

Projects as temporary organizations:

An agenda for further theorizing the interorganizational dimension¹

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Abstract

Existing conceptualizations of projects as temporary organizations capture their inter-organizational facets only implicitly. We present theoretical ideas on how to further conceptualize the interorganizational dimension in line with recent developments in the field of managing interorganizational relations. Toward this end, we will recapitulate the present state of theorizing projects as temporary organizations. Then we will highlight the increasing importance of what is called “interorganizational projects” (IOPs). After having described the phenomenon and spread of IOPs, we will discuss how the interorganizational dimension may be theorized. We conclude this article by introducing three facets of analyzing IOPs that help to advance the theory of the temporary organization – namely the multi-level perspective, the processual understanding of relationships, and modes of interorganizational governance.

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s there has been ongoing discussion about the theoretical foundations of project management. Previously, project management was by and large conceived as a domain of handy tools and normative concepts which were predominantly developed and used by engineers. Scholars from the field of organization and management studies first ignored and then started to argue that project management may either be seen as a theoretical domain on its own, or just another field of application for established theories (Packendorff, 1995). For a long time, project management theory therefore remained underdeveloped.

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This was the case, despite the fact that the notion of temporary systems pointing towards a more nuanced understanding of projects as an organizational form had already been brought up by Goodman and Goodman (1972, 1976), who studied theater as a time-bound organizational phenomenon. Later, with their influential article, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) were first to conceptualize projects as a temporary organizational form, before Turner and Müller (2003) integrated elements of the classic project management view with the perspective of projects as temporary organizations. More recently, scholars argue in favor of a more pluralistic approach, which makes use of the broad variety of organization theories and accounts for the interdisciplinary nature of project management (Lundin, 2011; Söderlund, 2011). No matter whether it is considered as a distinct theoretical domain or a field to which established theories of organization and management can and should be applied: the need for a theoretical foundation of project management is now beyond all question, and significant advancements can be noted, most recently with regard to institutional and practice theory (cf. Lundin et al., 2015: 225-230).

Even though not every single project is interorganizational, an increasingly important aspect of most projects is certainly their embeddedness in interorganizational settings. Examples are to be found in almost any industry, in traditional industries like construction and consulting, but in particular in science-based industries like biotech, smart materials, or robotics. Also, the production of most cultural artifacts such as films, music and news rely on projects in which more than one organization is involved. An illustrative example is the study by Sgourev (2013) who demonstrates convincingly that Picasso's turn to cubism would not have been possible without the support of leading galleries in Paris. Thus, in many cases value is created jointly by collaborating organizations (Bakker et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the interorganizational facets have remained largely undertheorized. This is all the more surprising as research on interorganizational relationships has for some time been

acknowledged as an important field in its own right. Evidence is provided not only by the continuously high number of articles on this topic in almost all leading management journals, but also by the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Inter-Organizational Relations* (Cropper et al., 2008) and several textbooks dedicated to this topic (e.g. Child et al., 2005; Sydow et al., 2016). In this article we will not only argue that this aspect of project management should always be considered, but also show how to conceptualize it in line with recent theoretical developments in the field of managing interorganizational relations. First, however, we will recapitulate the present state of theorizing projects as temporary organizations. Then we will highlight the increasing importance of what is called “interorganizational projects” (interestingly, the above-mentioned *Oxford Handbook* devotes a much cited chapter to this phenomenon; cf. Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008). After describing the phenomenon and the spread of interorganizational projects, we will show how the interorganizational dimension can be theorized. We conclude this article by introducing three facets of analyzing interorganizational projects that help to advance the theory of the temporary organization – namely the multi-level perspective, the processual understanding of relationships, and modes of interorganizational governance.

2. Theoretical foundation of projects as temporary organizations

In their seminal work on the field of organizational project management, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) developed the so called 4T-framework of time, team, task and transition to characterize the features of the temporary organization:

- Quite obviously, the *time* dimension is most critical for projects, as already suggested in the term itself and in the respective literature on temporary organizations and temporary systems (cf. Kenis et al., 2009). Precisely, projects differ from permanent organizational settings due to their *ex ante* built-in termination mechanism (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). The time-boundedness, however, faces limitations not only in

the case of serial projects, but also with regard to projects which are tightly embedded in ongoing interorganizational partnerships and additionally in the case of never-ending projects where, as in the case of the Sematech consortium often for good reasons, the termination is postponed over and over again (Müller-Seitz and Sydow, 2011).

