Stress and violence in the workplace: Theory and practice

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Abstract:

Work in the human services-whether on the frontlines or as a policy analyst, gram writer, researcher, manager, or teacher-is potentially satisfying and rewarding. It can also be extremely stressful, beyond the expectations of those starting out in a career. Educators are sometimes reluctant to cell students about the extent of the stress they might encounter in work, fearing that to do so might frighten them. Yet students, new entrants to practice, and seasoned workers find it helpful to receive information that normalizes the impacts of work pressures. They need the tools to identify unreasonable expectations and the knowledge to challenge those expectations. When overstressed workers receive information that recognizes the negative impacts of highly demanding and poorly resourced jobs, they often feel relieved. Critical sociological perspectives help us to challenge discourses that pathologize workers who become distressed when they face pressures, lack appropriate control over professional decisions, or receive too little support. Social work knowledge builds on these theoretical insights, adding to them with understandings derived from practice.

Keywords: social work | mobbing | workplace violence | workplace stress

Article:

Introduction

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Some particular stresses are typically encountered in human service roles. One of these is the realization of the painful circumstances of service users' lives. Being exposed to other people's losses and difficulties has a powerful impact on empathic people and can be traumatizing (McCann and Pearlman 1990). Collegial and supervisory support, coupled with attention to the prevention of work overload, can help to ease that impact (Hunter and Schofield 2006; van Heugten 2011a).

Many workers find the ongoing lack of resources in the social services the most difficult stress to grapple with. Workers who sec out on a career aimed at ameliorating social injustices become disillusioned when lack of resources means that they are unable to help their clients meet basic requirements, such as adequate housing, livable incomes, health care, and parenting support. And while these microlevel practice difficulties can be daunting, the macrolevel goals of creating lasting social change can seem so unattainable as to bring on a sense of hopelessness (van Heugten 201 la).

In addition, violence from service users (Littlechild 2005; Lowe and Korr 2007) and incivility and bullying from colleagues and managers both appear to be more prevalent in the hospitality industry and in education, health, and social services than in other occupations (Bentley et al. 2009; Zapf er al. 2011). When people elect to work in human service occupations, their prime motivations are usually altruistic. The discovery due human service users, fellow workers, managers, and powerful external interest groups may mete out violence against them can violate assumptions and shatter worldviews, causing significant distress.

Many human service workers, including frontline workers and managers, begin their work lives unaware of the prevalence of workplace conflict and violence, the forms they might take, the impacts, and in particular what can be done to professionally survive these events. This lack of information is only just beginning to change. In recognition of the financial and human costs of workplace violence, governments are increasingly putting in place health and safety legislation, or more specific workplace violence legislation, to protect workers. More organizations are instigating their own relevant policies. Although the helpfulness of such measures is debated, their existence offers recognition of the seriousness of workplace violence. Workplace conflict is now also more likely to be addressed in social work education.

The emphasis in this chapter is on recognizing that stress in human service work is normal but that unduly high demands and lack of resources should not be the norm. Nor should high levels of workplace conflict be accepted or incivility and violence be condoned. Because collegial violence in the form of bullying and mobbing is often underreported in the literature, and because its frequency may be increasing in the current neoliberal context, chis chapter focuses attention on these major sources of stress.

Workplace Stress

What Is Stress?

One of the most important things to understand about stress is that it is a neutral term, referring to pressures or demands. Some stress is healthy and energizes us; this healthy stress has also been called eustress (Selye 1976). Short bursts of demands activate physiological processes, including hormonal processes. As long as our bodies return to a resting state within minutes or hours, these short bursts of stress appear to promote good health and may strengthen the immune system (Dhabhar 2009). Without stress, without some challenging demands, we can become bored. Social scientists tend to be people who enjoy grappling with uncertainty, and human service work generally does not attract those who prefer to know exactly what situations they will face in a working day, especially in terms of human interactions. When high levels of pressure go on for a long time, however, or when they outstrip our internal and external resources to meet them, they begin to distress us. When we are distressed, we are often unable to think clearly; we may lose sleep, begin to become reactive, and possibly make mistakes.

