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Socio-psychological adaptation of deaf students at vocational schools: The value and activity-based approach

Adaptación sociopsicológica de estudiantes sordos en escuelas vocacionales: La actividad basada en el valor y el acercamiento

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ABSTRACT:

The paper reports on the study of the axiosphere and individual strategies for defense and coping behavioral mechanisms of deaf students during their socio-psychological adaptation to the environment at a vocational school. The study confirms the feasibility of an efficient application of methods and tests, which were initially developed for hearing people, as part of the examination of hearing-impaired students, provided that this process is directly supervised by an experienced psychologist specializing in teaching hearing-impaired children who is proficient in sign language.

Keywords: deaf students, socio-psychological adaptation, axiosphere, mechanisms of psychological defense, coping behavior, psychological and pedagogical support, vocational education, variation.

RESUMEN:

El artículo se basa sobre el estudio de la axiosfera y las estrategias individuales para cuidado y mecanismos de comportamiento de estudiantes sordos durante su adaptación en una escuela vocacional. El estudio confirma la viabilidad de métodos eficientes que se desarrollaron inicialmente para personas oyentes, para luego ser aplicados a estudiantes con discapacidad auditiva, siempre que el proceso esté supervisado por un psicólogo experimentado especializado en la enseñanza de personas con discapacidad auditiva y niños que dominan el lenguaje de señas.

Palabras clave: estudiantes sordos, adaptación sociopsicológica, axiosfera, mecanismos de defensa psicológica, comportamiento de afrontamiento, apoyo psicológico y pedagógico, educación vocacional, variación.

1. Introduction

The development of socio-psychological adaptation methodology as a foundation for the professional and personal fulfillment of deaf students at vocational schools (VSs) is an effective way to ensure equal opportunities for persons with such disability within a social group where the majority of people have normal hearing. This reveals the importance of

studying the specifics of the axiosphere of students with auditory deprivation during their adaptation to a VS environment.

Persons with a hearing disorder find it hard to integrate into a social environment comprised of hearing people. Having enrolled in a VS where they will study alongside hearing peers and be taught by hearing teachers and vocational supervisors, they struggle with adapting to the learning and educational space typical for the process of initial training they share with non-disabled people. This exacerbates the individual psychological traits of deaf students, which have been developed due to the lack of auditory perception (the emotional immaturity, proneness to conflict, egocentrism, etc.) and are distorting their life stance and their system of social relations (T.G. Bogdanova, R.M. Boskis, L.S. Vygotsky, A.P. Gozova, F.F. Rau et al.); exposes them to nervousness and mental stress and can disrupt their coping mechanisms and trigger disease-causing disadaptation disorders. In the face of the conflict between the modified imperatives of the external environment and the abilities of the deaf person, which, given the fact that "in a developing personality, every psychological aspect is conditioned upon the external circumstances, one way or another, yet nothing in its development can be directly derived from the external influences" (S.L. Rubinstein), causes internal conflicts that act as "the prerequisite for the subject's self-identification at various transition points of his/her life" (Antsyferova, 1981; Zhuravlyov and Kupreychenko, 2007) a hearing-impaired student is forced to build an individual strategy of coping behavior as a "response" to the stress-inducing impact of the modified external circumstances. How successful this process turns out to be, depends on the system of values the students must have acquired by the time they enter the adaptation period at the educational space of a VS, such values being interpreted as the determinant of a person's activity, behavior (A.G. Asmolov, L.I. Bozhovich, A. Maslow et al.), goals, beliefs and ideals. In its turn, this system is objectivized by the adaptation process towards optimizing the relation between its components and the ambient environment (Zhuravlyov and Kupreychenko, 2007; Yanitsky et al., 2007).

The hypothesis of the study was grounded in the premise that the axiosphere of the deaf students under examination is determined by their individual character traits which result from their growing up in the context of auditory deprivation. The key aspect of the study is the reliance upon both external and internal factors and persistent subjective personal traits of a person's willingness to use a certain system of psychological defense mechanisms, which, in its turn, is capable of determining the personality archetype (Subbotina and Yurkova, 2004) and objectivize the extension of the "subject space" of the "person's interrelations in the ambient environment" through the "acceptance of stereotypes, traditions and socially… declared role models and touchstones" at the social and personal level of its application.

