Illuminating the Tenure-Track Pathway: A "New" Faculty Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This narrative inquiry focuses on some elements of the journey of two female, tenure-track assistant professors at a Canadian university. Guided by Schein's (2004) theoretical framework on organizational culture, we explore the practices, beliefs, and assumptions of academic culture that impact our tenure-track journey. Through story sharing and dialogue, four dominant themes emerged: self and soul, empowerment and power differentials, inclusive community, and mentors and gurus "along the way."

RESUMÉ: Cette enquête narrative met l'accent sur certains éléments du parcours mené en vue de la titularisation, de deux femmes maîtres-assistants venant d'une université canadienne. Inspiré par la structure théorique de la culture organisationnelle de Schein's (2004), nous sondons les convictions d'apprentissage et les principes de la culture universitaire qui ont une incidence sur notre parcours à mener vers la permanence. A travers des histoires et des dialogues, quatre thèmes dominants ressortent "tout au long du chemin:" le moi et l'âme, l'autonomie et le pouvoir différentiels, y compris la communauté, les conseillers et les gourous.

Overview

We are two female researcher-participants, attempting to successfully navigate the tenure-track pathway in a Faculty of Education at a Canadian university. Motivated by an individual and mutual search for meaning and understanding, we share our stories of lived experiences and pay particular attention to practices, beliefs, and assumptions, within an academic culture, that support our journey from non-tenured to tenured faculty status. Specifically, we focus on healthy and holistic organizational cultural elements and relationships that provide encouragement, sound mentorship, support, and illumination as we navigate this pathway and reflect on how we can contribute to a rich and holistic academic culture in support of other new hires.

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The objectives of this study include: exploring dominant and sub-cultural themes that impact the tenure-track journey of new faculty; identifying core assumptions, beliefs, and practices that contribute to healthy community formation; and the potential for knowledge construction when colleagues gather, within safe and challenging learning spaces, to share stories and reflect on their experiences as tenure-track faculty.

The Power of Metaphor

As a lens for understanding and interpreting our pre-tenure journey we have chosen a metaphorical approach. Because of the complex nature of our pathway, we appreciate that metaphors do not represent a singular truth. They are "a particular way of seeing and using language" (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 5). As well, metaphors are pervasive and fundamental; we use them to construct our reality (Fairclough, 1992).

This is not our first time using the metaphorical lens to ponder our journey. After being on the pre-tenure track journey for a year, we sought each other out for support and eventually began to reflect on our experiences using metaphorical language. In a previously published article, "Creating Community" (Groen & Kawalilak, 2006), we chose a "kaleidoscope" metaphor to interpret our experiences; it represented our limited ability to only "focus on the fractured and individual elements scattered throughout the lens" (p. 64). Indeed, in retrospect, we now understand that the first two years did not allow us time or ability to look beyond our quest to understand and attend to our own research, teaching, and service responsibilities. In essence we were too busy trying to survive. As is often the case in survival mode, we were unable to step back and consider the bigger academic culture in our faculty, our university, and our academic association. While this fractured view resonated with our earlier experiences, we have since recognized that continuing with this metaphor is counter-productive, and could ultimately contribute to maintaining a status quo university/faculty culture in need of shifting.

As we no longer chose to be guided by a lens that conveyed a fractured array of pieces, processes, structures, and relationships, we sought a metaphor in support of our own growth and development, and our ability to see the organization from a more holistic, systematic, and coherent perspective. We remained steadfast in our desire for a culture that promoted inclusion, cooperation, unification, and collaborative community and believed that a more multi-level lens would support our

ability to understand the interplay and impact between organizational structures and policies, and the people that interpret and animate them within this context and culture. In recognition of this shift, we chose the "warp and weft" weaving metaphor, a more dynamic lens, to guide our current research.

A tapestry of warps and wefts contribute to the sustainability and durability of each other. Their respective purposes support our belief that we are all weavers in our academic communities of practice. This metaphor feels more intuitively aligned to our experiences in recent years as novice faculty, as we step further back and discern dimensions that would constitute a rich and holistic organizational culture in support of pre-tenure faculty.

