《Research Note》

Ideas matter and change policy, but how?: the reciprocal change of ideas and policy, and the relationship among ideas, discourse, and policy

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Introduction

Under constructivism, it is widely acknowledged that ideas matter and influence foreign policy. It seems, however, that previous researches remain unclear about how to clarify such influence and changes at idea level and intersubjectivity among ideas empirically. In addition, previous constructivist researches regarded ideas, culture, norms, and identity as relatively stable matters that influence the conceptions and policies in one state as if they were a structure. They did not pay attention to the reciprocal changes between ideas and the foreign policy of states.⁽¹⁾

Policy culture and ideas are reproduced through phased changes in behaviours. At that time, each changes slightly, and its accumulation finally produces changes which widen the norm frameworks that have validity in social institutions. (2) They are the resources with which actors conceptualize the world and promote change and reconceptualize it. (3)

In this article, my focus summarizes the theoretical knowledge in previous (including German) literature about ideas and discourses. I also consider the validity of discourse analysis as a method to scrutinize policy and ideal changes. In Section 1, I confirm what ideas are. In Section 2, I review the relationship among ideas, discourse, and political behaviours. Finally, in Section 3, I refer to how ideas and policy changes are clarified and verify the methodological validity of discourse analysis.

1. Ideas

(1) Ideas and actors

According to Beland and Cox, ideas are causal beliefs about economic, societal, and political phenomena. They are produced in our minds and are only connected to the material world by our interpretations of our surroundings. Additionally, ideas posit connections between things and between people in the world.⁽⁴⁾ When they are

coordinated with an actor's power, they acquire appropriateness. When ideas are internalized among the collective members in a society and are embraced as 'ours,' then they are transformed into common consensual contents. (5)

Depending on the material reality where actors exist, their ideas of actors influence their perceptions themselves of the world, the formation of preferences to political phenomena, the kinds of knowledge about material reality, and the degree of uncertainty about knowledge. Perceptions are decided through the political process by ideas that are regarded as social facts. Ideas do not function until institutional environments and normative frameworks contribute to broad social acceptance.

Ideas are indivisible from interests and power. Within material reality, actors understand their own interests. (7) Because ideas influence an actor's perceptions of interests and pave the way for their transformation, ideas form interests themselves and greatly impact political decisions. (8) Under *knightian* uncertainty situations that are defined by extremely high uncertainty, it is unclear what an actor's interests actually are. An actor's interest is reconstituted by her own ideas. (9)

In addition, ideas constitute the narratives, discourses, and referential frameworks that orientate the actor's behaviours. (10) Social structure, which is generally reflected as norms, values, and ideas, influences the meaning structure of actors who reproduce social structure through their behaviours.

Ideas are promoted by policy entrepreneurs. Competent policy entrepreneurs define ideas, disseminate them, and demonstrate connections to policies. They make the interpretation for the specific ideas as the dominant interpretation that is appropriate in society by aggressively (re)framing the idea as a coalition magnet. (6)

(2) Effects of ideas on policy

Even though ideas affect the results of policies, how they exert influence is the product of accidental environments. (11) There are two kinds of ideas: cognitive and normative, both of which interconnect with each other. Cognitive ideas can be expressed as causal ideas and explain which objects are indicated by ideas and their functions. Ideas explain the means with which actors enact a policy and the guidelines as well as the necessity for political behaviours and interest foundations. Ideas legitimate policies. On the other hand, normative ideas provide value about good or evil from the aspect of what actors should do and legitimize policies from the aspect of the appropriateness of behaviours. (12)

Mehta and Béland clarified the functions given by ideas about policy transformations. First, they argued that ideas have an agenda-setting function that ideas about pressing issues settle a society's definite problems as policy agenda. Second, ideas as a method

for policy solving submit the means with which problems are solved and aims are satisfied. (13) The third function is *problem definition*. Actors collide over how to define a policy agenda and a group's aims, and ideas define the scope of the possibility of policy selections. However, even if one idea is regarded as dominant and functions as a *problem definition*, such an idea only competes continuously with other ideas and has a fluid definition. Whether an idea succeeds as a definition of a problem depends on who authorizes it as a *problem definition* and what kind of professional knowledge is related to such an idea, if valid political avenues for solving problems are added to ideas as a *problem definition*, and these ideas are resonant with ideas submitted by the general public or the media. (14)

Fourth, ideas influence policy as meta ideas, such as public philosophy, the spirit of the time (Zeitgeist), national mood, and policy paradigms. Public philosophy is comprised of a block of ideas in a definite group, such as a sense of values, norms, principles in a society, and world views. The spirit of the time includes groups of dominant social, cultural, political, and economical ideas in discourses at a definite point of time. Public philosophy is engaged in open rivalry with other ideas; however, if such public philosophy becomes dominant, it will be briefly transformed into the spirit of the time and greatly influence the policies and society. A policy paradigm leads to a learning process through which policy legacies as existing ideas are reviewed and create policy changes. Additionally, because definite social and economical ideas legitimize the policies and institutions which fit such ideas and are recognized as appropriate, when these ideas become unstable and actors seek alternatives, both the existing ideas and the policy that is recognized to fit such ideas change. Such meta ideas also influence the functions of the means for policy solving and the definition of a problem and function as the criteria for value about appropriate and legitimate thoughts and behaviours. (15) Fifth, ideas spawn public debates through which policy decision makers, interest groups, and the general public agrees that change is indispensable. (16) When such strong actors as dominant parties promote definite ideas, such ideas will acquire much more political clout.(17)

2. Ideas, discourse, and policy behaviours

(1) What is discourse?