It is well known that adaptation, being a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon, integrates a whole range of the subject's various behavioral strategies, acting both at an objective and subjective levels as a way to adapt to a difficult situation by mitigating its negative impact, to counteract the influence of the external environment, to avoid the passive overcoming of challenges (in this case, the psychological defense mechanisms serve as one of the ways to implement the coping behavior (Subbotina and Yurkova, 2004), to fulfill the wish to change the situation in a way most beneficial for the subject or change oneself together with that situation). In this context, the coping phenomenon can be viewed as a variation of an individual life style chosen by the subject of the adaptation process, which goes through the prism of the particular conditions of a particular problematic event acting as a kind of bifurcation point along the person's individual trajectory of professional and personal self-organization together with his or her personal traits and unique resources, being also mediated by the latter. This can manifest itself in the general tendency for the properties of the system of values and beliefs to differ between deaf students of VSs and their peers with no hearing disorders. In this context, the authors were monitoring and benchmarking the specific properties of value systems in students with auditory disorders versus students with good hearing respectively over the period of their social and psychological adaptation to the integrated learning environment at VSs.

2. Methodology

The study outlines the results of the benchmarking analysis of the properties describing the person's system of values and beliefs, the mechanisms of psychological protection and possible coping strategies for deaf and hearing students at vocational schools respectively

The study involved 126 students from municipal vocational schools # 4, 5, 11, 18 in Lipetsk (with their age ranging from 17 to 23 years for students of both genders), which were divided into two groups: an experimental one, comprised of 62 deaf persons, and a reference one, comprised of 64 persons having no auditory disorders.

The dynamics and consistency of adaptation, it being a subjective ("to a certain extent" (Antsyferova, 1981; Bodrov, 2007) process, is determined by personality (Bodrov, 2007; Zhuravlyov and Kupreychenko, 2007). The personal and social characteristics of the participants of this study can also be viewed as coping resources and parts of the personal space for coping with stress (Korvasarsky, 2008; Zasiadko, and Oproshchenko, 2017]. In this regard, to measure the degree of successful social and psychological adaptation of deaf students who enrolled in VSs but have not yet immersed themselves in learning and practice full-on, the authors undertook a brief diagnostics of two main individual psychological qualities of their adaptation process: 1) the students' state as their "integral perception" of their "well-being (ill-being), comfort (discomfort)" in the external environment (Petrovsky, and Yaroshevsky, 1990], and 2) their individual style of defense and coping behavior as the participant's response to a stress-inducing impact of a difficult life situation, which can be accepted as a property of structural and dynamic aspects of the participant's adaptation mechanisms (Ye.R. Isayeva, 2009). Taking in full consideration that "by evaluating the dynamic properties and variation of defense mechanisms during certain fixed time frames and comparing the results to the intensity of the functioning of coping mechanisms, it is possible to make predictions as to the development of adaptation process, differentiate the nature of various disadaptation conditions and reduce the risk of their development" (Dikaya, 2007; Yanitsky et al., 2007), let us stress that since the diagnostics of coping strategies and mechanisms for psychological defense can only be effective in terms of systemic research of such mechanisms alongside personal qualities of people in this category of disabled persons, the scientific analysis of the results acquired during such monitoring also took into account the data which the authors obtained prior to that and published in a range of their other papers (e.g. see: Zasyadko et al., 2017; Zasiadko and Oproshchenko, 2017 and others).

Based on everything previously mentioned, the following properties of students' social and psychological adaptation have been accepted as the most informative in the context of this study:

- the degree of their anxiety, which "is the subjective display of a person's ill-being" (Petrovsky, and Yaroshevsky, 1990) and is justly interpreted as one of the most significant obstacles on the way to the person's successful adaptation and self-fulfillment (V.V. Korkunov, 2008, A.M. Prikhozhan, 2000) and others) that cripples the person's ability for active adaptation (Bodrov, 2007: 58). To differentiate between the signs of situational anxiety and true personal anxiety, which can be similar or identical, the authors used the self-report diagnostic methodology developed by C.D. Spielberger (1970) and adapted by Yu.L. Khanin (1976);
- psychological defense mechanisms (the intensity degree of each kind of psychological defense and the overall degree of its intensity) evaluated using the Life Style Index questionnaire (as adapted for Russian by L.I. Wasserman and colleagues (2005) and by Ye.S. Romanova (2008);
- individual coping strategies as identified using E. Heim's questionnaire (E. Heim, 1988).
- to identify any special aspects of the adaptation period for the participants of the study, the authors used the socio-psychological adaptation scale of C. Rogers and R. Dymond (1954).

