

Unusual First Names: A Positive Outlook

RICHARD L. ZWEIGENHAFT

Abstract

After discussing some problems with the tendency to generalize from the literature on the psychological effects of unusual first names, this article summarizes a series of studies that have been performed. In contrast to much of the research literature, which tends to warn against giving such names to one's child, these studies suggest a more positive view. The results provide evidence that having an unusual name may have no observable negative effects, and, in some contexts and in some ways, may have positive effects.

Ungewöhnliche Vornamen: Eine Positive Ansicht

Nach Diskussion der Probleme mit der Tendenz der Allmeinerung (generalization) aus der Forschung zur Wirkung der Ungewöhnlichen Vornamen, fasst dieser Artikel die Forschungsaersuche auf diesen Gebiet zunammen. Im gegensatz zur Mehrheit der Versuche welche gegen ungewöhnliche Vornamen für Kinder warnen, bietet diese Studie eine etwas positivere Ansicht an. Die Ergebnisse geben Beweis dass Sondervornamen keine negative Wirkung haben und tatsächlich manchmal positive Wirkung haben können.

Introduction

The patterns by which parents name their children vary from culture to culture, within cultures, and over time. Given the heterogeneous nature of the American population, it is likely that the psychological effects of various naming practices in this country are complex. Despite this, there has been a tendency among American psychologists, and among those who popularize their work, to generalize broadly and to over-simplify when it comes to analyzing the psychological effects of names. This has been particularly true of the claims made about "unusual" names.

Parents have been warned not to give their children atypical names. Perhaps the best example of this was *Psychology Today's* glibly titled article on this topic: "The power of a name: An unusual name can spoil friendships, success and your opinion of yourself" (Marcus, 1976).

This article describes some research that my colleagues and I have performed over a number of years which calls into question the legitimacy of such warnings. Although an unusual name, cruelly applied, may cause psychological harm, so, too, may the effect of an unusual name be

positive. Before describing our research, it is necessary to examine the psychological literature on unusual names.

THE LITERATURE ON UNUSUAL NAMES

Although there are specific problems with particular studies that have examined the psychological effects of unusual names, there are three general problems with these studies. These problems concern defining unusual names, discriminating among different unusual names, and assessing the psychological effects of unusual names. We can examine these problems by asking the following three questions: 1) What is an unusual name? 2) Do different unusual names have different psychological effects? 3) How have the psychological effects been evaluated?

What is an unusual name? Authors have not been consistent in the term they use to refer to these names. Some have called them “unusual” (e.g., Gladding & Farrar, 1982). Others have referred to them as “uncommon” (e.g., West & Shults, 1976), “singular” (e.g., Savage & Wells, 1948), “unique” (e.g., Schonberg & Murphy, 1974), or “peculiar” (e.g., Ellis & Beechley, 1954). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that unusual names have been defined operationally in a variety of ways. The most frequent technique has been to select from a given population those people with names that occur once, or very few times, and to compare these individuals on certain measures with other individuals whose names appear more (or the most) frequently. This method, however, is highly dependent on the size of the population from which the names are drawn. For example, Schonberg and Murphy (1974) selected as unusual those names which had low frequency of occurrence at a small Midwestern college, but the population at the college was so small that such common names as Alan, Joseph and Ralph were classified unusual. Two studies of unusual names, therefore, are not necessarily about the same thing.

It should also be mentioned that many of the studies performed on names have investigated undesirable rather than unusual names (e.g., Busse & Seraydarian, 1978, 1979; Garwood, 1976; Harari & McDavid, 1973; McDavid & Harari, 1976). However, as Busse and Seraydarian (1978) point out, “Although highly related, name frequency and name desirability are not identical” (p. 144). Therefore, an unusual name may not be an undesirable name.

Do different unusual names have different psychological effects? There has been an unfortunate tendency to lump unusual names into one large undesirable category, without considering the possibility that different

unusual names might have dramatically different kinds of psychological impact. Thus, the names cited by Hartman, Nicolay and Hurley (1968) — “Oder,” “Lethal” and “Vere” — may indeed have had harmful psychological effects on their bearers without this being true of all unusual names. Some unusual names may have neutral effects, and some may even have positive ones.

