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## Client's View of a Successful Helping Relationship

*David S. Ribner and Cigal Knei-Paz*

*This study asked clients from multiproblem families to describe a successful helping relationship. The replies were analyzed using narrative research techniques and results are presented in conceptual categories with illustrative quotations from the interviews. The article offers conclusions about client preferences in the areas of working relationship, work styles, and worker characteristics. The results revealed two general domains of the client-worker relationship: factors that provided a sense of equality in the relationship, for example, love, friendship, and a nonjudgmental stance; and the notion that the helping relationship should parallel more normative contacts and include components such as flexibility, chemistry, luck, and going the extra distance.*

**Key words:** *helping relationships; Israel; social worker-client relationships*

Social work, along with other helping professions, has long sought suitable means for defining and measuring the success or failure of various interventions. All too often, however, the profession has attempted to do so from the perspective of involved professionals, investing less effort in documenting clients' own responses. Moreover, studies that ask for client viewpoints tend to do so through a list of variables created by the researchers, consequently neglecting the actual subjective treatment experience.

This study asked 11 women from multiproblem families in Israel to describe a successful helping relationship. The replies were analyzed using narrative research techniques and the results are presented here in conceptual categories generated from the data, with illustrative quotations from the interviews. We have presented results concerning the nature of the assistance elsewhere (Knei-Paz & Ribner, 2000), that is, the specific help received in the relationship that the client saw as contributing to a successful helping experience.

We see this method as contributing a uniquely rich and effective view of the other side of the client-worker dyad, one that is often lost when us-

ing quantitative procedures. As Rosenfeld and Sykes (1998) noted about this client population: "Only through learning about their experiences, perceptions, and understandings, can researchers learn what they and others like them need and how they can best be helped" (p. 294).

### Successful Intervention

In their study of the effectiveness of various psychotherapies, Luborsky, Singer, and Luborsky (1975) illustrated their conclusions with a quote from *Alice in Wonderland*, "Everyone has won and all must have prizes." Most schools of psychotherapy, they maintain, predict similar benefits for patients and clients, making the task of differentiating among styles a difficult one. In this vein, Mahrer and Nadler (1986) noted that all therapists, when describing treatment success, tend to use uniform language, such as change, progress, improvement, or movement, with the understanding and use of each of these concepts modified by various theoretical models.

One way of attempting to group the attributes contributing to successful interventions is to make use of three perspectives. The first focuses on the

use of specific factors—that is, clearly defined techniques and activities (Hill, Carter, & O’Farrell, 1983), with each school of psychotherapy emphasizing those specific factors that fit into its treatment philosophy (Parloff, 1986)

The second approach sees nonspecific factors as being the primary generators of client change (Dasberg, 1987; Lafferty, Beutler, & Cargo, 1991; Miller, Taylor, & West, 1980). These factors, principally related to the therapeutic relationship, include, for example, warmth, empathy, understanding, acceptance, and involvement, which Bent, Putnam, Kiesler, and Nowicki (1976) and Cooley and Lajoy (1980) identified as significant contributory factors to treatment success from the client’s viewpoint.

The third perspective looks at the interaction between specific and nonspecific factors within the context of influences such as the skill of the therapist and the level of client distress. This approach, based on the assumption that no single technique can be proved more significantly effective than another (Jones, Cummings, & Horowitz, 1988), sees each client–therapist relationship in a singular interactional context in which numerous variables influence the potential for treatment success. In addition, both the client and therapist may evaluate the significance of change from independent vantage points (Butler & Strupp, 1986). This final perspective permits the viewing of each client’s narrative as unique, influencing the therapist’s choice of those specific and nonspecific factors to be used in treatment, as well as the client’s evaluation of interventive success or failure.

### **Intervention with Multiproblem Families**

The challenge of working with multiproblem families has long been the subject of social work literature. Some (Rosenfeld, 1993) have contended that existing services have not succeeded in establishing relationships based on mutual trust and understanding or in applying interventions specific to the needs of these families. More recently, the term “inapt” service has been used to describe “a lack of fit between what a family needs and the outside help which is provided” (Rosenfeld & Sykes, 1998, p. 286), setting up all involved parties for inevitable failure. The result has been a seemingly endless cycle of despair for both clients and workers (Bar-On & Ben-Arie, 1992).

