

Article

# The Elephant in the Room: Youth, Cognition, and Student Groups in Mass Social Movements

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**Abstract:** Student and youth groups are often vanguard actors in turbulent times. This article proposes that when they are part of broader social movements, they can introduce strong age-cohort influences in a movement's development. These influences derive from the balance between youths and adults in a movement and their interrelationships, especially over the long term when demands remain unanswered by the state. Other influences include resource availability, which tends to cluster with older generations, tactical specialization according to age cohorts, and the tendency of groups with younger members to be willing to take greater risks, be more passionate in their demands, and more militant in their tactics. In this report, we identified several empirically recognized cognitive dimensions relevant to youthful participation: (1) identity search, (2) risk taking, (3) emotionality, and (4) cognitive triggering. These cognitive factors of late adolescence and early adulthood can energize a movement when young cohorts participate but also run the risk of alienating older members and public opinion. We discussed how mass movements for political and/or cultural change are frequently intergenerational and how intergenerational relations can mitigate the inward-turning and militant tendencies of young adults. In broad movements for social change, these relations can create a division of labor in which students are the vanguard actors and the older members mobilize the social and material resources available to them. Under other conditions, youth and student groups wield a two-edged sword with the capability of energizing a movement or alienating older cohorts of militants and public opinion.

**Keywords:** social movements; social movement theory; student movements; generations; student activism; youth movements; age cohorts; high-risk activism

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## 1. Introduction

Highly relevant to the social science of youth cultures and subcultures is their role in vanguard movements of social change. In this decade, the Indignados in Spain, the numerous marches and encampments of the Occupy Wall Street protest wave, the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul, the student protests in Chile, and the Black lives movement in the U.S., among many others, were impelled by the disproportional participation of youth [1–5]. Consensus among researchers of the Occupy movement is that roughly 40% of the marchers were young, with a much higher proportion among the overnight occupiers [3,6,7]. Not all social movements are disproportionately youthful, but many are, and among those, we find some of the most significant movements of our era. This article is a theoretical essay whose goal is to come to terms with the generational dimension by identifying key age-related processes that operate in the big social movements of our era. The end point will be several propositions about the participation of youth and their relation to other participants, which we will articulate with selected evidence from our past research projects where generational influences operated.

There is a large amount of literature about the political participation of youth. In sociology, the traditions of research about youth groups and subcultures date back to early Chicago School perspectives, and today, they remain a vibrant and dynamic field of study, as this Special Issue

of *Societies* demonstrates. However, it is fair to say that in social movement research youth and age-cohorts as determinant factors have not been accorded central theoretical roles. This is puzzling because many of the major movements comprising the foundational literature of the social movements field today have generational relations and the role of younger activists at their core: in the civil rights movement [8–11], the women’s movement [12–14], and the 1960s student movement in the US [15]. Whittier’s study of the women’s movement in Columbus, Ohio [14] accorded generational “microcohorts” a key role. An important study of generational cohorts was Klatch’s comparison of left and right student activists [15], SDS and the conservative group Young Americans for Freedom, but her research is now two decades old. Neither of the recent handbooks, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* [16] nor *The Oxford Handbook Social Movements* [17], both authoritative reviews of the field by leading scholars, cover youth movements, student movements, or intergenerational relations. The field’s current theoretical emphasis on dynamics and relational-strategic approaches offers a conceptual space for assessing generational dynamics, but our sense of the literature yields very little on intergenerational mechanisms and their effects on movement strategies and tactics. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s forays into the mechanisms of contentious politics [18,19] did not address generational relations nor how they might play out as fundamental factors in mobilization. Overall, youth movements, student protests, and the concept of generations—the common experiences of age cohorts, developmental predispositions, and structural location—have been treated as incidental to the central causes of mobilization and movement development. In some movements, the obvious youth of most protesters is the “elephant in the room,” an undeniable social fact to those who study protest movements, but one that is rarely talked about.

Silence on the issue rides on two unstated assumptions: (1) higher-level theorizing about social movement development is achieved with mental models of “generic adults” as the participants. Pondering mobilization processes this way then rides on the additional assumption that (2) the 18–25-year-old cohort is substantially the same as, say, 25–35 year-olds, or—stepping up the developmental ladder, at least as far as most protest participation is concerned—to the 35–55 year-old adult actor. We saw these assumptions in the shaping of the social movements field in the late 1980s and 1990s when the new social movement perspective became an important theoretical model. Very little was said at that time about the fact that most NSM participants were between 18 and 25. In Melucci’s edited book, *Altri Codici* [20], which was the empirical basis of his version of NSM theorizing, all the movement groups studied were mostly composed of 18–25-year-olds. As every university professor knows, there are important cognitive differences between 18–19-year-olds in their introductory classes, and 20–22-year-olds in advanced classes, not to mention young adults 25 and older.

A theme that we will guide this study’s arguments is that physical, developmental, and cognitive traits among young cohorts can have significant impacts on social movement trajectories based on how they cluster within the web of relations among movement actors. Young participants can aid mobilization efforts with their energy, commitment, creativity, and idealism or negatively affect them by poor strategic choices, internal divisions, or “process fetishism”, as was observed by Gitlin [3] regarding many Occupy encampments and confirmed by the movement’s stunted development. Moreover, movements can be shaped by tactical specialization according to age cohorts, differential resource availability, organizational affiliation, technological skills, and sheer numbers, certainly a function of the well-known effect of the structural availability of youth—which, by the way, this report is *not* about. The numerical proportion of young participants in a movement is an empirical question, but it is undeniably high in many of the major movements of the new millennium. This report probes the theoretical implications of taking this seriously and the effects of how the cognitive traits of young participants cluster to shape their collective actions.

## 2. Cognitive and Psychological Development of Youth: The “Gang of Four”

Among social movement researchers—typically sociologists and political scientists—there is a tendency to steer clear of psychological factors in their research designs. This is due to a combination

of academic specialization, the dominance of structural concepts à la political opportunity theory, which tends to dominate the field's theorizing these days, and the avoidance of discredited collective behavior concepts like psychological disorientation and strain. However, there are important findings about cognitive development that, from the perspective of age cohorts, have significant implications for the field.