Many sports fans are aware of the charm and desirability of unusual names. Consider the following comment by Jim Murray, a sportswriter for the *Los Angeles Times*:

When I was a kid back in Connecticut, I used to love U.S.C. backfields. You had to be fascinated. I remember rolling the names off my tongue. Morley Drury. Homer Griffith. Grenville Landshell. Gaius Shaver. Irvine Warbyton. Orville Mohler. You read them and felt like going out and throwing rocks at your mother and father for naming you Jim. (Poe, 1974, p. 374)

Similarly, Larry Merchant, sportswriter for the *New York Post*, reacted to the unusual name of Vida Blue in the following way: “America knew it instantly. Vida Blue! Vida Blue tripped off the tongue like Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb and Lefty Grove” (Poe, 1974, p. 377). *Washington Post* sportswriter William Furlong quoted Jethro Pugh, former defensive tackle for the Dallas Cowboys, intuitively remarking on his unusual name: “If it weren’t for a name like Jethro Pugh, I might be anonymous” (Furlong, 1975, p. D 3). As Roy Blount, Jr. concluded, “To suggest to a sportswriter that he write about names is like suggesting to a fat man that he eat pie” (Blount, 1977, p. 46).

How have the psychological effects of unusual names been evaluated? For the most part, the criteria of evaluation have focused on a narrow range of behaviors: psychiatric labeling in clinical settings, and sociometric ratings in nonclinical settings. As an example of the studies done in clinical settings, Hartman, Nicolay, and Hurley (1968) looked at the records of large numbers of psychiatric patients, and found that those with unusual first names were significantly more likely to have been labeled “psychotic.” Similarly, Murphy (1957) found that those of his patients whose surnames were Small, Little, Short, or Bent were more likely to suffer from feelings of inferiority. These findings may not be generalizable to nonpsychiatric populations.

It is possible (indeed, it is likely) that the effect of unusual names is the result of an interaction with other features of the environment. Suppose, for example, that people in psychiatric populations are more likely to have had parents who were abusive than people not in psychiatric settings. Unusual names for those in a psychiatric setting may be interpreted as additional forms of abuse. Yet, for individuals in more accepting settings, unusual names might be interpreted as evidence of being special, rather

than being abused. It is conceivable that unusual names may be perceived as rare gems rather than rare diseases.

The studies done in nonclinical settings typically have asked people to rate common and uncommon names. West and Shults (1976), for example, asked college students to indicate their liking or disliking for 16 common and uncommon names on a 5-point scale. They concluded that common names were liked better than uncommon names (see, also, Harrison, 1969; and Lawson, 1980). Other investigators have measured the ratings that elementary school children give names (McDavid & Harari, 1966) and teachers' stereotypes of children's names (Harari & McDavid, 1973). It seems safe to conclude from these studies that, in general, people tend to like common names more than they like uncommon names.

Studies using sociometric ratings of names raise a fundamental question concerning the importance of one's name being liked by peers, or even by one's teachers. Let us suppose, for example, that a name which may not be liked by a child's peers may, however, increase the likelihood of that child being a high achiever, feeling unique, or being particularly proud of his racial or religious heritage. Should the parents avoid conferring such a name? This decision depends on the values of the parents and what they most want to communicate to their child in the choice of name. Consider the comments of Harry Edwards (1981), a black sociologist, explaining why he and his wife decided to give their children African names:

We sought to instill in our daughter a set of ideals that would compel struggle toward becoming a better human being and toward contributing to the creation of a more just and humane society. We saw our fundamental responsibilities as parents to be the task of molding the substance and contours of these ideals and using them to cultivate in our child an attitude of dignity, self-respect, and pride in peoplehood; an attitude conducive to the development of personal depth, a sense of accomplishment, and a high regard for human service; an attitude that would keep in the fore who she is, where she is, what she must do, and why. . . .

Boze and I felt very strongly that it was important for our children to establish an identification with and have some sense of their ancient cultural roots in the great Black empires and civilizations that flourished for centuries in Africa, as well as an appreciation of the ties between the political and social struggles for Black freedom and justice in modern Africa *and* in America. *We wanted their very names to be a statement of struggle, symbolic of a spirit and determination to prevail.* (pp. 271-272)

Edwards' comments make clear that whether or not your child's peers like unusual names in general, or your child's name in particular, may be less important than what the name comes to mean to the child. Sociometric ratings tend to measure name popularity, but there are other criteria for choosing a child's name.

