to local mores or traditions? Does it relate to the culture or religion practised by the people who live in the area the tale originated from? Is it something related to the storytelling as an art? Or is it related to the human cognitive structure and processes?

In this backdrop, the current study attempts to delineate the significance of demographic motifs in the stories and mythologies and its relationship if any with human cognitive functions and processes comparing folktales from three different geographical regions. Since the advent of the human civilisation most of the experiential knowledge, beliefs, and norms have survived in the form of stories and narratives, hence it has to be presented in a manner which is appealing to human mind and emotion. As the bulk of the narratives comprised experiential knowledge, their retention was conducive for human evolution and growth. In the absence of the written medium the onus of retaining such valuable information fell on human memory and attention. It is widely known that human brain has its own mechanism of processing and retrieving information, the analytical review of the motifs, the plot and the structure of the stories could reflect significant insights on human memory and cognition. The findings of the study have significant implications for research and practice.

Keywords: Stories, Myths, Narratives, Cognition, Memory, Attention, Chunking

¹ Assistant Professor, Post Graduate Department of Anthropology, Tilka Manjhi University, Bhagalpur-812007 (Bihar). Email: sonalpanday05@gmail.com, (M): +919647061222

1.0 Introduction

*After nourishment, shelter and companionship,
stories are the things we need most in the world.*

Phillip Pullman (Cited in Ouellette 2023)

Stories had always fascinated me since childhood. Storytelling was daily ritual in our household where all my siblings would flock around my mother, a non-literate lady, for a new story every night. My mother was a connoisseur in storytelling and would recite different stories ranging from the kings, the demons, the gods, the witches, the fairies, and the animals and so on. While growing up my favourite childhood story was ‘*the Niba, her seven brothers, and the neem tree*’. The story is about the *neem tree* protecting the young woman from the robbers by warning her about the prospective danger even at the cost of its own destruction emphasising the merits of environmental sustainability. In this story, a young maiden named Niba and her seven brothers are orphans who had a neem tree outside their courtyard. When the seven brothers grew up, they migrate to nearby town to seek some work and earn money leaving Niba behind. Before their departure, they entrust the neem tree outside their courtyard to protect their sister looking after her safety and well-being in their absence. The story is in a lyrical form where the brothers recite a secret message to the Niba and instruct her not to open the door without it. The song goes:

*Niba beheni Niba Beheni Khol da kiwar
Saton bhaiya aiye hai khade hai duar.*

(Niba Sister, Niba sister open the door. All your brothers have arrived and are standing at the door.)

A burglar overhears this conversation and a few days later tries to break into the house at night with his gang reciting the same lyrics. Niba is overjoyed to hear the song and runs to open the door. However, the tree interrupts:

*Niba Beheni Niba Beheni Kholi na kivar
Tuhare ji ke aye hai, aye hai levar.*

(Niba Sister, Niba Sister don't open the door. These are dangerous men who have come to slay you.)

The thieves are alarmed and astonished. They look around but could not trace the source of the warning. Upon careful scrutiny, they discover that the tree has been singing and warning Niba. Frustrated, the thieves leave and later return in the morning to slay the tree breaking again into the house after some time. This time also the bruised tree warns Niba and stops her from opening the door. Niba is watchful now and does not open the door. The thieves are severely angered and decide to chop the tree completely but a small piece of wood jumps inside the house. The severed piece of wood also kept guard warning her over and over. Few months later, when the brothers finally return, the piece of the wood affirms the arrival of the brothers and finally the brothers and sister are united again.

. Later in my elementary school I was introduced to the popular German folktale *the Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm (1972). The protagonist little princess Snow White is lonely and sad when her mother the Queen passes

away. The King, father of the Snow White, unknowingly re-marries a witch for the sake of his daughter. However, the stepmother of the Snow White is jealous of her beauty and plots to kill the princess with the help of a trusted aide. She asks him to kill the Snow White and bring her heart to the Queen. The soldier is moved by the Snow White's innocence; he decides to leave her unharmed in the forest and slays a goat to display the heart to the witch Queen.

