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Awareness, Analysis, Engagement: Critical Consciousness through Foster Youth Advisory Board Participation

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Brad Forenza[1]

Abstract Foster youth advisory boards provide child welfare-involved young people a forum through which to impact the policies, programs, and services that govern their care. In addition to facilitating policy change, these boards may also enable participating youth to cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and their worlds. The present study utilized a strengths-based, critical consciousness framework to describe the ways in which 15 foster youth advisory board members in a single state reflect on, analyze, and respond to their socio-political worlds. To this end, the author aims to describe youth advisory board processes, while attempting to answer the question, "How does critical consciousness manifest through foster youth advisory board participation?" Emergent themes are organized around the existing dimensions of critical consciousness. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

Keywords Child welfare · Critical consciousness · Foster care · Socio-political development · Youth advisory board

Introduction

Foster Youth Advisory Boards: An Overview

In the United States, approximately 22,000 young people emancipate from foster care each year (Children's Rights, 2014; Getz, 2012). Historically, these young people "age out" of their respective state systems at 18 years old (the legal "age of majority") in spite of a continued need for support and difficulty transitioning to independence (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Since 1999, however, the federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act has incentivized states to increase funding for aging out youth. Since the enactment of Chafee, emancipation from care has been recognized as a unique developmental trajectory, replete with targeted programs, services, and initiatives such as education, housing, and job training. Approximately 100,000 individuals utilize Chafee services every year (National Youth in Transition Database, 2012). Additionally, most states [including the focal state, where roughly 7000 young people are cared for in foster placements (U.S. Administration for Children and Families, 2016)] offer Chafee services beyond the age of 18.

In addition to providing concrete services, the Chafee Act states that foster youth must be incorporated into the development and design of the programs that serve them (Collins, 2004; National Indian Child Welfare Association, n.d.). This is important, because—historically—foster youth have had little say about the policies that impact their care (Bessell, 2011; Mason et al., 2003; Tregeagle & Mason, 2008). Nevertheless, foster youth are affected by adult decision-making more anonymously (and perhaps, more consequently) than non-foster youth (Cashmore, 2002). Through its mandate to incorporate youth voice, Chafee programming "puts youth at the center of articulating priorities and determining the best ways to get those priorities addressed" (Korwin Consulting, 2011, p. 1). In compliance with Chafee, state child welfare agencies have created programming to cultivate youth voice, and to buffer young people from the risks associated with aging out (Children's Bureau, 2012). Local efforts to formally incorporate youth voice often materialize as youth empowerment programs (Sala Roca, Arnau

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Sabatés, Courtney, & Dworsky, 2016). One such program is commonly referred to as foster youth advisory board (Sala Roca et al., 2016).

Foster youth advisory boards exist in every state, yet there is no federalized model for them (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). They function as conduits through which foster youth advise state officials, address/advocate concerns, and engage in shared decision-making processes with adults (Havlicek, Lin, & Villalpando, 2016). In recent years, a growing number of scholars have turned attention to these boards: Batista (2014), through the lens of empowerment; Havlicek, Lin, and Braun (2016) through the lens of youth voice; Naccarato and Knipe (2014) through the lens of participatory outcomes. To date, however, no research has investigated foster youth advisory boards through the lens of critical consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

As advanced by Freire (1968 [2014]), critical consciousness refers to a marginalized person's awakening to the oppressive forces in her or his life. The critical consciousness literature often focuses on a response to marginalization that occurs because of a young person's race, ethnicity, or social class (e.g., Aldana, Rowley, Checkoway, & Richards-Schuster, 2012; Campbell & Macphail, 2002; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2015). Watts and Abdul-Adil (1998) attribute this to the fact that minority youth face oppressive forces, as well as normative developmental challenges, which may not be experienced by non-minorities. In the context of this study, however, critical consciousness shall frame our understanding of foster youth socio-political awakening and the ability to combat institutional and organizational forces during a life in care.