A consistent theme is that conventional methods have failed and that new models must be created. These new approaches should take into consideration the history of each family with existing services providers, which has often been characterized by mistrust, resistance, hostility, and estrangement (Rosenfeld, 1964; Schlosberg & Kagan, 1988). Changing such a perception demands that services be relevant to the needs and wishes of families (McKinney, 1970) and that the emphasis be on “doing” as opposed to verbal therapies (Levin, 1964<reference>). In keeping with this stance, a number of techniques have been suggested or tried to facilitate work with this client population. These include reaching out (Reimel & Schindler, 1994; Tomlinson & Peters, 1981); home visits (Schlosberg & Kagan, 1988); informality (Rosenfeld, Schon, & Sykes, 1995); worker self-disclosure and de-emphasizing the “expert” stance (Rabin, Rosenberg, & Sens, 1982); and accessibility and flexibility (Benvenisti & Yekel, 1986; Rabin et al., 1982).

One common denominator of these intervention approaches is that all are based on the perceptions of helping professionals and not on the viewpoints of clients. In recent years, some attention has shifted to research focused on client reports regarding correlations between treatment success and treatment variables. In 1986, for example, a study done by Benvenisti and Yekel asked members of 35 multiproblem families in Israel to indicate which behaviors of their BSW student social workers were particularly helpful. Among the responses were willingness to help and be with the family; support, encouragement, and listening; allowing opportunity for the full expression of feelings; and provision of concrete services. Of particular note is that both students and clients interpreted any improvement as attributable to the unique relationship among the participants.

In addition, studies by Lorr (1965), Cooley and Lajoy (1980), Miller et al. (1980), and Lafferty et al. (1991) reported that clients attributed positive treatment outcomes to therapist empathy, positive regard, understanding, and acceptance. Maluccio (1979), Luborsky, McLellan, Woody, O’Brien, and Auerbach (1985), and Williams and Chambless (1990) found similar results with regard to the therapeutic alliance. Finally, authors using the narrative perspective have notably emphasized the importance of client perspectives, including participation in evaluative processes

(Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Borden, 1992; Nye, 1998).

### Research Design

In this study we have attempted to further clarify the issues of perceived intervention success through the use of a narrative research method. Clients were invited to participate in a research project that, through narratives about their positive experiences, could contribute to the improvement in the provision of social work services. One of the authors (Knei-Paz) interviewed clients in locations other than traditional work sites—that is, either in coffee shops or clients' homes—to create a more friendly and less formal or threatening atmosphere.

Each interview was tape recorded with client permission and lasted approximately 1½ hours. Interviews were then transcribed, mindful that the significance of body language and facial expressions would be lost (Mishler, 1986). In addition to the authors (both social workers), a sociologist–anthropologist did content analysis for each transcribed interview. The interviews stopped after 11 clients, as the narratives seemed rich enough to provide the data for content analysis.

### Study Population

The 11 women interviewed were referred either by social workers in local social services offices or by professional staff at therapeutic residences. At the time of the study all were clients of social services offices. These offices, under the aegis of the Ministry of Labor and Welfare, provide a broad range of legislatively mandated services and resources to various delineated populations, such as immigrants and elderly and unemployed people. Although services are provided locally, policy is set by the central government in Jerusalem, with some flexibility for the specific requirements of area populations, one example being the specific challenges of development towns. The rudiments of this network were established by European immigrants to Israel in the early years of the 20th century and to some extent still reflect a socialist perspective on fulfilling basic human needs. Staff consists almost entirely of social workers, most with BSW degrees (the entry-level degree in Israel), although increasing numbers are returning to school for advanced training. We did not collect any demographic data on the social workers described in this article.

The women chosen indicated that they had had and were prepared to discuss successful intervention experiences. All lived in households deemed multiproblem in terms of some or all of the following criteria: low socioeconomic status, lack of permanent residence, unemployment, debt, parent–child and spousal conflicts, social isolation, significant physical illness, and substance abuse.