Using MRI scans, cognitive scientists have found that the gray matter of the brain changes in different functional areas at different times during adolescence and thereafter [21]. While the study of brain development is still evolving [22], MRI techniques have shown that the brain's white matter—wire-like fibers that establish neurons' long-distance connections between brain regions—thickens progressively from birth and continues until about 25 years [23]. Insights about the late-developing brain came from a major longitudinal research project that looked at brain changes among children between 3 and 16 years old. The project was extended to include 22-year-olds, and researchers found that the brain kept changing in the panel participants into their twenties. Striking growth spurts were seen until the teenage years in areas connecting the temporal and parietal lobes, the regions of the brain specialized for language and understanding spatial relations [24,25]. In the later years, important changes were seen in the cerebellum and prefrontal cortex, the parts of the brain that constrain and control of emotions, and a pruning of the synapses occurred—depending on the traffic on the various pathways [26]. The brain increases efficiency by pruning pathways that are used infrequently and creates a leaner brain structure adapted to the individual's common environmental stimuli. This is a process that takes place during childhood and again during the adolescent years and into the twenties. For our purposes, the consensus is that changes in brain structure are much slower after the age of 25, but important changes occur up until then.

Related to these changes in cognitive processing are the stages of psychological development. A recent trend in psychology has been the articulation of a new stage of life-cycle development called “emerging adulthood” [27–29]. It is conceived as a period of identity exploration, self-examination, and experimentation in work, love, and life philosophy that one finds today among many 18–25-year-olds. This work is an elaboration of earlier thinking by the American psychologist Kenneth Keniston, who reflected on the turmoil of the 1960s and the “enormous value placed upon change, transformation, and movement” among youth during that period [30] (p. 6). He identified “a growing minority of post-adolescents who had not settled on questions that [in the past] defined adulthood and questioned social role and lifestyle.” Keniston [31] observed that these patterns occurred during the period between adolescence and young adulthood, 18–25 years of age.

Although this psychological-developmental literature is rarely cited by social movement researchers, its recent findings synchronize well with the foundations of the new social movement perspective laid thirty years ago. Identity exploration was seen as a major cause of participation in “movement areas” [32] or movement scenes [33]—platforms for identity politics characteristic of new social movements [34] (p. 89). These spaces are not only communal settings for cultural activities, but also involve “patronage of specific cafes, bookshops, meditation and yoga centers social contexts to experiment with new lifestyles” [35] (p. 110). Punk, anarchist, autonomist and squatter communities are also such centers [36,37]. Activities that occur there also synchronize with the findings about cognitive development and brain plasticity mentioned above—especially regarding the trimming of pathways—and how changing cultural expectations about the timetable for entering adulthood are processed and, in turn, reflected in the brain structure.

Concepts of generational and age-cohort participation take on different meanings when melded with elements of cognitive development that affect how experience is processed. When we overlay distinct cognitive orientations that affect information processing about life, love, and politics, the analyst encounters different causal mechanisms, namely, the aggregate effects of shared psychological states such that cohort-specific ways of processing shared experiences cluster to shape collective action. Regarding the social science of youth and society, this is reflected in unique configurations of preadolescent and adolescent cultures in gangs, cliques, fashions, fads, viral memes, and so on.

From the perspective of social movement theory, we see two general youth-specific collective action forms that reflect the intersection of cognitive structure, psychological development, and macro sociocultural change. First, contemporary economic and cultural trends allow clusters of behavioral patterns such as prefigurative subcultural affiliations, movement scenes, squatting, and emergent urban spaces for identity exploration and lifestyle experimentation. Elements of these spaces have found their way into protest events, from the anti-global occupations of twenty-five years ago to the Indignados and Occupy encampments in 2011. Second, where these trends are not as widespread, changing political opportunities regarding state regime, levels of repression and risk, and accumulating sociopolitical grievances, can activate the same cognitive processes regarding identities, ideologies, and youth-group affiliations—most notably at universities—and are often translated into the mobilization of protests. We have in mind vanguard student movements that go beyond education-specific themes, and student wings of broader movements of social and political change. Let us stress that the point of our cognitive-psychological focus is that there are reasons beyond structural availability, grievances (such as unemployment) and cultural trends for both patterns of youthful collective action. Moreover, we see shared cognitive orientations clustering in four ways, which we call the “cognitive gang of four,” which, once recognized, inform us of several research propositions that can guide a program of study about age effects in social movements. These four cognitive mechanisms are (1) identity exploration, (2) risk taking, (3) lower thresholds for emotional responses, and (4) cognitive triggering.

### 3. Identity Exploration

The idea of identity exploration stresses how cognitive elements derived from brain structure intersect with the social-constructivist character of self-identity long recognized by sociologists from the symbolic-interactionist perspective [38,39]. The concept also represents a key feature of “emerging adulthood” and overlaps with Erikson’s fifth developmental stage beginning in late adolescence [40]. Erikson’s classic treatise on youth and identity proposed that the process of arriving at a mature individual identity occurs through reconciliation of ascribed roles (received from social location) with various new and emergent roles that become available at this stage of life. For our purposes, this new universe of roles and relationships can include participation in a protest movement or a prefigurative community, which brings a new social identity into dialogue with one’s individual identity. Psychologists studying group formation have long separated individual identity from its social aspects derived from group membership [41,42]. As horizons widen at this stage of emerging adulthood, numerous and diverse alternatives for social identity construction become available and actively pursued. Erikson also noted a common link between identity and ideology. An individual’s identity can be integrated by how ideologies render it meaningful. The question “who am I?” is partly answered by “what I believe,” which, in the context of dense social networks of youth groups, is accomplished via discussion, debate, and intense interactions. Another way of stating this is “who am I” becomes closely melded with “what *we* believe”, with emphasis on the collective processes of social definition. These observations lead to the following proposition about youth and social movements:

**Proposition 1.** *Social movement groups with disproportionately high memberships of youths 18–25 years old are more likely to emphasize identity search and/or comprehensive ways of pursuing new lifestyles.*

Large social movements are complex, heterogeneous, and made up of networks of groups and organizations that share social change goals [35,43]. Future research will have to operationalize measurements of the identity-focus for different groups, such as differences between a formal organization of professional women that works for pay equity versus groups with a life-style focus on feminism, as in the women’s *Collectivo Ticinese* [20]. Both represent the women’s movement but may have different levels of intensity for identity construction processes and, as proposition one suggests, are likely to have different age make-ups. This is an empirical question to be examined in further research.