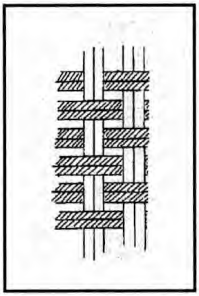

Figure 1. Tapestry of Warps and Wefts.

Threads Drawn From the Literature

Universities continue to be significantly impacted by provincial, national, and global realities and competing agendas. This, according to Garber (1996), has contributed to an "endemic absence of a purpose sufficient, 'personally and publicly,' to orient" lifelong learning behavior and activities (as cited in Stockton, 2004, p. 4). An "absence of purpose sufficient" has the potential to marginalize traditional philosophies, practices, and values that once fostered critical thinking and analysis, developmental and integrative scholarship, knowledge construction, and the strengthening of social consciousness and commitment. Making reference to *our* chosen metaphor, Garber (1996) referred to these mounting tensions in his work titled *Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years*. Stockton (2004) stated that "the fragmentation of knowledge into isolated, individual fields, and the incredible accumulation of information in recent years have [contributed to two significant] problems: a confused role for the teacher, and a vocationally motivated educational system" (p. 5). All of this continues to impact the journey of new academics as we attempt to make meaning of these shifts in the focus of the university.

In addition, for pre-tenure faculty, a significant portion of time can be devoted to undergoing a socialization process, specifically, "learning how to prosper in their new academic community" (McCormick &

Barnes, 2008, p. 6). This socialization process is complex and ongoing as newcomers try to discern the intricacies and layers of organizational culture revealed through the peculiar beliefs, routines, and rituals (Morgan, 1997) that are specific to their academic profession, department, and university. While several streams from the organizational theory literature inform this study, Schein (2004), in particular, provided a theoretical foundation upon which to better understand culture and organizations. In defining the term "culture", Schein argued that it "should be reserved for the deeper level of *basic assumptions and beliefs* that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken-for granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment" (p. 6). These deeper level assumptions are to be "distinguished from the 'artifacts' and 'values' which are manifestations or surface levels of the culture but not the essence" (p. 7).

In light of these transitions, pre-tenure faculty may find it challenging to determine cultural norms and beliefs since "one may well find that there are several cultures operating within the larger social unit" (Schein, 1985, p. 7). For example, while the "dominant culture, that is the themes shared most widely by the organization's members" (McShane, 2001, p. 458) can be linked to the larger university context, there is a broader cultural norm at play here – the institutional type of the specific university.

Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) argued the complexities of balancing the typical threefold dimensions of the faculty portfolio: a) research, b) teaching, and c) service, and that these needed to be understood within the type of institution, differentiating research universities from liberal arts colleges. An outstanding pre-tenure academic at a research university must respond to the deeply imbedded belief that research overshadows other dimensions of faculty work: "Teaching trails along as a way of imparting the results of research and thereby bringing others up to the mark" (Clark, 1987, p. 123). In contrast, for a faculty member in a smaller liberal arts college, teaching would likely take on a more prominent role, while also engaging in some research and contributing significantly to institutional service.

As faculty members we locate ourselves within the broader institutional culture associated with a particular type of university. We are also situated "within layered 'subcultures' [which], in turn, are located through [our] various divisions, geographic regions, and occupational groups" (McShane, 2001, p. 458). According to Clark (1987),

navigating these sub-cultures is particularly complex. Not only do we locate themselves within our own university/institutional type and specific department, we have a strong sense of solidarity within our subject area, which could potentially cause some tensions. "The symbols and myths shared most keenly by individuals and groups in an institution may not be those most treasured by the institution itself" (Silver, 2003, pp. 158-159).

In considering the fundamental importance of organizational culture to the tenure- track journey of newly appointed academics, we pondered cultural elements that would be most supportive, considering the multi-layered complexities of the academic milieu. Indeed, while one might envision the university as a community of scholars, this espoused value is often not seen as the enacted value. Austin (1993) stated, "given the powerful incentives that it offers for individual scholarly accomplishment, the 'community of scholars' remains more of an ideal than a reality. We have the scholars, to be sure, but we lack the community" (p. 4). We maintain that it would be all too easy, as new faculty members, to become isolated in such a culture.