Because foster youth have historically lacked decision-making authority as related to their circumstances, they are assumed powerless (Bruskas, 2008). Powerlessness happens when an institution (even a well-intending institution, like a state child welfare agency) unwittingly oppresses its constituents (Young, 1990). Powerlessness is synonymous with disempowerment; disempowerment equates to lack of control over one's life. The mandate provided by Chafee—that foster youth have a say in the programs that serve them—may function as a harbinger of *em*powerment (Forenza, 2016).

In participating in decision-making processes, vis-à-vis youth advisory boards, foster youth must analyze society and their place in it, so that they may also challenge institutional constraints where they exist (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). Engaging in participatory processes recognizes that youth in care are capable of becoming institutional actors, as opposed to the mere passive beneficiaries of institutional services (Checkoway, 2011). Critical consciousness is a vital developmental

trajectory that is best studied in the context of one's environment (Carlson, 2006; Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016; Schusler, Krasny, Peters, & Decker, 2009). As per research conducted with over 650 marginalized young people, Diemer and Li (2011) contend that parents and peers help facilitate critical consciousness and the ability to affect social change. In a separate study, Diemer (2012) re-emphasized the importance of parents in shaping a young person's socio-political development. Since many foster youth have experienced the involuntary removal from their parents' care, foster youth advisory boards may function as the formalized environment through which to examine critical consciousness among aging out youth.

Much has been written about critical consciousness since the formative writings of Paulo Freire. An entire cottage industry exists around its conceptual merits. A number of frameworks have been used to test, operationalize, and explain its theoretical underpinnings. The most agreed upon (or written about) framework, however, seems to explicate three dimensions of critical consciousness. As recently articulated by Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, and Rapa (2015), critical consciousness is comprised of: (1) critical reflection, which refers to one's awareness and questioning of the status quo, (2) critical motivation, which refers to one's analysis and questioning of her or his ability to affect change, and (3) critical action, which refers to the individual's propensity to respond and actually engage in the socio-political environment. The present study utilizes these dimensions to describe youth advisory board processes, while attempting to answer the question, "How does critical consciousness manifest through foster youth advisory board participation?"

Method

Research Setting and Sample

Youth advisory board (a generic pseudonym) is a statewide program in the northeastern United States, through which emancipating foster youth can advocate for their needs and the needs of other foster youth. Specifically, board-related advocacy involves meeting with officials to discuss foster care policy and services in the focal state. It also involves providing outreach and education to younger children in care, as well as outreach and education to the general public, about the experiences and issues that foster youth face. At the time of data collection, youth advisory board in the focal state adhered to a statewide model but was implemented locally. In other words, there was one centralized administrator for all regional boards, and 12 implementing bodies, housed at local vendor agencies.

Participants were recruited into this study via a recruitment flier that was distributed to each of the implementing

agencies. Utilizing a recruitment flyer was thought to empower individuals to participate in this study on their own free will, as opposed to having been cherry-picked or recruited into the sample by an adult. Specifically, the recruitment flier solicited active members of youth advisory board who were (1) at least 18 years old (an IRB stipulation), and who were (2) currently or previously executive members of their local board (President, Vice President, etc.). Speer, Jackson and Peterson (2001) note that commitment to associational memberships varies at the individual level. Due to the inconsistent nature of voluntary commitments, and due to disparities in local agency record keeping, leadership was used as a proxy for organizational commitment (see Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). In recruiting leaders into this study, the author hoped to elicit a depth (as opposed to breadth) of youth advisory board experiences.

After several rounds of follow-up with contacts at the local, vendor agencies, the author had received communication from 11 active, self-selecting current/former youth advisory board leaders from around the state. The author also received invitations to attend and observe five (of 12) local meetings. Through attendance at these meetings, four additional, qualified participants expressed interest in participating in this study ($N = 15$). The greatest frequency of participants was female ($n = 10$) and Black/African American ($n = 10$). All of them were between 18 and 23 years old, and most ($n = 8$) still had active, open cases with the state child welfare agency. The average age at which participants first entered care was 10.3 years old and, at the time of interview, most were living in supported housing environments. On average, participants had been members of youth advisory board for 27 months (slightly more than 2 years).

