Us and Them: Understanding Upwards Bullying through the lens of Social Identity Theory.

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Abstract

As the nature of managerial work is changing and becoming ever more demanding it is argued

that managers are increasingly vulnerable to becoming the recipients of workplace bullying from their

staff. The possibility of a manager being bullied by their staff has been under explored within the

bullying literature. This phenomenon is referred to as 'upwards bullying'. It is argued that due to the

essential role managers play in organisations, and the significant costs workplace bullying has been

found to have on individuals and organisations, it is essential that we begin to investigate the real

possibility of staff bullying managers. This paper applies social identity theory to allow a further

understanding of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Workplace Bullying, Workplace Abuse; Upwards Bullying; Social Identity Theory.

The current economic climate has forced organisations to adapt and change, which has resulted in greater workplace complexity that has led to increased stress for both workers and managers (Fulcheri, Barzega, Maina, Novara, & Ravizza, 1995; Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001). The result of this has been a change in the nature of managerial work, the focus of this paper. Cartwright (2000), citing a 1999 survey by The Institute of Management in which 1200 U.K. managers responded, states that "managers increasingly see their jobs as becoming more complex and more fragmented" (p. 18) and thus more demanding. It is argued that, as a direct consequence of stress, there has been an increase in the psychological and physical illness of managers and supervisors, which are a cost to the individual, their family and the organisation (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Fulcheri et al., 1995).

Within this organisational environment, Hoel et al. (2001) suggests that managers are increasingly vulnerable to workplace bullying for a range of reasons. For instance, managers now often have to fulfil roles previously performed by specialized sections in the organisation, such as Human Resources (Hoel et al., 2001), resulting in role overload. Furthermore, leaner organisations (Sheehan, 1996) may result in increased competition for managerial positions as these positions become increasingly scarce (Hoel et al., 2001). Hoel et al. (2001) states that "perceived job insecurity may make managers themselves more liable to become bullied as their ability to resist ever increasing pressures may be reduced" (p. 459). Similarly, Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott (1999) state that during times of high stress and pressure to perform, bullying in the workplace can happen at all levels and that managers are now targets. They believe that staff may bully upwards as a way of dissenting against the manager who they believe is the cause of their stress.

Despite this understanding, research has thus far focused mostly on bullying conducted by managers and directed to their staff, or downwards bullying and, more recently on horizontal bullying, that is, bullying from one colleague to another (Lewis & Sheehan, 2003). It is argued in this paper that managers can also experience workplace bullying instigated by their staff, a phenomenon referred to as 'upwards bullying', and that the processes associated with this form of workplace abuse may relate to a range of organisational factors and group processes. Such an investigation is called for because of the vital role managers play in organisations and the significant costs workplace bullying has been found to have on individuals and organisations. Within this paper workplace bullying will be

initially discussed, followed by a framework for better understanding upwards bullying through the application of social identity theory.

Defining Workplace Bullying

The term workplace bullying has been described as an umbrella term, which incorporates harassment, intimidation and aggressive or violent behaviours (Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2000). In addition, a variety of terms have been used to describe workplace bullying. Within Scandinavian countries the term 'mobbing' is commonly used (Rylance, 2001a). Alternatively, the term 'psychological terrorism' is sometimes used as a way of encompassing all of the elements bullying can include (Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2000). Others such as Keashly (1998) refer to bullying as 'emotional abuse' and within the United States researchers commonly refer to 'workplace abuse' (Rylance, 2001b). Researchers within Australia and Great Britain tend to use the term (namely Hoel; Lewis; Rayner; Sheehan) 'workplace bullying'. As a result the term workplace bullying will be used within the current paper.