The methods and tests listed above were translated into the sign language used by the deaf participants. The examination was supervised by an experienced psychologist and teacher of deaf students who is proficient in sign language. This, in the authors' experience, significantly improves the diagnostics of persons with hearing disorders and allows to efficiently use the methods and tests, which were initially developed for people with normal hearing, as well as make a quality interpretation of the information received on both ends, thus greatly easing the degree of psycho-emotional tension in deaf participants of the study (Subbotina and Yurkova, 2004 and others).

Considering that "the mechanisms, which facilitate psychological adaptation response and trigger the adaptation process, are diverse and personalized" (Yanitsky et al., 2007: 101), the authors also assessed the range of the individual differences in the properties listed above as manifested in the participants; their metric being the coefficient of variation CV, in %.

3. Results and discussion

The monitoring revealed material group variations of the measured properties in deaf students and their hearing peers. For example, the results of the assessment of their value systems in terms of normative ideals, given the overall high measure of values of safety and conformity in participants with hearing disorders, indicates a slightly lower importance the members of the experimental group place in these "conservative" values, as well as values of achievement and kindness, as compared to students from the reference group (Table 1).

Table 1

Benchmark analysis of the average degree of importance of various types of values for VS students, in points.

Value type	Degree	Category of participants			
		deaf		hearing	
		M±m	CV, %	M±m	CV, %
Kindness	Normative ideals	4.26±0.17	32.05	4.93±0.12	20.06
	Individual priorities	2.10±0.09	33.29	2.49±0.08*	25.88
Universalism	Normative ideals	4.00±0.13	24.70	3.91±0.19*	39.27
	Individual priorities	1.65±0.12	55.01	2.17±0.09	34.90
Self-reliance	Normative ideals	4.80±0.12	19.35	4.97±0.14	22.58
	Individual priorities	2.49±0.10	31.52	2.55±0.09*	27.32
Hedonism	Normative ideals	5.28±0.12	17.47	4.94±0.15*	24.18
	Individual priorities	2.53±0.12	37.96	2.64±0.13*	40.87
Achievement	Normative ideals	4.31±0.15	27.57	4.75±0.14	23.62
	Individual priorities	1.87±0.11	48.16	2.34±0.10*	35.30
Power	Normative ideals	3.74±0.19	39.69	3.48±0.19	43.94
	Individual priorities	1.48±0.13	70.87	1.25±0.12*	74.75
Safety	Normative ideals	4.72±0.11	19.17	5.32±0.12*	17.83
	Individual priorities	1.80±0.14	59.12	2.28±0.09*	32.09

Note: * – P<0.05 compared to the previous group

The reverse tendency can be observed when it comes to egocentric values, such as

hedonism, stimulation and power. Given the score of the achievement value, this indicates a higher degree of emotional immaturity, egocentrism, infantilism of the deaf participants combined with the urge to go to any extents to receive validation on the part of members of their immediate social environment, including in a way that does not imply the exertion of any efforts aimed to compensate the existing physical disability in a socially acceptable manner, which increases the risk of disadaptation for deaf students at VSs. The group difference in the importance of the values of traditions, universalism and self-reliance were less noticeable; with no significant distinctions revealed between the normative scores for the value of traditions in students from both groups. The importance of stimulation, slightly more pronounced in deaf students as compared to their peers with good hearing, indicates their craving for novelty and deep emotions, which can result from the increased activity that subjects from this category demonstrate in the integrated learning environment at a VS, a brand new experience for them. Let us stress than the established specifics of the hierarchy of values in sensory-deprived participants who face serious challenges in communication, which underlies their isolation from other people, their individualistic nature, combined with the tangible differences in the personality structure of deaf participants versus their peers with normal hearing (Zasiadko and Oproshchenko, 2017), as revealed by the authors, can explain their propensity towards increased aggression, interpersonal conflict-seeking, frequent changes in mood, interests and attachments, their resentful temper, which act as a fundamental block in the personal adaptation of deaf students who have found themselves in a social environment full of hearing people. The evaluation of homogeneity of both participating populations in respect to the measured qualities of value systems at the level of normative ideals established noticeable individual differences in the importance of such values as stimulation, power and traditions placed on them by the experimental group. This possibly means that deaf participants can be differentiated by their attitude to the ability for controlling a problematic situation and change themselves in line with the new requirements of the social environment. In all other types of values, the results for this category of participants did not exceed the thresholds of the coefficient of variation. There is a slightly different set of values with the greatest individual differences in appreciation at the level of normative ideals among the participants of the reference group, namely power and its antagonist value of universalism, as well as traditions, which implies the possibility of various forms of deviant behavior in a significant part of the VS students with normal hearing who took part in the study.

