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ABSTRACT

The article explores the multiple forms of discrimination within sporting contexts, with the aim of highlighting the limitations of solutions inspired by a fragmentary and sectoral approach that fail to create interaction among the various expressions of diversity. Specifically, by analysing the challenges in accessing and participating in physical and sports activities for women, people with disabilities and individuals who do not fall within the gender binary, the need emerged to assume an intersectional perspective both to understand the uniqueness and complexity of experiences of discrimination and to design interventions capable of creating authentically and concretely inclusive contexts.

L'articolo esplora le molteplici forme di discriminazione all'interno dei contesti sportivi, con l'obiettivo di mettere in evidenza i limiti delle soluzioni ispirate ad un approccio frammentario e settoriale che non riescono a creare un'interazione tra le varie espressioni della diversità. Nello specifico, analizzando le difficoltà di accesso e di partecipazione alle attività fisico-sportive delle donne, delle persone con disabilità e delle persone che non rientrano nel binarismo di genere, è emersa la necessità di assumere una prospettiva intersezionale sia per comprendere l'unicità e la complessità dell'esperienze di discriminazione sia per progettare interventi capaci di creare contesti autenticamente e concretamente inclusivi.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion; Sport; Education; Diversity; Intersectionality.
Inclusione; Sport; Educazione; Diversità; Intersezionalità.

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Introduction

In line with the profound changes affecting today's society, inclusion is becoming consolidated as the foundational category of pedagogical discourse. Educational action in multicultural and increasingly heterogeneous social contexts seems to rediscover its authentic vocation only when oriented towards the construction of a process of recognition and harmonization of differences (Cambi, 2019; Bruni, 2008). In order to start a reflection around the theme of inclusion, it is important to first focus on the concept of the "margin", a structural element of both pedagogical reflection and educational practice. The margin is configured as a place of encounter in continuous transformation, in which dynamics of separation, categorization and social exclusion take place. Particularly significant in this area has been the work of Goffman (1963), who, through a detailed empirical analysis, arrived at the development of a general theory of stigmatisation processes. According to the American sociologist, to understand such social dynamics, it is necessary to focus on relational aspects, as stigma arises from them rather than from inherently discrediting attributes. In this regard, Goffman (1963, pp. 137-138) writes: "that stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and in some phases of life. The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives".

In this sense, diversity is configured as something that, not conforming to socially shared expectations and going beyond the boundaries of 'normality', is perceived, evaluated and represented negatively (Cassese *et al.*, 2017). From these processes of marginalization arise two reactions, both attributable to what Annacontini (2015) defines as the 'margin dynamics': the first treats diversity as an emergency, and the second tends, instead, to render it invisible, silencing its prerogatives and obscuring its instances. In these cases, the attribution of disvalue coincides with the formation of stereotypes and prejudices that contribute decisively to the perpetuation of multiple forms of marginalization and discrimination, which are responsible for the reduction of social, economic and political opportunities for the victims.

In this perspective, it is of fundamental importance to examine the data from the Eurobarometer Special 493 "Discrimination in the European Union" (European Commission, 2022), which focuses on European citizens' opinions, attitudes and