Workplace bullying has been defined in the research and practice literature in various ways (e.g. Keashly, 1998; Queensland Department of Workplace Health and Safety, 2002) and by a number of common factors. Workplace bullying is often defined as inappropriate (McCarthy, 1996; McCarthy, Sheehan, & Kearns, 1995) or unreasonable behaviour (Gorman, 1999), conducted by either one or a group of people (Rigby, 1996), which is persistent or regular (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Hoel, 1997; Smith, 1997), occurs over a period of time (Einarsen, 2000) and has negative consequences for the recipient (Randall, 1992). The need for a power imbalance to exist between the two parties (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003) and difficulty on the part of the recipient to defend themselves (Einarsen, 2000) are also often referred to as essential definitional components. It is noted that the intention of the perpetrator, as a definitional aspect of workplace bullying, however, remains unclear (Keashly, 2001). After considering the previous elements the following definition of workplace bullying will be used. Workplace bullying is persistent abusive behaviour (which can include harassment and psychosocial abuse) by either one or a group of people, directed at an individual or group of people who find it difficult to defend themselves. A power imbalance between the perpetrator and recipient is necessary for the bullving to occur. This definition can be applied to upwards bullying, where the specific focus

is on managers who are bullied by staff. While the manager has positional power, it is argued in this paper that there are a number of group and psychological processes that can impact on the traditional power relationships within organisations.

Impact of Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying has significant consequences on those directly experiencing or witnessing the bullying, and the organisation. The consequences of bullying at work can range from physical harm through to an increase in psychological stress for the recipient (Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2000). Einarsen (2000), in his review of the mobbing/bullying literature, presents a range of physical and psychological symptoms commonly associated with workplace bullying, including fatigue, muscular complaints, lack of self-esteem, sleeplessness, depression, feelings of abuse and victimisation, nervousness and psychosomatic complaints. In a study which investigated the incidence of workplace bullying in Danish organisations, it was found that even just occasional exposure to workplace bullying resulted in stress related symptoms (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). Mikkelsen & Einarsen's (2001) results also indicate a strong relationship between bullying and the symptoms of depression (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). Workplace bullying has been associated with other psychological symptoms such as a higher risk of suicide attempts (O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire, & Smith, 1998) and clinical levels of anxiety (Quine, 1999). Research indicates that workplace bullying not only impacts on those who directly experience it but also on witnesses or bystanders (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). Co-workers of those who experience workplace bullying have reported that workplace bullying impacts on them in a number of ways. In a British study of 761 public sector trade union members, 73% of witnesses of workplace bullying reported an increase in their stress levels, and 44% of respondents were concerned about being the next target (Rayner, 1999).

Furthermore, workplace bullying has also been found to have a negative impact on the organisation (Einarsen, 2000). In general, bullying in the workplace can impact on the organisation through loss of productivity, an increase in absenteeism and turnover, as well as the cost of intervention programs (Einarsen, 2000; Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2000; McCarthy & Barker, 2000; McCarthy et al., 1995). Sheehan, McCarthy, Barker and Henderson (2001), using a conservative prevalence estimate of workplace bullying (3.5%), calculated the costs of workplace bullying to

Australian employers at between six and 13 billion dollars every year when hidden and lost opportunity costs were considered. Using a higher prevalence estimate of 15% increases this figure to between \$17 and 36 billion dollars per year.

If a manager who has experienced or witnessed upwards bullying, or a staff member who has witnessed upwards bullying, is affected to the same or similar extent found in previous studies, then it is expected that the ability of either the manager or staff member to effectively perform their role will also be reduced. Furthermore, given the complex and vital role managers perform, it is suggested that the cost to the organisation will be considerable. For instance, workplace bullying directed at a manager may impact upon not only the manager but also their workgroup. This may happen because the manager and the staff members are not functioning effectively (due to physical or mental health related symptoms); others are drawn into the conflict; or the manager and members of the work team may become involved in grievance investigations. Further costs may be included for those who have to mediate or help resolve the situation, such as human resource staff and organisational counsellors, and the use of formal grievance system, including the costs of tribunals and legal representatives (Sheehan et al., 2001). As a result, it is argued that organisations need to investigate methods by which they can inform managers of support mechanisms, that bullying behaviour performed by anyone (manager or staff member) is not acceptable and to seek support as soon as possible. It is also proposed further understanding of the processes involved with upwards bullying is also necessary.

