Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice With Film: How to Use *Fight Club* to Teach Existential Counseling Theory and Techniques

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Abstract

Because existential counseling is sometimes difficult to teach due to the philosophical concepts of the theory, counselor-educators can use films to help students understand, synthesize, and apply existential concepts. Constructivist teaching methods and experiential exercises give to students a structure that helps them understand existential concepts within the context of their own worldviews and how those concepts could operate in a therapeutic practice. By providing a detailed explanation of *Fight Club*, educators assist students in grasping the philosophical underpinnings of existential counseling theory concretely. Specific activities are then used to help students apply the concepts with clients.

Keywords

existential, philosophy, media, theory, counseling

Counseling theory is a fundamental course in counselor education that requires students to accomplish several things. First, they must learn the essential assumptions and concepts within each theory. Next, students must examine their basic beliefs about life and the nature of change to determine which theory they might apply in their work with clients. Inexperienced counselors are encouraged to work from a specific theoretical orientation to fully ground themselves in a framework that will provide ways of conceptualizing client problems and treatment goals and offer specific interventions. Learning existential counseling theory is often a challenging process for counseling students and educators alike as it requires the bridging of theory and practice and making philosophical, abstract concepts meaningful in real-life counseling scenarios. This process also requires that students reflect on the theoretical information they are learning in a personal meaning-making process. To assist students in accomplishing this multilayered task, instructors benefit from a constructivist teaching structure and dynamic techniques. This article presents a specific, constructivist-informed lesson plan of using films to help connect theory and practice for use in a counseling theory course. The film *Fight Club* is used to illuminate existential concepts, help students evaluate their own belief systems, and practice applying an existential orientation in a therapeutic process. The use of films in counseling theory courses can bring a much-needed experiential element to the classroom (Collin, 2006; Koch & Dollarhide, 2000; Villalba & Redmond, 2008), giving students a tangible grasp of how different

orientations guide therapeutic processes. Using a film within a constructivist framework is a concrete way to assist instructors in helping students to actively examine theory from the perspective of their own life experience and belief systems.

Constructivist Education

Constructivist teaching practice is rooted in the idea that knowledge is coconstructed by both teachers and students and that those students construct knowledge from their personal experiences (Loyens, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2009). They bring their own way of understanding the world, influenced by culture, language, and life experience, to the classroom. The challenge the constructivist teacher faces is how to guide students through a creative process where information can be gained through active dialogue and an examination of personal epistemology. Constructivist approaches depend on students "actively constructing their own knowledge rather than passively receiving information transmitted to them from teachers and textbooks" (Weimer, 2002, p. 11). Systematically providing information to help students create an internal structure for organizing what they are learning, a concept known as scaffolding, is a useful way to understand

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the process of learning within this context. Cognitive development becomes an essential first step in knowledge construction so that students can become adept at answering higher order questions and using inductive methods of reasoning (McAuliffe & Lovell, 1997; Montgomery, Marbley, & Kurtines, 2000). This is accomplished through a variety of methods, including Socratic questioning, group discussion, limiting hierarchical relating, and encouraging autonomy within the class structure.

Challenging students to be active participants in their own learning requires creativity and interventions that invite student participation. Socratic questioning is a useful tool as it engages students in examining their reasoning without being shamed by the teacher as they seek to integrate new ideas (Overholser, 1993). Questions are designed to motivate students to find the answers on their own so that they can learn to think independently and apply what they know to a new situation. Through dialog and discussion, students are taught to think critically, to find the basis for their beliefs, and to adequately support them through facts (Dewey, 2005).

In a constructivist environment, the teacher eschews the traditional position of authority in favor of being responsible for the process itself. Helping students become active participants in their own learning can be challenging when teachers are confronted with students' resistance and desire for passive learning. However, empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning can lead to a rich, texturally dynamic classroom experience while critical thinking skills serve students well in all other areas of their lives.

Every culture of people has its specific way of understanding and engaging with others (Bruner, 1990). Students' personal cultures are shaped by their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Therefore, it is imperative that educators help their students construct personal meanings from their own experiences rather than forcing their own assumptions and judgments into the presentation of new ideas. Group discussion that allows students to examine the basis for their beliefs can help create a safe environment where critical appraisal of belief systems and the coconstruction of knowledge is an end result.