Some well-established theories explain these stress processes. These include Karasek and Theorell's (1990) demand-control-support model of workplace stress, which postulates that high demands can be energizing, as long as professional people have a fair degree of autonomy over how they undertake their work, and they are well resourced and emotionally supported to carry out their roles. Theories such as these, which have been tested and found to apply across a range of cultures and occupations (Landy and Conte 2007), are helpful in understanding what causes stress overload for human service workers. They also provide some answers about what we can do to prevent this overload (van Heugten 2011 a).

Social workers engage in highly demanding practice, and they are expected to remain reflective and calm in the most crying of circumstances. Their thinking about stress is therefore probably ahead of the thinking of more theoretical social scientists. Social workers' struggles have given rise to some solutions from which other disciplines can benefit.

Dealing with Stress Overload

Should attempts to understand the causes of stress overload help us to prevent it? Ideally, the answer to this question would be "yes." In reality, however, this is an unrealistic goal; at best, we can hope to limit the extent of suffering. The balancing of challenge and overload is not an exact science. The point at which stress changes from challenge to distress will be different for different people and will alter for individuals as they find themselves in different circumstances over time. For example, in the aftermath of the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 in Canterbury, New Zealand, many women who had previously enjoyed traveling for their jobs began to find this requirement intolerable. They were mothers, and they wanted to be close to their children during the ongoing aftershocks so that they could protect and comfort them (van Heugten 2014). This is just one example showing that "fit" is an interaction between people and contexts, as identified in French, Caplan, and Van Harrison's (1982) person-environment fit model of stress. The person-environment fit model is an ecological model-that is, one that encourages us to take into account a wide range of personal and contextual factors (see chapter 2 for a discussion about ecological models). It is less testable than the demand-control-support theory because of the wide

range of possibly relevant variables. It is nevertheless a helpful model, as long as we are aware that it can be open to misuse: when people become distressed by an intolerable workplace situation, their distress can be blamed on "lack of fit," thereby avoiding a thorough critique of the contextual issues at play (van Heugten 2011a).

More general research into stress overload in social work and human services has given rise to some good general guidelines. People can find it difficult, however, to follow such guidelines—such as taking care of personal well-being by eating healthily and exercising—when they are overly stressed. Furthermore, most research into stress overload suggests that the overload is usually caused by work-situational rather than personal factors. Stress overload can bring on exhaustion, which can eventually lead to serious outcomes, such as burnout, which is characterized by cynicism, a loss of capacity for empathy, and loss of a sense of professional accomplishment and organizational commitment (Freudenberger 1974; Thomas and Lankau 2009). Once workers are burned out, merely taking a break does not suffice, and recovery can take a long rime. This is why the prevention of burnout, with its costly impacts on workers, service users, and organizations, is so important. Causes of burnout include work overload, lack of control over role-related decisions (being micromanaged), clashes of personal and professional values with organizational values, lack of collegial support, lack of a sense of being respected and created fairly, and lack of rewards (Maslach and Leiter 1997).

When workers understand that it is overload and lack of support rather than personal failings that lead to exhaustion, they can find it easier to speak out about the impacts of stress on their functioning. Identifying the causes of stress overload helps workers to raise issues, such as concerns about workload. Social workers have found it is helpful to do this with supervisors, who act as professional sounding boards and development coaches, as well as with colleagues and managers. Team support has been shown to enhance job satisfaction and to provide a buffer against burnout (Kyonne 2007; Lasalvia et al. 2009). Speaking with colleagues who are experiencing similar workplace problems can assist in the building of constructive cases for interventions. Workload scoping and audits are means by which collective concerns can be addressed. Although funding issues may continue to impact on workloads, just knowing that overload is not a personal failing and that colleagues and supervisors are supportive can help workers to externalize what might otherwise appear to be personal shortcomings.

Work-life conflict increases the stress experienced by employees (Kelly et al. 2014). Allen and Armstrong (2006) identified a link between work-family conflict and the physical and mental health of workers. Increasing workers' control of their schedules while also educating supervisors to provide more support for workers around their family and personal lives has been shown to decrease stress (Kelly et al. 2014). These findings fit with the observations of other authors, such as Schwartz, Gomes, and McCarthy (2011), who noted that expecting workers to work more and faster is not conducive to wellness in the workplace. Rather, a workplace that is respectful of human needs supports the health of both the worker and the organization.