perceptions on discrimination (based on gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, beliefs, ethnic origin), putting it in relation to the work, political and sentimental dimensions. Despite an improvement compared to the 2015 data, the survey showed that phenomena of intolerance towards 'diversity' are widely spread and the data vary depending on the discriminated group and from country to country. Worrying is the situation in Italy, where the perception of discriminatory phenomena is generally higher than the European average: towards people of Roma ethnicity (79% vs 61% EU average), towards transgender people (66% vs 48% EU average), towards intersex people (58% vs 39% EU average), or based on sexual orientation (69% vs 53% EU average). For the purpose of this reflection, it is also important to focus on the ideas and beliefs of European citizens regarding the policies and educational interventions implemented to address all forms of discrimination. Only 28% of the participants, in fact, believe that their country's efforts on these issues are effective, while the majority think that it would be appropriate to introduce lessons and educational materials on diversity in schools, especially on topics related to disability (86%), ethnic origins (82%) and religions (81%). The percentage of people who advocate for informative and educational sessions on Roma history and culture is lower (72%), as is the one for transgender or intersex issues (65%). Regarding the perspective of expanding educational offerings with programs and practices for 'diversity education', Italy is not in line with the European average: only 47% support the introduction of information on being transgender and 49% on being intersex (vs 65% EU average); 56% support education on sexual orientation (vs 71% EU average) and finally only 53% on Roma history and culture (vs 72% EU average). These data not only highlight divergences in the opinions of citizens in various European countries but also indicate a lack of awareness regarding the necessity and essential role of pedagogical action in competently addressing all issues related to 'diversity'. Some of these issues appear particularly controversial in certain socio-cultural contexts, contributing to the activation of more or less intentional processes of 'classification' of discriminated groups. In this way, alongside the value and power hierarchy underlying the relational dynamic between 'normality' and 'diversity' (where 'diversity' coincides with 'abnormality'), an internal hierarchy within diversity emerges, prioritizing the management and protection of some issues over others. On the contrary, as Cambi (2019, p. 25) writes: "Differences matter. All of them. [...] And they are matter precisely because they make pluralism, which carries freedom and equality in diversity".

These are more than valid reasons to which pedagogy should anchor itself and from which it should draw inspiration and motivation to develop educational proposals

that do not reduce or simplify the complexity of challenges related to diversity, and especially do not address them separately. In this regard, just as in other fields, there is a growing awareness in the pedagogical field about the need to adopt an intersectional approach (Lim *et al.*, 2021; Zolletto, 2023) both to assess, analyze and understand the uniqueness of various discrimination processes and to design interventions capable of creating authentically inclusive contexts (Tafari *et al.*, 2017). An intersectional perspective involves recognizing that each person has multiple identities (gender, age, social class, ability, religion, sexual orientation, etc.), each of which interacts with the others to create unique experiences of oppression or privilege. As Bello (2020, p. 87) writes, an intersectional perspective can prove extremely useful in “sharpening the focus on the complexity and diversity of discriminatory experiences, scrutinizing unexplored interstices that would otherwise remain invisible”.

Based on these premises, the article aims to explore various forms of marginalization, violence and oppression within the sports universe, as an analysis of the dynamics occurring in this context makes it possible to unveil the limitations of a fragmentary and sectorial approach to the issue of inclusion and to understand the importance of the theoretical model of intersectionality (UN, 2020). As the investigation will focus on inclusion-exclusion processes in sports contexts, it is important to clarify that in this paper, the term “sport”, following the definition of the Council of Europe (2022, p. 12), will be used in the broadest sense, referring to: “all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, are aimed at maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels”.

In the course of the discussion, cases within the competitive sports contexts, specifically elite sports, will be cited as they are significant for the purposes of this analysis. Thus, by making explicit reference to particular sporting disciplines and the relevant regulations, the intention is not to make gross generalisations ignoring the complexity of the sporting universe, but rather to explore the multiple challenges that sport is called upon to face, bringing them within a coherent and unitary reflection.

1. Discrimination in sports contexts

In recent decades, numerous studies have focused on the educational potential of sports activities, highlighting their crucial role in the physical, emotional, socio-relational and cognitive development of individuals (Isidori, 2009; Sibilio, 2005).

Specifically, sports practices, when guided by a clear educational intentionality, can be valuable tools not only for promoting well-being but also for fostering inclusion and positive interaction among individuals, regardless of age, cultural background, gender, abilities, sexual orientation, etc. (Zolletto, 2016; Isidori, 2010; Benetton, Visentin, 2021).

Despite the widely recognized pedagogical value of sports, sporting events often become stages where episodes of hatred, segregation, violence and discrimination unfold. This contradiction highlights the complexity of the social, political and economic dynamics underlying the sports universe and, at the same time, it provides pedagogy with the opportunity to address some of the most pressing issues of postmodernity. Indeed, sports function as a privileged observatory for both educational and ethical research (Zolletto, 2016; Isidori, 2010; Camporesi, 2023), increasingly requiring an interdisciplinary and multi-perspective approach. In this regard, Isidori (2009, p. 94) writes: "Without sports, postmodern education could not even be conceived. This requires, therefore, an in-depth exploration and constant engagement with this issue not only by sports pedagogues, but also by all those involved in various capacities in pedagogy and philosophy of education. [...] Postmodern sports, with its typical characteristics, opens up new frontiers and new research paths for pedagogy, such as issues of masculinity, homosexuality, gender mix, hyper-consumerism, postfeminism, popular culture, mass culture, interethnic and cyberculture".