Applying constructivist teaching methods to a counseling theory class provides a unique opportunity for students to evaluate orientations within the context of their own worldviews. This style of teaching gives students the chance to actively explore various counseling theories and interventions and be better able to choose a starting point for their own professional work that is complementary with their inherent beliefs in the nature of change and transformation. Having a personal connection with the material helps students to specifically apply a lens to their work that reflects their own intuitive way of helping. For these reasons, the constructivist approach to this essential course is an effective way to make the material come alive for students.

Using constructivist teaching practices can also help to model the therapeutic process in counselor education as constructivism and humanism overlap considerably (Motschnig-Pitrik & Rohlíková, 2013). Helping clients to examine their own belief systems and values while empowering them to find ways to transform is similar to helping students incorporate new ideas and skills. Facilitating learning occurs in both the classroom and the therapy office, and constructivist methods, which help to build meaning-making and critical thinking skills, are particularly relevant in counselor education for the same reasons.

Existential Theory

Of all of the counseling theories included in graduate programs, the existential orientation is perhaps one of the most difficult to teach. Existential philosophy is a key contributor to many counseling theories, and many theories parallel each other. For students unfamiliar with philosophy, the concepts can seem obscure and ponderous, and teachers may struggle to find concrete ways of presenting the orientations. In reality, existential philosophy is compatible with many constructivist assumptions and can be successfully presented in this style of instruction. Existential counseling is grounded in the understanding that experience is subjective and that unique perceptions must be respected by the therapist (Harris, 2001). Existential counseling incorporates examining social constructs like gender, race, and money to find personal truths and values. Individuals are also called to name their own experience and deal with the task of becoming more personally responsible, a principle echoed in constructivism. Both orientations build on an understanding of cognitive development, the nature of reality, and the effects on society at large.

Because of existentialism's focus on subjective reality, it is important that students understand the variations of counseling applications when using this theory. Existential counseling theory is quite personal, and therefore, it is fairly diverse. "The goal of [existential] counseling is to help clients make-meaning of their lives" and so students must initially learn how "to make *their* own meaning" in relation to existential theory (Edger & Meyer, 2010, p. 17). Therefore, a set formula of existential counseling is not offered in this article. Rather, existential themes are the focus, with some potential interventions offered to students for experiential practice.

The Film

Using films is a powerful means to help students understand archaic philosophical existential ideas within the context of modern life. *Fight Club* (Linson, Chaffin, Bell, & Fincher, 1999), the cinema version of Chuck Palahniuk's 1999 novel, is an ideal vehicle for teaching existential principles in a way that is immediately thought-provoking and entertaining, ensuring student participation and dynamic discussion. Using a movie also provides a framework for helping students to (a) understand how clients could

present with problems that could be framed existentially and (b) apply existential themes and interventions to a therapeutic process.

Starring Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, and Helen Bonham Carter, *Fight Club* offers a gritty commentary on the state of contemporary society and offers a gender-specific alternative to existential alienation of contests of brute strength and anarchist fantasies of freedom. It focuses on an unnamed protagonist, played by Edward Norton, who becomes disenchanted with his soulless, work-focused existence. His perceptions of reality and his role as a man in modern society are challenged when he meets Tyler Durden, an alter-ego character who represents all of the vitality, freedom, and masculine agency he lacks. The film illustrates several key existential issues in a way that is relevant for those of college age, which makes it a visceral, lively teaching tool for counselor-educators.

This complex movie shows one man's journey from alienation to authenticity, interweaving subtexts related to identity and gender. Edward Norton's character, an anonymous office employee (henceforth referred to as "E") manifests his distress over his materialistic, emotionally empty life through chronic insomnia. A visit with his physician leads to a referral to visit cancer support groups to expand his perspective. He visits a building that houses several support groups for varying ailments, and he finds himself fascinated by the raw emotion and relational intensity expressed by participants, many of whom are facing impending death. He meets another habitual attendee, Marla, who notes that people "really listen to you" when they think you are dying. Themes of death meet with the ultimate meaninglessness of life when E meets Tyler Durden, a handsome and hip fellow passenger on a plane, when traveling for business. Durden challenges E's conventionality, and is immediately authentic, honest, and direct in his communication. When his condominium is destroyed by fire, E contacts Tyler and begins to share a dilapidated home with him on the outskirts of their city.