Stressful Situations in the Workplace

Human service practitioners with social science backgrounds tend to have complex perspectives on social dynamics. They can see multiple potential intentions and contexts that might lie behind

family problems, policy decisions, and workplace conflicts. They often empathize with multiple stakeholders, and they can foresee negative outcomes entangled with positive ones. This multiplicity of perspectives applies also to the practitioners' views on their own work situations.

Although there are no perfect solutions, doing nothing or continuing to merely observe a situation is not an option for most human service workers, including when the situation is their own workplace stress. Social work researchers and practitioners have contributed to the development of intervention measures that can help workers move beyond analysis to ameliorating the impacts of dealing with trauma, workplace incivility and bullying, and oppressive organizational processes and practices.

The Impact of Encounters with Client Trauma

When educators and seasoned practitioners prepare beginning workers for the emotional impacts of work, and when beginning workers are given time to process these impacts, this goes a long way toward preventing sadness or shock from turning into traumatic stress reactions. It is reassuring for workers to know that it is normal to feel affected by the stories, sights, and sounds of other people's emotional or physical pain. Office-based workers are sometimes caught by surprise when they discover that even reading about people's misfortunes, for example in insurance claims, can make an impact (Ludick, Alexander, and Carmichael 2007). It can also be difficult for workers to harness their emotions when applying regulations or delivering outcomes that they know are unwanted by service users. It is not always possible to provide the assistance people seek, and sometimes workers need to take actions that overrule the wishes of service users; this is especially common in the areas of child welfare, criminal justice, and mental health.

Workers often have to make value-laden decisions, and they sometimes encounter difficult ethical dilemmas that require them to make choices from among imperfect options. Chapter 3 addresses how human service workers can work through such dilemmas. There is a separate issue, however, and that is the moral distress that can result from having to make these difficult decisions (Austin et al. 2005; Ulrich, Hamric, and Grady 2010). The frequency with which these ethical dilemmas occur may be increasing across the human services. For example, technological health innovations are costly, and public funding does not cover interventions for all people who might benefit from them. In another example, megadisasters, such as pandemics or disasters that radioactively contaminate the environment, can put workers in the unenviable position of having to choose between their own well-being and that of service users (van Heugten 2014). The distress of workers during and after encountering such dilemmas can be so severe that they develop depression and anxiety disorders. When workers are distressed to that extent, they can find it difficult to make peace with their actions and to appropriately process their memories. This can be especially difficult when workers identify with service users because of shared demographics or similarities in traumatic life experiences or because the workers are living and working in the same degraded environment as service users (Tosone, McTighe, and Bauwens 2014).

Social work authors emphasize the importance of education that recognizes the complex nature of ethical decision making in practice, rather than presenting simplistic rules or codes that are difficult to apply in real-life situations (Banks 2008; see chapter 3, which discusses ethical

decision making). By modeling self-care and balancing of workloads, supportive colleagues and supervisors, who have experience in dealing with traumatic incidents and difficult ethical dilemmas and who recognize the taxing emotional labor involved, can help new graduates entering practice to avoid early burnout (van Heugten 2011a). Sometimes workers require counseling support; cognitive and mindfulness approaches are among those that are helpful and nonpathologizing (Rothschild and Rand 2006; van Heugten 2011a).

Close Encounters with Workplace Violence

Other difficult situations that social science graduates can encounter, and to which social workers have given a significant amount of thought and input, involve forms of workplace violence. Until recently, the literature on all kinds of workplace violence has tended to focus on finding causes in people, somewhat simplistically blaming aggressive or mentally ill clients, inept or aggressive managers, neurotic workers, or victims who brought it on themselves (van Heugten 2011a). More recently, attention has turned to the situations, settings, and wider social contexts in which violence arises. This socioecological perspective has highlighted the relevance of relationships of power. It has, for example, drawn attention to the multiple connections that might exist between experiences or perceptions of incivility and bullying, organizational structures and systems of power, and pressures arising from organizational change.