Interview Procedure and Schedule

The in-depth interview guide was created by the author in collaboration with a qualitative methodologist, an aging out expert, and a theologian. Interview questions were designed to contextualize the empirically tested dimensions of critical consciousness (e.g. "What made you want to join youth advisory board?" "In what ways are your experiences similar to, or different from, other youth advisory board participants?" "Why do you stay involved in youth advisory board?"). All participants were interviewed once, at a single point in time (cross sectional research), at the public location of a participant's choice (e.g., a library), for approximately 45 min each. Per university institutional review board approval, participants were not audio or video recorded (the nature of their status as foster youth classified them as a vulnerable population). Instead, the author took notes on a laptop computer and read responses back to participants, to ensure the accurate recording of data. Repeating responses back to participants functioned as a form of member checking,

which can enhance validity regarding the interpretation of subjective experiences (Koelsch, 2013). In some instances, participants elaborated on original responses, but no participant changed her or his response completely. Finally, all participants completed a written consent form detailing their rights as voluntary research participants; additionally, all participants signed a receipt of remuneration ($25 for each participant) at the interview's conclusion.

Qualitative Analysis

The author and a research assistant conducted a deductive, thematic content analysis on the data. While the author utilized qualitative software (ATLAS.ti) to sort and organize the data, the research assistant (trained in qualitative analysis by the author) conducted her own thematic content analysis by hand. Both author and research assistant immersed themselves in the data, reading it thoroughly by case and by question. This began the first phase of analysis. Utilizing the existing dimensions of critical consciousness, the data were then chunked into broad, a priori families of themes (hence, the deductive approach to analysis and understanding). Within each family of themes, smaller, emergent themes were identified when clusters of participants illustrated a given concept. Both author and research assistant shared their findings periodically through memos, establishing a paper trail. When both had exhausted the possibility of identifying more emergent themes, they met to discuss preliminary results.

The collaboration between author and research assistant resulted in the collapsing and re-branding of certain themes into more comprehensive, "third" themes that help to describe participant realities. This collaboration also resulted in smaller themes being reduced into subthemes. Subthemes were defined by two attributes: (1) they must have been illustrated by a smaller number of participants than their parent theme, and (2) they must help to contextualize a nuance of the parent theme. Saturation, which occurs when "the addition of more units does not result in new information" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 183) occurred for both analysts between eight and ten interviews. This threshold corroborates Creswell's (1998) belief that ten units is the upper-estimate for reaching saturation in a phenomenological study such as this one.

Findings

Descriptive findings contextualize dimensions of critical consciousness (critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action), as they relate to foster youth advisory board participation. Findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of findings

Indicators of critical consciousness	Emergent themes and subthemes
Critical reflection: awareness of inequity	Caseworker capacity
	Gaps in formal policy
	Governance of intra-family dynamics
	Perceived injustices
Critical motivation: analysis of ability	Public speaking
	Leadership
Critical action: engagement	Personal volition
	Giving back
	Feelings of isolation
	Recruitment
	Incentive

Per Table 1, each dimension of critical consciousness is allied with an a-priori family of themes derived from theory. The emergent themes and subthemes that contextualize each family of themes support and extend our understanding of critical consciousness as it relates to foster youth advisory board participation. Through the exploration of these findings, the author hopes to answer the question, "How does critical consciousness manifest through foster youth advisory board participation?"

Critical Reflection: Awareness of Inequity

As a dimension of critical consciousness, critical reflection (awareness) refers to one's questioning of the status quo. In this sample ($N = 15$), questioning the status quo was best illustrated by a participant's identification of inequities in care, as provided by the focal state's child welfare agency. Specifically, several participants referred to *caseworker capacity* (the first emergent theme) as a facilitator of inequity. As one young man noted:

> I want to be president because thing in DYFS, things in foster care, take longer than they should, and I want to change that. I want to stay on top of things. If there was one thing I could change, it would wind up changing everything. It's the cases. The [caseworkers] should have less kids, so they can actually pay attention to individuals.