We chose female heads of households because, at least in Israel, they represent the population with the greatest direct contact with social services agencies (Jaffe, 1983), and therefore are more likely to have experienced, at some point in their time as clients, a positive helping relationship. All of the women were Jewish and either Israeli born or had been resident most of their lives. They ranged in age from 33 to 50 years; seven were single parents, and three were employed out of the house. Presenting problems included dysfunctional, often violent, familial relationships; child-raising issues, particularly in the educational realm; financial and housing instability; and physical and emotional illness.

### Content Analysis

Corradi's (1991) hermeneutic framework served as the basis for this study's content analysis. This approach views the narrative text of the interview both as an attempt by the interviewer and interviewee to give meaning to an aspect of the latter's social context. The told story provides a mechanism for giving order to past events by providing a connection between what the storyteller was before and is today, allowing for current perspectives to furnish retroactive significance. Analyzing the texts requires cognizance of the effect of the presence of the interviewer in the life of the interviewee, as well as the interviewer's subjective understanding of meanings adjudged accurate and attributed to the interviewee. Demographic information related to these women's lives, such as marital status and number of children, were not considered in the content analysis, in accord with the method developed by Rosenthal (1993).

Themes that emerged from transcripts of the "success stories" were discussed in conferences among the three readers, who reached a consensus regarding the justification of grouping quotations from the narratives into the following categories:

- description of client–family life before encountering the worker and the specific reason for the meeting

- description of client–family life after encountering the worker
- areas in which the client felt the worker helped her
- ways in which clients attributed interventive success:
  - success attributed to personality characteristics of the worker
  - success attributed to the professional ability of the worker
  - success attributed to client–worker interaction
  - success attributed to the client herself
  - success attributed to life circumstances during the interventive period
  - success attributed to factors unrelated to the intervention (for example, child-birth)
  - success attributed to therapeutic factors unrelated to the worker (for example, the therapeutic setting).

Analysis of the client's choice of words was based on the assumption that the language chosen reflected the significance of the event for the client—that is, these words were understood as representing the experience undergone by each of the women. During the interviews, respondents were asked to indicate what meaning a specific word had for each of them (for example, help), and based on their replies words or phrases were grouped into the data analysis. (Original transcriptions were in Hebrew and have been translated by the authors.)

After extracting the elements of a successful helping relationship as perceived by the clients, we compared them to the existing literature dealing with multiproblem families. Although each narrative was truly unique, it was possible to discern common threads.

## Data Analysis

### Central Role of “My” Social Worker

Despite a wide range of elements listed as being part of a successful intervention, all the women saw a specific social worker as anchoring that experience. In contrast, lack of success was attributed to “the welfare office,” “budget problems,” or a nameless person filling a bureaucratic role.

Many and varied descriptions appeared regarding the quality of the connection these women felt with their social workers. One woman saw the

link as having been directed to her by providence or luck: “It is my luck that God loves me and sent me Ricki.” Another found it hard to accept her good fortune: “I never believed that I could have a worker like . . . until now that I look at it I don't . . . it doesn't seem that I really have a worker like this one.”

One client described her unique relationship with her worker in terms of a loving couple: “Like a man falls in love with a woman, like sudden, it can't be explained.” Chemistry was another approach: “It's chemistry between two people—another woman said this social worker was no good.” For others, this singularly fitting relationship was beyond description: “It's impossible to explain,” or “I truly do not have the words,” or “I don't know how to explain it.”

In describing the strength of the relationship with their social workers, the women used expressions of love toward them; eagerness to meet with them again: “I am already waiting for the next session”; feelings of lost love when the worker left; tears: “All the women clients cried when she left”; subsequent emptiness and the conviction that no other worker could be related to in quite the same way.

Two additional examples of these positive feelings were responsibility and forgiveness. One woman said, “I feel a responsibility to come to the [parenting] course, it's part of the connection” to the worker. Another was prepared to forgive the social worker for not fulfilling a specific expectation, because of the existing positive relationship.

These descriptions underscored these clients' perceptions that unique connections had been woven between them and their social workers. Whether it was the consequence of chemistry or divine intervention, the women believed that this relationship was unusual and not likely to occur again. Once the relationship ended, some doubted if they would again invest as much in any future contact with another social worker.