Process of Upwards bullying:

Application of Social Identity Theory to Upwards bullying

Research into workplace bullying thus far has focused mostly on individual factors such as personality traits of the target or the bully (for example, Ashforth, 1997; Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Zapf, 1999) and bullying as an interpersonal conflict (for example, Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003). More recently there has been a move towards investigating the influence that organisational factors, such as leadership and the changing nature of work, has on workplace bullying (for example, Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2003; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Hoel & Salin, 2003; McCarthy, 1996; Sheehan, 1996; Vartia, 1996). Others have emphasised that bullying is a multi-faceted phenomenon and, as such, multiple causes, including

organisational and group related factors and not just individual aspects, should be considered (Zapf, 1999). Zapf (1999) suggested that group characteristics, for example envy and scapegoating of groups are also related to workplace bullying. Furthermore, group characteristics such as ethnicity (Rayner & Hoel, 1997), gender, age and organisational status [for instance, the division between management and staff within organisations (Jablin, 1986)] (Hoel et al., 2001) have been found to be related to workplace bullying. As a result, further research into workplace bullying as a group event has been called for (Ramsay & Troth, 2002). It is argued here that, as managers are commonly viewed by staff as being 'an outsider' and different to the dominant culture of 'the workers' (Jablin, 1986), they can be viewed as legitimate targets of abuse.

Einarsen et al. (2003) contends that being a member of a group which is considered outside of the accepted dominant culture may be the only reason some people are bullied. It may be that the bullying of managers by their staff can be regarded as a group-based conflict between staff and their managers, which can be explained by applying social identity theory, which can further inform our understanding of the processes involved. In the following section social identity theory will be applied to the case of upwards bullying, as one conceptualisation of the processes involved when a staff member bullies a manager.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory provides a framework for understanding how group factors may increase vulnerability to upwards bullying. A number of hypotheses have been presented as part of, or extensions of, social identity theory to explain why individuals seek to place themselves within or outside of social groups. According to social identity theory, social competition resides within two complementary processes, social categorisation and social comparison (Hogg & Mullin, 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2000) as seen in Figure 1.

Social Categorisation

Social categorisation is a process by which an individual classifies themselves and others according to perceived similarities and differences (Haslam, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). As a result, individuals place themselves in a preferred in-group based on similar characteristics. Difference is used to exclude others and place them in the out-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). While characteristics that people can use to define in-groups

or out-groups include age, gender, or race, organisational distinctions, such as department, profession and position, the roles of manager and staff member can also define in- or out-group membership (Schneider & Northcraft, 1999).

Social Comparison

Social comparison is the process whereby individuals make direct comparisons between themselves and others, as well as to other social categories or groups (Callan, Gallois, Noller, & Kashima, 1991). By comparing ourselves to those whom we like and are similar to, or the in-group, we enhance our self-esteem (Callan et al., 1991; Haslam, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Schneider & Northcraft, 1999). This is known as the self-esteem hypothesis and is considered as one of the primary motivating factors for the development of social identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Furthermore, comparing the characteristics of the in-group to relevant out-groups also develops social identity (Callan et al., 1991). Therefore, in order to enhance social identity individuals tend to favour members of their in-group at the expense of those in the out-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Schneider & Northcraft, 1999). As a result individuals in the in-group develop their own social identity, self-esteem and fulfil a need for inclusion (Brewer, 2001) at the expense of those in the out-group, who are excluded.

Self-categorisation and Prototypes

Self-categorisation extends the theory of social identity by explaining the cognitive processes involved (Haslam, 2001) and can be used to further explain the process of bullying. According to Ramsay and Troth (2002), prototype formation and uncertainty reduction are two processes related to self-categorisation, which in turn can be associated with workplace bullying. Prototypes tend to be the attributes that individuals attach to members of in-groups and out-groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Ramsay & Troth, 2002). As a result, prototypes tend to indicate model behaviour or the ideal types of behaviours, thoughts and attitudes expected from a member of a particular group (Haslam, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Through social comparison, similarities of prototype attitudes, beliefs and behaviour are commonly emphasised within in-groups whilst differences between out-group members are accentuated (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus, norms, stereotyping and cohesion within and between groups are developed.