In light of these considerations, the choice to focus on the sports universe is primarily based on four reasons:

1. media impact: sport has a great impact at the media level and can therefore actively contribute both the transmission of socially shared stereotypes and prejudices and to their deconstruction;
2. organizational dimension: the organizational aspects of elite sport affect grassroots sports in many ways, including the youth sector, which is an agency for non-formal education;
3. intersection between sport and physical education: although sports and physical education are two distinct and separate activities, they intersect at various levels and, consequently, sporting dynamics also influence formal educational contexts (Parri, Ceciliani, 2020; Giese, Ruin, 2018);
4. role of the body: discriminatory phenomena often emerge and take root in the sports context, primarily due to the prominent role assigned to the bodily

dimension, on which the marks of stigma are often imprinted. Given that in sports, bodies are mainly evaluated on the basis of physical criteria (such as strength, efficiency) and external characteristics (body shape, appearance, skin color), all people whose bodies do not conform to predefined expectations are often excluded and marginalised.

2. Gender Gap in sport

The first issue to consider is undoubtedly the persistent gender gap which, despite profound social and cultural transformations, continues to be one of the most significant aspects of the sports system. Various international reports and surveys confirm that, although data on female participation in sports activities are gradually increasing (EIGE, 2017), the level of physical inactivity for women is generally higher than for men across all age groups (WHO, 2022; EIGE, 2017). Observing elite sports, despite a considerable narrowing of the gap between men and women in recent years, barriers impeding women's access to various roles in sports organizations have not been entirely eliminated. The gender gap is indeed a multidimensional phenomenon that concerns not only participation in sports activities but also aspects such as the female athletes' remuneration, the level of media coverage and the presence in coaching and managerial positions. Confirming this, the EIGE report (2017, p. 5) emphasizes that: "Gender inequalities are evident across the sports sector, from representation at decision-making levels and media coverage, to participation in sports activities including coaching. Women may also face a general lack of safe and appropriate sports facilities, potentially exposing them to physical and/or verbal sexual harassment and assault".

The gender gap is not the only critical issue within the sports sector, where phenomena of sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism are widespread and often intersect with each other, generating unprecedented forms of multiple discriminations (Valerio *et al.*, 2017; Lorenzini, 2020; Mura, 2009; Lim *et al.*, 2021). Such situations are deeply rooted in the history of the sports system, which still presents itself as a field "sex-segregated and male-dominated" (Gill, Kamphoff, 2010, p. 563), meaning it is rigidly structured based on gender and "male-dominated". In fact, as Valerio (2017, p. 22) writes: "It is self-evident that social mechanisms that tend to create differences in status and power - as in the case of homophobia or sexism - find fertile ground in sports, where gender becomes a key lens for interpreting phenomena and social relations. Sports considered typically male (soccer, rugby, etc.) or female (dance, artistic gymnastics,

etc.), for example, make it difficult to think of more neutral dimensions, in which everyone can be involved regardless of their gender”.

Although gender inequality in the sports contexts generally favors men, sexist discriminations are far from unidirectional. An illustrative example is rhythmic gymnastics, an Olympic discipline exclusively for women, and the battle for the right to compete by Spanish athlete Rubén Orihuela, who after years of being a victim of bullying and sexist discrimination for choosing a sport deemed “too feminine”, managed to get a national championship for male gymnastics in 2009, becoming an idol and example for many young male gymnasts.