Workplace abuse from colleagues, hierarchical superiors, and subordinates is present in most organizations in one form or another, as recent research has highlighted. The psychological, social, and financial costs of this violence are also receiving increased exposure (Koonin and Green 2004). The continuum of organizational violence runs from verbal abuse and social exclusion to harassment to physical violence. Workplace violence of any kind creates high levels of stress for individuals and teams. When high stress levels continue for a significant period of time, they can negatively impact workers' health and well-being (Leka and Jain 2010), impair team communications, and hinder networked care for service users (van Heugten 2011a).

Workplace Violence as a Structural Problem

Workplace violence can best be understood and assessed within a systemic context (Braverman 2004); social workers use ecological perspectives (explained in chapter 2) to help them do this. Some of the organizational features that contribute to the development of abusive dynamics are pressure to conform, the valuing of compliance over discussion, organizational tolerance of abusive behaviors, problematic communication, power imbalances, and lack of supportive interpersonal relationships (Duffy and Sperry 2014). The consequences are destructive, and the impacts on workers, organizations, and society are negative. It is within this broader understanding of workplace violence as a structural violence problem that we now consider bullying and mobbing before considering approaches to achieving positive organizational change.

Bullying and Mobbing

Bullying and mobbing are forms of organizational violence that impact both the organization and the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of chose targeted (Sloan et al. 2010). The

terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but here we will discuss them as distinctly different in their form and impact. Bullying within the workplace is a form of aggression in which one individual directly targets another, in order to hurt the other person or that person's position in the organization (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, and Namie 2009). It involves repeated mistreatment through verbal abuse, offensive conduct, or violent verbal and nonverbal behavior; it results in the harming of an individual, perhaps even driving him or her from the organization. These actions are threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, and they interfere with the employee's ability to complete their work (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, and Namie 2009). Bystanders also become distressed, yet they typically remain silent, both because they worry about attracting negative attention to themselves and because they fear that they might worsen the situation for the victim (van Heugten 20116). There has been much less research on the people who have been accused of bullying, but they too may suffer ill health in the aftermath (Jenkins, Winefield, and Sarris 2011).

Mobbing, on the other hand, involves a process through which one person uses rumor and innuendo to draw together multiple people who are then engaged in a group form of bullying. It is destructive at the individual, group, and organizational levels. It can destroy the credibility and reputation of the target. Weaknesses in organizational structures and systems allow mobbing to take place and allow perpetrators to take advantage of problematic communication patterns and difficult interpersonal relationships. Mobbing may be tolerated or even covertly condoned in an oppressive workplace (Duffy and Sperry 2012, 2014). Mobbing is complex; it is embedded in multilayer interactions among structures and people, and achieving change requires engagement across those multiple organizational layers.

Some researchers have found that autocratic and laissez-faire styles of leadership may be more likely to support bullying or mobbing (Hoel et al. 2010). Namie and Namie (2011) have suggested that a highly structured, hierarchical organization with an autocratic leadership style is more likely to create the intensely competitive context in which bullying behavior thrives. They have suggested that a laissez-faire style of leadership, on the other hand, leaves a leadership vacuum that may be conducive to mobbing. Bullying is more likely to take place from manager to frontline worker, supervisor to supervisee, or peer to peer, whereas mobbing may additionally be directed from supervisees to supervisors or from frontline workers to managers (Namie and Namie 2009; Sloan et al. 201 0).

Because mobbing has not been as extensively covered as bullying in writings on workplace violence, we will discuss it here in more detail. Mobbing may involve the creation of derogatory rumors and innuendo, processes that isolate and shame their targets, impacting their physical and mental health, professional identity, and employment or employability (Duffy and Sperry 2014; Sloan et al. 20 l 0). It is a process that relies on organizational complicity. Because others in the organization are drawn into the group process as bystanders, many workers within the organization are impacted individually and interpersonally. "Key organizational members become involved in mobbing through overt or covert actions against a target or through failure to act to protect organizational members from abuse" (Duffy and Sperry 2014, 8). This compounds and confuses the organizational impact; as a result, mobbing can be insidious in its consequences, both for the person targeted and for the organization (Duffy and Sperry 2014).