Discourse is a series of ideas that carry new rules, values, and customs as well as a resource with which actors simultaneously create and legitimize ideas. Discourse is

more than just political ideas or a sense of values; it also includes mutual reciprocal processes through which ideas are transmitted, as seen in policymaking in the public sphere or in political communications. Discourse is a mediator which imbues ideas with meaning in concrete situations. In discourse, not objective reality, but reality's interpretation in society is reflected. In discourse, a series of social and political ideas and material interests are given and arranged. Actors change their own insights, values, and orientations through it. Discourse is affected by institutional structure or context. In justifying definite actions, discourse clarifies which ideal elements are activated or inactivated.

Discourse includes cognitive and normative arguments. Discourse submits political means for goals and problems, the current significance of policies and institutions, and appropriateness and logical consistency and creates a cognitive argument which legitimizes ideas from the standpoint of the logic of necessity. However, at the same time, discourse submits a normative argument that fits a society's values and legitimizes ideas from the standpoint of the logic of appropriateness. Whether cognitive argument succeeds depends on the extent to which it submits problem solving and problem definition and how well it develops the spirit of the times. Whether a normative argument succeeds depends on the degree to which it enjoys resonance with social values (23)

Either a cognitive or a normative argument alone produces only weak discourse. Discourse cannot secure strong power for modification until it encompasses both kinds of arguments. (24) If actors who are seeking changes in existing institutions desire to promote a discourse to the dominant discourse which constitutes the mainstream in the discussion, they must submit an argument that identifies the problems in the existing institutions and present blueprints for new institutions (cognitive argument). That argument must inevitably acquire legitimacy by becoming suitable for the existing sense of values or norms (normative argument). The success of a discourse is contingent on it generally having encompassment and consistency. (25)

Discourse is divided into ideal and interaction levels. The former is a series of political ideas and values that form cognitive and normative meaning. The latter is communications and deliberative processes by elites with the general public and coordination processes of views among the elite themselves.

Non-activated ideal elements and discourse share a reciprocal relation with which they influence each other. Ideas provide the ultimate grounds for arguments. The effects of discourse also activate definite ideal elements.

Ideas and power are recognized by subjective and intersubjective interpretations

about the world of actors and their interests through discourse. Actors exchange ideas through framing processes in which one weds definite ideas to important values or convinces others of the appropriateness of the discourse's definite interpretations, leading to interaction between ideas and power. (26)

Definite ideas acquire legitimacy when they are promoted in political discussions by such authorities as primary policymakers or expert groups. Policy entrepreneurs can easily acquire societal acceptance about definite policy aims, if they give appropriateness to ideas with valence, or reframe the existing ideas and give them equivocalness. (27)

(2) Discourse in parliamentary discussions

Even though discourse can generate its own dynamics, it cannot do so alone. And the introduction and development of discourse are influenced by those who assertively and passionately engage in discourse: discourse exponents or privileged storytellers. A discourse exponent has the authority to make utterances and engage in behaviours and influences the constitution of communication's meaning system. Various groups frame definite types of discussion as the dominant type and seek to build a 'hegemonic discourse.'(28)

What kind of discourse about behaviours becomes dominant depends on the repercussions in society about discourse. When many participate in it, quote it, or develop a similar discourse, then that discourse becomes dominant. But when a definite discourse is criticized or attacked, it becomes a branch discourse.⁽²⁹⁾

The dominant discourse limits the opposition of a society against the behaviour of a government or strictly limits the range of a government's behaviours. Various groups develop discussions that are enmeshed with specific ideas and try to establish that discourse as the dominant one in their society. A branch discourse maintains attention on a policy that is considered unsuitable or unconventional.

However, both dominant and branch discourses share basic codes at a much deeper abstract level. ⁽³⁰⁾ Branch discourse is not always opposed to the dominant discourse. And even though a branch faction might clash with the political mainstream faction, it can handle similar issues with the mainstream faction with similar vocabularies and concepts. Branch faction tries to remove opponents in the mainstream faction using various means, including inserting a discourse that includes its own concepts in the dominant discourse.