Processes of identity construction occur in situations of sustained interaction among group members, which will direct researchers to look at specific groups within a movement for whom a strong identity focus might be hypothesized. A qualitative research design based on intensive interviews, systematic observation, and review of internal documents can probe processes of identity construction among members, as a first step operationalizing proposition one. In the next section, we examined the collective-identity processes with microlevel textual data from one such group, an anarchist-punk collective in the U.S. that calls itself Profane Existence.

### *Collective Identity Construction in the Punk-Anarchist Groups*

Punk, anarchist, squatter, and autonomist groups advocate politicized lifestyles that give strong emphasis to the construction of collective identities. With roots that reach back over forty years, the punk movement, broadly conceived, is one of the most significant contemporary cultural movements in the West. Separate groups draw upon antiestablishment sentiments and prefigurative organization to offer a reservoir of discourse to probe questions of “who am I?” and “what are we about?” [36,44]. These groups and collectives have been widely studied in several contexts: in England [44–47], in North America, [37,48,49], in Germany [50,51], in Spain [52,53], and in Italy [36,54]. We know that there is considerable diversity in what these groups believe and how they are organized. Some have articulated anarchist or Marxist ideologies and are well organized. Others are loose aggregations united by a general collective identity that derives primarily from their music and lifestyle, and secondarily from politicized sentiments. The same can be said about their members; there is variation in political sophistication and engagement. In its entirety, the movement has a worldwide base that was loosely linked through self-published newspapers and magazines (“fanzines,” now social media), independent audio production and distribution networks of hardcore music and personal communication networks. To empirically ground our discussion and focus on the identity dimension in the context of its developmental-cognitive aspects, we examined a specific group located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which we previously reported on [55].

The Profane Existence Collective characterizes itself as a small group of revolutionary anarchists, but by dress, musical predilection, and collective lifestyle, it is clear that they draw heavily on punk-autonomist subcultural norms. Most members are between 18–28 years old, with a few in their thirties. They publish a bimonthly paper of “revolution and resistance”, screen print T-shirts, produce a music label, and distribute hardcore punk music according to DIY values. We did not choose this group because it is representative of punk culture—although it does capture part of the punk-anarchist scene. Rather, we will focus on a textual statement as cultural artifact of the group, collectively produced, that presents an articulated belief system and a characterization of the group’s collective identity. Close analysis of the document offers the analyst a window to explore the relationship between ideology and identity, as we discussed in the last section. With the newspaper and music activities, the collective has a level of organization that places it at the cusp of protest activity. Some members have taken part in gay pride activities, but for the most part, the group does not move beyond prefigurative lifestyle activism to embrace activities in the modular protest repertoire. The printed text in Figure 1 helps clarify why. It is reproduced here from the group’s newspaper. Poignantly, the text is superimposed over a picture of a hand grenade to accentuate the anarchist-prefigurative quality of the autonomous free space the group has created.

Key themes in this text are anarchist and class-war imagery, which is characteristic of many autonomist and anarchist groups in Europe and North America [33,50], and a global antisystem and antiestablishment focus. Yet, as an ideological statement, close analysis indicates that it falls short of providing impetus and direction for focused protest mobilization, based on what we know about collective action framing [56–59]. First, it fails to address unambiguously the diagnostic task, that is, the identification of the problem and the attribution of blame [56] (p. 200). To be sure, the statement articulates a sense of injustice and anger both in words and tone, but it does not identify a specific target of action. By grouping together the system, the capitalists, the ruling class, the cops,

sexism, ageism, and homophobia, all as enemies, the manifesto offers no concrete personification of the enemy that might push emotional hot buttons to precipitate collective action [59] (p. 33). Second, the statement's specification of what needs to be done, its prognostic frame [56] (p. 201) or agency frame [59] (p. 7), presents only vague allusions to "working together to solve the problems", and ill-defined individual or small group action, such as joining with friends, sisters, and brothers to "take action, create autonomous zones". Moreover, the contempt for organization and leadership ("We ain't got no bosses and not one of us is higher on the ladder" and "The last thing we want to do is lead any movement") tends to undercut any kind of joint agency.

## PROFANE EXISTENCE

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**WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO:** The Profane Existence Collective is a small group of revolutionary anarchists working together to produce a bi-monthly paper of revolution & resistance, not to mention punk rock. We do a record label, screen print shirts, run a literature and music distribution service and various other projects including local struggles and actions. All these things are anarchist in perspective and we do them with the goal of revolution.

**WHAT WE BELIEVE:** We ain't got no bosses and not one of us is higher on the ladder (what fucking ladder?) than any other. Some call this non-hierarchical we wouldn't have it any other way. We are anti-authoritarian, aim to kick the fucking cops out and keep them out, working for the total destruction of the state and capitalism and all the evil institutions they create. This system which we intend to string from the neck until dead divides us into classes based on power and wealth with the majority of people continually exploited by the rich bastards otherwise known as the ruling class. We support the rich in their numerous attempts at suicide, we might even throw in a helping hand. This fight is anti-racist and we support self-determination of people of color. We are pro-Queer, don't you know how sweet it is. We are anti-sexist with a swift kick to the groin of patriarchy. We support the fight for equality of those with different physical abilities. We fight against an ageist system in society that alienates the young and disregards older folks. We are eco-anarchists. We smile gleefully as multinationals burn to the ground. We will use all means necessary (i.e. the guillotine) to fight this oppression that fucks with our daily lives. Oh, and we'll do it with a smile. The revolution we fight for is one of pleasure to release us from the boredom of the everyday roles the ruling class has created. Have a blast while you drop the fucking bomb.

**(DON'T) JOIN US:** We don't think we are any higher than any one of you (remember that ladder? We burned it down). The last thing we want to do is lead any movement. We're not a party, we're having one. Do it Yourself, you and your friends, sisters and brothers can work together to solve the problems, take action, create autonomous zones. This is not some kind of dippy lifestyle drop-out commune thing but a situation for the spark of revolutionary movement with the aim of transforming our entire society. A society of freedom and pleasure, based on the needs and desires of people not tyrants. You got the power it takes to destroy the power that takes.

**FIGHT BACK! A WHOLE WORLD IS WAITING FOR US!**

Figure 1. Profane Existence: Who We Are.