### Feelings of Closeness

Terms used to describe the social workers reflected a quality of closeness felt by these women. Seven said she was “like a friend”; three said, like a mother”; and two said, “like a sister.” When asked to expand on the notion of friend, the clients emphasized the directness and equality of the relationship; they did not experience the distance of speaking with a professional who knew better

than they: "I don't feel that I am speaking with a social worker, more like a friend . . . she doesn't give the feeling that she is on a higher level than you are." Or, "She was just like my friend, I did not feel at all that she was a social worker." "Not like a social worker that you go in to see her and speak hesitantly, you know you're nervous and don't feel so comfortable. She lets you feel like a friend . . . we felt that she was our friend, she laughed with us and spoke freely."

Because reduced social interactions and problematic family constellations characterize these women, contact with their social workers represented the only source of support and attention in their lives, underscoring the status of the social worker as a friend: "I didn't want talk at home, so I talked to the worker; I had someone to pour out my heart to, to tell these stories." It should be noted as well that the study population of 11 women chose 11 female social workers as those who had provided them with successful intervention experiences and, more specifically, who could be characterized as friends.

Although gender in and of itself was not mentioned by the clients as a determinant of success, it should not be ignored that all of these women spoke of positive therapeutic relationships exclusively with regard to female social workers.

### Working Styles

Along with descriptions of their relationships with successful social workers, these clients also recounted the activities and interventions employed by the professionals to achieve the experience of success.

**Enabling Atmosphere.** Nine women spoke of the conditions necessary for them to feel comfortable talking to their social workers and to be helped by them: "To really be with the person . . . to give [her] a good feeling, to be with [her] just like me and you are talking now, then I really want to open myself up, to speak to you, to tell you stories; not, let's say like a social worker who thinks so highly of herself . . . that you are too arrogant; you just don't want to talk to her." The women felt at ease talking with a worker who did not make them feel that they were in a therapist-patient relationship: "To let you feel free, not to speak as if to a therapist"; or "Not to speak as if [the therapist is] on a higher level."

**Equal Stance.** The interviewees stressed the importance of a sense of equality within the working

relationship. The emphasis on friendship stands in stark contrast to the powerlessness often felt by clients when need demands that they become dependent on the establishment and its social work representatives.

One woman described a social worker with whom she did not feel a sense of equality: "She says, 'Its what I think that is most important' and you feel that you don't understand life at all and she studied many years and she knows . . . you just listen to what she has to say and it goes in one ear and comes out the other." Some clients saw language as a marker of this disparity and wanted their workers "not to speak like a social worker" or "not like a professor." These women did not want the social workers to present themselves as all-knowing, demeaning their clients by pointing out only the mistakes they made.

**Working Together.** One woman told of her stay in a shelter for battered women and how the social worker cooked in the kitchen along with the residents and went out jogging to encourage the women to do the same:

There were other social workers there who would say 'Do this and do that,' and she would even clean up with us. One time we women were talking about how fat we are and so on and that we had to start doing some exercise or something, or that we had to go out a little and run around the area, so she said 'Why not now? I'll go with you,' so me and two or three other women, so every night we went out to run and she went with us and she didn't say 'So you go and do what you want' . . . she would do things that we would do . . .

From the clients' perspective, this "doing" together encouraged and strengthened them to be more active and reinforced their impression that the social worker understood their needs and genuinely wished to help.

### Flexible Contacts

**Accessibility.** The interviewees valued the social workers' willingness to go beyond the traditional format of a scheduled hour in an agency location. The successful worker was remembered as one who would see the client whenever she wanted or needed to, who understood that when she was in distress, there would be no need to make an appointment. From a negative perspective, one client said: "What did she say to me? 'You have to

make an appointment.' I said to her 'What do you mean appointment, I need you now, I can't put this off.'" Although in contrast, another noted: "When I needed her, she was available to me."

*The Client's Turf.* Home visits also were perceived as indicating a special level of concern on the part of the social workers, as evidence of trying to reach the client geographically as well as emotionally. One woman noted the efforts of a physically disabled social worker: "She was crippled and even though it was hard for her, she overcame the problem and came to visit me at home." None of the women spoke of home visits as a way of observing or controlling them; rather they understood these actions as designed to bring the client closer to the worker. This was related, in part, to the difficulty experienced by some of the women in reaching the workers' office, as well as the emotional effect of seeing themselves as being in need: "Sometimes she saw that I couldn't come, not because I was sick or something like that, but because it was hard for me with being pregnant, she would say 'I will come to you,' she would come and sit, she never said to me 'I don't want to.'" Another woman said: "I don't feel comfortable, I feel humiliated when people see me in the welfare office; I don't like going there, I feel ashamed."