The evaluation of importance of values as the students' individual priorities produced a slightly less degree of importance that the participants of the experimental group attach to most types of values compared to students from the reference group (Table 1). In both groups, the scores do not reach the normative value, which, on the one part, points to a broad range of challenges with behavioral adaptation experienced by a significant number of participants, and on the other part, implies a vast potential for optimizing the adaptation process for this category of students through the psychocorrective modification of values and beliefs determining their behavior.

The analysis of the coefficient of variation for rank scores measured for students' values proved a large degree of heterogeneity in all measured scores among the population of deaf participants, except for the value of universalism, which scored at the level of normative ideals. Within the reference group, the number of such exceptions remaining within the normative range is much bigger; besides, the individual priorities in terms of values are also above the thresholds in all cases (Table 1). This highlights the significant gap between the preferences in values and ideals among the participants of both groups and objectivizes the personality-oriented nature of the intricate psychocorrective efforts required to help each deaf student, who has, upon enrollment in a VS, acquired a new social status and faced the need to learn the norms and rules of fulfilling their new social role, develop a system of values and paradigms of a legitimate subject of a job training process.

The monitoring of the anxiety level produced high scores of personal anxiety in both groups of VS students (Table 2).

Table 2.
Benchmark analysis of anxiety and socio-psychological adaptation in VS students.

Qualities		Category of participants			
		Deaf		Hearing	
		M±m	CV,%	M±m	CV,%
Anxiety level	Personal anxiety	48.11±0.63	10.34	35.34±0.74 *	16.83
	Situational anxiety	36.18±0.43	9.35	38.75±0.64*	13.20
Socio-psychological adaptation	Adaptation	56.26±0.94	13.16	67.30±0.96*	11.42
	Self-acceptance	69.15±1.12	12.79	79.17±1.13*	11.47
	Acceptance of others	54.52±1.36	19.57	68.22±1.41	16.51
	Emotional comfort	54.03±1.25	18.15	69.97±1.62*	18.47
	Drive for domination	49.47±1.54	24.51	52.28±1.68*	25.77

Note: * – P<0.05 compared to the previous group

Based on the data in Table 2, there is a general counter-tendency for higher anxiety scores as a personal trait in the experimental group (high anxiety) as compared to the scores of the same quality (moderate anxiety) in the participants from the reference group. The higher level of personal anxiety in the group of deaf students versus students with normal hearing can indicate poorer adaptation abilities in the students with health disabilities that are responsible for the much lower efficiency of their primary vocational training.

During the monitoring of the socio-psychological adaptation of the participants, the authors established a tendency towards lower scores of measured values in the members of the experimental group as compared to their counterparts with good hearing. This tendency becomes the most pronounced in respect to the overall adaptation score, acceptance of others and emotional comfort, which also indicates a high (compared to the students from the reference group) level of anxiety, emotional tension, uneasiness of the participants with auditory disorders, a significant disproportion of their goals and values to the results of their work aggravated by their lack of understanding (or ignoring) the uniqueness of other people, which all raise barriers to successful interpersonal communication.