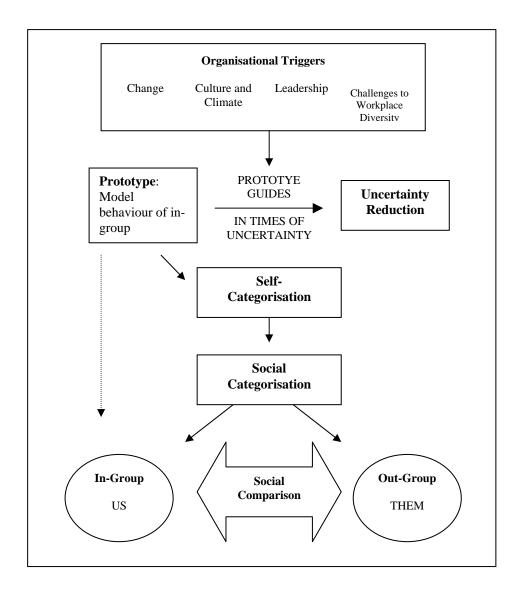


Figure 1. Social Identity Theory

Consequently, through the use of prototypes, individuals are no longer seen as being distinctive or unique but rather representative of a prototypical group member. This is known as the process of depersonalisation (Haslam, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). It is proposed that depersonalisation of others may help explain how some bullying behaviours are accepted or justified in some organisations (Ramsay & Troth, 2002).

Uncertainty Reduction

In addition, since prototypes inform individual group members of appropriate beliefs, thoughts and behaviours, they can also reduce uncertainty. The reduction of uncertainty is seen by Hogg and Terry (2000) as an additional motivation beyond the enhancement of self-esteem, and perhaps a more

central explanation as to why individuals seek to categorise themselves into groups. Self-categorisation reduces subjective uncertainty by providing individuals with a clear set of attitudes and behaviours to follow in the form of a prototype (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Ultimately prototypes inform individuals as to who they are and where they fit in. In times of great uncertainty or with regard to vital issues, groups that provide clear and simple prototypes will be especially attractive to individuals (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus, in the current workplace environment, which is characterised by uncertainty (Lewis & Sheehan, 2003; McCarthy, 1996; Sheehan, 1996, 1999), social identity and self-categorisation processes are particularly relevant because they provide an explanation about individual behaviours, including how negative behaviours such as bullying could become prevalent.

It is possible therefore that individuals seek in-group support and the assurance it provides in times of uncertainty (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Furthermore, it is also possible to consider that those who are bullied are perceived to be in the out-group simply because they are different to the prototype set by the in-group (Ramsay & Troth, 2002). In the case of bullying it may be that the person who is being bullied is a target purely because they do not suit the social categories within the organisation (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). Thus, they are isolated and placed within the out-group and treated accordingly. The following discussion provides a framework of how social identity theory conceptually explains the process of upwards bullying.

Social Identity and Workplace Bullying

As previously discussed, social categorisation occurs when an individual self-categorises her or himself within a group (Haslam, 2001). This self-categorisation reduces uncertainty through the guide of a prototype (Hogg & Terry, 2000). One method by which people within organisations categorise themselves is by their position in the organisation. The differentiation found within most organisations between 'Us' the workers and 'Them' the management, can be seen as a categorisation of different groups within an organisation. The existence of these two groups is supported by research into supervisor-subordinate communications. Staff members and managers not only tend to describe themselves differently, they have been found to use different criteria when making judgments and they rarely agree on the duties of the subordinate (Jablin, 1986). Whether a manager has previously held their staff member's position has little effect on bridging the gap between manager and staff (Jablin,

1986). Thus it is apparent that within organisations workers and managers categorise themselves into two different groups: 'Us and Them'. Social comparisons between the two groups then occur, as explained.