With the emergence of the information era and the increasingly important role of technology within our society, we believe that a healthy organizational culture for tenure-track faculty models interdependence and interrelatedness as a fundamental orientation (Morgan, 1997; Wheatley, 1998, 1999). This perspective honours the values of inclusion, transparency, the creation of safe and challenging spaces, and demonstrates the importance of mentoring and supportive community building and sustainability.

A Tapestry Emerges

Preparing the Loom

We were two newly hired, female, tenure-track assistant professors attempting to successfully navigate the tenure-track pathway. We were hired to the same Faculty of Education and our shared passion for the discipline/specialization of adult education and adult learning informed our teaching, research, and service. We experienced safe space with one another as we had developed mutual trust and openness during our first few years as tenure-track assistant professors. We supported one another as we sought to make sense of our respective experiences. Coming together in this way also helped to alleviate mounting feelings of isolation and confusion.

Our initial dialogues took place early in our second year, leading to our first publication "Creating Community" (Groen & Kawalilak, 2006); subsequent dialogues, reflected in this publication, occurred during our third and fourth year. Through our eight audio-taped dialogues, we shared reflections, experiences, and interpretations of our pre-tenure journey; each dialogue lasted between one and one-half to four hours. We intentionally chose a non work-related physical location and availability of time in support of a free-flowing exchange. General themes loosely guiding our dialogues included: dreams and aspirations as new scholars, exploring power and other relationships with colleagues, service and scholarly activities, resource availability and sharing, supportive and non-supportive infrastructure elements, our sense and interpretation of culture and community in higher education, and, subsequent tensions and challenges.

Revisiting Our Metaphor: Warps and Wefts

While we continue with our exploration of the four key themes that guided our first article (Groen & Kawalilak, 2006): self and soul, empowerment, inclusive community, and mentors and gurus, we now reflect on and illuminate these themes against a larger backdrop of organizational structures, policies, and procedures.

Returning to our weaving metaphor of warps and wefts, we realize that these themes reflect the dynamic, interactive human element within our university culture (*wefts),* and what has become apparent in this later phase of our pre-tenure track journey, our ability to discern this human element against the backdrop of policies, procedures, and norms within the university culture (*warps*). While immersed in the initial phase of our pre-tenure journey, we were not able to distinguish between the warps and the wefts. Our ongoing dialogue process helped us to identify a stability and repetition in the university setting, an increasing familiarity with the rhythm of the year, and an understanding of the regulatory policies and procedures within the faculty, the university, and academic discipline.

As noted in Figure 2, the purpose of warps and wefts in a weaving project align nicely to organizational structures, processes, and dynamics. We are reminded by Schein (2004) that human relationships and dynamics are positioned within a larger organizational landscape and are subsequently shaped by the basic assumptions that inform this broader cultural context. An analysis of the human wefts within the

context of organizational warps is critical to support new faculty as we learn how to prosper in our academic communities. Warps in a weaving represent the strung, vertical (lengthwise) threads that contribute to overall structure and durability. In Figure 2, we expand the notion of warps to reflect the multi-layered sub-cultures we navigate with respect to our faculty, our university, and our discipline. Indeed, each sub-culture has its own policies, procedures, and traditions that may or may not align with one another. Wefts refer to the horizontal (back and forth) threads that are woven in a cross-wise fashion *through the warps*. Wefts are typically colourful and ultimately contribute to the texture and overall design of a weaving project. We are reminded that our initial themes of self and soul, empowerment, inclusion, and mentors/gurus reflect how we wish to engage in our faculty, university, and academic discipline in order to create and sustain a culture that is supportive of new faculty in working toward tenure.