Furthermore, though people in general may rate common names more favorably than they rate unusual names, there is also reason to believe that

many people do not like having common names. In a study of students' reactions to their own names, Eagleson (1946) found that the most frequently cited reason for dissatisfaction was "too many people with the same name" (p. 194). More anecdotally, Stephen Birmingham (1982) writes the following about William Rosenwald, one of the sons of Sears Roebuck founder Julius Rosenwald:

He was convinced, among other things, that he had been given his commonplace first name because his parents had been too busy to think of anything else (his older brother had the distinctive name of Lessing). (p. 98)

And, as we have indicated, sportswriter Jim Murray, enchanted as a boy by athletic heroes with unusual names, concluded that you "felt like going out and throwing rocks at your mother and father for naming you Jim" (Poe, 1974, p. 374).

THE POSITIVE SIDE OF UNUSUAL NAMES: RESEARCH

Let us turn to some empirical studies. In our work, we have defined unusual names as those which appear in a given population only once. In most of our studies, we have drawn these names from populations of thousands of people, so that those names that appeared only once were in fact statistically rare in the broader culture as well as in the population being studied. In a few of our studies, however, where we have drawn from smaller populations, we have added a step in which we asked a group of people to rate the names that occurred only once on a scale ranging from "very unusual — never heard of this first name" to "relatively common — heard it many times." We have then eliminated from the unusual name group any names rated as "relatively common."

Differing reactions to various unusual names. As we have indicated, although there is evidence in the literature that unusual names are not liked as much as common names, all unusual names do not necessarily elicit the same negative reaction. In order to demonstrate this, we performed a study (Zweigenhaft, 1977) in which a group of 154 college undergraduates at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, were asked to rate a set of six common and unusual male and female names. These names were drawn from a list of 11,246 North Carolina high school students. The common male name was David and the unusual male names were McKinley and Talmadge. The common female name was Marsha, and the unusual female names were Berleana and Courtney.

Each student rated each of the names on 15 bipolar adjective scales: Good-Bad, Strong-Weak, Smart-Stupid, Upper class-Lower class, Attractive-Unattractive, Masculine-Feminine, Overconfident-Uncertain, Strong-willed-Weak-willed, Creative-Uncreative, Stable-Unstable,

Open-Closed, Follower-Leader, Tolerant-Intolerant, Brave-Cowardly, and Warm-Cold. Twenty-five additional students were asked to select which end of each bipolar scale was more socially desirable than the other. There was at least 80% agreement on every scale except Masculine-Feminine.

The results demonstrated that people react selectively to different unusual names, and to different common names. Among the male names, the common name received the most positive evaluations. This was not the case for the female names.

The name David was rated as higher on Good, Strong, Attractive, Masculine, Strong-willed, Stable, Open, Leader, Tolerant, Brave, and Warm. On 11 of the 15 scales, the more frequently occurring name received the most socially desirable evaluations.

Notably, the ratings of the two unusual male names were quite different. Of the three male names, McKinley was rated as the closest to Upper class, Overconfident, Intolerant, and Cold. The image suggested was of aristocratic aloofness and insensitivity. Talmadge, in contrast, was seen as closest to Lower Class, Bad, Weak, Stupid, Unattractive, Feminine, Uncertain, Weak-willed, Unstable, Closed, Follower, and Cowardly. Talmadge received the most socially undesirable rating on 12 of the 15 scales. The portrayal of this name was not upper class and aloof, but, rather, lower class, inept, and weak. Therefore, though neither unusual name was a real favorite, it is noteworthy that they were evaluated quite differently.

The analyses of the ratings of the three female names presented a very different pattern. The name Marsha was rated positively and the name was considered closest to Good, Feminine, Open, Tolerant, and Warm. The two unusual names, however, were rated in dramatically different ways. The name Berleana was not well-liked, and received the least socially desirable rating on all 15 scales. The name Courtney, however, received a very positive portrayal, and was seen as closest to Strong, Smart, Upper class, Attractive, Over-confident, Strong-willed, Creative, and Leader. The name Courtney received the most socially desirable rating on eight scales, three more than the name Marsha received. Obviously, to have the unusual name Courtney is not the same as having the unusual name Berleana. These data demonstrate the pitfalls of overgeneralizing about the negative impact of unusual names.