E is further drawn to explore primal ways of relating when he engages in a physical fight with Tyler, at Tyler's urging. The deconstruction of life down to the basic elements of adrenaline, fight-or-flight responses, and physical pain shifts E out of his disconnection and alienation to a sense of truly being alive. His former priorities begin to fade as he and Tyler set up a club for men who regularly converge to challenge one another in physical contests of strength, stamina, and force. This becomes the place where E finally feels a sense of meaning in his life. Discussions ensue about the inherent emptiness in contemporary lifestyles, the absence of fathers in the American family reflecting God's disinterest, and facing the reality of death. They embark on a series of capers designed to undermine society that escalate into a long-range plan labeled "Project Mayhem."

Marla completes the character triangle when she phones E in a self-acknowledged cry for help, telling him she has overdosed on anxiety medication. E admires and identifies with her, as he realizes she is striving toward authenticity yet is deeply flawed. E continues his transformation toward freedom as well as reconnecting with his humanity through relations with others. Tyler remains outside such relations and a struggle ensues when E attempts to stop the large-scale project Tyler has instigated. The final plot twist reveals that Tyler is an aspect of E's psyche rather than a separate individual, which leads E to the integration of his fragmented identity.

Method of Instruction

A general introduction to existential philosophy and the concepts of authenticity, death and nonbeing, aloneness and relatedness, existential angst, personal responsibility, and meaning-making should start the teaching segment. Populations that may benefit from existential counseling and current orientations, such as Gestalt therapy, that offer an example of contemporary practice should be reviewed. If possible, a brief overview of such philosophers as Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre will help students to place existentialism in its proper historical and philosophical context.

Next, educators can introduce the film and present the structure for class processing. For processing, students are divided into groups of three to five. Each group is asked to choose one existential theme or concept that was identified during the previous introduction to existentialism, which they will look for as they view the film. Students are told to view the film using an existential lens while recording their designated themes, illustrating how they are demonstrated throughout the film. Students are informed that breaks of 15 min each will occur during viewing during which time they can discuss themes and ideas that have emerged thus far as well as how they personally have experienced those concepts. Students are told that after the film is viewed, groups will be responsible for presenting their findings in an informal manner to the class as a whole. Due to differing course schedules and the breaks planned during viewing, it may be necessary to break up the showing of the film into two consecutive classes. Educators may stop the film at various points of the feature depending on what existential themes are the foci of elaboration for a particular class. For example, if the existential theme is authenticity, the film break could occur after E has a conversation with Tyler on the plane. An explanation of each existential theme and the representation of that theme throughout various parts of the film are included in the appendix.

Once students have viewed the film, time is made for them to finalize and organize themes and concepts. These are written out by the instructor while students present them to the class at large. Concepts can be explored in detail to ensure student comprehension at this time, and examples missed by the students can be introduced by the instructor. Questions that can be asked to further the personal meaning-making process are as follows:

How do your values about work and conforming to societal norms differ from the characters' values?

How much freedom do you believe we really have to do what we want in the world?

How important is gender in forming your identity?

These questions can be incorporated into written assignments as well as a class discussion, and students could be encouraged to create their own questions for other groups if time allows.

Application of Concepts and Themes

The next important aspect of the film discussion is how existential concepts are illustrated and how existential issues can be identified in clients. This requires reviewing existential themes in terms of behavior and experience (see the appendix for an explanation of existential themes in the movie). Educators could ask students to generate a list of symptoms for E (e.g., isolation, alienation, emotional numbness, meaninglessness, hopelessness, loneliness), and this could be followed by a discussion of potential diagnoses. Having students brainstorm possible ways E's behavior demonstrates his need to fill personal needs can also help students to see E's attempts at emotional connection, understanding what it means to be a man, and trying to find one's place in society. From here, the scene where E visits the doctor could be replayed. The instructor can play the role of E from this point forward and allow students the chance to practice engaging the client in a therapeutic dialog building on his comment in the film, "I am in pain."