The authors established a more frequent use by deaf participants (as compared to their peers with normal hearing) (Table 3) of certain psychological defense mechanisms (displacement, compensation, reaction formation, intellectualization) at all levels of actualization, i.e. instrumental, attributive and semantic (O.N. Arestova, N.V. Kalinina. 2000). In fact, the intensity of defense they put up is higher than in the participants of the reference group – 43.37 versus 38.95 points respectively. The group differences between the members of the two groups are most obvious with regards to the defense mechanism of intellectualization (78 percentiles in the experimental group and 42 percentiles in the reference group), which lets in psycho-traumatic information, yet transforms it in a way as to cause no material damage to the subject’s mental well-being through intellectual analysis whilst denying any emotional feelings, and thus actualizes at a semantic level, initiating, according to O.N. Arestova and N.V. Kalinina, the “restructuring”, above all, of “the personality itself, its self-esteem and mindset” (see: Subbotina and Yurkova, 2004: 62).

Along with intellectualization, another defensive mechanism was found to be dominating in the arsenal of deaf participants, compared to their hearing peers. In contrast to intellectualization, its actualization takes place at an attributive level, i.e. compensation (86 and 63 percentiles in the experimental and reference groups respectively), which consists in

the interpretation of the information traumatic to the subject in a way most agreeable with his or her mental health, in particular, through the attempt to replace the existing physical defect with a different quality, most often by attributing qualities, values, paradigms, behavioral characteristic of a different person who does not have this auditory defect. The latter, due to the lack of their analysis and restructuring by the deaf subjects, do not become part of their personalities, which can push their systems of values and beliefs towards the development of various forms of deviant behavior. Consequently, deaf students demonstrate a more obvious use of reaction formation as a mechanism of psychological defense, which is defined as the "development of a behavioral pattern that is contrary to the unconsciously displaced intention" (Petrovsky and Yaroshevsky, 1990: 49), although their group differences in this parameter to participants with normal hearing are much less evident (85 and 76 percentiles in the experimental and reference groups, respectively).

Although there is this general tendency for a more frequent use of defense mechanisms by participants with normal hearing as opposite to their deaf peers, still the members of the experimental group demonstrated a more pronounced use of such protective mechanism of psychological defense as displacement (83 percentiles in the group of deaf participants and 63 percentiles in the reference group), which makes it possible to ignore psycho-traumatic information through pushing the anxiety-causing external impacts and the stress caused by them into the unconscious stratum, which, without the necessary transformation of the subject's system of values in the face of the remaining "intrapsychic conflict", results in a significant level of the hearing-impaired subject's personal anxiety and may make that person susceptible to neurosis. Interestingly, deaf participants quite often displace personal traits and qualities that result from the deaf person's dysontogenesis amid sensory deprivation, which the students themselves consider as a barrier in the way to optimizing the interpersonal relations with other people, including those with good hearing.

The results of the research into the individual differences demonstrated by the participants in the use of mechanisms of psychological defense indicate a significant degree of heterogeneity among both populations of the students in terms of a range of measured defense mechanisms combined with substantial distinctions in their range. For example, there is a significant exceedance of thresholds of the coefficient of variation for all measured defense mechanisms, except displacement (which is close to the thresholds) and intellectualization, in deaf students and for denial, projection and displacement in their peers with normal hearing. This can confirm the individual nature of defense processes (Subbotina and Yurkova, 2004; Zavalishina, 2007) and determine the need for the personality-oriented approach to their diagnostics and correction within a VS.

Table 3
Specifics of psychological defense mechanisms in VS students.

Psychological defense mechanisms	Category of participants					
	Deaf			Hearing		
	M±m	CV, %	percentiles	M±m	CV, %	percentiles
Denial	6.69±0.33	38.29	83	6.58± 0.20	24.60	84
Displacement	5.73± 0.24	32.92	83	4.02±0.21*	41.65	63
Regression	4.87±0.27	43.39	68	5.02±0.21	33.34	70
Compensation	**4.84±0.26**	**42.35**	**86**	**2.77±0.17***	48.57	**63**
Projection	**5.08±0.28**	**43.63**	**20**	**6.98±0.23***	26.12	**36**

Replacement	4.37±0.24	42.35	69	4.98±0.16	26.42	77
Intellectualization	**7.21±0.18**	**20.11**	**78**	**4.58±0.22***	38.77	**42**
Reactive formations	4.58±0.22	37.10	85	4.02±0.21*	41.18	76

Note: * – P<0.05 – compared to the previous group:
entries in bold are for defensive mechanisms.

