Jonathan Singer: So I want to thank you so much for talking with us today about the Culturagram and I am very excited to actually talk with you because I have used the Culturagram for a number of years and I’ve taught it in class and I think this is a wonderful tool. So the first question is what is the Culturagram?

Elaine Congress: Well first, thank you Jonathan for asking me to participate in a podcast, I am very interested and excited about this and I feel this is a way to really tell others about the Culturagram. The Culturagram is a family assessment tool I developed to help social workers and others understand better families from different cultural backgrounds. It basically consists of a diagram with 10 different aspects. I think of culture as not being a singular concept, a singular term. Under culture I feel is subsumed race, ethnicity, national origin and religion, as well as values and beliefs. So I feel as social workers it’s very important for us to understand completely the cultural background of families we work with. I’ve decided that one way to really do this would be to develop a tool to help social workers really better assess the families they work with.

Jonathan Singer: When you talk about families it makes me think of some of the other assessment tools like the genogram, or you know there’s the ecomap for individuals. Is this different or in conjunction, or how does it fit in with those other assessment tools that social workers might be more familiar with?

Elaine Congress: Right. Well another major factor that contributed to me developing the Culturagram was my earlier experiences as a social worker, before I entered academia. I worked in a mental health clinic primarily with Latino clients and I became increasingly aware of how different clients were, even clients from different Latino backgrounds, and I realized that many people make
generalizations and stereotypes about all Latino families are this or that, and also a lot of our literature speaks about characteristics of Latino families. I just realized how different families were, and for example, in the morning I would work with a Puerto Rican family who had been in New York City for 20 years, and then that afternoon I would work with a Mexican family who had just arrived last week. You could call both families Hispanic, but they were very very different. So this really influenced me in terms of developing the Culturagram to really help individualize these families. I also found that even two Puerto Rican families were very very different, and the Culturagram seemed in a way to help really look at some of the differences between families even from the same ethnic background.

Jonathan Singer: You’re really talking about the challenge of recognizing cultural differences between groups, but also within groups.

Elaine Congress: Right, exactly, exactly.

Jonathan Singer: Now I noticed that in the second edition of the Social Workers Desk Reference, just came out Oxford University Press, that you have a new version of the Culturagram, and I was wondering what changes you made to the most recent version of the Culturagram?

Elaine Congress: Well first, I first developed the Culturagram in the early 90's and it was based on large part upon my experience working in an agency, and then when I was just beginning in academia. I revised this slightly in 2000 but I presented about the Culturagram really all over the United States and all over the world, and I feel that I’ve received a lot of input from people over the years, and I’ve become really increasingly aware of how I, the Culturagram could be changed to include what I felt were really pertinent issues. In the most recent version, I really look at oppression, bias, discrimination, and racism. Immigrants have often been the subject of this type of discrimination. They often experience this both in terms of where they come from, because in their home country, especially in terms of refugees, have experienced much discrimination, many of them have had very difficult times in passage to the United States, and now after they’ve arrived there’s much discrimination. A lot of this is a post 9/11 era, and homeland security hasn’t made it more secure for many immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, and there’s continuing bias crime, there was just a recent murder of an immigrant on Long Island. So I really felt that part of the Culturagram should really look at the history and current discrimination that immigrants encounter.

Jonathan Singer: Well that makes a lot of sense. Now one that you mentioned in your chapter in the Social Workers Desk Reference that I thought was interesting is that for some immigrants, specifically different than refugees, some immigrants might have been part of the majority group in their home country, so may never have experienced or been the victim of discrimination, and I thought that was a really interesting insight.

Elaine Congress: Right, this is very true and many immigrants experience this. Immigrants from the Caribbean, from Haiti, Jamaica, in which being black is the majority, and then they come here and there’s a lot of prejudice, and also our newest immigrant group are immigrants from West African
countries, and they too experience all kinds of discrimination because of the color of their skin when they come to the United States.

Jonathan Singer: Can you talk briefly about each of the areas of the Culturagram, we sort of jumped into the most recent addition, but you have a number of areas you had mentioned that social workers assess for in the Culturagram, and I was wondering if you could talk about each one of those areas?