- Temporary organizations regularly rely on *team* structures, meaning interdependent sets of people working together (Goodman and Goodman, 1976). Empirical studies often analyze project teams as groups of individuals rather than organizational entities (Bakker, 2010). As for interorganizational settings, these individuals often start as a group with very diverse backgrounds, experiences and expectations regarding the project objectives. They represent different (permanent) organizations with different priorities and preconditions. Getting a coherent team together is thus not self-evident. Moreover, project teams with a short time-frame focus tend to focus more on the immediate present: they concentrate on the tasks at hand. This leads to information processing that is heuristic rather than systematic (Bakker et al., 2012).
- The *task* is the reason why a project is set up (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) and it manifests the development as well as the being of the temporary organization (Kenis et al., 2009). The task tends to be rather unique and more complex than those dealt with in permanent organizations (Bakker, 2010). In an interorganizational project the task is negotiated among the organizations that are involved in the project and it may well be formally redefined during the course of the project, e.g. in terms of “change requests”.
- *Transition* is described by Lundin and Söderholm (1995) as something necessary and useful e.g. to overcome the inertia which is inherent in many permanent organizations. Transition describes the change between “before” and “after” in the project work, its outcomes, and how this is perceived by the project team. As for an interorganizational setting, this dimension gains complexity. Transition takes place not only within one

parent organization, but can apply to all organizations that are involved in an interorganizational project.

In a review on the nature of temporary organizations, Bakker (2010) suggests dropping the transition concept from the overall framework because, within 15 years of research, he found only few articles that conformed to this theme. Instead, he suggests that *context* should be another important dimension. According to his view, context describes how temporary organizations relate to permanent organizations and to a wider social context of networks, fields and society (see also Engwall, 2003). In this conceptualization, the interorganizational dimension of projects is acknowledged in the context of networks and ecologies in which projects are embedded. The notion of “context” is used here as a bracket for interorganizational facets, but somewhat downplays their distinctive role and importance. For example, the strategic relevance of projects is often based in their seriality and interrelatedness over time, particularly in R&D projects where multiple firms cooperate in various (sub-)projects (Artto and Dietrich, 2004). Moreover, phenomena such as project networks essentially rely on interorganizational relations and practices that lasting much longer than single projects (Manning, 2010; Windeler and Sydow, 2001), i.e. behavior in many projects is influenced by past and future shadows of interorganizational relations (Ligthart et al., 2016). Apart from offering high levels of organizational flexibility and coping with uncertainty (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008), these relationships turn out to be sources of innovation and performance in project-based organizing (Maurer and Ebers, 2006; Eriksson et al., 2016). In a similar vein, interorganizational relations are an essential part of project ecologies, making use of the spatial agglomeration and spill-over effects between organizations and thereby considering multiple levels, i.e. the core team, the firm, the epidemic community as well as personal networks (Grabher, 2002, 2004). Even at the field-level, interorganizational relations help to stabilize and reinforce project-related practices

(Sydow and Staber, 2002). To sum up, the interorganizational dimension deserves to be perceived as being in the center rather than in the context when theorizing temporary organizations.

Apart from the 4T-framework, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) also suggest a sequential concept regarding the development of temporary organizations. They describe four phases - from an action-based entrepreneurial stage, to a phase that is characterized by the fragmentation and decoupling of tasks, to a partitioning stage involving the planned isolation of the project work as well as safeguarding it against internal and external threats, to the final stage, which is the institutionalized termination including the recoupling of the project to the line organization in order to save the project results and to learn from the experiences made. This concept is derived from the notion of the life-cycle and seems to be intuitive. However, it barely takes into account the interorganizational implications of project work. Specifically, interorganizational projects are often embedded in ongoing partnerships that can make the entry stage and the termination stage somewhat smoother. Moreover, decoupling and recoupling becomes much more complex in interorganizational settings due to the number of organizations involved, each of which have their own de- and recoupling routines, their own cultural influences etc.