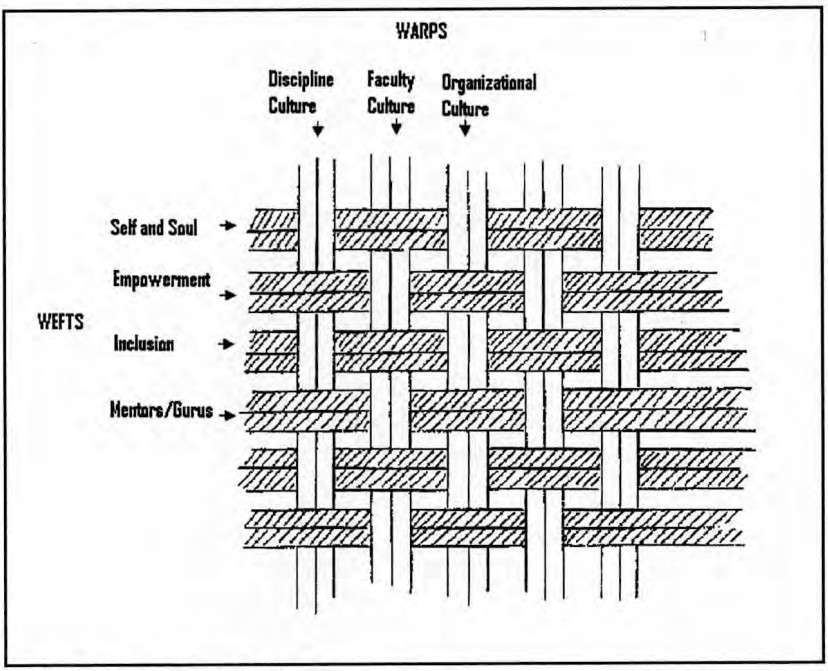

Figure 2. Warps and Wefts.

Finally, it is important to expand the weaving metaphor to explore the interplay between the warps and wefts. As the thread moves in and out

of the vertical strands, the weaver shifts these strands; pulling several strands together, separating others or moving the vertical strands to the forefront or to the background. The various decisions, interpretations, and choices that are made regarding the pathway of the weft create the rich, textured, and varied weavings. With respect to our faculty, university, and academic discipline, we have come to realize that the vertical warps of policies and procedures are not static and unchangeable. Rather the horizontal wefts of human interaction and interpretation determine the creation, shaping, and implementation of policies. In summary, as we revisit our four themes, we recognize the structural warps are not easily nor neatly separated from the interrelated human wefts which occupy and influence them.

Colleen and Janet as Weavers

To weave is to create and, not unlike woven stories that are revisited and reviewed, there is great potential when one stands back to reflect on earlier images and interpretations, to recognize and make meaning of previously unnoticed, emergent patterns and intricacies. Through a more seasoned lens, the subtleties and interrelationship of the colorful and textural design elements become visible. We reflected on the earlier challenges surrounding our transition to a deepened understanding of our academic culture. Colleen reflected on her transition from a vocational college to university culture:

> *The first years of my hire were particularly difficult. I had transitioned from a successful 22 year career as a counselor/adult educator where my knowledge and experience were valued. I am now treated as a novice. I have a lot to learn but I also bring rich experiences with me. My past experiences should count for something!*

And Janet:

> *The first few years here are a blur as I was adapting on so many levels. I felt pressure to do well in my new role as a faculty member because I moved my three children and my husband from Eastern Canada to Calgary to take on this role. The image of the monopoly board constantly surfaced. Even though I had gone around the board to successfully complete my doctorate, I felt as if I was back on "the start" square where I had to prove myself, again capable. Did I want to start over again? Aren't I getting too old for this!*

As we revisited and reflected upon the tapestry of our own tenure-track journey, our understanding of the interconnectedness of self and soul, power relations, inclusive community, and mentoring deepened.

Relational Wefts

Attending to *self and soul* continued to resonate as a commitment to teaching, research, and service within an adult education setting. To remain focused on this, our vocation, within a shifting landscape, only contributed to a deepening sense of purposeful intentionality. We became acutely aware of our need for relationships with colleagues that fostered *empowerment*, growth, and development. The roots of adult education are steeped in a history of empowerment through *inclusive community* and we recognized that cultivating and sustaining our vocation to be adult educators in an academic setting was dependent upon this. Colleen shared her need for community:

> *I feel lonely in this environment and this surprises me. I am a people-person. People are not unkind or uncaring, but we all put our heads down in our bullpens to do what needs to be done. Where are the spaces to gather, to connect with one another, to respectfully challenge, to share stories, to just be with one another? Meetings are stuffed full with information. We're so focused on scarcity of time, funding, energy, and publications. I can obsess as much as the next person. But, I don't want to leave others feeling that they are stealing my last moment on earth if they want to approach me. I am grateful to the few who have extended their time and support and I feel bound to be generous and more present to others who are in need of this from me.*

And Janet's experience:

> *My doctoral research, which focused on spirituality in the workplace from the perspective of adult educators, stresses the importance of finding a sense of meaning in one's workplace as well the high value we place on feeling interconnected and being part of community. In going through the tenure process I often asked myself if I felt alignment between my sense of purpose in being an academic here, and the external expectations of university in working toward achieving tenure. For the most part I think I can honestly say that I didn't sell myself out in order to achieve tenure. However I have had many dark nights of the soul*

where I have asked myself if any of this is really important. Does my work really matter?