Lonely, Snow White moves here and there before she stumbles upon a little hut in the centre of the woods. Scared and tired Snow White immediately enters the cottage and is astonished to see seven little beds, seven little chairs, seven little tables and so on. Everything in the house was in the sets of seven. She enters inside the kitchen and eats the leftover food from the pots and falls asleep. In the evening, she wakes up to the curious gaze of the seven dwarfs who are astonished to see a little girl in their house. The Snow White then narrates her ordeal to the dwarfs who are moved by her misery. They ask her to stay with them helping in the household chores. The Snow White readily agrees and starts living happily with the dwarfs in the forest.

However, the Witch (the step mother) is able to locate the Snow White with the help of her magical mirror. Angered by the betrayal of her aide, she decides to take the reins in her hands. This time she enters the forest as a fruit seller and gifts poisoned apple to the Snow White. No sooner the Snow White takes the first bite she immediately faints and falls on the ground. When the dwarfs return in the evening, they find her unconscious. Saddened by her death, the dwarfs prepare a special bed and placed her body below a tree keeping watch over her. The body lay unconscious through the autumn, the winter and the snow. During the spring a prince of nearby kingdom entered the forest when his eyes fell on the Snow White. He is immediately mesmerised by the beauty of the Snow White. He gets down from his horse and enchanted by her beauty he casts a kiss on the lips of the Snow White. To everybody's utter amazement, the Snow White is brought back to life breaking away from the magical spell of the Witch Queen. The Snow White and the prince get married and lived happily ever after.

Later in my life after my marriage, I learnt that the Karwa Chauth Vrat Katha also have a similar demographic motif about a sister and her seven brothers. Karwa Chauth is a popular ritual in north India where married women and young maiden fast throughout the day for the long life and good health of their respective husbands. It is celebrated on the 4th day of the lunar calendar of Ashvin month. On this day, the women fast throughout the day from the sunrise to the moonrise worshipping moon and offering oblations. According to the narratives, the married sister visits her native home to celebrate Karwa Chauath with her brothers' wives. On the day of the Karwa Chauth, she fasts for her husband. The brothers love the sister dearly so they invite her to have dinner with them. The sister refuses stating that she is observing the Karwa Chauth and can have food only when the moon arrives. Out of their love and concern for their sister, the seven brother's fake moonrise by firing woods from a top of the mound. The sister is convinced of the moonrise and breaks her fast. Her sisters-in-law warn her informing her of the brother's hoax. However, she does not pay heed and breaks her fast which offends the moon. As a consequence of her recklessness, her husband falls sick immediately. Upon learning of her husband's health, she cries inconsolably. She prays to the Moon God and asks for forgiveness. The Moon God then asks her to complete the ritual oblations. Once she performed all the rituals her husband is healed. The sister is then relieved and promises to the God to fast throughout her life on this day for the health and long-life of her husband.

The three narratives given above from the three different cultures viz. Niba and her brothers in Uttar Pradesh, the Snow White in Germany and the Karwa Chauth mythology in Punjab exhibit interesting similarity in their demographic motifs. Moreover, the story of Topoi in Odisha too has 7:1 relation. I was intrigued by the commonality in the motifs of these stories. All the tales discussed above and many more had a striking similarity in the number of males and female protagonist besides the other characters. The demographic structure in most of these narratives is in the ratio of 7:1. This resemblance in the gender configuration i.e. 07 males and 01 female, immediately left me wondering whether it was coincidental or deliberate? This recurring pattern of gender distribution posed innumerable associated research questions? The first question: is this demographic pattern due to local mores or traditions? Does it relate to the culture or religion practiced by the people who live in the area the tale originated from? Is it something related to storytelling as an art? Is it related to the human cognitive structure and processes?