Another milestone in the theory of the temporary organization was reached by Turner and Müller (2003). They analyze the nature of the project as a temporary organization from the perspective of organizational theory. Against this background, they propose to build upon existing definitions of projects, but add new aspects to them. Classical definitions, based on a normative, tool-oriented understanding of projects, are compared with a production function that transforms certain inputs into outputs via mathematical formulation and project planning. Turner and Müller (2003) argue that this notion has weaknesses and needs to be complemented. These are, above all, the organizational underpinning of projects accounting

for conflicts of interest between various stakeholders, different roles including agents and brokers, and the need of information and communication systems in order to prevent opportunism. Moreover, the authors point to the nature of projects as an agency for (organizational) change processes, for resource utilization and for managing risk and uncertainty. Thereby, they underline the role of project managers being two-fold, which explains their behavior. In the first place, project managers have autonomy and power, so can therefore act as chief executives of the temporary organization. At the same time, however, they are agents to the principal, which leads to the same opportunism traps that we know from permanent organizations. Turner and Müller (2003) implicitly account for the inter-organizational dimension of projects, namely when they address the role of stakeholders for the temporary organization. Moreover, the role of the principals and agents may also stretch across organizational boundaries. Yet, similar to Lundin and Söderholm (1995), the inter-organizational dimension is certainly not conceptualized as a major parameter of their theoretical approach (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparing important theories of projects as temporary organizations

	Lundin and Söderholm (1995)	Turner and Müller (2003)
Contribution	Core features and the life cycle of the temporary organization	Integration of classic project definition with aspects from organization theory
Approach to project management theory	Universal model that is generally applicable	Inclusive with regard to the normative project management approach and organization theory
Theory advancement	Bakker (2010) with a review and replacing the transition dimension by context	Turner (2006a, b, c, d) by confirming and refining the theory based on practical insights
Role of an inter-organizational dimension	Only as context	Limited, e.g. considering organizational stakeholders; in the principal-agent relationship

More recently, scholars argue in favor of a more pluralistic approach towards the notion of projects as a temporary organization. Söderlund (2011) proposes seven schools of project

management, accounting for the variety of interdisciplinary approaches to project management. Nevertheless, he argues that pluralism has its limitations, and is not the same as randomness or complete fragmentation. In a similar vein, Lundin (2011) observes heavy controversy between project management scholars at international research conferences, particularly between more traditional, classic project management scholars on the one hand and social scientists on the other. He makes up the metaphor of a family which sometimes has serious discussions but which, in the end, sticks together. In such a more nuanced, pluralistic understanding, the role of interorganizational relations can also become more vital. For example, one of Söderlund's (2011) schools captures the relational aspects in and around projects.

3. The missing interorganizational dimension in theorizing projects

Interorganizational relations with customers, suppliers, service providers and other stakeholders certainly provide an important context for project organizing. This is widely acknowledged, also by the two theories of temporary organizations discussed. However, an increasing number of projects – whether initiated within a permanent organization supported by projects or entirely based on projects, e.g. in the construction, consulting or film industries, (cf. Lundin et al., 2015: 20-65) – crosses organizational boundaries. Such temporary forms of organizations are correctly described as interorganizational projects or IOPs (e.g. Jones and Liechtenstein, 2008; Bakker, 2010; Righart et al., 2016). Organizations collaborate in such projects, but unlike in project networks (cf. Lundin et al., 2015: 31-36, 65-78), do not *necessarily* operate on a repeated basis or with the expectation of a likely repetition. In contrast to project networks and other “semi-temporary organizations” (Bakker et al., 2016), an IOP may therefore potentially have neither a past nor a future beyond the present collaboration, although many, if not most, do (Jones and Liechtenstein, 2008; Bakker, 2010; Righart et al., 2016). Moreover, an IOP may be confined to the collaboration of only two

organizations. Much like project networks, however, the coordination of IOPs cannot rely only on hierarchy, but may also mobilize functional equivalents such as cooperation, reciprocity or trust (Powell, 1990). Based on these reflections we would like to explore four features of IOPs in greater depth:

- *Bridging singularities via latent and activated ties*

Projects have often been analyzed as an “island”, without taking their temporal and relational embeddedness into consideration (Engwall, 2003). Interorganizational partnerships, however, are typically not terminated with the end of a project, but tend to remain at least in a latent state until they are potentially reactivated for future projects (Starkey et al., 2000; Windeler and Sydow, 2001; DeFillippi and Sydow, 2016). In this sense, interorganizational relations act as a bridging device between distinct projects over time or, more precisely, between IOPs, and can create the stability and continuity which projects as *time*-bound objects do not. Thus, exemplary research questions are: *How can IORs balance flexibility and continuity? What practices and routines are involved that stabilize IORs within and across projects?*

- *Disordering hierarchies in interorganizational teams*

Temporary organizations typically rely on *teams* of individuals that collaborate closely. This applies, of course, also to IOPs. In such projects it is often the case that the members of these teams work on different hierarchical levels. In an ideal team environment, hierarchical elements from the permanent / parent organization would be less prevalent. Instead of hierarchical sub-ordination in teams, typological roles emerge that ensure a mutual understanding (Bechky, 2006). This, however, is not very likely when organizational boundaries, where each organization has their own hierarchical structure and culture, are crossed. In this case, roles may be co-defined by the organizations in an IOP and remain paradoxical, at least contradictory (DeFillippi

& Sydow, 2016). Corresponding research questions are, amongst others: *How does hierarchical power and legitimacy affect interorganizational cooperation at the level of projects, project networks, organizations and the organizational field? How do practices and routines change if projects become interorganizational?*

- *Blurring organizational boundaries*

The modern architecture of value chains or networks is based on a high degree of labor division and thus a fragmentation of work across organizational boundaries. The externalization or outsourcing of parts of the value chain, however, requires coordination and integration (Grimshaw et al., 2005), already at the front-end of such projects (Matinheikki et al. 2016). Even though there are work packages and modules within IOPs, there is still a necessity to integrate the work contributions to a consistent outcome in order to fulfill the given *task*. In this situation, project members on the organizational level realize that only their joint effort will lead to the result of project work aimed at. And on the individual level, project staff from different organizations may become a more or less coherent team (Braun et al., 2012, 2013). Thus, remaining research questions are: *What are the barriers to integrating fragmented pieces of work in IOPs? How can interorganizational governance be arranged to ensure the commitment of different organizations and their members to the project?*

- *Reframing behavior*

The blurring of organizational boundaries, together with the team character of working in IOPs, requires from project members a different framing. The task loses its singular, organizational character. Instead, the task binds organizations together. In this *transition*, members of IOPs are not only expected to identify with the organization they belong to but, in addition, also with the IOP (or even the network the IOP is embedded in). Braun et al. (2012, 2013) have shown that members of IOPs develop a “project citizenship behavior”; under particular circumstances such an extra-role

behavior could even be directed towards the project network. Against this background, some of the main future research questions are: *How does individual behavior affect cooperation beyond the project level, i.e. at the organizational level, the project-network level and the field level?*

These four features make IOPs something special, asking for a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of this particular form of temporary organizing (cf. Bakker et al., 2016). Against this background, we propose to complement theories on temporary organizations by means of an explicit interorganizational dimension.

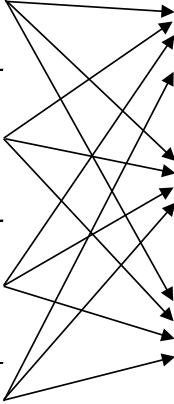
4. Ideas for theorizing the interorganizational dimension

Theory should be able to answer why and how questions and go beyond description, providing convincing and ideally empirically substantiated explanations for what is going on in reality. As indicated above, research on interorganizational relations, including more advanced, agency-considering and context-sensitive versions of network theory (Borgatti et al., 2014), can be used to theorize the interorganizational dimension of project management beyond considering it as context and explaining the four features elaborated above. However, in line with Lundin et al. (2015) we share the view that such an approach has to be multi-level, i.e. considering not only the IOP but at least one level ‘above’ (such as the organizational field or the industry including the institutional environment) and/or one level ‘below’ (such as the organizations collaborating in the project). In addition, we will propose a more processual, practice-based approach to understanding the why and how of IOP dynamics; an understanding that puts neither actors (as in most project theories) nor structures (as in most network theories) first, but conceives the two as being recursively related, i.e. as a duality rather than a dualism (Giddens, 1984). Moreover, we elaborate on the different modes

of governance that can be applied in order to lead IOPs. These three aspects deserve our attention (see Table 2).