Even though most participants reported positive interactions with caseworkers, most also perceived their relationships with caseworkers as bureaucratic and rushed. "When I was a kid, I saw my worker all the time, but—once you get to be a teen—you don't see them that much," said a second young man. This sentiment was expanded upon by a young woman, who noted that burdensome caseloads caused high turnover among her caseworkers. "If caseworkers keep changing for kids, that's a problem," she said. In the most severe illustration, a second young man reflected upon having lived in 34 placements, and having experienced almost

as many caseworkers. For him, caseworker inconsistency was demonstrative of a profound inequity in care.

In contextualizing critical reflection, vis-à-vis inequities in care, most participants also referred to *gaps in formal policy* (a second emergent theme) that precipitated their involvement in foster youth advisory board. For some, gaps in formal policy manifested through the *governance of intra-family dynamics* (a subtheme). For example, several participants ($n = 3$) described barriers in locating and communicating with their siblings (siblings who were both in- and out-of-care). Additionally, one participant lamented a unique family-level dynamic when she explained that, "After my parents adopted me, I no longer had an active case [with the state child welfare agency]. But then, [my adoptive parents] became homeless and the state offered no help." This individual was eventually returned to foster care, where her experience with homelessness informed her understanding of a gap in formal policy, as it relates to intra-family dynamics.

A second subtheme related to gaps in formal policy is the notion of *perceived injustices*. This subtheme refers to participants perceiving themselves as treated differently than non-foster youth. Throughout the in-depth interviews, which were conducted statewide, two injustices emerged most frequently. The first pertains to the placement of foster youth in private homes and/or residential care. Specifically, participants lamented how far their placements were from their communities of origin. "They told me I was going to have to move to the complete opposite end of the state [from where I was living]," said one participant. "They labeled me 'at risk,' which is why they wanted me to move so far," she continued.

Critical Motivation: Analysis of Ability

As the second component of critical consciousness, critical motivation refers to one's analysis of her or his perceived ability to affect change. Almost all participants noted that their *public speaking* abilities became fully realized as a result of foster youth advisory board involvement. "I communicate really well now, and I get my point

across… I want to be heard," said one participant. Public speaking was considered to be a vital skill for providing education and outreach through the board. "I loved being able to talk to younger kids about speaking for themselves instead of having older people speak for them, and make their decisions," said one young man, referring to the importance of foster youth advocacy that is truly youth-directed. As 13 participants indicated, the formalization of one's public speaking abilities were almost always linked with leadership and/or a commitment to representing others in care:

> I've learned a lot… especially about speaking in public, speaking at large events, advocating for myself and other people… [Foster youth advisory board has] helped me become a better leader. Being a leader gives me responsibility, so that one day when I find a job that I want, I can hopefully lead there, too.

As participants noted, *leadership* abilities derived through foster youth advisory board almost always correlated with a responsibility to affect change on behalf of others. Reflecting on becoming a leader herself, one young woman noted that, "When I was growing up, I didn't have many leaders around… [youth advisory board] showed me how to step-up." Regarding the leadership capabilities of participants themselves: one participant recalled using his professional contacts to secure a desirable outcome for a friend in care and three participants discussed advocacy on behalf of siblings in care. As one of them stated:

> As long as I'm involved in youth advisory board, I can impact my brother's life. My brother is going through the same things now that I already went through. In youth advisory board, I can be his voice. I can advocate on his behalf.

In addition to siblings and friends, participants also analyzed their ability to change policy for future generations of foster youth. When asked to specify who those other youth were, participants indicated that they were other children encountered through the focal state's child welfare system; they were other children participants knew from local, nonprofit agencies; they were other children participants had lived with in prior out-of-home placements. "We help each other, we support each other," said one young woman, referring to the common bonds of life in care. "A lot of us come from jacked-up situations, so it's nice to look out for each other as a community," she concluded. "I don't want anyone else to have to go through the mess I went through," a second participant noted, referring to the implied responsibility that often accompanies leadership.

Critical Action: Engagement

Critical action refers to one's propensity to actually engage in change-oriented endeavors. In this study, critical action was probed for via an exploration of why participants ignited and maintained their foster youth advisory board involvement. More than half of all participants ($n = 8$) stated that they joined through *personal volition*. As one noted:

> I kept hearing [my local youth advisory board] talk about projects and things they wanted to do, but they weren't doing anything… So I got into [youth advisory board], because I've always seen myself as wanting to be part of a bigger solution.