Elaine Congress: Sure. First thing, the Culturagram really is a pictorial representation of these 10 aspects, and I felt, you know they say a picture is worth a thousand words, and I just thought it would be helpful for social workers to see a diagram of a Culturagram. In the center of the Culturagram you put the family, you list individual members, and in there are 10 different aspects of culture you look at more closely, and I’m going to go through the 10, and we’ll look more closely at them.

Jonathan Singer: We can put up an image of the Culturagram on the website for listeners so you can go to the Social Work Podcast website at http://socialworkpodcast.com and see a version of the Culturagram.

Elaine Congress: Number one, reasons for relocating, and I think it’s really important to ask our families why people came to the United States. Very often, a very common reason now why people come because other family members are here. Many people come because of economic reasons, and also many people who come here end up sending money back home to support others who they have left behind. Many people come because of political/religious persecution. We find that many people have moved from rural to urban areas. A reoccurring theme in terms of reasons for relocating is can one go home again, and some people go home frequently and there is a phenomenon now of transnationalism and very often immigrants go back and forth between United States and their home country. But there are many people who can never go home again and there’s a certain sadness with this.

Jonathan Singer: Ok so that was the first category, reasons for relocation and then the second one is legal status. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Elaine Congress: Often in the same family people have different legal statuses. There are illegal immigrants, people who have Green Cards, there may be refugees, people who have special status based on a well founded fear of persecution based on religious/political opinion, race, nationality, or membership in particular groups. Also there are undocumented people, they may be people who have overstayed their visa’s, or people who have entered without papers, you will have citizens, because if your born in the United States you are a citizen. Many of the children in immigrant families are citizens, this creates a lot of tension within families with often undocumented people live in great fear of being deported, and often legal status will contribute to people avoiding needed medical or social services because it’s a lot of fear of having their immigration status known.

Jonathan Singer: I remember when I worked in Austin, Texas, I was one of the bilingual social workers, and very early on in any sort of intake assessment or even phone call with a family, and they were usually from northern Mexico, I would say you know we don’t ask about what your legal status is...
because you get services regardless. It was sort of a double edged sword because on one hand I wanted to
my clients to know they didn’t have anything to fear, but on the other hand because there was a sort of
don’t ask don’t tell policy, I think this assessing for what the legal status was and what sort of services
we could provide maybe didn’t get addressed to the extent that it should have.

Elaine Congress: Right, I’ve often said that you have to kind of approach this carefully, because
sometimes if you ask someone for, in the very beginning what is your legal status, people will become
really scared. So this is something that you need to find out after you build a relationship with the
client, and sometimes knowing this information can be very helpful because you can then refer perhaps
to a lawyer for legal service that might be able to help someone with their legal situation.

Jonathan Singer: The third area is time in the community, and it seems like all of these areas are very
interconnected but what’s important for assessing time in community?

Elaine Congress: Well first, and it may differ for different members, what we find now is often one
person will come first. I mean sometimes it will be the woman; she will come to do domestic work, or
work in a factory. Sometimes it will be the man who comes to work in agriculture, and so this really can
make a difference in terms of acculturation, how long someone has lived in the United States.

Jonathan Singer: The next category is language spoken at home and in the community, and I think
somebody might look at that and say well obviously if they speak a language other than English, I just
write down that that’s the language that they speak. What else would you need to assess for or why
would you be looking for languages spoken at the home and in the community?

Elaine Congress: Well sometimes you find that immigrants speak one language at home and another
in the community. One thing that is often linked to interesting and challenging role reversal issues as
children learn to speak English very quickly, in school and to be with their peers, and so often children
are used an interpreters, which is problematic because sometimes children are kept out of school to go
with their parents to interpret and also I’ve seen working in a health sector many years, children being
exposed to things they shouldn’t be exposed to because they’re used as interpreters. This can really lead
to all kinds of conflict within the household, I remember once a family came to see me, a family with
adolescent children, and what was a presenting problem was a lack of communication, I thought oh this
is typical like adolescent-parent situation, but in working with the family I found it really was a
communication difficulty because the parents only spoke Spanish, the children had some
understanding of Spanish but they really refused to speak Spanish, they only spoke English, so literally it
was the communication.

Jonathan Singer: Yeah it was a language barrier.

Elaine Congress: Right, exactly, within the same household.

Jonathan Singer: Yeah usually we have to with people that speak the same language, we have to do all sorts of investigation to figure out what the communication issue is, but it was pretty clear in that instance.