The differentiation between sports based on gender, whereby certain disciplines are considered more suitable for men and others for women, not only leads to sexist phenomena but also intersects with issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, founded on two key concepts, “the feminisation of males and the masculinisation of females” (Valerio, 2017, p. 22). Female football players, in addition to facing sexist insults focusing on presumed lack of femininity, also experience homophobic discriminations stemming from stereotypes and prejudices based on the mistaken belief that there must necessarily be a correlation between the choice of a sport socially recognized as masculine and a non-heterosexual orientation (Lorenzini, 2020; Valerio *et al.*, 2017). This is one of many examples that attests to the unwavering persistence of preconceived opinions and long-standing beliefs regarding women’s sports (Benetton, 2019). These opinions influence and distort the perception and representation of women’s sports at multiple levels, impacting parents, sports educators, coaches and physical education teachers.

Therefore, despite significant strides forward, the path toward gender equality in sports is still long and intersects with new calls for change, raising a series of ethical and pedagogical questions. While the spotlights in the run-up to the Paris 2024 Olympic Games focus much of their attention on achieving coveted gender equality, which derives from a numerical balance between male and female participants (for the first time, 50% of participants will be female), it is crucial to shift attention to those who, for various reasons, have been and will be excluded from the most important international sporting events or similar competitions (e.g., World Championships, Continental Championships). In recent years, the sports world has grappled with two highly relevant issues for this reflection, leading to revisions of regulations by top international sports organization: the first relates to people with disabilities and the second concerns individuals who, for various

reasons, do not fit into the gender categories of sports competitions (Camporesi, 2023; Martínková, 2020).

3. Sports and Disability: Between "Parallel Competitions" and Attempts at Unification

As analyzed in various contributions, Adapted Physical Activity (APA), a field of study developed in the 1950s with the aim of adapting physical activities to the specific needs and abilities of people with disabilities, has revolutionised the field of human movement sciences, promoting physical activity as therapeutic, expressive, recreational and competitive experience (Benetton, Visentin, 2021). Specifically, APA, considering functional limitations at the physical, cognitive and sensory levels, aims not only to broaden opportunities for the development of physical-motor skills but also to increase opportunities to promote participation, inclusion and improvement in the person's quality of life. Another step forward in this area has been taken by the Paralympics movement, which transitioned from a therapeutic-rehabilitative paradigm to a sports-oriented one, initiating the participation of people with disabilities in competitive events at both amateur and professional levels. The Paralympics movement, in addition to encouraging the participation of people with disabilities in sports activities, has played and continues to play a crucial role in the process of deconstructing stereotypes and prejudices, which are gradually changing perception and representation of disability.

Thanks to the increasing media attention dedicated to these types of sports events, Paralympic athletes have become iconic protagonists of a narrative and self-narrative process that has contributed to redefining the experience of disability and celebrating the exceptional potential of the human being. In this context, sports deserve recognition for bringing visibility to the achievements of these athletes, their life stories and their bodies, highlighting their diversity, which had been concealed for too long.

Despite the significant impact of the Paralympic Sports in various areas from the social to the educational, from the economic to the political, from the medical to the technological, it is essential to highlight the limitations of this model, especially when viewed from a pedagogical perspective. The Paralympic Games have, in fact, created a "separate" and "parallel" world for people with disabilities, distinct from the "Olympics". This model cannot be considered concretely and authentically

inclusive since inclusion is achieved where categories are removed and the experience of sharing spaces, times and opportunities is promoted (Mura, 2009).

There are athletes with disabilities who have participated in competitions for “able-bodied” people, such as Oscar Pistorius in Athletics, but these have been exceptional cases (Camporesi, 2023). The introduction of assistive technology, such as prosthetic aids designed to compensate for functional limitations (due to the amputation of a leg, for example), allowing people with disabilities to engage in physical and sports activities, has been a highly controversial issue. In this regard, the case of Marcus Rehm, a German Paralympic athlete, who was not allowed to participate in competitions for “able-bodied” athletes because the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) deemed that his prosthesis provided him with an unfair advantage (Camporesi, 2023). The Rehm case, aside from its legal and biomechanical aspects, emblematically illustrates the difficulty of balancing inclusion with equity in sports competitions.