2.0 Review of Literature

Universally number seven is significant in the myths and narratives. In several cultures 07 is a sacral number known as number with strong magical power and is used very often in spells and legends (Akram o'g'li 2024). Seven is also regarded as the number of perfections in several cultures (Liabenow 2014). Initially it was believed that there were only seven planets in the universe, hence there was tendency to portray significant items in sets of seven. To illustrate, the presence of the seven hills, the seven seas and so on was a recurring theme across the folktales. According to the Hindu myths and traditions, the saptrishis (the Seven great sages: Atri, Bharadvaja, Gautama Maharishi, Jamadagni, Kashyapa, Vasistha, and Vishvamitra), the *sapt chiranjeevi* (the seven immortals: Ashwatthama, Mahabali, Ved Vyasa, Hanuman, Vibhishana, Parashurama, and Kripacharya) and so on are significant. Since, myths and folktales are not just narratives they reflect significant insights into local mores, norms, traditions as well as human cognition.

In this backdrop, the current study attempts to delineate the significance of demographic motifs in the stories and mythologies comparing three narratives from three different geographical regions. The article also intends to delineate the significance of the demographic motifs and its relationship if any with human cognitive functions and processes.

Table 1. Comparison of Demographic Motifs in the given folktales and narratives

The Narrative	Protagonists		Geographical Place of Origin
	No of males	No of female	
The Niba, seven brothers and the Neem Tree	Seven Brothers	The Niba	Uttar Pradesh
The Snow White and the dwarfs	Seven Dwarfs	The Snow White	German
Karwa Chauth Vrat Katha	Seven Brothers	The Woman	Punjab
Tale of Matysa Avatar	Seven Sages	A Fish	North India
Tapoi	Seven brothers	Tapoi	Odisha

Source: Relevant literature

3.0 What is a story?

A story or narrative in its broadest sense is anything told or recounted (Denning 2016). A story is the telling of an event, either true or fictional, in such a way that the listener experiences or learns something just by the fact that he/ she heard the story. A story is a means of transferring information, experience, attitude or point of view. Every story has a teller and a listener (Travis 2011). A story is basically a representation of a journey and is usually marked by a beginning, middle and an end. Most of the stories usually begin as '*Once upon a time...*' located in a certain time and geographical context. Storytelling is retelling of a story through voice and gestures. Often the story unfolds through songs, dialogs and speeches in prose as well as verse. The plot of the story is woven around some characters which may be real or fictional. These characters may include but are not limited to human beings, mythological creatures, animals and so on.

Stories are one of the oldest and deepest forms of communication (Delgado 2019). Stories and storytelling evolved with the evolution of communication and the primordial stories would not have been vocal as stories in the contemporary context are. Since speech is a recent development in the history of humankind; hence, the verbal stories are also quite modern in origin. No sooner the humankind started interacting through the spoken words, the stories were born. Hence, the primeval stories comprised personal narratives, first-hand accounts, and so on devoid of any mythical or fictional characters.

As a human being, narratives pervade our everyday life and storytelling lies at the heart of being human (Byatt 2000 cited in IGNOU E-Gyankosh n.d.). By nature, human beings are creator of narratives and narratives pervade every aspect of our life. Being a medium of communication, the stories/ narratives are expressions of different emotions of humankind (IGNOU E-Gyankosh n.d.). It is important to note that although emotional expressions in human beings are quite diverse such as happiness, anger, sadness and so on yet they are indivisible. The emotional manifestations in humankind are not linear but fall along a spectrum where a person may be happy and sad at the same time. As humankind is blessed with multiple emotional stimuli, the stories too reflect these emotional expressions highlighting the all-pervasive nature of stories in our life (Neimeyer 1993). It is not overstatement to believe that we all live submerged in cauldron of stories. Since the narratives are universal, the stories are ubiquitous. In the words of the corporate storyteller Antonio Nunez (2007: 15), '*we all are creators and consumers of stories*'.

Initially, stories were used just for the purpose of entertain or amusement. Gradually it was realised that apart from enjoyment stories also influenced the growth and development of human mind. Stories have had a larger role in shaping the cognitive process of the brain. Being embedded in the local cultural ethos, stories convey societies', culture and history shaping the cognitive dimensions of its members (Andrew et al. 2009). In the classroom settings, storytelling has been found to stimulate as well as engage the learners and help them understand difficult and complex concepts in a subtle way (Gupta & Jha 2022).