Being interconnected and forming community isn't easy. Even our physical building presents a challenge; high-rise towers do not lend themselves to building community as you mainly only connect with colleagues on the same floor.

We remained particularly sensitive to elements within our own academic community that contributed to scarcity, and to a deepening sense that few had the time to commit to relationship development. Perhaps this was motivated by a fear that expending time and energy was difficult to quantify and document in the infamous annual report for merit! Our need to connect with others, less preoccupied with scarcity, deepened. We sought out *mentors and gurus* willing to share knowledge and experiences. Although we offered support and insight to one another, were we not the blind leading the blind? Extending our network of support would ensure a more critical perspective and understanding of our experiences as novice faculty.

While we sought out other colleagues for support and mentoring, we remained committed to one another to continue our dialogues in the interest of sustaining our co-mentoring relationship. *Trust* within our co-created *safe space* was both critical and foundational to staying connected to our soulful selves. Within safe space we explored "power with" versus "power over" relationships, what constituted sustainable and inclusive communities, and how we might pay forward what we received from one another and from those who took the time to mentor us along the way. Safe space welcomed questions, confusions, and insecurities, and provided generous allotments of time to explore needs, opinions, and perspectives. Safe space also encompassed a commitment of care, expressed compassion and collegiality and equated to *inclusion, support, and trust.*

Warps Made Visible

In the first two years post-hire, we attempted to successfully navigate a maze-like pathway where unsuspecting twists sometimes spiraled into feelings of disorientation and powerlessness. Our dialogues in year three and four focused on stepping back from our everyday tasks and to situate our work against our organizational culture. We began to ask, "Why are things this way?" and to tease out patterns and systems. We then located our experiences against a backdrop of structures, policies, and

procedures and attempted to make meaning of how these warps informed our university life. In essence, we were beginning to reflect on the warps of our various sub-cultures. A pivotal warp for a pre-tenure faculty member, across the sub-cultures of our discipline, faculty, and university, is the ability to discern and balance the varying emphasis placed on the roles of teaching, research, and service. Within our broader university setting, we quickly realized that our university positions itself as one of the top research institutions in Canada. However, within our own Faculty of Education, while striving to position ourselves as an emerging voice in educational research, we still place great emphasis on teaching. In fact, our teaching loads are consistently higher compared to other faculties. In addition, our location within a professional faculty discloses tensions around the debate as to what constitutes research. Many faculty members engage in significant applied research, working at various levels to enhance the educational experiences and structures within their local community and beyond. The question lingers, however, as to whether or not this counts as research for a pre-tenure faculty member when "it is in research grants, books, articles, papers, and citations that every university defines its worth" (Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 15). How does one measure applied research within our university? What are the implications for choosing this pathway as a pre-tenure faculty member? How is applied research situated against the backdrop of one's discipline? Discerning research paradigms and trends was critical as we strived to become valued and respected academics in our discipline.

Parallel in its elusiveness is determining how a pre-tenure faculty member shapes service contributions. We attempted to understand the various formal leadership positions, committees, and governance processes within and beyond our own Faculty of Education. Bewildered, we attempted to discern how we might make significant service contributions without jeopardizing our publication records. We also realized the importance of being active in support of our discipline, through editorial and conference planning work, and by way of contributions to community work. There was always this unspoken tension around service contributions. How much is enough? At what point are we compromising our research productivity?

In summary, our focus on organizational warps within our discipline, faculty, and university was directed toward understanding a foundational warp within the university culture; the norms and processes that are valued in becoming a tenured faculty member. This

particular organizational warp remains elusive, however, and in turn, contributes to a journey that is unsettling and uneasy.