It should also be emphasised that the Paralympics is just one of many sports events dedicated to people with disabilities, among which it is worth mentioning the Trisomie Games, aimed at people with Trisomy 21; the Deaflympics, or the “World Silent Games” for individuals who are deaf; and finally, events organized by the Special Olympics movement for people with intellectual disabilities. While these projects highlight the importance of adapting the organization of sports events to the specific needs and abilities of particular groups, they also underscore the inability of organizations to find truly inclusive solutions. In this regard, it is interesting to note the direction in which Special Olympics is moving with the promotion of the pioneering Unified Sport approach, aimed at the design of sports disciplines in which people with and without disabilities can compete together. The Unified Sport approach seems to be the only approach that can authentically meet and address the challenge of inclusion in the sports contexts, and to go beyond removing the physical, social, emotional and normative barriers that hinder the access of people with disabilities to such practices. A paradigmatic example is Baskin (Inclusive Basketball), a new team sport originating from Italy and gaining international popularity. In this discipline, people with and without disabilities, men and women, compete in the same competition without distinction of categories. Baskin is based on a complex set of rules in which roles are diversified according to motor skills and provides for mixed teams in terms of gender, age and ability. This ideal context enhances differences and fosters interaction among participants, illustrating how unified sports can effectively serve as a vehicle for inclusion and the appreciation of diversity in educational contexts.

4. Towards an overcoming of gender categories in sports activities

Another crucial issue that cannot be ignored when reflecting on inclusive processes within the sports context is related to people who, for various reasons, do not fit into the gender binarism on which sports categories are based (Martínková, 2020; Kamasz, 2018). This topic has gained great relevance in recent years thanks to cases involving famous athletes, which have catalysed media attention and triggered a lively interdisciplinary debate with numerous ethical, philosophical and pedagogical implications. One such case involves South African athlete Caster Semenya, a two-time Olympic champion in the 800m and three-time world champion in the same discipline. Her story is undoubtedly one of the most well-known and controversial, exerting a significant impact both within the sports context and on public opinion. Semenya was born with a condition known as hyperandrogenism, which gives her testosterone levels higher than the female average, and for this reason her participation in competitions within the female category has been called into question (Camporesi, 2023). Like her, other athletes in similar situations have been suspended from competitions, subjected to sex testing (a highly questionable ethical practice) and faced real discriminatory processes, amplified by the relentless media attention.

Transgender individuals, particularly transgender athletes (MtF – male-to-female), also face similar challenges, being excluded from competitions due to an alleged unfair advantage over their competitors (Kamasz, 2018). International sports federations, tasked with establishing criteria governing access to competitions in various sports, have taken different positions on this controversial issue and in many cases regulatory adjustments are still ongoing. The World Athletics (International Association of Athletics Federations), for instance, starting with the “Semenya case” and after revising its regulations several times, has established that in the event that female athletes with DSD (Differences of sex development) wished to be admitted to competitions, they would have to undergo pharmacological treatment to lower their testosterone levels, accepting to undertake hormonal therapies that are not medically necessary (Camporesi, 2023). Again, the World Athletics, with the aim of protecting the integrity of the female category and ensuring fair competitions, has also, for the time being, prohibited the participation of transgender athletes (MtF) who underwent male puberty and completed the male-to-female transition. Regarding these issues, among various proposals, there is the consideration of establishing a “third category” to accommodate people excluded from male and female categories, which seem unable to fully represent

gender fluidity and human complexity. Many national and international sports organizations have been actively seeking solutions in recent years to ensure a balance between fairness and inclusion. The decision to exclude certain individuals from competitions with the goal of preserving fairness is not in line with the principles of Olympism. The Olympic movement, an indisputable reference for numerous sports disciplines, has always included the fight against all forms of discrimination among its fundamental principles, emphasising the role of sports in promoting equality, justice, inclusion and peace. For the purposes of this reflection it is not useful to delve into the technical and normative issues that characterize the choices of sports organizations, but it is crucial to highlight that these decisions are influenced partly by economic and commercial considerations and partly by the cultural model inherent in sports. The sports system continues to perpetuate its original masculine imprint – most sports were designed by men for men, when women were not allowed to participate in sport activities – and to favor a competitive approach where fairness in competition takes precedence over equity in participation. On the contrary, as some scholars suggest, the focus should shift towards what makes sports fair not only in terms of performance, but also in terms of human rights (Camporesi, 2023; Kamasz, 2018).