On the basis of his research among children, Friedberg (1994) found that the retelling of the stories represents model problem solving, alternative thinking, behavioural experimentation, and the use of self-statements among the listeners. He further added that the stories ignite self-statements among the listeners. It also served as a metaphor for skill training and presenting educational material. The lesson provided a summation or a conceptual anchor point. The moral offers a hook upon which the listeners can hang an alternative construction or explanation of their experiences. These three processes are

interrelated and reinforce each other. Besides storytelling promotes listeners' exploration of their cognitive and emotional experiences, coping self-statements, the hypothesis-testing process, alternative problem solving, accurate reattribution, and behavioural experimentation. Hence, recently storytelling has become popular in the classroom settings in amalgamation with the other pedagogical tools.

4.0 Conceptual framework delineating narratives, numbers and cognition

Memory basically refers to the human capacity of retaining and recalling information over a period of time (Uppal 2024). Any information received by an individual is a basically processed in three independent but interrelated stages of encoding, storage and retrieval. In the encoding stage, an external stimulus impinges on human sensory organs generating neural impulses. This incoming information could be visual or iconic and echoic or sound. The narratives are encoded in our acoustic system. Storage refers to the process of accumulating encoded information for later retrieval. The mechanism of storage is quite complex as there are three memory systems: the sensory memory, the short-term memory and the long-term memory. While retrieval is putting the accumulated knowledge for relevant cognitive tasks such as problem solving or decision-making and so on.

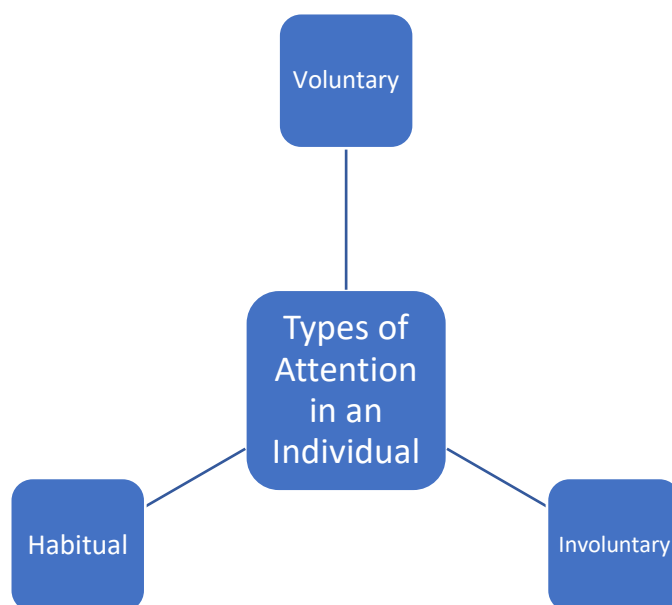
According to the Stage Model, any incoming stimulus is first registered in sensory memory, then the short-term memory and finally the long-term memory (Uppal 2024). As an oral medium, the narratives are registered first in the human sensory memory. One can never understand the transition of a narrative from the sensory memory to the short-term memory without understanding the mechanism of human attention. Attention is the phenomenon through which distinct stimuli are registered in human brain. Everyday humans are exposed to countless stimuli but the conscious mind is able to register only a limited number of stimuli. By nature, human sense organs have been designed to respond positively to certain stimuli and negating or ignoring the other. Although human sense organs are similar yet the human reflex is quite diverse and two individuals may react differently to selected stimuli. This perceptual process of selecting only a few or certain stimuli or input for inclusion in our conscious awareness is known as attention (Wadhwan n.d.(a)). Attention is the facility for responding favourably to certain events in our everyday life which may involve the decision-making process of deliberately registering certain events and cancelling out the stimuli that one does not intend to register. This facility could be compared to the zoom in/ zoom out facility in a camera where we intentionally shift the focus of the lens and the image automatically changes.