Existential Therapy Task Exercise

Students are divided into groups of four. One student plays E as the client. One student is the counselor, and two students are observers. Observers are given clear instructions to provide behavioral feedback to the counselor on how they completed specific therapeutic tasks. The counselor, as a result of the group-level examination of themes and symptoms, can begin a role-play exercise that allows him or her to practice existential counseling skills. Students should be informed that these skills would be appropriate after a therapeutic alliance had been formed with the client and basic personal issues had been identified. The following therapeutic tasks are included in the instructions:

1. Honor the client's experience while being fully present and with the client.
   a. Use body language, eye contact, tone of voice, as well as validation, empathy, and positive regard
2. Using empathic dialog, Socratic questioning, and reflecting listening, help the client to develop his or her understanding of his or her own suffering and his or her responsibility for the suffering.
   a. Use questions such as "How did you come to feel so badly?" "What part have you played in the creation of the situation you are in?" and "Do you remember a time when you felt more alive?"
3. Develop the client's understanding of his or her own values, beliefs, and desires and how he or she is supported by, or is at odds with, contemporary society.
   a. Use questions such as "If you knew you would be dead in 1 year, what would you want to experience beforehand?" "How would your life be different?" "What is most important to you?" "What gives your life meaning?" and "What beliefs were you raised with that feel relevant for you still?"
4. Help the client brainstorm ways to live with more agency, empowering the client to explore the consequences of different options.
   a. Use questions such as "If you knew you could not fail, what changes would you make in your life?" "What are some ways you could be a little more like Tyler in your daily life?" "What are Tyler's drawbacks?" and "What would it look like if you could only take the best of Tyler?"

The observers should be encouraged to reflect on the counselor-specific comments that the counselor made, questions he or she asked, and body language that gave evidence of the above tasks. With this technique, the observers help to track for the counselor what interventions yielded a fruitful dialog, what interventions were not as helpful in engaging the client, and how the counselor was relating with the client, for instance, what was awkward or seemed inauthentic.

Conclusion

In *Fight Club*, we see how one man journeys out of convention and stereotypical cultural limitations toward the existential ideal of an authentic, self-responsible person who is freely being-in-the-world in an honest, engaged way. The different aspects of E's psyche provide illustrations of different existential perspectives on sexuality, freedom, and God, as well as a fragmented sense of self. Viewing *Fight Club* as a contemporary story of one man's confrontation of fundamental existential issues provides a compelling and entertaining structure around which the instruction of existentialism can be organized. As counselor-educators help students understand existential counseling through media, it is important to bear in mind that educators are also colearners of this process. Educators must allow for students' personal meaning-making of existential concepts. Because existential themes vary from one philosopher to the next, students must also learn to understand what existential counseling looks like through their personal experiences and perceptions, and that is an achievement that is unavoidably individualistic.

Appendix

The existential themes and principles that can be taught using *Fight Club* are explained below.

Authenticity

The challenge with authenticity, from an existential perspective, is that we all must balance the need to be true to ourselves with the need to compromise and conform to get along with others and manage the limitations that society imposes on us. Compromises must be made as we are inextricably linked to the consequences of the choices we make. Counselors can play a unique role in helping clients to examine their freedom to choose, the limitation of those choices, and the consequences they bring. At the beginning of the story, Edward Norton's character (E) is consumed by the "the self," or *Das Man*. That is, E is living the life that he feels the world expects him to live. He is materialistic, focused primarily on work despite his lack of enjoyment of it and conforms his behavior to others' expectations of what is socially appropriate. Subsequently, he suffers from insomnia and a desire to die. Despite these symptoms, E is unable to understand or articulate the source of his disconnection and depression. That role is fulfilled by the charismatic and care-free Tyler Durden.

When E meets Tyler on the plane, he is intrigued by Tyler's confrontation of his conformity to social expectations. E asks what Tyler does for a living. Tyler states, "Why? So you can pretend you're interested?" In this moment, Tyler illuminates and mocks the social expectation of small talk. In another encounter, E makes a joke about Tyler being an interesting "single serving friend." Tyler retorts by asking E if being clever works for him. In this exchange, After E's condo is burned, E calls Tyler, and Tyler joins him at a bar. It is apparent that E needs a place to stay, though the social and cultural importance that is placed on self-reliance results in E not asking Tyler outright for a place to stay. Tyler confronts him by saying, "Just ask, man." He does not believe E's insistence that he had not thought to ask Tyler for help and persists until E formally asks Tyler for a place to stay. In this exchange, Tyler demands E to engage in human interactions that are raw and true.