Mobbing occurs as a consequence of systemic and structural inadequacies. It creates a tense and hostile environment, increasing the levels of stress and thereby contributing to an even more hostile work environment. The violence of mobbing has direct and indirect costs for the organization (Koonin and Green 2004; Sloan et al. 2010), including high employee turnover, low workforce morale, and decreased productivity. Mobbing creates personal, interpersonal, and organizational conflict. Those who observe mobbing, like bystanders to bullying, experience guilt, stress, and feelings of insecurity (Duffy and Sperry 2014).

Current Approaches to Interventions in Workplace Violence

Workplace violence, including bullying and mobbing, involves institutionalized dynamics that are often accepted and ignored as the price of being financially competitive and efficient, and having go-getting workers and organizations. Companies consequently focus on positions and promotions instead of human needs and relationships. Research by Namie and Namie (2009, 316) found that "employers predominantly did nothing to stop the mistreatment when reported (5.3%) and actually retaliated against the person (71% of cases) who dared to report it."

Current approaches to intervention regarding workplace bullying and mobbing largely ignore structural issues and power dynamics. Despite evidence that shows the ineffectiveness of models such as mediation, negotiation, and the use of outside consultants for "team building," few approaches move beyond these one-dimensional interventions. Such narrow, short-term models do not produce lasting change without simultaneous intervention at multiple levels (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2011). Human resource models focus primarily on developing solutions designed to facilitate agreement between the "two parties" and thus avoid legal action (Namie and Namie 2011). Little is done to validate and redress the harm and to prevent future incidents. These measures focus on bullying and mobbing as solely interpersonal problems. For any approach to effectively address abuse and aggression in the workplace, it must look at the multiple layers of the conflict.

Attempts to transform conflicts through mediation and negotiation are only effective when the needs, interests, and positions of all parties are equally represented. Because bullying and mobbing make a target feel inferior, a power imbalance exists between the target, the perpetrator(s), and the other members of the organization. This precludes a fair and just representation of the parties in the mediation sessions, as well as those persons outside the process (Namie and Namie 2011). Furthermore, the confidential nature of the process means that other members of the organization are excluded and that the damage being caused by organizational structures and systems is able to be ignored. Because of this lack of transparency, there is no remediation for the group and no intervention at the organizational level. There is therefore no base for creating meaningful change (Namie and Namie 2011).

More recently, attention has begun to be paid to social interventions that target the organizational cultures and practices that have enabled incivility and lack of care for worker well-being (Rhodes et al. 2010). Whole-of-organization approaches include changing the organizational environment, engaging the leadership in establishing a culture of change (Sloan et al. 2010), and bystander training (van Heugten 2011b). As leaders become aware of the dynamics, they can play a role sensitizing others in the organization (Braverman 2004; Koonin and Green 2004). In

bystander training, colleagues are encouraged to identify oppressive behaviors and their impacts and are taught how they might safely take a collective stand against inappropriate or abusive behaviors (Scully and Rowe 2009; van Heugten 2011b).

Stopping the violence is only the first step. Interpersonal remediation is important. At the interpersonal levels, the target, the bystanders, and those accidently drawn into the mobbing dynamics must be included in processes of healing, rebuilding relationships, and fostering more collaborative workplace interactions (Duffy and Sperry 2014). Less has been written on how to effectively engage the bully or mobber. Those seeding the violence cannot just be moved to another organizational role or location; they must be provided with a process that offers them the chance to join in a change process toward building a healthier organizational culture.

When organizational structures do not support their employees' human needs, the organizations are vulnerable to creating environments that support structural violence. An overemphasis on strict definitions of bullying obscures how ideas about violence are constructed to blame individuals rather than workplace processes (Liefooghe and Mackenzie Davey 2010). By expanding definitions to include mobbing and by focusing on structural factors that encourage and support these behaviors, an organization can begin to reform its structures away from those that promote systemic violence. When researchers listen to what people have to say about their experiences of workplace aggression, researchers can begin to notice the impact of oppressive workplace practices. These impacts fall not only on traditionally identified targets but also sometimes on managers who are required to implement workplace policies with which they do not necessarily agree. When we stop focusing on measuring whether bullying and mobbing can be proved to have occurred according to definitional criteria, we can begin to take note of how organizational power struggles lead to workers' distress, in a neoliberal output-oriented context that is antithetical to occupations that consider caring their mission (Hutchinson et al. 2010; Social Work Task Force 2009; van Heugten 2011 a). When workers and managers begin to identify the resulting damage to individual, ream, and organizational well-being, they can take a step back to consider more inclusive practices (van Heugten, Kelly, and Stanley 2013).