The concept of attention could be aptly illustrated through the old Indian parable of the six blind men and an elephant. Once there were six blind men who had never seen an elephant and were unaware of its shape and form. Whenever the elephant would pass through the streets the children would get excited and shout with excitement. The blind men would often get curious but felt desperate due to their sightlessness. One day they decided among themselves that we would inspect the animal and using the sense of touch ascertain its shape and form. So, when the elephant next came into the street all the blind men surrounded it and started feeling its different parts. The first person happened to grope its trunk; he concluded that the elephant is like a thick snake. The second blind men replied that the elephant seemed like a kind of fan as his hand happened to reach its ear. Other blind men whose hands were upon the leg of the elephant replied that the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said the elephant is like is a wall. Another who felt its tail described the elephant as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is

hard, smooth and like a spear. Each individual could pick only selective stimuli which are called indexing in cognition domain.

Human beings are endowed with three types of attention prowess: voluntary, involuntary and habitual. When the perceiver/ the observer makes efforts on his own to focus on any stimuli, this attention is known as voluntary attention. For example, in a classroom situation a student has to focus otherwise it may affect his/ her academic performances. Similarly, while driving one has to focus on the road or accident is likely. Involuntary attention on the other hand does not require deliberate efforts on an individuals' part as in our daily life certain things grab attention on their own due to their virtue of the strength of the stimuli. To illustrate, in a crowd sometimes we unconsciously register somebody may be due to her/ his clothing, accessories or gait depending upon one's own personal preferences, dispositions or choices. The third category of attention is born out of the "*habitus*" of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Gargi 2022) Bourdieu is credited with the introduction of the term *habitus* or the social dispositions of an individual. He defined *habitus* as **something that is created through a social** rather than an individual process leading to patterns that are long term and versatile from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. He argued that the *habitus* are both shaped by past events and structures, and shape current practices and structures and also condition our own understanding of these. In the sphere of attention, our sense organs are more receptive to certain stimuli due to the influence of the individual's *habitus* (Borah n.d.). Hence, basically attention is an adaptive process that acts as a facilitator for carrying out the various activities of our life. This could be as simple as talking to friend to planning a rescue mission for a disaster-struck region. This adaptive process acts as a facilitator for carrying out the various activities of our life and is critical for effective delivery of number of tasks in various spheres of life.

Chart 1. Types of Attention Facility in an Individual



Source: Wadhwan n.d. (a)

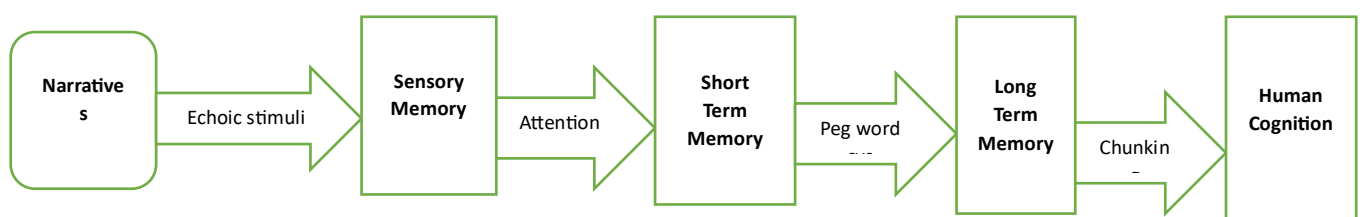
There is a known link between attention and memory. Memory is the fundamental cognitive process in humans as it helps in thinking, remembering one's personal events and so on (Wadhwan n.d.(a)). The individual's learning outcome is positively associated with the

attention ability i.e. in order for learning to occur, the learner needs to pay attention. Attention in learning is directly influenced by the pedagogy, the nature of the tasks, the timing within a lesson, and the duration of the task (Hlas et al. 2019). Attention affects learning and the ability for perceived stimuli to be encoded into both short-term and long-term memory. Wei et al. (2012) believed attention serves as the gatekeeper for processing, storing, and retrieving of any information hence learning cannot proceed in the absence of attention.

It is widely known that the emotion and attention are intimately connected (Matthews and Wells 1999). As memory is influenced by both the cognition and emotion of the learners (Tyng et al. 2017), stories/ narratives are very powerful in this regard arousing the cognition and emotion reflex in the learners. Since the advent of the human civilization most of the experiential knowledge, beliefs, and norms have survived in the form of stories and narratives, hence it has to be presented in a manner which is appealing to human mind and emotion. As the bulk of the narratives were wisdom knowledge, their retention was conducive for human evolution and growth. In the absence of the written medium the onus of retaining such valuable information fell on human memory and attention. It is widely known that human brain has its own mechanism of processing and retrieving information, the analytical review of the motifs, the plot and the structure of the stories could reflect significant insights on human memory and cognition.