According to the results of the monitoring undertaken by the authors, the increased intensity of psychological defense explains more severe challenges faced by the participants during the adaptation process under subjectively new conditions. This is reflected in the tendency for a higher level of anxiety and emotional tension and lower scores of socio-psychological adaptation, which is substantiated by the established differences in these scores between the VS students who took part in the study.

The identification of individual coping strategies in VS students revealed a substantial imbalance in how deaf participants use coping behavioral strategies in difficult situations that take place in the course of their adaptation to the integrated learning environment at a VS, with a poorer "repertoire" of coping strategies used (61.5% of all possible ones) as compared to participants with normal hearing (84.6% respectively). In particular, the analysis of a problematic situation in the members of the experimental group, unlike the members of the reference group, did not detect the use of adaptive cognitive coping responses (0% and 21.88% respectively), which can arise from the deaf students being stuck on their hearing disorders, experiencing implicit self-rejection, lack of confidence in themselves and their abilities to resolve complicated life situations, including the overcoming of any challenges that may arise during their socio-psychological adaptation to the job training environment at a VS. That said, 80.65% of deaf students apply, with a varied degree of success, relatively productive cognitive techniques to resolve difficult life problems, which mainly aim to search for and attach meaning to this process due to the students lacking any clear goals for the future. The rest of the students, 19.35%, use non-productive techniques, including, primarily, ignoring anxiety-causing circumstances and confusion that in general explains the subjective withdrawal of this category of deaf participants from any constructive steps towards overcoming the arising problematic situations. This, in its turn, drives up the tension and intensity of their psychological defense (Subbotina and Yurkova, 2004). In contrast, 64.06% of the members of the reference group were observed using relatively productive cognitive coping responses, with only 14.06% of students with good hearing demonstrating non-adaptive behavior.

Since it is "through changes in behavior that the most important aspect of a person's adaptation – the active influence on the environments – is exercised" (Bodrov, 2007: 58), this study placed the greatest significance in revealing group differences between the behavioral coping responses of the participants. The monitoring results show low variation of coping behavior forms in deaf students, with more than a half of them (56.45%) using non-adaptive behavioral coping strategies of regression and active avoidance, which translate into the hearing-impaired person's trying to stay alone, avoid thinking about the problem and refuse to make any active efforts aimed at finding a socially acceptable way out of a difficult life situation. This score is much lower in the reference group – just 4.69% of the total number of participants. More than one third of deaf participants (37.10%) use relatively adaptive variants of coping strategies that are implemented through compensation and distraction – behaviors that result from the subjects' wish to temporarily avoid solving the problems by switching instead to their favorite pursuit; the authors also registered calls for help from the members of the experimental group to other people, including person with good hearing from their closest social circle (family members, other students, teachers and training supervisors, the teacher of hearing-impaired students, etc.). Only 6.45% of deaf students were seen using adaptive behavioral coping strategies, such as asking for help and cooperation in solving problematic life situation from referent people. Among the students of the reference group, 84.37% of the total number of participants use the entire range of

relatively productive behavioral coping strategies, and 10.9% of them use such adaptive variants of behavioral coping strategies as cooperation, help-seeking and self-possession.

4. Conclusions

The monitoring revealed a significant range of group and individual differences in a number of measured qualifies of the systems of values and beliefs, psychological defense mechanisms and coping strategies in deaf and hearing VS students, which result from the deaf participants' dysontogenesis amid sensory deprivation and make it reasonable to facilitate personality-oriented psychological and pedagogical support of the adaptation process for this category of students with health disabilities. This, along with the initiation of an effective individual behavioral strategy for each subject, will enable to take into account, actualize and utilize the subject's unique personal coping resources in their complex dialectic interaction with the resources of the environment.

The results of the study prove the special potential of the value and activity-based approach that takes the research into and improvement of socio-psychological adaptation of hearing-impaired VS students to a brand new methodological level, allowing to focus on the dual by its nature process of learning and development of the axiosphere of deaf students to help them accept the values and value systems of a successful, professionally mobile subject of a society where the majority of people have normal hearing – "a person of action" (K.D. Ushinskiy) as a regulatory basis for the establishment of an individual defense and coping behavioral style that provides socio-psychological adaptation, socialization and self-actualization of a hearing-impaired person in the modern labor market.

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