Elaine Congress: Right, exactly.

Jonathan Singer: Now what about health beliefs, that’s the next category?

Elaine Congress: Many people have very different beliefs about diagnosis and treatment. I think an example, this is based on a true experience from my practice days, a woman came into the emergency room with her two year old son who had a very very high fever, and the doctor was very concerned, and said well we may have to hospitalize your son, I think he has pneumonia, has your son all of his immunizations. She said well I’ve never brought him before, to a doctor, because he’s never been sick before, so immediately she’s on the phone with the social worker saying maybe you should call protective services about this, but I think this illustrates how many issues in terms of a prevention, our children kind of go to well-baby clinics from the time they are born, and many people come from countries in which health care is very very limited, and you only go to a doctor if your child or you are very very sick. I think for many immigrants, health and mental health are all interwoven, and there’s not this focus on mental health the way we conceive of it. So the idea of kind of going to someone, sharing your very personal issues, and then at the end of 50 minutes it’s up, that’s just really very strange for many immigrants.

Jonathan Singer: Now the next category is impact of trauma and crisis events.

Elaine Congress: Well first, and most of the immigrants that we work with have had trauma after trauma after trauma. First, and many have been traumatized by pre-migration experiences, certainly refugees, and I have talked to many refugees who endured war, torture, murder of relatives, rape, all kinds of pre-migration traumatic experiences. And also many have had very difficult experiences in terms of coming here. So definitely this is something one needs to look at. Now in terms of other types of crisis events, I look at this in two ways, the first in terms of developmental crisis, and you could think about every kind of new stage in life and the developmental crisis, and I think adolescence is a major developmental crisis for immigrant families, because very often adolescents really want to be just like their peers while their parents might be more traditional, and I’ve seen lots of issues with this especially with young adolescent girls who want to be like their peers, they want to date, they want to shop in the afternoon with their friends while families have beliefs that the girls should come right home after school. So this is a real crisis area. “Bolt from the blue” is another type of crisis event, and these are really unexpected events, such as accidents, sudden illness, violence, unemployment, and certainly in today’s economic environment, this is very clear and present. And so I think it’s very important to look at all of these traumatic and crisis events because they really affect an immigrant family.

Jonathan Singer: And earlier you mentioned that you have sort of transnational individuals, folks who go back and forth, but there’s also this money that will flow back to a country of origin, and I would imagine that if somebody was chosen (by their family) to come to the United States and work, and send
back money, and they lost their job, they were unable to work, they couldn’t actually afford to send back money, that could have implications for that person, their family at home, the relationships between them, all sorts of implications that we might not necessarily think about.

Elaine Congress: Right.

Jonathan Singer: The next category is contact with cultural and religious institutions, holidays, food, and clothing. And I thought that was very interesting, I am very interested to hear what your thoughts are on “assessing for clothing.”

Elaine Congress: Ok, well this is an expanded category. I first started out contacting cultural institutions, and this was kind of based on an experience in New York, and there are a number of kind of ethnic social clubs. Also, I expanded it to include religion because many immigrants are involved with church, temples, mosques, and religion is and spirituality is very important I think, and to understand the culture of the family it’s important for us to understand this and also as we know there are holidays, especially ones that are part of all cultures, and it’s really important to understand what is particular for this immigrant family. Food and clothing, I think there has been a tendency for everything to become more uniform, I mean you’ll find people wearing t-shirts everywhere around the world, but there is clothing that is specific perhaps to the culture, and I know I’m working now with many immigrants from West African countries, and very often the dress they wear at home is also the dress that they’ll wear here. Also there’s a whole issue about clothing too when you work with immigrants many of whom have come from developing countries to the south, places that haven’t experienced winter the way that we do in much of the United States, this is a real challenge, and I mean I know that in some cases they have reported to Child Protective Services because the kids weren’t adequately dressed in boots and coats.

Jonathan Singer: The next category we touched on briefly, this is the one on oppression, discrimination, bias, and racism, and I’m wondering also if part of the assessment is to find out what some of these immigrant or refugee clients own biases are and what they might bring into this country, maybe biases against folks from their own country who might be here. Think about Rwanda as an example of two groups that really hate each other, but we might not recognize them as being different just on the surface.