From the workers' perspective 'Us' is the in-group, which is trusted and to be protected and perceived to share the same values and attitudes (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Schneider & Northcraft, 1999), while managers or 'Them' is the excluded out-group. By comparison, members of the out-group are not to be trusted and are often seen as more difficult to communicate with (Schneider & Northcraft, 1999). Schneider & Northcraft (1999) suggest that shared social identity within groups increases perceived differences between groups, thus enhancing the possibility of unnecessary conflict, which may increase during times of organisational uncertainty. In the case of upwards bullying, social comparisons of managers as members of the out-group may result in managers being regarded as untrustworthy, which could lead to conflict.

Organisational Factors as a Trigger

It is proposed that organisational factors can threaten the in-group or further emphasise the difference between the in-group and out-group. Hoel and Salin (2003) proposed four organisational antecedents for bullying. They cited the changing nature of work, the work organisation, organisational culture and climate, and leadership are reasons that may influence or cause bullying in the workplace. Changes such as the de-layering of organisations resulting in increased competition between workers (Sheehan, 1999), changes in organisational procedures (Baron & Neuman, 1996) as well as increases in diversity within the workforce (Baron & Neuman, 1998), for example the increase of women in managerial positions (Hammond & Holton, 1993), were all suggested as factors which may act as enabling or triggering factors (Hoel & Salin, 2003).

For some staff members within the workplace, changes and challenges described previously may be perceived as a threat to their in-group. As such, individuals may show resistance to these changes to protect either their position in the in-group or the in-group itself, seeking the reassurance and security of the group membership as well as enhancement of self-identity (Brewer, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000). It is suggested that factors such as organisational change, organisational culture and climate, leadership and challenges to workplace diversity act as enabling factors or triggers in the

occurrence of upwards bullying and may assist in explaining why an individual may act against a manager. Davenport et al. (1999) supports this view, stating that, staff may dissent against a manager, who they hold responsible for the current uncertainty. This suggests a need on the part of organisations to further support managers, especially if these factors are present.

Need to Act

According to Brewer (2001) aggression occurs more often out of a desire to enhance or protect the in-group. Where the out-group is seen as a threat to the in-group's goals or values, hatred of the out-group is intensified (Brewer, 2001). In this case, the individual acts out of the desire to be a 'good group member'. Similarly, if an individual's identity or inclusion within the in-group is threatened then the individual may act because of this perceived threat (Ashmore, Jussim, Wilder, & Heppen, 2001). The motive in this case is for the individual to reduce the uncertainty and to protect their position in the in-group. Thus, upwards workplace bullying may occur when an individual perceives a threat to the in-group, for instance cultural change to the group, or to their own position within the ingroup through an organisational re-structure.

Consequently a manager who, as a member of the out-group or 'Them', is perceived to be a threat to the in-group's values and goals would be more likely to experience upwards bullying. For instance, a manager implementing or overseeing an organisational change process may be seen by the workgroup as challenging and threatening the values and norms currently inherent within the workgroup. Furthermore, a manager who is seen as a threat to the culture of the workgroup (for example a young new manager, a new female manager or a female manager in a traditionally male dominated organisation) could also be seen as threatening the values and norms of the in-group. Thus, it is argued that the phenomenon of upwards bullying and the associated behaviours can be better understood within the framework provided by social identity theory.

Risk of Action

Naturally the risk for those taking actions associated with bullying will be substantial, especially in the case of upwards bullying, where traditionally managers are seen to have much of the power.

Thus, in the case of a conscious act of bullying, the individual or the in-group would need to consider whether the risk is worthwhile before deciding to bully a manager. However, feelings of victimisation

and vulnerability may increase the chance of action and override concerns an individual may have about risk (Ashmore et al., 2001). Furthermore, risk for the in-group can be minimised through either the support of another manager (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel & Vartia, 2003) or via the use of subtle behaviours. Miller (1997) in her study of gender harassment within the U.S. Army suggests that men within the army take on covert behaviors in order to undermine their female superior's legitimate power. Examples of how this occurred included foot-dragging, constant scrutiny, gossip, rumours, and sabotage. Thus, if the threat is considered extreme enough, there is support from the group, and behaviours are subtle, then the risk may be perceived as reduced enough for the perpetrator/s to take action, that is, to bully upwards.