Achieving Positive Organizational Change

Just as organizations need the energy, talents, and ideas of people, people also need organizations-not only to meet their basic survival needs but also to fulfill their need to belong and contribute in a meaningful way. If the fit is poor between the organization and the individuals in the organization, problems arise, and one or both suffer. When the fit is good, individuals can thrive, and organizations have the talent and energy they need (Bolman and Deal 2013).

Effective transformation of an organization away from violence requires changes in the organization's structures and systems. If those in leadership positions want to stop workplace violence, they need to be actively engaged and vigilant. Structural change also requires training on interventions that disrupt workplace violence at all organizational levels, including managers and others in leadership roles (Koonin and Green 2004), the development of high-level communication skills, the implementation of mechanisms for increasing participation and interaction, and the establishment of a culture that values rather than denies differences of

opinion. Open channels of communication require a willingness to listen to criticism and to welcome constructive feedback. Researchers have suggested that workplace cultures that emphasize mutual respect, rather than blaming and shaming approaches, are most likely to be supportive and violence-resistant (Bentley et al. 2009; Quine 1999). Organizations with flatter hierarchical structures, an open flow of communication, and systems for relationship and team building create an atmosphere conducive to the development of increased trust and higher morale (Lewin and Regine 2000). An organizational culture that treats employees with dignity and respect while establishing expectations of accountability and responsibility is more resistant to workplace violence, including mobbing and bullying. An environment that is inclusive, where people feel valued and purposeful, can have a positive impact on organizational community (Bolman and Deal 2013). This is facilitated by redesigning the environment so that people are encouraged to interact informally and across roles and hierarchies. For example, staff rooms where people can have tea and coffee breaks together and where they can prepare and share food can become gathering places for supportive conversations.

In an organization where open communication and mutual support are encouraged, difficult ethical decisions and traumatic work experiences do not have to be faced alone. Workers need to be able to talk about value conflicts and distressing experiences, whether small or large, with trusted colleagues and supervisors. This simple act of externalizing difficult but unavoidable encounters is extremely helpful; social support is frequently all that is necessary to normalize, soften, and contextualize emotional responses (Dollard et al. 2003). Social workers have found that it is also extremely valuable to discuss, in supportive and reflective supervision, the more difficult practice situations that they encounter. The importance of providing such supervision is becoming better recognized across the wider human services (Davys and Beddoe 2010).

Unfortunately, collegial and supervisory support is not always readily available. If a worker is being bullied or mobbed or is working in an environment that neglects to care for workers' needs, he or she will need to consider where to seek support. That support may come from people within or outside the organization, including supervisors, mentors, lawyers, unions, colleagues, friends, or family. Externally provided health audits and interventions can be more effective than internal processes. Even if workers ultimately decide to end their employment, sound advice has been found to assist them in achieving better outcomes in the form of better exit packages and in maintaining self-confidence as they work through their options (van Heugten 2011a).

Conclusion

Difficult and challenging work situations are common in human services because of the nature of the work that is undertaken. The challenges should not, however, be allowed to be exacerbated by unreasonable workloads, unrelenting output-oriented managerial demands, or a lack of resources. Workers should not be subjected to bullying or mobbing in their workplaces nor to other forms of structural violence that may be difficult to name but insidiously detrimental. Although social workers have not necessarily found "answers" to such complex workplace problems, they have researched, theorized, and tested interventions, the most hopeful of which lie in the establishment of supportive workplace cultures that feature open communication, shared decision making, and collective, nonshaming approaches to facing and resolving conflicts.

Reflective Questions

1. Consider the various ways in which workplace stress (including stress in relation to study or paid employment) impacts you and people close to you. What approaches do you use to deal with stress overload?
2. Does identifying sources of stress (for example at a personal, organizational, or political level) make a difference in how you might approach dealing with chose experiences?
3. Have you experienced, observed, or been drawn into situations that involved workplace violence? Has this chapter provided you with different ways of considering causes and approaches to workplace violence? What interventions do you think might be helpfully applied to situations in which there is workplace violence?

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