If the statement is not a call for collective action, how, then, are we to interpret it? The answer seems to lie in the litany of identity statements that occur in the section, "what we believe," at the very beginning. "We ain't got no bosses." "We are anti-authoritarian." "We are pro-queer and anti-sexist." "We fight for equality." "We fight against a system that alienates." From the beginning we are given not so much a call to arms but rather a manifesto of collective identity. To put it another way, the weakly developed statements of prognostic or agency frames might be better understood, especially in the context of clear statements about outrage against social injustice, as assertions of collective identity since they are not practicable calls for action. We suggest that this interpretation is reinforced by statements about motivation at the end of the text, in the "what We Believe" section. Here, the revolutionary struggle is conceived as a release from boredom: "Have a blast while you drop the fucking bomb". We are a "society of freedom and pleasure." These are motivations, less so for collective action and more so for commitment to a particular identity. It is worth noting that an essential element of punk identity is missing from the statement, namely, the centrality of music. Moore and Roberts [37] discuss how listening to hard core music, dancing to it, making it, producing it, and talking about it are central behaviors of punk scenes. Yet, focusing on identity, lifestyle and music as a form of protest

directs the rage of the anarchist-punk subculture away from the established protest repertoire, and thus, away from intergenerational linkages that alliances in protest campaign might bring and turns the group inward to identity-construction processes.

To summarize, this statement is a specific example from one movement group of a general element of youth activism: collective identity construction in a sustained group interaction. In some groups, it is possible that developmental-identity issues produce mostly inward-looking interactions that become self-perpetuating and are strongly predicated on boundary maintenance in the sense of lifestyle and ideological articulation. In general, the anarchist-punk movement has proven to be a long-lasting phenomenon, lasting much longer than the beats of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s. Through the years, groups like the Profane Existence Collective have engaged in coalitions and campaigns with political impacts: ecology, gender and sexual rights, labor, antifascism and antiracism, but it is fair to say that, in general, the movement maintains strong identity dimensions based on a prefigurative lifestyle. In contrast, other kinds of activist youth groups, such as various kinds of student organizations (to be discussed in the next section), are more networked in institutional relations, most notably schools, universities, churches, and political parties, and can draw upon resources to enhance and amplify their mobilization efforts. Of course, isolation from establishment groups is precisely the point of punk-anarchist strand of DIY ideology, but this means that they are mostly cast upon their own devices for protest mobilization and that intergenerational contacts are limited. Relations with other groups can mitigate and channel identity-search activities and encourage the exchange of ideas. Intergroup connections can also inject what in a later section we labelled “cognitive vanguardism” in the form of bringing more innovation and creativity into to broader political opposition.

#### 4. Risk Taking

Next, cognitive development affects the frequency and extent of risk-taking behaviors. While structural availability may reduce the interpersonal fallout of risky behavior—for example, where one’s arrest would not impact the livelihood of a household—there are cognitive patterns that suggest that 18–25 year-olds (not to mention adolescents 14–17 as in the Palestinian Intifada; [60–62], are less able to invoke and effectively apply varied and elaborated problem-solving models and emotion-regulation strategies to process hot-button emotional situations such as intense interpersonal interactions [63,64]. In addition, young adults are prone to have positive outlooks about the outcomes of events, which imparts a false sense of confidence and reduces their willingness to invest cognitive resources on problem-solving tasks. This makes them more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, such as activism, in repressive states where extensive security increases the likelihood of arrest. Indeed, we can confidently assert that in our field research in several different repressive states (more on this shortly), those high-risk activists who painted antiregime graffiti, distributed leaflets, staged oppositional pranks, raised flags, sabotaged police cars, made symbolic placements (of flowers, for example, at the Gdansk shipyard gates), and waged clandestine campaigns were students almost entirely between the ages of 18 and 25.

**Proposition 2.** *In large social movements made up of numerous groups and organizations, it is more likely that groups composed mostly of young members will engage in high-risk actions and dangerous tactics than groups composed of older members.*

This proposition suggests a general empirical relationship, but as in the first proposition, the operationalization of tactical risk must await the next phase of research. Risk implies increased threats to personal safety, which, in the context of protest movements, means arrest, police violence, and perhaps attacks from counter-protesters and hired thugs. Civil disobedience as a tactic that challenges unjust laws by breaking them is a high-risk behavior by definition. Large numbers, such as in mass street protests, tend to reduce risks and therefore, a higher proportion of older participants would be predicted. As mentioned above, the engagement of young activists in risky behaviors was confirmed

in our own research, although at the time of our fieldwork, their youth was simply taken for granted. Part of the reason for this was that we too were in our thirties—not much older than our respondents. At that time, the fact that most activists were young students was not seen as especially distinctive [65]. But now, as we re-analyze our data, we see that there was an “elephant in the room”—a key variable was missed because we were not looking for it. The purpose of proposition two (and this article in general) is to sensitize researchers (1) that age is a factor that influences tactical choice, and (2) it can significantly influence the trajectory of the larger movement. It may be that in mass movements with diverse intergenerational makeups, leaders may use younger activists for positive radical-flank effects. Or—perhaps more commonly—movement groups of younger members may push the more tactically cautious and typically older movement sectors to more assertive and riskier actions. This is a widely recognized mechanism that occurred in the U.S. civil rights movement.

#### *Risk Taking and Civil Disobedience: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement*

It has been widely documented that students made up an important wing of the African American civil rights movement that pushed the older generation to consider the role of high-risk student militancy in the overall struggle. Student civil resistance began on 1 February 1960, with lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina by four young college students. The next day, students from other black colleges joined them, occupying the Woolworth’s and an S.H. Kress store down the street. It did not take long for the sit-in tactic to spread widely to other southern states. Actions in Nashville and Atlanta were met with mob violence and arrests. Social movement research has extensively chronicled the student branch of the civil rights movement and the dynamics with the SCLC [8–11,66].