When analyzing E's and Tyler's relationship, it is apparent that E is only living to please the world and Tyler is living to please himself. Does this make Tyler authentic? Tyler is fully engaged in meeting his needs and wants. However, he does not appear to be aware of life's limitations. From an existential perspective, Tyler is ultimately not authentic because he lives fully to please himself, causing chaos around him without suffering the consequences, an impossible human feat. E is the bearer of Tyler's consequences, which enables E to understand what living authentically really means. This is illustrated in several places throughout the film, from Tyler's largely sexual relationship with Marla to Bob's (E's friend) death during a Project Mayhem mission. By denying the inextricable link to the world in which E lives, Tyler can only be a figment of E's imagination.

Death and Nonbeing

According to existential theory, the inevitability of death renders life meaningless. To find meaning in the "average everydayness" of life, people feel compelled to suppress the knowledge of their mortality. The realization and acknowledgment of the inevitability of death, however, can serve as motivation to live more fully. E was able to do this through facing the fact of his mortality when he attended support groups for individuals who were dying of chronic illnesses. "Losing all hope was freedom," he stated, "Every morning I died, and every morning I was born again, resurrected." By facing his own death, E felt more fully alive in those moments. Of course, for E, this was only temporary because he returned to his mundane life, a life that he was barely living, and he was once again failing to fully live. The denial of death enables individuals to ignore what is important to them, take life for granted, and deny the responsibility of owning their lives, among other consequences. The inevitability of death also reveals how, ultimately, every person is alone in the world, because dying is an irrevocably individual process. This essential aloneness can lead to self-responsibility, as it is up to the individual to choose how he or she will live life. These paradoxes inherent in the human condition also serve as the foundations for existential angst.

Existential Angst

Angst is a feeling that results from the knowledge of our own mortality. Angst is the expressed reaction to the realization of the helplessness of being human in a world that intrinsically limits our possibilities. When individuals make a choice, they essentially give up other choices. Freedom of choice is limited to action, not to those actions' consequences. Marla makes a conscious choice to seek E's attention and, in doing so, is emotionally abused and ultimately kidnapped by Tyler. In contrast to E's emotional disconnection prior to his enlightenment, existential angst provides the necessary tension and anxiety required to help E be fully alive. His angst is also fueled by the tension between the ultimate aloneness that comes with death, with self-responsibility, and the fact of being inextricably connected to the world. This tension is brought into bright relief as E tries desperately to save Bob's and later Marla's life.

Personal Responsibility

The reality of life "is that it is without excuse" (Sartre, 1957/1998, p. 55). We are constantly faced with the reality that we have to choose the kind of people we want to become, and this choosing never ends as long as we are alive. In

Marla's case, she chooses to be a victim through her choices of allowing Tyler to dominate her and through her suicide attempts. E stayed in a job he hated because he did not want to face the consequence of having no money and removing himself from the belongingness of convention. Tyler's consistently knew who he was and wanted to become, and he made active choices toward that goal. However, as mentioned before, he was continually free of consequences, which is an element that does not align with human reality. If Tyler suffered consequences, would the choices he made in the film differ? It is certainly an excellent question for class discussion.

Meaning Making

Self-responsibility requires self-awareness and leads to the creation of an individual sense of meaning. The process of finding meaning has been approached in a variety of ways by different existential philosophers. Viktor Frankl (1959/2006) described meaning as an ever-present construct in the world and proposed that suffering was the best vehicle for finding meaning, while Sartre (1943/1984) pointed to the meaninglessness of life and, therefore, the need for individuals to make their own meaning. Throughout the story, E attempts to make meaning out of his interactions with others in his life. His relationship with Marla offers a helpful example of the quest for meaning. E is both attracted and repulsed by Marla and tries to come to terms with what that means for him in his life. In many ways, Marla mirrors E. She searches for authenticity and connection in the support groups, she latches on to E as E latches on to Tyler. Both try to find something in the other that they lack in themselves. In another sense, E admires Marla for her relative freedom of choice and nonconformity. Marla steals clothes from the Laundromat and sells them at resale shops. She takes Meals on Wheels dinners on behalf of women who have died from the unaware charity that continues to supply food for them. Marla knows the limitations of her life, and she exploits any advantages she has to the fullest extent. She refuses to adhere to social expectations for the sacrifice of her limited comforts in life. E is, on some level, attracted to her brazen behavior and constructs this piece of her personality in his ideal alter-ego, Tyler Durden.