Elaine Congress: I think Jonathan that’s an excellent point, and it’s a good point to the importance of not generalizing. I mean we some how feel that people are going to be very very similar if they come from the same area, the same country, but people are very different, and they bring with them many of their conflicts and prejudice and biases from where they have come, and I’ve really seen this in terms of working with West African persons that have migrated before to many different countries, there are many many different groups, and they have many biases against different groups, and this is really very tricky for us in terms of developing social services because sometimes we make an assumption like, oh this social worker is from a west African country, he can work with any African American, he can work with any Caribbean black, and that’s just not true.

Jonathan Singer: And you know I just want to touch on something that you said briefly, that sometimes folks who come to this country, this is not their first immigration, that they might have gone from their country of origin, to another country, been there for a while, then to another country, and then ended up in the United States, which seems like it would be an important thing to know.

Elaine Congress: Sure, exactly, and to know a bit about their experience in the other country. Also, I mean a phenomenon we often find are people who moved from a rural area to an urban area, even within their own country, and lived like in a refugee camp, or a slum around a large city in their own country, and then moved from there to another country, and then ultimately to the United States. And I think we have to not kind of jump over all of that, we have to really know and understand the experiences of families each step of the way.

Jonathan Singer: So the next category is values about education and work, and I’ll just say that I know that there’s this belief that if you’re not sort of a middle class white person, that you don’t actually believe in the value of education.

Elaine Congress: Which is absolutely wrong. I mean if I can think of any people who believe more in education through their children, I mean immigrants really want their children to be educated and want their children to have a better life, and there are differences that can be challenging because many immigrants come form backgrounds in which you brought the child to school and the teachers took over, and I think this came about with many immigrants who are really not educated and the teacher was seen as a great expert. I mean this is different than our American educational system where you know teachers and parents are supposed to be partners in terms of education.

Jonathan Singer: No I agree, and I’ll just throw out one more anecdote, I know this is your interview and I’ve been, and I keep jumping in.

Elaine Congress: No these are so interesting Jonathan.

Jonathan Singer: I was working with a family and they were from El Salvador and the mom wouldn’t show up for school meetings, so the assumption of the administrators was that this mom didn’t value education. And actually what was true was when the mom was in school and she was only in school until the 3rd grade, she was beaten on a regular basis because they forbid her to speak her native Indian language in school, and her and her friends would speak and they would get beaten, and so she feared the actual school building, and she had traumatic experiences of the school building, even though she believed very strongly in the importance of education.

Elaine Congress: And that’s really important to get this information, instead of like just blaming the mother for this, or oh she just wasn’t interested in education, but to really find out the reasons that this woman had a very negative experience with her early schooling. Some parents I find are really nervous about going to school because they feel, especially if they are undocumented, you know that the teachers, principal, and people of the school are seen as like authority figures who are going to reporting them about their immigrant status. Sometimes I have found parents are really embarrassed when their
continually getting notes sent home and they can’t read it at all, not in any language. We have a very different sense of education, education we believe in kind of the individual child and the development of the individual child. I was involved in this situation in which the mother was very upset, as was her children, she had two boys, they were 11 months apart ok, so you know that they were put in different grades, in different classrooms. The children were very upset, they had always been together, but what was explained to the mother was well we believe in individual development of each child, and even for twins we put them in separate classes, so I mean I tell you this in terms of different ways of approaching education.

**Jonathan Singer:** Very clear examples of differences in cultural beliefs. Yeah.

**Elaine Congress:** Right, yeah. Now in terms of work, immigrants really want to work, and they do work, and many immigrants have several jobs at the same time, and everyone in the family works. One issue has to do with status of work, many immigrants who have come here have had a higher status in their own home country as compared to here, and in fact I was just talking to an immigrant now who was ultimately able to go to school and now is a doctor, but he spoke about how he would have been a college professor in his own home country, an African country, and he came here and the first job that he got was washing cars because you know he just, his credentials weren’t recognized here, which you know is a real issue. Also this sometimes leads to conflict within marriage, especially if a man is not able to find a job, has a lower status job, there’s a lot of family conflicts that can develop.

**Jonathan Singer:** I’m thinking of a movie that came out a few years ago, I think it was based on the book “House of Sand and Fog.”