The importance of these student actions resided, according to Martin Luther King Jr., in their forceful “refutation of the idea that the colored citizen is satisfied with segregation”. Like Soweto, South Africa, which is discussed below, black students sensed that their parents were too timid about segregation, and many considered King’s SCLC too cautious. Encouraged by Ella Baker, the executive director of the SCLC, not just to integrate lunch counters but to reshape American social structure in its entirety, students formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the spring of 1960. The generational element was clear in Baker’s words: “the younger generation is challenging you and me, they are asking us to forget our laziness and doubt and fear and follow our dedication to the truth to the bitter end” [66] (p. 3). A key event in the African American civil rights movement was the generational split between the SCLC and SNCC, with the students continuing high-risk militancy in desegregation campaigns and voter registration drives, most notably the freedom summer of 1964 in Mississippi [67].

### **5. Emotionalism**

The third member of our “cognitive gang of four” is the tendency of emotions to run higher among youthful participants. Previous research has documented that a person’s ability for emotional regulation is positively associated with age [68]. In addition, somewhat differently, there is research showing that emotional intensity decreases with increasing age [69,70]. Younger participants in protest actions exhibit more emotional and spontaneous actions, sometimes leading to violence or—related to proposition two—ill-advised risks that precipitate violent responses by police. It is a testimony to the training and nonviolent discipline of the student activists in sit-in actions during the U.S. civil rights movement that emotional responses to being beaten, cursed, and spat upon did not carry them away to strike back. On the other hand, in Soweto, South Africa, (where protesters were mostly high-school students) events quickly escalated to violent confrontations, burning, and property destruction, which was a turning point in the anti-apartheid opposition there. In the Hong Kong autonomy protests, which are occurring as we write these words, highly emotional and violent street confrontations between the student sectors of the movement and the police are occurring. It was the youth sector of the movement that stormed the Hong Kong legislature building, defacing the assembly hall, destroying property, and driving a wedge between them and more moderate movement sectors of older citizens. When



there is an outbreak of violence, especially in confrontation with the forces of social control, it is likely that younger activists are at the forefront, or that young bystanders are brought into the fray, as in the Ferguson, Missouri protests of August 2014 [71]. Violence in protest events can be a strategic choice, sometimes among younger, more radical groups, or it can be spontaneous, which typically occurs when the police are provocatively brutal. These are empirical questions, but drawing on our cognitive approach, we offer the following general proposition to guide further refinement of the relationship between youth groups and violence, and then discuss the violent uprising in Soweto, South Africa as a case in point.

**Proposition 3.** *Social movement groups of mostly young members 18–25 years old are more likely than older members to be the initiators of violence in protest events.*

#### *Student Protests of 1976, Soweto Township, South Africa*

The Soweto insurrection was a turning point or hinge in the South African anti-Apartheid movement. The protests were mostly led by high school students who were animated by a change in educational policy requiring courses to be taught in Afrikaans and quickly expanded to express the broader frustration and anger that native South Africans harbored against the apartheid regime. Planned as a peaceful protest in the morning of 16 June, 1976, the leaders had been politicized by their ties to student members of the black-consciousness movement in universities. Specifically, there was a widespread belief among student activists that the older generation's passivity was part of the problem and that their task was to break the silence. When police opened fire on the marching students, it sparked a violent reaction among protesters, leading to several days of rioting. Students set fire to symbols of apartheid such as government building, white businesses, buses, beer halls, and liquor stores. Collective violence spread to Durban, Pretoria, and Cape Town. It was the largest violent outburst South Africa had experienced. Fearing international condemnation, official reports of casualties were often inaccurate but usually fell within the 200–600 range. Soweto students voiced their outrage at the regime that their parents had muted for years, but also their uprising marked and initiated a shift in the ANC's anti-apartheid strategy from organizing outside of the country to the internal organization. The student organizations at universities and youth groups in neighborhoods were part of that anti-apartheid movement writ large. In this example, it is clear how the cognitive mechanism of emotional volatility among younger cohorts affected the movement's long-term trajectory.

## 6. Cognitive Triggering

We offer the concept of *cognitive triggering* as our last mechanism in the “cognitive gang of four”, which captures how information processing and interpretive schemas of youthful activists facilitate breaking with patterns of the past and seeing connections and opportunities in new ways. This is a central and, perhaps, the most significant element of the “gang of four”. Triggering refers to the social psychological concept of breaking social conformity and quiescence, which opens avenues to viewing the world differently and innovating new responses. Being cognitively primed for this partly accounts for the general phenomena of student unrest and mobilization in broad movements of social change, which will be discussed shortly. This also partly explains the high proportions of young 18–25-year-old members in some radical groups and militant groups. However, we suggest that it is first a determinant for a pattern observed by McAdam [72] among his student activists, tactical innovation.

Young activists and students see things in ways their elders do not. The problem-solving algorithms of 18–25-year-olds are less encumbered by past experiences, which allows for a greater processing speed. It also permits greater ease in making connections with other interpretative schemas, receiving new ones, and synchronizing them with new experiences. On the one hand, this means that young activists will be more likely to develop new protest tactics outside the standard repertoire to which opponents may not be able to quickly adapt and/or counter. This kind of tactical innovation can be a resource for social movements, and the more members with these cognitive skills in a movement

or SMO, the greater the likelihood of successful movement outcomes. On the other hand, there are implications regarding the use of technology in mobilization campaigns. Thus, we have two propositions about tactical innovation:

**Proposition 4.** *Information processing patterns of a youth cohort 18–25 years of age can increase strategic and tactical creativity. This predicts that a higher proportion of creative strategies and tactical innovations will come from this cohort.*

**Proposition 5.** *Movements and/or movement groups that are disproportionately made up of young-cohort groups will have a measurably greater use of the latest technologies for mobilization tasks—today, most notably, social media and the latest communication and GPS platforms.*

Propositions four and five may seem self-apparent but they need to be clearly articulated so that further research can empirically test these relationships. Operationalizing tactical creativity for testing will require a systematic approach, but impressionistically, the baby Trump balloon in London, giant puppets at the Battle of Seattle, the sleeping-dragon sleeves at environmental protests, and the numerous innovations to organize and govern the Occupy and Indignados' encampments all qualify.