*Keeping in Touch.* Telephone contact, from worker to client, also was cited as a sign that the worker cared and remembered—that they would call even if the client had not requested anything lately. Referring to an unsuccessful experience, one woman said: "If I don't call her, she doesn't call to see what's happening"; about a positive experience another said: "She's the one who calls, she's the one who asks what's going on."

*Doing More.* A third manifestation of flexibility was the workers' willingness to go beyond the boundaries of their formal roles. Interviewees mentioned, for example, participation in a child's birthday, making a home visit on the social worker's day off, and a child's social worker calling the mother to find out how she was doing. The women understood and valued the extra effort needed to function on this level and experienced these efforts as showing a sincere desire to help rather than just fulfilling a prescribed responsibility. Such activities also served to differentiate a particular worker from the faceless establishment.

In comments that reflected an appreciation of a social worker's willingness to explore alterna-

tives, one client said: "It's enough that she comes, it shows you and tells you, 'we'll work it out for you, we'll find some other place,' she helps, worries, [whereas] this other one 'go drop dead, that's what there is,' as if she says no before she even checks. A second woman noted: "To try to help from all kinds of directions, not to try and help just one way and not even to try anything else." Regarding her child, a third client noted: "What will be, where my son will be in nursery, she would say 'good, it'll be okay, don't worry,' and right away she checks, calls, brings me an answer."

We think it is significant that, in these narratives, the social workers were not seen as representatives of the services in which they were employed. This quasi-independent status underscored the uniqueness of both the social worker and the specific relationship, and allowed the worker to be viewed as a mediator between the client and the welfare office. Thus, when the office refused a client's request, it was perceived by the client as a rejection of both her and her social worker—as equal participants in this process: "Like now, for example, with the clothing, she says that it has to wait, and then tomorrow or the next day it'll rain, so they wait until the last minute . . . on the other hand, it's sort of all right, I don't blame her that it didn't work out, she tried all kinds of ways."

## Discussion

We acknowledge at the outset the inherent difficulty in extrapolating from 11 personal stories to reach conclusions significant to wider populations. However, in using a narrative research method, we tried to convey the richness and passion of the intervention experiences of "real" clients, a perspective not available in quantitative designs. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) noted: "Human behavior, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities" (p. 106)

Two additional factors should be noted that might influence the significance of any data presented here. Although original content analyses were done in Hebrew, our use of translations in this article may distort meanings and blur nuances. The fact that the authors are English-Hebrew bilingual but with opposite mother tongues has helped sensitize us to the complexity of this task.

The presence of a tape recorder at each interview may have introduced an additional bias. Knei-Paz reported that when asked permission to record the conversations, several of the interviewees consented enthusiastically, explaining that they wanted their responses to be recorded because they related to positive experiences. In retrospect, this aspect of the research protocol should have been explored during the interviews.

Before commenting on specific findings, we underscore one particularly troubling point: For all of these women, positive relationships with social workers stood out as isolated instances from long history of social agency contacts characterized by unfulfilled expectations, unmet needs, and recurring disappointments. To their credit and despite the fact that most social workers did not act as the clients' would have wished, these respondents clearly were able to recognize and discuss those rare situations in which they felt satisfied with their relationship with a given social worker. Their demands were not of an "all or nothing" nature; rather they exhibited a realistic and thus professionally valuable perspective on the elements of a successful working relationship.

It was, in fact, the positive relationships with their social workers, and the qualities of those interactions, that most consistently resounded throughout the descriptions of successful client-worker experiences. This is consistent with Lambert's (1989) conclusion: "In addition to clinical wisdom and anecdotal evidence, there is empirical support for the notion that the individual therapist can have a substantial effect on process and outcome, one that often exceeds that attributable to technique" (p. 480).