As further illustration of personal volition (and implied elsewhere), participants often linked their desire to engage with a desire to *give back* to other people in care. "I want to give the state my feedback about what I've been through, and about what programs work and don't work, so that [the state] can do more for other children," said one participant. "I went to one [youth advisory board] meeting and I liked it, because I realized it was an opportunity to give back to other people in similar situations… the one's just entering the system," said another.

Of the eight who said they joined youth advisory board on their own volition, three noted that they joined because of *feelings of isolation*. "I participated in [youth advisory board] just to get out of the house sometimes," said one young man. His sentiment was corroborated by a young woman from a different county, who reflected that "I joined to keep busy, but when I saw the impact that [youth advisory board] was having on people higher up—people making decisions for children—I had to stay a part of it." For the speaker below, joining youth advisory board changed her perspective on life in foster care:

> The truth is, I came into care and I felt very alone. I was struggling with everything. Not just my family, but also school and everything… I was having visitation with my biological father at [the same facility where youth advisory board met]. After visitation, the coordinator caught sight of me and told me to come in [the room where youth advisory board was meeting]… Not only did youth advisory board help me deal with my frustrations with [the state child welfare agency], but it also helped me deal with frustrations I had with my father and everything else.

Five additional participants noted that they were *recruited* into the group by friends ($n = 3$), as well as civic youth workers ($n = 2$). Civic youth workers are the adult professionals helping to implement these boards at local vendor agencies. As one young man explained:

[Someone] referred my name to [the civic youth worker in my county]. She reached out via email and told me to come to the meeting to see what [youth advisory board] was all about. I saw what their purpose was, and I knew they needed people who knew the system, and were involved, and could give an accurate voice for youth in the system. I worked my schedule around [youth advisory board] and I wanted to contribute.

Finally, the remaining participants ($n = 2$) noted that there was *incentive* to join their local youth advisory board. For one of these individuals, the incentive to join came via the free food that was offered at her local membership meetings. She noted, however, that "Eventually it became about much more than food. It became about the meetings, and helping people like me… and providing care packages for kids who had already aged out." Like other speakers, this quote demonstrates that regardless of one's motivation to engage—e.g., volition, recruitment, or incentive—most participants maintained their board involvements because of a higher-level commitment to effectuating change.

Discussion

Summary

This study attempted to describe youth advisory board processes, and to answer the research question, "How does critical consciousness manifest through foster youth advisory board participation?" Findings explore three, a-priori families of themes (critical reflection/awareness, critical motivation/analysis, and critical action/engagement) that are consistent with the existing dimensions of critical consciousness.

Critical Reflection/Awareness, which refers to participants questioning the status quo, was comprised of two primary themes: caseworker capacity and gaps in formal policy. While *caseworker capacity* refers to the perception among participants that caseworkers were overburdened and changed too often, *gaps in formal policy* refers to systemic inequities that participants identified in the focal state. These inequities were further contextualized via an exploration of two subthemes: the *governance of intra-family dynamics* and the *perceived injustices* of life in care. Awareness of perceived injustice caused one participant to join foster youth advisory board, where she formally and successfully lobbied for a better placement on her own behalf.

Critical Motivation/Analysis, which pertains to analysis of one's ability to affect change (as acquired via foster youth advisory board), comprised the second family of themes. The specific abilities that participants in this study illustrated

having acquired through their participation were were *public speaking* and *leadership*. For several participants, the ability to affect change was rooted in achieving desirable outcomes for other young people in the state's foster care system (e.g. a brother). To this end, foster youth advisory board may have helped to develop the capacity of some participants to feel capable closing the aforementioned gaps in formal policy as the related to the governance of intra-family dynamics and/or perceived injustices.