There are different mechanisms through which any information is retrieved for meaningful task inside the human brain viz. mnemonics, chunking and so on. Mnemonics is the process of using associations to organize stimuli for further retrieval. Another important process for memory enhancement is chunking. Chunking is the process of splitting information into smaller units to recall it in future. The earliest research on human mind and memory was conducted by Psychologist George Miller. On the basis of his research on memory, he found that the human short-term memory has a forward memory span with approximately a limit of seven items plus or minus two. Probably this proposition led to the evolution of "magical number seven" common denomination across myths and stories (Miller 1956). Human mind often finds it convenient to recall information in conjunction with other items popularly known as the peg list system. The fundamental concept is that the information is anchored on set of words/ numerals akin to the pegs used to hang items such as hats, scarves, and coats and so on. To illustrate, it is easier to recall seven hills than a hill. Since antiquity of writing is recent development in the history of humankind most of the wisdom knowledge has survived in the form of oral narratives recurrence of number seven is not uncommon. We find preponderance of items in pairs of seven e.g. seven hills, seven rivers, seven men, seven dwarfs and so on across the myths and folklores universally.

Chart 2. Conceptual framework delineating narratives, numbers, and cognition



Source: See Miller (1956) and others

The mechanism of processing and organization of mythic wisdom inside human brain is incomplete without the structural analysis of myth by French Anthropologist Claude Levi

Strauss (Sahay 2024 and Upadhayay & Pandey 2002). According to Strauss, myths are ubiquitous hence there must be some underlying common mind mechanism which is responsible for the encoding, accumulation and retrieval of intangible cultural heritage. He believed that myths are products of unconscious thought process of man and hence myths are omnipresent pervading inferior cultures as well as civilization. The second underlying property of a myth is its binary opposition pattern (Sahay 2024). He earnestly believed that these two factors have been responsible for structural uniformity in the myths globally.

5.0 Conclusion

Narratives are not just retellings of personal accounts rather they are also medium through which a culture disseminates its values, mores, traditions, history and so on. Hence, these stories and myths had to be structured in a way that could arouse neural response, could be accumulated for a longer time and retrieved when required. In the absence of written accounts these wisdom texts must have exercised significant role in the human evolution too. Using the peg number system, the items were enlisted in numeric order like three sisters, three witches, seven hills, seven rivers, seven dwarfs and so on. Interestingly human brain memorizes information in chunks and Miller (1956) proved that human mind can process information up to magical number 'seven' plus minus two. In the absence of written medium most of the narratives have survived as oral tales hence they were structured in a way which could be stored, and retrieved by the human mind as and when required. As narratives stimulate our echoic memory they are first stored in our sensory memory. Using chunking, they are transferred to our long-term memory. Since seven is the maximum information processing capacity of humans probably most of the narratives exhibit the demographic motif of seven is to one i.e. seven male and a female.

The findings of the study have significant implications for research and practice. It is widely known that the attention, emotion, and memory are interrelated and directly influence the learning outcomes among the students. On the other hand, the failures in attention have numerous negative implications for the students such as poor academic performances, low grades, and finally dropouts. The New Education Policy (2020) emphasises on the 'outcome based-education' where the curriculum is more market centric i.e. the learners not just gain knowledge but they learn requisite skillset. The focus of the NEP is to revive Indian knowledge system instead of the *Macaulayism rote* memorisation system. Narratives could prove to be handy in this regard. Since bulk of human knowledge and learning has survived through narratives highlighting the merits of propagating curriculum in the form of stories or cases. As discussed above human mind is more amenable to narratives and stories hence, such curriculum would facilitate ease better attention and memorization which in turn would increase the academic performance of the students. Recently, there has been large influx of international students in India especially for higher education. Hence, such curriculum would not only improve the academic performance of the Indian and international students but will also be effective in attracting more international students in India.

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