Assuming Formal Roles of Leadership: Impacting the Warps

It was during years' three and four of our pre-tenure journey that we each assumed leadership roles within our Faculty of Education. Some viewed this as an affirmation of our respective accomplishments; we had both extended ourselves, significantly, beyond the norm, in service activities. Others expressed concern that our respective leadership appointments were due to an imbalance regarding the ratio of available assistant, associate, and full professors. Specifically, full professors were prone to decline such invitations and associates were in short supply. Assuming leadership roles did, however, bring us closer to the politics of the organization, to the structural warps that are seldom conducive to supporting the type of dynamics and relational wefts that we remained committed to creating. Janet expressed some of her initial hesitations about her new leadership role:

> *I remember when the new Associate Dean popped by my office to offer me the role of Graduate Coordinator. I cautiously said yes but worried about managing the demands of this leadership position along with the other faculty expectations. I wondered how this role would impact my research, in light of the insatiable administrative demands. But I still said yes. I sought a deeper understanding of responsibilities associated with those in administrative roles within our faculty.*

Colleen elaborated:

> *Part of me is interested in saying "yes" to a formal leadership role, although some colleagues caution me against this. I am told that I shouldn't ruffle any feathers before gaining tenure! That I should lay low, keep my head down, peddle to the metal, and do what I am told to do and what is expected of me. I struggle with this as I came into this with 22 years of adult educator experience. I do have something to offer. Yet, I am fearful about some of the power dynamics that I will be confronted with. Can I effectively weave together these new expectations with my own research agenda? Is the expertise I bring being recognized? Should I be worried about ruffling feathers and pissing people off as a non-tenured faculty member?*

In spite of our respective hesitations, we chose to assume these new roles. Our dialogues continued in support of one another through this transition. We drew confidence from our previous work histories and saw this as an opportunity to have a voice at the table of program planning and delivery, and to the building of a healthy, sustainable culture within our faculty. We also drew strength from our commitment to actively participate in the possibility of creating a collaborative, caring, and constructive academic community. We believed that we would learn valuable lessons from active participation in a leadership role and were guided by our commitment to publicly "walk our talk" in the co-creation of a vibrant and sustainable work and learning community. While not suggesting that all pre-tenure faculty members should assume formal leadership roles, this opportunity provided us another lens with which to make deeper meaning of our faculty culture. This, in turn, enhanced our ability to discern where and how we might influence some of the organizational and faculty warps.

Message to New Faculty

The objectives of this study included: exploring dominant and sub-cultural themes that impact the tenure-track journey of new faculty; identifying core assumptions, beliefs, and practices that contribute to healthy community formation; and the potential for knowledge construction when colleagues gather, within safe and challenging learning spaces, to share stories and reflect on their experiences as tenure-track faculty. Standing at the end of the pre-tenure faculty journey, as two recently tenured faculty members, we now realize that our unwavering attention to co-mentoring each other, through dialogue, was pivotal. Our four key themes, *self and soul, empowerment, inclusive community,* and *mentors and gurus,* were animated through our deliberate initiative to cultivate and sustain a safe space with another colleague who was also walking the pre-tenure journey.

Our message to new faculty is simple. Tend to one's pre-tenure journey by creating a safe reflective space to step back from challenges of being a new academic. While the academic culture compels us to higher levels of productivity and engagement, it is only by stepping back from the frenetic demands of teaching, research, and service that we can begin to discern our beliefs and practices against the backdrop of our faculty, our university, and our academic discipline. Extend an authentic invitation to others to participate in this space and to share stories of experiences lived as novice faculty. There is potential for co-mentoring

to organically evolve from within this space. Along with the frustrations and tensions we share through story, we may even laugh a little. Within safe space we come to realize that we are all *weavers*; we have the ability to significantly reshape structural and procedural warps.

While we have focused on the power of co-mentoring each other as new faculty, we wish to extend our notion of human wefts to senior faculty and to those in formal leadership positions. These voices, if guided by a commitment of care, compassion, openness to engaging with differences, respectful discourse, and intentionality, have the potential to refocus and rebuild some of the organizational warps that often act as barriers, into bridges of opportunity for new faculty members attempting to successfully navigate the tenure-track pathway.

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