**Elaine Congress:** Oh right.

**Jonathan Singer:** And Ben Kingsley played a man who had been one of the highest ranking military officials in his home country, I think it was Iran, and then when the Shaw was deposed he came to the United States and he would leave his home every morning dressed to the nines you know in his silk suit, and he would drive his BMW, and then he would get to work and he would put on like a janitors outfit or something. But his family didn’t know, nobody in the community could know that he had to take menial labor job, they all assumed because eh told them that he was going to the office to do important work.

**Elaine Congress:** Right. And a big part of it is like saving face.

**Jonathan Singer:** Absolutely. Now the last category is called values about family, structure, power, myths, and rules.

**Elaine Congress:** Ok, and also let me just say that at one point in the first Culturagram, values was all together, and I realize this is so basic, and so important that you really need to look at it in two different aspects. The education and work is more outer directed if you will, the number 10 is more inner directed, and I’ve taught family therapy, so a lot of this comes from those days, just looking at family values.

structure and I mean is the family kind of hierarchical or egalitarian, and I think, I would say that this is making a generalization, but I think we look at a married couple as kind of equal partners, and children are listened to and have voices. But I think many immigrant families come from backgrounds in which they’re much more traditional, and the father is really in charge, and so I think it’s really important to understand the way the family is set up and organized. Also another issue I have found is that many immigrant families are very connected, you know the family is very important, more than individual issues, and individual needs. And this I think is sometimes challenging for a Western Anglo social worker, when you see but how family is really so important. I can just share another example from my practices experience, I was working with a 17 year old boy, very very intelligent, and he’s won a scholarship to go to a distant university, and I said oh great, go for it, and he said I can’t leave my family, his mother had had some health problems, not you know life threatening, but you know some health problems, and he said I just can’t go half way across the country, and I was just thinking about I was putting my own kind of individual bias in terms of like achievement, right, and rather than looking at more in terms of family and how important it was to him. Other aspects, under value I think are very important are gender differences, and this really can make a difference in terms of boy children having more power and control, certain tasks for girls, and this often leads to family conflict. But I think, I have spoken some generalizations in there, which I found with some of my work with immigrants, but it may not be true with the family with which you’re working, so I think it’s really important to look at what is uniquely the family story in terms of the way that it’s structured, the way that power is arranged, what kind of family myths are there, what are rules, and so I think you have understand what’s unique for the family.

Jonathan Singer: Could you give an example of a family myth?

Elaine Congress: Ok, a child is going to be just like his uncle for who some reason the child was given the same name at birth, and is very different than his uncle. I mean I was working with an immigrant family once, the mother came in with her child, you know children are curious, and it was a little four year old boy, he was looking at a lot of stuff on my desk, so he knocked something off, and the mother “you’re gonna be just like your uncle Juan, he was no good and he ended up in jail”, and on and on and on, and I think families have kind of myths about like what’s going to happen with certain people, or family stories that are passed along. I think it really behooves us as social workers to really kind of understand the particular stories and myths because they really affect the family.

Jonathan Singer: Ok that’s really helpful, thank you. So those are the ten areas of the Culturagram, and I’m sure folks who are listening are thinking wow that’s a lot of information. So how do social workers use this information to improve the services they provide to their clients?

Elaine Congress: Ok, well first, all of this information isn’t necessarily received in the first interview; I mean this is a process. First thing, it can engage the family, this is not meant, this is different than a DSM-IV diagnosis, which looks at problems and deficits, this really looks at strengths, and who the family is and what the family brings with them. I think that it can be used to engage the family, it can assess the family in terms of different issues and areas, it can be used in terms of planning interventions, for example for legal status if you see there’s a problem or issue here, perhaps a referral to legal services.
might help. If perhaps you detect that there’s a real conflict within the family, perhaps family therapy might be helpful. I mean it really kind of helps you decide in terms of where to go in future work with family. It really serves to empower the family, this is there story, this belongs to them, I’ve done the Culturagrams with families and they can keep it, this is their story, this is who they are.

**Jonathan Singer:** So on a practical level, do you write this information as a narrative or do you fill out the boxes on the Culturagram diagram?