Finally, *Critical Action/Engagement* pertains to what ignites and maintains foster youth advisory board involvement. Most participants in this study ($n = 8$) joined through *personal volition*. A deeper examination of personal volition revealed two subthemes: (1) a desire to *give back* to others served by the focal state's child welfare agency, and (2) *feelings of isolation* that compelled three individuals to get involved for the sake of merely having something to do. Five participants were *recruited* into youth advisory board by friends or civic youth workers, and a minority of participants ($n = 2$) received *incentive* (specifically, food) for having joined the group. Regardless of reasoning for engaging, participants maintained their board involvement because of a higher-level commitment to effectuating change. Some participants initially discussed feelings of defeat and powerlessness regarding their placement in care. Through youth advisory board participation, however, individuals in this sample were able to exert control over personal situations (or the situations of significant others) through engagement on the board.

Limitations

Like all qualitative research, findings in this study cannot be generalized beyond the 15 participants interviewed here. Similarly, findings are unique to one state's youth advisory board program. Several other biases limit the study. While small sample sizes are congruent with phenomenological research, sampling in this study is limited in one primary way: it is comprised exclusively of executive board members. Even though recruiting executive board members can be a proxy for the demonstration of organizational commitment (Russell et al., 2009; Speer et al., 2001), this sample omits rank-and-file members who may have been as involved in youth advisory board (or more involved) than the group's elected leadership. Additionally, participant recollections for joining youth advisory board may be tainted by a retrospective bias. Most ($n = 8$) recalled joining on their own volition, which is not congruent with literature that states youth councils/youth advisory boards are merely adult attempts to engage young people (see Taft & Gordon, 2013).

Finally, the institutional review board prohibited the audio and video recording of these participants. While participant responses were read back to them, the author

concedes that some data was likely lost in this process. Nevertheless, because participants offered clarification and elaboration around their original responses, additional data was often procured. In spite of these limitations, the present study makes a unique contribution to the youth engagement, critical consciousness, and child welfare literatures.

Implications

Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars will benefit from this descriptive, phenomenological inquiry of critical consciousness through foster youth advisory board in several ways. First, policymakers must know that state foster care policies have an impact on the constituents they serve. Historically, child welfare-involved young people have had little say about the policies, programs, and services that govern their time in care (Bessell, 2011; Mason et al., 2003; Tregeagle & Mason, 2008). Often, these youthful constituents are voiceless in child welfare agency decision-making processes, which is why the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act has called for their incorporation.

Participants in this study identified inequities in policy (e.g., caseloads, placements, etc.) that caused them to feel powerless and oppressed about aspects of their care. If policymakers can fund the growth of participatory programs like youth advisory board, and if policymakers can incentivize attendance at youth advisory board meetings, it is possible that subsequent generations of foster youth will have more accessible channels through which to combat potentially oppressive forces like caseworker overload and gaps in formal policy.

While this research is a descriptive study in one state, practitioners will benefit from knowing that variations of youth advisory board exist around the United States. However, there is no national model for youth advisory board, and the implementation of local boards varies from state to state (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Nevertheless, participants in this study contextualized experiencing dimensions of critical consciousness throughout their board involvement. In the absence of these boards, participants are not likely to have had a formalized channel through which to experience socio-political development. Foster youth participation, after all, is often facilitated through partnerships with professional adults (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Meaningful and equitable youth-adult partnerships— what Ungar and Ikeda (2017) might term an "informal support"—are integral to child welfare practice.

Scholars will benefit from this descriptive study of critical consciousness through youth advisory board participation in myriad ways. First, there are few-to-no studies like it. Much of the critical consciousness literature does, in fact, focus on the socio-political development of marginalized youth. However, young men and women emancipating from state child welfare systems have been under-represented in the extant studies. The present study recognizes the value of applying a critical consciousness framework to one's socio-political development, as well as the value of recognizing those emancipating from care as a uniquely special developmental population.

Finally, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars alike must appreciate that this descriptive, phenomenological research is strengths-based. In this study, emancipating foster youth engaged in youth advisory board, often on their own volition, to impact the seemingly inequitable (albeit, well intending) state child welfare agency policies, programs, and services. Participants maintained their involvement because of an overwhelming desire to create better, more responsive systems of care. In this process, they became socio-political actors capable of action in the civic sphere. For this, they should be commended.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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