Gender and Identity

The notion of how sexed identity can be socially constructed is not one that was explored in depth by early existential philosophers aside from Simone de Beauvoir. The film provides many thought-provoking depictions of gender relations and sexuality that are helpful in elucidating the existentialist translations of identity and self in relation to Other. For this reason, students should be asked to watch for illustrations of relational dynamics and gender differences during the film viewing.

As the person who challenges E's perceptions of success, meaningfulness, and autonomy, Tyler is seemingly free of societal constraints and represents E's culturally constructed fantasy of ideal masculinity. He exudes confidence, and is fearless and handsome; his athletic build and fighting prowess represent the stereotypical ideal of sexually charged manhood. E eventually rebels against Tyler's lack of concern for others, and in this, Tyler's ultimate limitations are exposed. E's journey from dissociation, meaninglessness, and alienation to an authentic and connected human being is made explicit during the course of the film. An essential step in this process is the reclamation of his masculinity, which is expressed through contests of physical strength and bravery in the fight clubs. E becomes more fully human and more fully a man as a result of his experiences. As evidenced by his care and desire for Marla, he has found a more balanced version of masculinity, which allows for interdependence and emotional connection with others rather than the stereotypical notion of the "strong, silent" man.

Marla, as Tyler and E's love interest, played an important role in E's process. Just as Tyler served as an instrument of enlightenment or freedom for E, Marla served as an instrument of integration for Tyler and E, who are in reality two manifestations of the same psyche. Sexual relationships provide a context for exploring the paradox of aloneness and intimacy, as Levinas acknowledged. Because sexual passion exists in a realm outside of the average everydayness of life, it can therefore serve as a vehicle for the reunion of paradoxes and opposites (Dimen, 2003). Hence, it is largely through Marla that the conflicting aspects represented by Tyler and E merge into balance and allow E to be authentic in the world.

Marla is also a female response to the existential dilemmas presented in the film. She has freed herself from the conventional in her lawlessness (stealing clothes and food) and understands the ultimate emptiness of human existence. She expresses the tragedy of the human experience as reflected in the knowledge of our impending deaths that coexists with the perpetual *not* dying we experience throughout life. Marla is not without stereotypical aspects of traditional femininity, as she seeks connection with E in a dependent, weak manner. Despite the limitations in her character, she still serves as a role model for E and as a means through which he can find balance.

Along with illustrating gender dynamics, *Fight Club* offers commentary on the role of men in contemporary society. Tyler tells E that part of their alienation arises from the pervasive absence of their fathers. If, as Foucault (1978) posited, the family can be seen as a political institution that regulates gender–power relations, the rise of single-parent families led by women could indeed have deeply felt ramifications. Seen within an existential lens, for males who have grown up without masculine influence, the abandonment by their fathers mirrors the larger lack of any kind of *divine*

presence within whose protection humanity might exist. Tyler tells E that their fathers are models of God, and because their fathers left, E must "accept the possibility that God does not like you, that he never wanted you. In all probability, he hates you." Tyler concludes with a rejection of God/fathers, saying, "We don't need them." However, as men, they cannot escape their identification with their fathers and therefore cannot escape God. This illustrates the existential position that "man is fundamentally the desire to be God" (Joy, 2006, p. 103). Tyler is in fact trying to remake the world according to his vision, and Marla's mistreatment by Tyler can be seen as a reflection of his identification with a God who is modeled on an uncaring, abandoning ethos. His rejection of her can also be seen as a general rebellion against the mother, both because she is the only available parent to whom men's anger can be expressed and because it is the constraints of femininity that have bounded men's world. Reclaiming power as a man allows E to step into the vacuum left by the absence of the masculine principle in his life.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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