Searching for evidence of psychological damage. We then turned to the issue of the psychological damage an unusual name allegedly *does*. Many investigators of unusual names have inferred that since unusual names as a group are not liked as much as common names as a group, all unusual

names must have adverse psychological effects. We looked for evidence in two studies.

In the first (Zweigenhaft, 1977) we compared those individuals whose names occurred only once on a list of 11,246 North Carolina high school students with a control group of those whose names appeared the most frequently on that list. We were able to compare the groups on a wide range of measures, including a broad battery of tests assessing IQ, achievement and creativity; a wide array of information from the individual's high school transcripts (such as academic performance and days absent); and teachers' ratings of the students on a number of characteristics (such as initiative, interest in education and leadership). In addition, because the sample was so large, we were able to perform separate analyses for males and for females, and for blacks and for whites.

The most striking feature of the results was the lack of significant differences between the unusually and commonly named groups. There were no significant differences between those with unusual names and those with common names on any of the variables measured among white males, black males and black females. For the white females there was one significant difference; on the Reading section of the Stanford Achievement Test, taken as eighth graders, the women with unusual names were less likely to score high ($\chi^2 = 5.27$, $df = 1$, $p < .02$). However, they were more likely to score high on the Science portion of the same test, though the finding does not quite reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 2.78$, $df = 1$, $p < .10$). It is likely that this one significant difference was a statistical artifact. Overall, it is safe to say that the unusually named high school students — male and female, black and white — showed no adverse effects on the wide range of measures that were assessed.

In another study (Zweigenhaft, Hayes, & Haagen, 1980), we looked at the scores on the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) of men and women with unusual and common names. These names were drawn from a sample of 2603 entering freshmen between 1966 and 1973 at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. The CPI is a personality inventory designed for the multidimensional description of normal personality. It yields scores on 18 scales: Dominance, Capacity for status, Sociability, Social presence, Self-acceptance, Well-being, Responsibility, Socialization, Self-control, Tolerance, Good impression, Communality, Achievement via conformity, Achievement via independence, Intellectual efficiency, Psychological mindedness, Flexibility and Femininity.

Results for the men indicated no statistically significant differences between those with unusual names and those with common names on 17

of the 18 scales. The unusually named group did score significantly lower on Intellectual Efficiency ($t = 2.67$, $df = 162$, $p < .01$). This finding will be discussed below.

The women with unusual names, in contrast, showed marked differences from those with common names. Unusually named women scored significantly higher (for all the t values following, $df = 66$) on Capacity for Status ($t = 2.65$, $p < .01$), Sociability ($t = 2.73$, $p < .01$), Social Presence ($t = 2.60$, $p < .01$), Self-Acceptance ($t = 2.34$, $p < .02$), Achievement via conformance ($t = 2.20$, $p < .05$) and Psychological Mindedness ($t = 2.53$, $p < .02$). These findings, plus the fact that the women with unusual names scored higher than the control group on 17 of the 18 scales of the CPI, provide substantial evidence that the unusually named women demonstrated more, not less, optimal personality profiles than their female peers who lacked unusual first names.

Since it was not clear why Wesleyan women with unusual first names scored higher than their control group, but Wesleyan men with unusual names did not, we decided to replicate the study on the women. We selected a second control group in the same manner, from the same population, and compared the same unusually named women on the 18 scales of the CPI. The women with unusual names again scored higher than the control group of women with common names on 14 of the 18 scales, but significantly so only on one, Capacity for Status ($t = 2.30$, $p < .05$). In a second replication, using a third control group, the experimental group scored higher than the control group on 12 of the 18 scales, and significantly higher on three: Capacity for Status ($t = 2.47$, $p < .02$), Sociability ($t = 2.16$, $p < .05$), and Social Presence ($t = 2.05$, $p < .05$).