It is important to emphasize once again that the strict segregation into gender-based categories not only results in the exclusion of certain athletes from high-level competitions but also causes processes of segregation and discrimination in physical education programs, in school sports and in university sports (Erikainen *et al.*, 2022; Kamasz, 2018; Martinkova, 2020). For this reason, working on teacher education is indispensable to increase their awareness of stereotypes and socio-cultural models that are often integral to the hidden curriculum of physical education (Parri, Caciliani, 2020). Additionally, the focus should be on designing alternative physical and sports activities that concentrate on cognitive, socio-relational and emotional aspects characterizing the bodily experience (Parri, Ceciliani, 2020; Fitzpatrick, McGlashan, 2016). As Mura (2017, p. 127) writes: “It is a matter of preparing, in the different places where today is practiced physical and sports (schools, gyms, recreation clubs, sports clubs open environments,), multi-level activity paths that include customized options and different access possibilities, taking into account the abilities, aspirations and individual possibilities of those who wish to access them”. (Mura, 2017, p. 127). Specifically, it is necessary to initiate a process of deconstructing the rigid boundaries that separate gender categories shaping sports practices, minimizing the connection between physical education and the competitive sports model. This involves promoting innovative activities capable of embracing and respecting diversity. Indeed, as Fitzpatrick and

colleagues (2016, p. 7) write: “Given the complexity of gender, sexuality and embodiment in the field of physical education, it is time that the field stopped attempting to work towards greater inclusion, while completely ignoring issues of gender (not to mention social class, racism and ability)”.

Conclusions

In the preceding paragraphs, an attempt has been made to analyze some of the forms of discrimination that cross the sports context with the aim of highlighting the limitations and critical aspects of organizational interventions implemented by sports organization regarding the theme of inclusion. In particular, the analysis of gender inequality has proved fundamental to understand those structural characteristics of sport that contribute to the formation and perpetuation of processes of marginalization and exclusion. Sport is traditionally configured as a profoundly “male-dominated” and rigidly gender-segregated context, where the archetype of the male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied athlete continues to prevail (Cunningham *et al.*, 2021). This is one of the main reasons that make it necessary to adopt an intersectional approach, whereby people’s experiences cannot be explained based on a single dimension of identity but rather through a deeper understanding of the interactions among multiple identities. In this regard, interesting are those studies that propose an intersectional look on discriminatory phenomena in the field of sport and physical education starting from the concept of skill, used to describe the stigma against people with disabilities (Giese, Ruin, 2018; Arora, Wolbring; 2022).

The conceptual framework outlined by ableism allows to find a point of contact among the various marginalised groups, which are judged based on expressed abilities, particularly through the body. The ability, considered not as a mere individual attribute but as a socially constructed multidimensional concept, which, especially in the sporting context, appears closely linked to masculinity, heteronormativity, as well as external aspects of the body (such as skin color). As a result, the processes of discrimination and stigmatisation affect all those who are deemed not to possess such abilities or who possess them unfairly, both for natural characteristics, such as people with higher than average testosterone levels, either because they are generated by human interventions such as gender transition or the use of assistive technology (Arora, Wolbring; 2022). Dynamics of exclusion in sports and physical education are based on an instrumental view of the body, which must fall into precise categories and meet normative and socio-cultural

expectations related to physicality (Giese, Ruin, 2018). Except for exceptional cases, individuals whose bodies do not conform to the above-described demands often do not find a place in mainstream sports circuits but rather in separate contexts that, on one hand, may be more suitable for specific needs and, on the other, risk transforming into places of segregation. For this reason, as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, the endeavor to balance equity and inclusion requires a radical reconsideration of sport. It, as a human practice in continuous evolution, is called to adapt to address discrimination issues through an integrated and intersectional approach, with the awareness that “every process of inclusion is by its nature incomplete and inevitably involves breaks, distinctions and thus exclusions, even if only temporary and partial” (Ferrante, 2020, p. 18). In the sports context, as Mura (2009, p. 127) writes “This also means rethinking the activities proposed so far, modifying and readapting them for broader participation, creating new and unprecedented activities and disciplines that, through different roles and contributions of different levels, contemplate and enhance, in the rules and strategies of development, every possible diversity”.

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