Previous research has suggested that there are cognitive patterns in the way that young adults (18–25) deal with new and unexpected situations versus the way older adults handle them. Young adults search for new strategies that optimize goals in a problem setting, while those who are older invoke past experiences stored in memory to arrive at a solution [64] (p. 3). It makes sense, therefore, that older participants will apply problem-solving models that have been successful in the past, while innovation and flexibility would be the province of youthful participants. This partly explains why younger activists easily embrace new technologies. Older activists have numerous time-tested schemas—many regarding old technology—and the sheer number of these interfere with acquiring new approaches. This is not because youth are born with a technology gene, but because of their enhanced information-processing and learning abilities which are less encumbered by patterns already stored in memory. Technological innovation was evident with the Chinese students' use of the internet in 1989 during the democracy protests, and in Iranian students' use of YouTube and Flickr during the Green Revolution in 2009. This was clearly demonstrated in the various Occupy encampments and today in the Black Lives movement in the U.S. While these observations are mostly noncontroversial, the cognitive basis of them may be less widely recognized.

We also suggest that triggering is a cognitive mechanism that enables youthful activists to see injustices more clearly, be open to new waves of social criticism and new ideologies and make connections between these and the world they are freshly encountering as young adults. Moreover, these processes can synchronize with emerging identities, as we discussed, and impart a double dose of passion to their activism. The key point here is that individual information-processing patterns for this age cohort aggregate, and thus produce a social effect. Fresh cognitive orientations account, in part, for Mannheim's observation that students can more clearly see injustices and inequalities due to their "fresh contact" with history and society [73] (p. 300). This is an observation confirmed by cognitive science and that leads to our next proposition.

**Proposition 6.** *Compared to older activists, the cognitive patterns characteristic of emerging adulthood in the 18–25-year-old cohort increase one's ability to make new connections and draw new conclusions from fresh contact with society, history, and ideas. We predict that the passionate embrace of new visions for society, new ideological critiques, and alternative futures are more likely concentrated in this cohort than among older cohorts.*

Evidently, there are individual issues of cognitive processing that vary according to brain structure, intelligence, education, class, and past experiences, but as every professor knows, some youths make connections and arrive at new interpretations of the world, become passionate about them, and their passion is contagious for others. This is because the others—students and youth—are also open to new

ways of seeing, and this synchronizes with the other cognitive mechanisms discussed earlier: identity, passion, and risk. Thus, in the next section, we explore how in every historical epoch, cognition intersects with psychology, social psychology and elements of social structure to produce broad and powerful waves of collective action, which we call student vanguardism.

### *Cognition Meets History: Student Vanguardism*

From a historical perspective, the most significant cases of young adults acting collectively for social and political change are large student mobilizations. Indeed, research projects about student movements—especially student radicalism and the “generation gap”—comprised a growth industry in the 1960s and 1970s. Many scholars in sociology and political science looked to broad, macrosociological answers to student protest, such as social alienation [74], the baby boomers confronting traditional university structures [75], affluence and delayed adult responsibilities [30], postmaterialism [76], and an unresponsive political system waging an unpopular war in Vietnam. Others considered psychological and social-psychological causes of student unrest [77,78]. In sociology, Turner [79] presciently observed that identity and personal transformation were increasingly important themes of movement formation during the 1960s. However, since then, the field of social movement research has seen a decline of interest in the student movements.

We use the label student vanguardism instead of “student movements” or “student radicalism” to distinguish our focus on student groups that participate in larger movements, become part of larger movements, or precipitate larger movements. For example, the student sectors of the Hong Kong autonomy movement are distinguishable from other groups and organizations that also demonstrate to protect Hong Kong’s special one-country-two-systems status. One common pattern is that students are the vanguard actors of social change that leave the mass of citizens behind, as we will discuss regarding the New Left movement of the 1960s. Another pattern is that students and young workers mount initial antiregime challenges, which may enjoy wide support among the citizenry but who, for the most part, remain quiescent during initial stages of the movement. In such cases, youth groups and student groups constitute the vast majority of initial actors. Although older participants are sometimes present in the early days—professors, teachers, intellectuals, and workers—students are the vanguard in campaigns that later grow into mass movements. Overall, we suggest that these different patterns intersect with our cognitive observations because (1) this age cohort sees new possibilities for the future, (2) they are risk takers, (3) they are passionate, and (4) their activism feeds their identity quest. The mechanism of cognitive triggering intersects with and is reinforced by the other three “gang of four” mechanisms. This, we suggest, is partly why students and youth are more likely to be the first to fill the streets, occupy squares, confront police in high-risk situations, and endure police violence and arrests in these grand movements of social change. Moreover, we believe that these patterns are not only present due to structural availability, increased enrollments in higher education, intergenerational inequities (such as high unemployment), resource deficits, political, unresponsiveness, or lack of access to elites—structural variables that are often used to explain student movements. Rather, there are mechanisms at work at the level of individual cognition that are powerful because they guide how the world is seen. When aggregated in the intense interaction within and among student groups and organizations, they produce a social effect that the literature and student movements fails to capture. From the mid-twentieth century to today, major movements of social and political change were precipitated by students who saw that another world was possible, and they did this because their brains are different.

In Hungary, the first widespread rebellion against Soviet-imposed Eastern European governments occurred in 1956. Students played a vanguard role and were at the heart of the national uprising. In October, a student march in Budapest was joined by hundreds of thousands of citizens. When students were shot outside a radio station, the army came to their defense, sparking the general uprising [80,81]. In China, the Cultural Revolution opened full throttle when in 1966, Mao Zedong formed the Red Guards to mobilize China’s youth against to counterrevolutionary elements. Mao

did this to strengthen his position against his opponents in the Chinese Communist Party, but the passion of the Red Guards shows that through the eyes of youth, visions of different futures can take widely divergent forms [82,83]. This was further confirmed twenty years later when Chinese students and young workers occupied Tiananmen Square to voice demands to the Communist Party for democratization. A new generation of Chinese youth had a new way of seeing possibilities under the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping. In Czechoslovakia, 1967, widespread student demonstrations ignited broader calls for reforms that led to the liberalization of state and party the following year—the Prague Spring—which the Soviet Union eventually crushed with tanks.

Another instance of world-historical student mobilization was May 1968 in France. Tarrow [84] described these events as a component in a much larger cycle of protest energized partly by student movements in the U.S., Germany, Italy, and throughout Latin America. There is evidence that many leaders and activists quixotically saw *les événements de mai* as part of a larger world revolution, but from the perspective of trying to grasp the shape of the participants' motivations, we see a complex mix of practical student issues (at first) aggravated by police brutality, which mixed with revolutionary-anarchist ideology that was fashionable in some student subcultures and which were diffused through images on broadcast media [85]. Finally, in Paris and elsewhere, there were also strong doses of anger and emotion that spiraled out of control to produce weeks of violent confrontation.