First, the organizational form of projects creates an additional layer of analysis that usually does not capture research attention when analyzing permanent organizations. Projects are often embedded in a permanent organization. This can be observed in the way that the project organization supports the permanent organization (project-supported organization), which applies to many change and IT projects. In project-based organizations, the temporary logic replaces most of the typically permanent elements, as can be seen in many consulting firms. And ultimately, projects can be embedded in a project network that builds on enduring interpersonal and/or interorganizational relations (Lundin et al., 2015). Both organizations and interorganizational networks are embedded in a wider organizational field which offers additional rules (e.g. industry standards) and resources (e.g. regional knowledge) that members of IOPs can draw on when managing the project. In cases where projects dominate in importance over organizations, some speak of “project ecologies” (Grabher, 2002, 2004). Because of the multiple embeddedness of IOPs in fields or ecologies (‘above’) on the one hand and organizations (‘below’) on the other, a complete analysis of such a system – in particular when focusing on IOP dynamics – requires a multi-level approach. This implies that qualitative research should take data into account at different levels (project, organization, network, field) and that quantitative research should consider variables at multiple levels and/or conduct corresponding multi-level statistical analysis that captures across-level interactions.

Table 2: The Role of Inter-organizational Relations (IORs) in important theories of projects as temporary organizations

4T-Dimensions	Missing interorganizational features	Research questions*	Cues for theorizing the interorganizational dimension
Time	Bridging singularities via latent and activated ties	<i>How can IORs balance flexibility and continuity? Which practices and routines are involved that stabilize IORs within and across projects?</i>	 <p>(1) Accounting for multiple-levels in theory and research methods (project, organization, project-network, field)</p> <p>(2) Adopting a dynamic perspective based on mechanisms, processes, practices and routines</p> <p>(3) Considering modes of interorganizational governance, i.e. lead organization, shared governance, network administrative organization</p>
Team	Disordering hierarchies in interorganizational teams	<i>How does hierarchical power and legitimacy affect interorganizational cooperation at the level of projects, project-networks, organizations and the organizational field? How do practices and routines change if projects become interorganizational?</i>	
Task	Blurring organizational boundaries	<i>What are the barriers to integrating fragmented pieces of work in IOPs? How can the interorganizational governance be arranged to ensure the commitment of different organizations to the project?</i>	
Transition	Reframing behaviors	<i>How does individual behavior affect cooperation beyond the project level, i.e. on the organizational level, the project-network level and the field level?</i>	

*Exemplary, neither mutually exclusive, nor collectively exhaustive

Second, for a long time, projects in general and IOPs in particular have been analyzed in a rather static manner, note particularly the comprehensive research on success factors regarding project-based organizing (for a review see Söderlund, 2011: 159-160). Against the background of concepts such as organizational dynamics, institutional complexity, project behavior or micro-political processes it is not surprising that much of the normative success factor research turned out to be ambiguous, often with inconsistent results. Taking a more dynamic perspective, we follow Lundin et al. (2015) and argue for a practice-based perspective that focuses on the recurrent activities, e.g. project routines as well as interorganizational routines (cf. DeFillippi and Sydow, 2016), with which IOPs are actually managed (see for a practice-based approach to projects also Blomquist et al., 2010; Manning, 2010; Manning and Sydow, 2011; Hällgren and Lindahl, 2017). Such a dialectical approach that conceives agency and structure as a duality – the latter not only constraining but also enabling action, the former relying on but also reproducing or transforming structures (Giddens, 1984) – sensitizes for the role of tensions and contradictions as well as of institutions that may or may not be aligned (see for an institutional approach to projects Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008; Dille and Söderlund, 2011; Morris and Geraldi, 2011; Lundin et al., 2015). Moreover, the practice perspective focuses on how actors, including project managers acting with interorganizational relations, actually do behave in real-life situations instead of describing how they ought to behave – as suggested by normative project management approaches. Corresponding research methods to capture such practices are, for example, participant observation, retrospective and real time in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies. When outlining practices in a process flow diagram as part of the data analysis, this implies focusing more on the arrows than on the outcomes of phases (Hernes, 2014). Moreover, processual features such as iterations and recursiveness deserve special attention.