A cycle between threat and appraisal and harm doing has also been proposed (Ashmore et al., 2001). The cycle suggests that, as the in-group perceives a threat and responds with harm doing, be it physical or psychological, this in turn increases the threat even more, resulting in the need for further harm doing in a spiral of ongoing harmful action. When applying this to upwards bullying, acting against a manager would be seen as involving a risk due mainly to the positional power they hold within the organisation (Yukl, 1989). Once harm doing occurs, it is suggested that the threat of action on the part of the manager increases and further harm becomes necessary. At this point, the interplay between the individual and the group becomes especially important. The individual may act in response to a threat and out of a need to protect either the in-group or their own position within the ingroup. The group may actively support their actions or lend tacit support by allowing it to occur. Thus, upwards bullying is an experience shared between the perpetrator and the in-group, who the perpetrator/s perceive as a support mechanism. In all, it is argued that upwards bullying is a theoretical and practical possibility that can be damaging to managers, staff and the wider organisation.

Research Recommendations

Through the application of social identity theory to the concept of upwards bullying it was concluded that organisation uncertainty could act as a trigger for a staff member(s) acting against a manager. It was suggested there could be a number of possible triggers of upwards bullying (for instance, organisational change). As a result it is recommended that organisations investigate the

possible triggers of upwards bullying and what they can do to support managers who are faced with the potential environment where upwards bullying may occur.

It was also suggested that in order to reduce the risk involved with upwards bullying, staff might need to obtain support from the group or another manager, and also employ subtle behaviours that are difficult to identify. It is expected that awareness of upwards bullying behaviours will facilitate the timely identification of upwards bullying situations allowing for earlier intervention on the part of the organisation, thus reducing the impact on managers and staff. Further research is necessary to assist in identifying upwards bullying behaviours.

It is expected that a feature of upwards bullying will be that managers may not label bullying behaviours by their staff as bullying, using in preference, alternative terms such as 'a difficult staff member'. Furthermore, they may normalise inappropriate behaviour by some staff as being 'part of the job'. This may in turn reduce the likelihood of a manager seeking assistance. As workplace bullying has been found to be a form of workplace conflict that degenerates progressively into ongoing abuse (Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2001) as well as the enhancement of the perpetrator's power due to the recipient remaining silent (Adams cited in Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2000) it is even more vital to provide managers with early intervention strategies that enable them to identify inappropriate behaviour, save 'face' and to resolve interpersonal conflicts. As a result research into intervention programs which assist managers and staff alike to identify and label inappropriate and abusive behaviour by both staff and managers (Sheehan, 1999) is needed.

Furthermore, it could be argued that there is a need to identify support measures for managers who feel they are being bullied by their staff. As upwards bullying has previous been unexplored it is proposed that there will be little, if any, support for managers. Given the detrimental impact upwards bullying could have on the manager and their workgroup, it is argued that organisations need to investigate methods by which they can inform managers of support mechanisms and to engage in educational activities that convey information about the unacceptable nature of bullying and its effects..

Conclusion

Through the application of social identity theory, it is possible to conceptualise the process of upwards bullying. It was argued that an increase in the level of uncertainty in an organisation, for instance an organisational restructure, may trigger a staff member to act against their manager. As a member of an out-group a manager could be perceived as a suitable target, despite the risk to the staff member for taking such inappropriate action. Action on the part of a staff member against a manager increases the risk of disciplinary action from the manager and as such brings about the need for further action on the part of the staff member thus, beginning the cycle of abuse and bullying. Subtle behaviours and the support of another manager may be ways in which the staff member/s can reduce the risks associated with actions against those in higher levels of positional power. It was argued that the costs for the manager who has experienced being bullied by a staff member, the workgroup and organisation will be substantial. For this reason it is essential that organisations and researchers attempt to explore the process of upwards bullying, the factors involved, the behaviours and support measures.

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