**Elaine Congress:** Yeah, well really both. We fill out the diagram, and I’ve done some, some of the articles I have written on this, I’ve done diagrams when I’ve lectured on this, you know we’ve taken a case example, and we filled in the block, but a block is only so big. So definitely if you want to expand it more in particular blocks, you could a narrative about it.

**Jonathan Singer:** Is this something that if you filled out this Culturagram that you could just put in somebody’s chart, or is something that you share with them, or is this something that you would keep for your own notes?

**Elaine Congress:** Well first, I think I would definitely share it with the client, in fact I might even work on it with the client, and I know students who have worked on it with the clients, and shared it with the client. I would be careful about putting it in the chart without discussing it with the family.

**Jonathan Singer:** So sort the same with any sensitive information, that might not be directly related to the reason that somebody’s coming to treatment, you don’t want something to be in this official document that could be embarrassing or in some way come back to haunt them.

**Elaine Congress:** And especially in this day and age, and the whole issue of legal status, I would be very carefully about putting this in the chart. I mean certainly a social work student would want to share with his or her field instructor or supervisor.

**Jonathan Singer:** We’ve talked about the use of the Culturagram as a way for social workers to improve the services that they provide to their clients. Has there been any research done as to the use of the Culturagram?

**Elaine Congress:** A number of people have written about it, Lum written about it in using it with people of color, there have been articles on using it with battered women, with children, with immigrants, with older people, with people who have health problems. So a number of people have kind of looked at it and talked about issues with different population. I haven’t done a large quantitative study on it, most of it has been qualitative work in terms of people, individual social workers, as well as some agencies have tried using it with their social workers. And reports have been positive, and I’ve tried to take in suggestions, and certainly if anyone hears this podcast and would like to offer suggestions for Culturagram 4, let me know because this is a work in process, this isn’t fixed in stone for all time.
Jonathan Singer: Ok, well that’s great, we can put your contact information on the Social Work Podcast website where people can contact you if they’re using it and they have ideas for additional categories or professors that are listening and thinking about using it in a research study for example, that might be a great way of advancing the tool. The last question is where can people find the Culturagram other than going to the podcast website?

Elaine Congress: Ok, well I’ve written a number of articles about it, you know most recently in the Social Work Desk Reference 2. I first wrote about it with the Families in Society in 1994, I have a book Multicultural Perspectives in Working with Families, the second edition came out in 1997, and also I think I talk about the Culturagram in my new book Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees: Legal Issues, Clinical Skills, and Advocacy. So I mean there are many sources, and some of these we can put on the podcast website, right?

Jonathan Singer: Absolutely, no we can put links to all of them. You know I just thought of a question, or a comment, and I’d like your idea about this. I have assigned this Culturagram to my students when they’re doing their sort of comprehensive case studies, and things like that, and I’ll get students who come back and say I can’t use this because my client is white, and you know sort of has lived in the same town for three generations, and so what do you want me to do. And I always tell them, do a Culturagram, use a Culturagram with your families that come from the dominant American culture because there’s this assumption that, particularly white people in America, don’t have culture and I think it’s important to challenge that, and I’m just wondering what your thoughts are on this idea?

Elaine Congress: Well Jonathan, I’ve had a similar experience because when I was the Culturagram family therapy class, I had a couple of students say well I don’t have any culture, and that’s certainly not true at all. And I think that it could really be adapted, I also think it’s probably very important for everyone to understand his or her roots. I mean we all have culture, and even if our parents came over on the Mayflower, I think we definitely have a culture that we can write about. Also it’s interesting in terms of the Culturagram, I know that many African Americans use this, or have written about the Culturagram, many who have moved from rural places, places in the rural south to urban areas, you know Chicago, New York, and have found like it really kind helpful and understanding more of their culture.

Jonathan Singer: Is there anything else that you wanted to mention about the Culturagram, otherwise I don’t have any other questions for you?

Elaine Congress: I think that’s about it, I’ve really enjoyed having this opportunity to talk to you about the Culturagram, and thank you for asking me Jonathan, and also anybody that is listening, please contact me if you want more information, if you have some questions or comments, I really would appreciate it.
Jonathan Singer: Oh that’s very generous. Well Elaine thank you for taking the time and I appreciate you first of all developing the Culturagram because I think it’s a great tool, and I appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule there at Fordham to talk with us today. So thank you so much.

Elaine Congress: Ok, thank you.

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