Whatever the reason for the women with unusual names scoring higher on the CPI, and whatever the extent to which they did score higher, it is clear that neither men nor women appear to be at a psychological disadvantage as a result of having an unusual first name. The finding that Wesleyan men with unusual names scored lower on Intellectual Efficiency was not confirmed by our data on North Carolina high school students. That study found no differences between men with unusual names and men with common names on three different measures of IQ. Nor was there any evidence that males with unusual names were less efficient intellectually.

Searching for evidence of psychological strength. Having demonstrated that different unusual names elicit different reactions, and that unusual names in general are not accompanied by adverse effects — at least, not in North Carolina high school students and Wesleyan University undergraduates on the variables we measured — let us turn to the third issue we

raised earlier, the criteria by which unusual names have been assessed. We have suggested that the likelihood of possessing certain positive attributes, such as achievement, might be enhanced by having an unusual name. Further, we have suggested that this benefit would be more likely to occur in an environment in which the unusual name was perceived as special rather than odd. In order to investigate these assumptions empirically, we examined the relationship between names and achievement in an upper class sample (Zweigenhaft, 1977).

We chose to look at the names of upper-class people because we believed they would be particularly likely to interpret an unusual name as “special.” Upper-class children, privileged in so many ways, are socialized generally to think of themselves as special. Psychoanalyst Robert Coles (1977), writing about the children of the affluent, describes this process as “entitlement”:

Wealth does not corrupt nor does it ennoble. But wealth does govern the minds of privileged children, gives them a peculiar kind of identity which they never lose, whether they grow up to be stockbrokers or communards, and whether they lead healthy or unstable lives. There is, I think, a message that virtually all quite well-off American families transmit to their children — an emotional expression of those familiar, classbound prerogatives, money and power. I use the word “entitlement” to describe that message. (pp. 54-55)

Although in America there are no royal titles like Prince, Duke, or Baron, there are signs of entitlement. One of these is a naming pattern that is characteristic of, though not exclusive to, the upper class: using the family name as a first name. For example, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart is the son of James Stewart and Harriet Potter. As evidence of the frequency of this naming practice among America’s elite, one study of the names of Harvard students over a four-year period found that most of the “singular” names were “recognizable as surnames” (Savage & Wells, 1948).

We hypothesized that unusual first names among the upper class would not have negative ramifications, but positive ones. Such unusually named children might indeed think they are different from the other children with common names, but would also come to realize that they are different in desirable ways — as a result of birth they are economically, educationally, and culturally privileged, and their difference is one of being special. In this situation, having an unusual name might emphasize one of the advantageous qualities of that life: that is, being different from (and, they might assume, above) the rest of the herd. More specifically, it was presumed that an upper-class child with an unusual name might be encouraged to do unusual and exceptional things, and to do them well. Therefore, it was predicted that unusually named members of the upper

class would demonstrate greater achievement than a matched group of blueblooded peers with common names.

We randomly selected 2000 adult male names from *The Social Register* which, according to Domhoff (1967), is the best guide to membership in the national upper class. Those 218 names that appeared only once were operationally defined as unusual. We then looked up each of these 218 people, and another 218 people with common names drawn from the same list of 2000, in *Who's Who in America*, in order to see if those with unusual names were more likely to have made significant achievements.

As we predicted, a disproportionately high number of those listed in *Who's Who* were from the group with unusual names ($\chi^2 = 9.16$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). Of the 30 listed in *Who's Who*, 23 (77%) were from the group with unusual names, seven (23%) from the group with common names. These findings support our contention that in certain settings (such as the upper class provides), and with certain criteria (such as achievement), having an unusual first name does not have a detrimental effect and might even have a beneficial one. The upper-class males with unusual names in this study may not have been happier or more popular than their peers with common names (though they may have been), but they were more likely to have made, in the words of *Who's Who*, a "reputable achievement."

In one final study (Zweigenhaft, 1981), we looked to see if people with unusual names would be more likely to possess another positive attribute: uniqueness. Snyder and Fromkin (1977) have developed a 32-item Uniqueness Scale which is based on what they refer to as "a positive conception of deviance" and is related to a sense of positive self-esteem.

Hypothesizing that individuals with unusual names would score higher on the Uniqueness Scale, we administered it to 104 men and 62 women at Guilford College. Those first names that occurred only once in the entire Guilford student population ($N = 1749$) were operationally defined as unusual and those that occurred more than once, as not unusual. There were 14 unusual first names among the women and 11 among the men.