Student protests began in the early spring with the actions of radicals at the University of Paris, Nanterre, who demanded educational reforms merged with a broader social platform of anti-imperialism and anti-consumerism. Occupations and protests continued to build through the early spring, leading to disciplinary actions against student organizers and the temporary closing of the university. On 4 May, at a large student rally at the University of Paris at the Sorbonne, students attacked the police, which started a downward spiral of police brutality at ever larger and larger student mobilizations and police occupations of campuses. On 6 May, a melee between students and police lasted hours. Some students saw the revolution they had been calling for as beginning that day. For the next week, students barricaded the streets and, armed with paving stones, bricks, bottles, clubs, Molotov cocktails, and whatever else they could throw, waged daily battles with the police in the Left Bank section of Paris. Later, workers joined the strikes, taking strategic advantage of the situation to make demands for higher wages.

Although the motives of students were revolutionary and those of the workers mostly practical, the joining of these two forces brought Paris to the brink of chaos. Business, transportation, banking, and other necessary services came to a standstill. By the end of May, it seemed that the government of Charles de Gaulle would be brought down. De Gaulle checked if he could count on the support of the military. He then gave an impassioned speech and called for national elections. Hundreds of thousands of supporters rallied to his defense and demonstrated in Paris to voice their exasperation at the student uprising. Winning the elections on 23 June, de Gaulle immediately split the movement by offering concessions to workers. The student uprising, weakened by division and lack of popular support, was finally de-energized by a major educational reform, *le loi d'orientation*, which demonstrated a modicum of responsiveness by the government [84]. Although student mobilizations almost brought down the Gaullist regime, they ended up reinforcing it by alienating much of the general populace. The disruption they caused, and the students' revolutionary rhetoric were too much for conservative French citizens. A similar result can be seen in the student mobilizations in the U.S., in which the net political effect was the election of Richard Nixon, the conservative, law-and-order candidate in 1968. Even more negative consequences were seen in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, where mobilizations precipitated invasions by Soviet troops, or, as in Greece in 1973, where student protests caused a coup d'état [86].

## 7. Intergenerational Contact and Mass Movements

A combination of the socialization processes and generational patterns of experience—recognized by Mannheim—and cognitive orientations can drive a wedge between generations. This can give

rise to vastly differing visions of current politics, of the future, and of what must be done. This is what occurred sixty years ago when the youth wing of the Basque National Party criticized the conservatism of the older generation and formed the ETA, a radical Basque separatist group based on a fusion of Marxism, nationalism, and strategic violence to destabilize the Spanish government. The ETA was a force that destabilized Spanish politics for the next forty years. [87,88]. Such conflicts reflect the generation-gap thesis that was frequently invoked to explain the student uprisings of the 1960s. Generation gaps do exist, but our argument is that (1) there are cognitive dimensions to such divisions and conflicts, and (2) such divisions can have either positive or negative consequences for the movement as a whole. To put it differently, in conjunction with other age groups in a movement, cognitive triggering can enrich and energize the overall campaign, imparting to it a militancy that increases its likelihood of success. However, when isolated, a combination of the cognitive “fresh contact” mechanism and intense interaction through youthful networks and subcultures, powered in part by identity issues, can create tensions between generations that can become a generational gap that divides the movement.

In previous research, we had the opportunity to see firsthand how intergenerational contact affects social movements. We analyzed resistance movements against authoritarian regimes that persisted over several decades, culminating in broad-based democratic oppositions that were intergenerational and which demonstrated triggering, identity search, tactical innovation, and risk taking among the youth sectors. In the development of the opposition movement against General Francisco Franco’s regime in Spain, the time span was forty years. In the opposition to the Russian occupation and the communist one-party regime, the Baltic states of Soviet Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the time frame was fifty years [65]. These studies indicated that when repression is long-lived, the mere passage of so much time naturally accords generational factors a central role in the development of the opposition. For oppositional attitudes and sentiments to persist, (1) they must be in part congealed by one generation’s experiences, often in a civil war, invasion, or a coup d’état (2) which are then passed to subsequent generations, (3) being reaffirmed among some and redefined among others as new generations “cognitively trigger” new political contexts, and (4) these dual forces of continuity and change are in a dynamic relationship, working through generational and intergenerational networks which shape the overall development of the movement. Let us begin our discussion by putting these observations in the form of propositions.

**Proposition 7.** *Long-lasting and broad-based opposition movements are fundamentally intergenerational, which means that a division of labor may exist according to age-group cohorts and cognitive specialization.*

**Proposition 7a.** *A strategically positive effect on the movement is likely if there are sustained network connections between age-cohort groups, such as the student wing of the movement, and party organizations of older cohort makeups. The denser the network connections, the greater the likelihood of successful outcomes.*

**Proposition 7b.** *Strategically negative effects may occur when communication among these groups does not take place. The weaker the network connections, the less the chances of successful outcomes.*

The heterogeneity and dynamism of broad-based oppositions movements can be seen in the following excerpt from an interview in Spain with an older-generation activist, Xavier, who was a member of the Socialist Movement of Catalonia. He spoke of his discussions during the 1960s with Carlos, a younger-generation militant, who, like many other students at that time, was strongly influenced by revolutionary Marxist ideology. The interview segment was selected as a micro-level example of network connections among movement groups. As members of different sectors of the broad Catalan national opposition, their sustained dialogue represented a micro-level example of sustained network connections in a movement [17,43] and the intergenerational quality that these connections can take.