As much as any technical assistance, these women valued the human dynamic of these professional contacts. In reviewing the responses, we discerned the significance for these respondents of two general domains of the client-worker relationship. The first domain included the factors that provided a sense of "equality" in the relationship (Rhodes, 1978), a word that included aspects of love, friendship, and fairness. To experience the worker as a friend and not as an "expert" (Rabin et al., 1982) was poignantly significant for these women, perhaps underscoring not only the inadequacy of earlier professional relationships (Schlosberg & Kagan, 1988) but also their own social isolation (Bar-On & Ben-Arie, 1992). The

respondents attributed the cordial atmosphere to an informal conversational style and to a feeling of being accepted for who they were, of not being criticized for failures in life or as clients.

In addition, a sense of equality allowed these women to feel at least somewhat freed from the label, if not the status, of "needy." Any activity that softened the reality of being in distress, such as home visits or jointly undertaken tasks, permitted them to be helped without the degradation that they had so often encountered in the past. There was no attempt to deny the exigencies of their realities; rather these clients sought relationships in which those realities did not proscribe their being perceived as people and not just as problems. In other professional relationships in which equality was notably absent, these women reported feeling demeaned, rejected, and threatened.

Related to this was the clients' view of these particular social workers as separate from the social welfare structure, as people rather than heartless and faceless institutions. Their experiences with social welfare agencies left impressions of uncaring and inflexible monoliths, and any social worker fully identifying with such a setting could not be seen as successful. Through the respondents' descriptions, it appeared that previous social workers themselves might have contributed to this perspective, particularly when attempting to explain their inability to help in specific situations because of insufficient resources or rigid administrations.

The second domain emphasized the notion that relationships with social workers should include components such as flexibility, "chemistry," luck, and going the extra distance. None of these women had been able to select the worker. Luck and the vagaries of chemistry were acknowledged as playing integral roles in achieving success, although they were not as important as some other factors.

These clients expected the workers to conduct themselves as people who, at times, could bypass agency directives for the good of clients, not as people totally bound by social agencies' rules and regulations. They wanted to know that the workers had tried, despite the likelihood that bureaucratic structures could not be altered for their unique situations. Furthermore, the respondents looked for professionals whose availability was not necessarily bound by time or space, who

would have flexible hours and meet at locations beyond the traditional workday office visit. Although noting that it was the rare social worker who conducted herself in such a manner, none saw this expectation as unrealistic.

## Conclusion

Although Bergin and Garfield (1994) concluded that, as yet, no single therapeutic model has been proved to be more effective than others, the respondents in this study emphasized the importance of relationships as the basis for the success of any intervention strategy. Parallel to any concrete assistance, the "doing" side of social work, these women valued the relationship, the art of "being" with the client, which included warmth, acceptance as equals, and ability to listen and to create a sense of calm. Although this may appear to be stating the obvious, the lack of such positive contacts in their histories as clients underscores the gap between social work theory and actual practice.

In this context, we must acknowledge the possibility that a higher percentage of social workers would have been willing to invest more in these clients but for the massive caseloads and budgetary restrictions that characterize work in most Israeli (and probably most worldwide) government agencies. In addition, the work culture in a given agency or service may restrict the provision of client contact beyond the traditional office visit. Thus, the gulf between theory and actuality may be more a function of administrative mandate than worker hesitation. In such situations, both clients and social workers may feel equally frustrated.

Finally, we question the messages social workers receive when they do venture beyond narrowly defined professional expectations. Is a late night, emergency home visit compensated at some future date? And more telling, does the supervisory response label such involvement as acceptable, even laudatory, or is the social worker always seen as a victim of manipulation who has lost all sense of professional boundaries? We do not advocate that such questions be answered solely from the client's perspective and we do not propose that professional dedication be replaced by personal sacrifice. In this study, however, we have underscored the importance of respecting client involvement in the selection of the kind and quality of professional services they receive, and we en-

courage greater administrative flexibility to allow, wherever feasible, for interventions adapted to those frames of reference. ■

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*David S. Ribner, DSW, ACSW, is vice chairman, School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel 52900; e-mail: ribner@mail.biu.ac.il. Cigal Knei-Paz, MA, is a social worker, Ramat Gan, Israel. The authors thank Professor Suzanne Sered for her assistance with narrative research methodologies and to the reviewers for their incisive recommendations.*

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