As predicted, the women with unusual names scored higher than those with common names on the Uniqueness Scale ($t = 3.00$, $p < .01$). This was also true on each of the three factors of the Uniqueness Scale. They scored: (a) significantly higher ($t = 2.00$, $p < .05$) on Factor 2, defined by Snyder and Fromkin as "comprised of 11 items that appear to tap a person's desire to not always follow rules"; (b) significantly higher ($t = 3.90$, $p < .001$) on Factor 3, defined as "comprised of 6 items that evidently reflect a person's willingness to publicly defend his or her beliefs"; and (c) higher, approaching significance ($t = 1.86$, $p < .10$) on

Factor 1, defined as “comprised of 15 items that appear to tap a lack of concern regarding others’ reactions to one’s different ideas, actions, and so on.”

The differences on the Uniqueness Scale and its three factors between men with unusual and common names were in the predicted direction, but none approached statistical significance.

This study on uniqueness, combined with our findings on achievement in upper class men, and our findings on various personality characteristics in Wesleyan University women (a predominantly affluent group), lead us to believe that unusual names may be positive as well as negative (or neutral) in their impact. It appears that one’s socioeconomic background is an important intervening variable to consider when examining the psychological effect of an unusual name. It also appears that the significance of an unusual name may be very different for women than it is for men, and that researchers need to look beyond the issue of name popularity to other features such as achievement and feelings of uniqueness.

CONCLUSION

The studies we have just described, which are summarized in Table 1, lead us to conclude that there is a positive side to unusual names that often gets overlooked because, in general, people tend to rate unusual names less positively than they rate common names. This, of course, does not mean that giving a child an unusual name *can’t* have negative effects. In his classic book on *The American Language*, first published in 1919, H. L. Mencken commented upon such unusual names as Placenta, Granuloma, Gonadia, and Positive Wasserman which he had found as names of American Negroes. He explained:

The name of Positive Wassermann Johnson . . . probably represents the indelicate humor of a medical student. The young brethren who deliver colored mothers in the vicinity of the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore sometimes induce the mothers to give their babies grandiose physiological and pathological names, but these are commonly expunged later on by watchful social workers and colored pastors. Placenta, Granuloma and Gonadia, however, seem to have survived in a few cases. (Mencken, 1936, p. 525)

Though Mencken did not speculate on the psychological effects of such names, it is hard to imagine that names like these, maliciously given and bound to evoke ridicule, could have anything but negative effects. Toni Morrison (1977), a black novelist, addresses this issue in her novel, *Song of Solomon*. It includes a character named Macon Dead who was named by a drunken Union Army officer who asked a newly freed slave whether his parents were alive, then wrote DEAD in the space for surnames, and MACON, his birthplace, in the space for first names. “White people name Negroes like race horses,” says Macon Dead’s grandson.

We are not advocating that people name their children the way they name their horses, or their pet gerbils, or their dogs. Many unusual names should be avoided. But our research demonstrates that unusual names differ, and some unusual names, thoughtfully chosen and given in contexts which suggest that they are special or distinctive rather than weird or odd, can have positive effects.

Guilford College

Table 1
Summary of Studies Suggesting a Positive Side to Unusual Names

Author, Year	Sample	Measure/Variables	Results
Zweigenhaft, 1977	Guilford College undergraduates	Ratings of unusual and common male and female names	Certain unusual names rated positively, others negatively
Zweigenhaft, 1977	11,246 North Carolina black and white, male and female, high school students	A wide range of measures, including academic performance and teachers' ratings.	No meaningful differences between those with unusual names and those with common names
Zweigenhaft, Hayes, and Haagen, 1980	Wesleyan University entering freshmen, 1966-1973	Scores on CPI	Women with unusual names scored higher than women with common names on a number of scales of the CPI. No meaningful differences between men with unusual and common names
Zweigenhaft, 1977	Upper class men, drawn from <i>The Social Register</i>	Frequency of appearance in <i>Who's Who</i>	Those with unusual names appeared more frequently than those with common names
Zweigenhaft, 1981	Guilford College undergraduates	Scores on the Uniqueness Scale	Women with unusual names scored higher on the Uniqueness Scale. No meaningful differences among men.

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