*For example, let's take Carlos. I would say that he made me into a Marxist, and I made him into a nationalist. We went out at night in Barcelona for hours, me trying to convince him that they should contact our party and accept political pluralism and him, evidently resisting because of what then was very important for these young men, Castroism and the Cuban revolution. They were absolutely fascinated, bewitched, by Fidel Castro. Us, for us older ones, we took him with what we Catalans say, grànuls salís [grains of salt]. So of course, the Marxist history of Catalonia came to me through these kids. They showed an extraordinary intellectual inquisitiveness, and you don't know what they did to get a hold of those books.*

Here, we can clearly see the ideological give-and-take that occurred between two generations in which Xavier's moderate approach to working with other oppositional groups may have moderated Carlos's Fidelismo, which represented a more radical direct-action approach to the Franco regime. On the one hand, Carlos' revolutionary Marxism evolved from the student groups at the university where books were passed and intense discussions occurred in coffee shops and student flats. On the other hand, Carlos may have, over time, raised Xavier's points in discussions with his student compatriots, giving them new perspectives, moderating their positions, and, perhaps, even extending intergenerational contacts. The point is that this interview segment represents a poignant example of the numerous interactions that can occur between generations in the course of broad oppositional movements. While, in all cases, we cannot claim mutual influence, it is plausible to assert that there were instances in which the forces of moderation and radicalism worked dynamically through multiple network ties like this one. Moreover, while sometimes, students go their own way, as in Hong Kong or Greensboro, NC, channels of intergenerational communication can mitigate both students' actions and older generations' public opinion about them.

Regarding tactical innovation, these mutual influences were also at work. As mentioned in the section on risk taking, we frequently encountered older activists who were left in wonder of student innovation and audaciousness. In Spanish Catalonia, during the Franco regime, small networks of students audaciously painted buildings, placed flags, distributed flyers, and organized campaigns that far surpassed the guidance of oppositional Catholic priests who were their mentors. The other side of the coin was that the older generation, if not demonstrating high-risk audacity in its actions, often showed considerable guile to advance the movement by adapting legal organizations duplicitously to oppositional ends. In the Baltic state of Estonia, where all civic organizations were controlled by the party and state, members transformed bee-keeping clubs, hiking clubs, English-language societies, and book clubs, which were routinely mentioned as groups where oppositional sentiments percolated [89]. Potentially of even more benefit to the opposition were cases where some well-placed functionaries—publicly loyal party members but privately democrats or nationalists—were able to channel resources, influence favorable decisions, and/or preclude repression because of their placement in the power structure. It takes cognitive maturity to recognize the complexity of such actors' positions—not dismissing them as traitors or sell-outs—something older-generation activists could understand, but younger militants less so.

The generational component is apparent in these studies of long-term mobilization, where intergenerational relations are preordained by the longevity of the repressive regime and the oppositions that fight against them. It is also plausible that in shorter-term mobilizations where students took vanguard actions on their own initiatives, such as in South Korea in 1960 [90,91], Greece in 1973 [86], Turkey in 1960, and Iran in 1978, similar intergenerational processes were at work. Among students, we include their characteristic cognitive vanguardism (which gives a fresh look at possibilities and fresh approaches to tactical innovation), risk taking, emotional hot buttons, as well as identity factors that bind their commitment. Among the older generations, their tactical caution may constrain the movement, but they also bring greater numbers (through personal networks) and can deliver greater social capital via channels of influence, institutional contacts, and the provision of material resources. We close by observing that full explanations of how mass movements bring down regimes require the consideration of factors that go beyond generational analysis, such as elite interests

and alignments, the role of the military, global pressures, and repressive capacity of the regime. Nevertheless, the unsuccessful cases of the French May and Tiananmen Square, and the successful cases of the Spanish, Mexican, or South Korean democratic transitions can be partly understood by intergenerational linkages, intergenerational support, and the ways that these broaden and strengthen the movement. Generational factors may not be fully explanatory of the outcomes, but it should be clear from our discussion that they are important processes that committed researchers should not exclude.<sup>8</sup> **Conclusions**

To close our discussion, we offer several summary observations about cognition, youth and student mobilization, militant groups, and the “conflict of generations.”

Recent research in the cognitive and neural sciences has provided firm empirical grounds for affirming cognitive elements in the generational dimensions of mobilization. It makes sense that cognitive elements work at all stages of the life cycle, but, especially relevant for the field of protest studies, we focused on insights about student and youth groups and their roles in broad movements of social change. Notably, we identified the “cognitive gang of four”.

The first derives from how personal and social identities are intertwined in identity schemas. As youth mature, social roles and experiences fill these schemas to give substance to identity, but this process is played out in terms of the continuing active construction of identity during emergent adulthood between 18 and 25 years of age. This observation has several effects: (1) it gives rise to a preponderance of youth in new social movements, (2) it gives rise to the increased likelihood that ideological schemas become enmeshed with identity schemas, and (3) it disposes youth to membership in subcultural networks where highly innovative prefigurative lifestyles and ideological patterns construct and affirm new identities.

Cognitive processes also dispose young militants to riskier behaviors. The well-known social-psychological construct of unrealistic optimism is especially strong among this age cohort because schemas of interpretation are not laden with experiences of disappointment and failure. Whether this basic cognitive mechanism is compounded or mitigated by collective discussion, consideration, and on-the-ground action is an open empirical question.

Third, we discussed the cognitive dimension of emotionalism among youth. Although studies of decision making in social movements have been biased towards the rational weighing of costs and benefits as a prelude to behavior, it has been increasingly recognized that cognitive schemas link with processing nodes that activate emotional responses. It is well-known that emotional control increases with age, which indicates that emotional linkages are over-laden with other problem-solving schemas to interrupt emotional responses. We suggested that this, in part, explains why student and youth movements often react violently to police intervention, creating a downward spiral in which the students are usually the losers.

In cognitive triggering, we discussed how young activists see new possibilities for politics and society, not because of their location in the educational process—a social determinant—but because their interpretative schemas are less encumbered and their processing speeds are more rapid. They make connections more easily. At the aggregate level, this means that student groups are more likely to break the surface tension of quiescence when state regimes are repressive and be examples for others about the possibilities for action. The same cognitive factors also dispose student movements to tactical innovation. In large movements, when groups move outside the standard repertoire to innovate tactics, they are typically youth groups and/or student groups.

Finally, we suggested that in broad movements of social change, intergenerational contact mitigates the inward-turning construction of these kinds of generation-gap identities, characteristic of punk, hippie, beat, even gang subcultures. Yet these factors, when part of the overall mix of a social movement, can shake out in the form of a division of labor in which students are the militant vanguard and the older members bring to bear social, material, and cognitive resources available to them. Student radicalism can be a two-edged sword, with the capability energizing a movement with creativity and daring, but also running the risk of alienating older activists and publics. The propositions we offer in

this article represent a starting point for social movement researchers to test these observations about youthful activism and cognition.

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