Third, interorganizational relationships have their own kind of governance which is typically different from hierarchies that are found in permanent organizations, but also different from market transactions “at arm’s length” (cf. Sydow et al., 2016: 12-47). The governance of interorganizational relationships often contains some elements found in hierarchical as well as in market coordination; however, it may also entail further facets such as trust, reciprocity and continuity as stabilizing parameters. In practice, IOPs in general and project networks in particular are often coordinated by “shared governance” (Provan and Kenis, 2008) where the network is rather dense and little centralized and participating organizations cooperate in a consensus-based fashion with few power differentials and the option for active participation in governance for all partners. An alternative mode is the case of an IOP embedded in either a dyadic relation or in a more complex network of relations in which a lead organization, often a general contractor, but nowadays also either the client or a special project-delivery organization (Brady and Davies, 2014), uses its power to install hierarchy-like but nevertheless collaborative structures to coordinate across organizational boundaries. In this case, the network is usually less dense and more centralized, often with a core of more than one organization. In between these types, the governance by a network administrative organization (NAO) combines the advantages of a lead organization with the possibility of active participation of other members of an IOP or interorganizational network. In this case, like in the case of a specially established project-delivery organization, a new organization is created that coordinates the network (Provan and Kenis, 2008). An often cited example of governance by an NAO is the Star Alliance airline network (cf. Sydow et al., 2016: 67-74); an example of a specially established project-delivery organization is the CLM, a joint venture between CH2MHill, Laing O’Rourke, and Mace, formed to act as the Olympic Delivery Authority’s partner in the 2012 London Olympics (Brady and Davies, 2014). In all three cases, however, it would not be sufficient to study the formal form of governance (and how they eventually interact in any plural form). Even if you look at specific forms of governance,

like governing knowledge in project-based organizations (Pemsel et al., 2016), capturing only the formal aspect is not enough. Apart from formal contracts informal connections matter (Berends et al., 2010; Müller et al., 2016). Moreover, the interplay of forces from ‘above’ and ‘below’ should be considered when studying (interorganizational) project practices, how they are enabled and constrained by structures, and how they reproduce or transform any form of governance. In this vein, Ruuska et al. (2011) suggest a new governance approach for multi-firm projects focusing on network-level mechanisms and self-regulated practices embedded in a historic sphere. Thus, project management research should not only analyze the governance and politics of and within distinct projects but also of longer lasting interorganizational networks and their influence on projects. Their shadows from the past and future certainly frame the behavior and action at the project level (Braun et al., 2012; Righart et al., 2016).

5. Conclusions

Projects are without doubt a particularly important form of temporary organization. The seminal papers by Lundin und Söderholm (1995) as well as by Turner and Müller (2003) have tied research on project management more closely to organization theory (see also Sankaran et al., 2017). Since then, project research has not only become more theoretically sophisticated and methodologically pluralistic, but has raised hopes that it will eventually have an impact on organization and management research more broadly, not least because of its focus on issues of time and temporality (Bakker et al., 2016).

Interorganizational projects, or IOPs for short, have become increasingly important in the “society of networks” (Raab and Kenis, 2009), as have interorganizational relations in general (Sydow et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the understanding of projects as being embedded in either dyadic or more complex networks of interorganizational relationships lags somewhat behind. For that reason, this paper has argued for a more thorough theorization of the interorganizational dimension of projects: by adopting a multi-level approach to projects in

general and IOPs in particular; by focusing the dynamics of projects, organizations and interorganizational relations with the help of a practice perspective that is sensitive towards the role of institutions, not least those nested at the field level; and, last but not least, by developing a differentiated understanding of project governance in the interplay between projects as a temporary organization, the permanency of hierarchical coordination within (and, significantly less frequently, across) organizations, and the more or less institutionalized structures in the field which are likely to follow a market logic.

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