Discourse remains open as long as plural discourses, which include various ideas, are competing with each other. When one discourse that reflects one ideal element crystallizes as dominant and gains social consensus, the actual discourse is closed and

finished. While a discourse is opened and closed, internalization appears whereby ideas are reconstituted. Even if a discourse ends, such a situation does not continue long and can always be latently opened for subsequent (re)crystallization. (31)

(3) Relationship among ideas, discourse and policy behaviours

The ideas in a country constitute its foreign policy rather than decide concrete foreign policy; ideas provide a country's orientation, a framework for its behaviours and conditions that are recognized by the citizens to be performed possible and appropriate. Additionally, ideas control the perception of a society about foreign issues and fundamental national interest.

The policy behaviours of a country are performed within the framework of behaviours that are derived from common recognition about the ideas in the society of that country. (32) Ideas produce effects as the groundings with which we endow one behaviour priority over others.

Ideas and policy behaviours share a mutual relation with which they influence each other; they are not in a direct causal relation. Ideas are reproduced, changed, and reconstituted by policy behaviours. Their relationship continuously develops through political and social conflicts by all actors. (33) At that time, ideas limit policy behaviours through discourse, but they are reconstituted by policy behaviours through the discourse. What kind of policy behaviours occur and are legitimized depends, in addition to rational reasons in behaviour situations, on discourse situations where ideas are constituted in parliaments. (34)

In discourse, a combination of ideas and policy behaviours is tried under the social logic of appropriateness. Ideas submit various patterns of behaviours that can be performed as well as the frameworks that ground the pattern of behaviours in a country in discourse. In discourse, the pattern of behaviours related to ideas and their legitimization are crystallized. (35)

Discourse and policy behaviours have a mutual and reflexive relationship. Discourse influences the possibility that a policy behaviour will occur. It also limits the framework for behaviours given by ideas beforehand, reconstitutes the ideal elements about concrete definite behavior, (36) and evaluates policy behaviours. On the other hand, discourse is reproduced by policy behaviours and transformed. Moreover, discourse legitimizes policy behaviours and the ideal elements that are related to those behaviours. (37) In pluralistic democracies, policy elites are difficult to act contrary to the wishes of the citizens in the long term without the threats of exposure to pressure from mass opinion or election setbacks. Therefore, governments seek to cloak themselves in

the garb of legitimization for necessary policy behaviours through parliamentary discussions. (38)

A circular relationship is seen between policy and discourse. We can think of two situations. First, when discourse in parliamentary discussions influences the foreign policy beforehand (ex ante), and second, when foreign policy actions influence the discourse in parliamentary discussions afterward (ex post). We discussed the former case above. For the latter case, discourse first gives the conceptual basis for the decisions that otherwise become incoherent. Second, discourse institutionalizes the ideas. Third, it enables dialogues among actors and transforms the game just one time toward repetitive ones.⁽³⁹⁾

(4) Gazing at institutional context

In considering discourse, institutions and institutional context must be considered that are constituted by the vast range of rules, norms, and arrangements and that bypass ideas and policy behaviours and frame ideas themselves. Federal systems and consensus democracy models are examples of such institutional contexts. (40)

Institutions, which function as structure that forces actors to fulfill any specific behaviours, are created and transformed by actors. (41) Institutions establish the common referential frameworks for actors and influence the perceptions, preferences, and the interactive patterns of actors.

In a unitary polity system, such as in Great Britain, where power is focused on the cabinet, communicative discourse is stressed more than coordinative discourse under unitary actor or small electoral district systems, and government enacts nationalistic politics and limited policy elites make policy. Access to policymakers is so limited that the spread of ideas through actors is very difficult. However, once they accept a new idea, then the possibility is high that they will realize policies that reflect it.

In such pluralistic polity states as Germany, a plural actor system has developed where there is a consensus/negotiation democracy and power is decentralized, and refined coordinative discourse is stressed more than communicative discourse. (42)

Coordinative discourse is formed by the individuals and groups at the core of policymaking who produce and legitimize policy ideas and coordinate the consensus for them. Coordinative discourse is crucial both for a policy consensus among policy actors and for legitimizing the consensus contents among electorates. Communicative discourse is the means with which general citizens are persuaded that a policy idea developed in coordinative discourse is required and appropriate, and their support can be obtained through such public persuasive processes as manifestation or legitimization

of policy ideas against general citizens. Communicative discourse is formed by individuals and groups who lay at the core of policy communications. Coordinative discourse is very general, because it does not damage compromises among policy actors; it is fragile. Such transactions in discourse from policy elites to citizens are not one-sided activities because adverse activities also exist. Citizens, for example, engage in communicative discourse through demonstrations, media and communication acts in the public sphere. (43)

3. How can we grasp reciprocal transformations between ideas and policies?

(1) Policy changes based on ideas

Ideas are not the only reasons for policy changes, but they are the main reason for such changes under definite institutional and political conditions. (44) The change of such external conditions as international circumstances promotes a sense of crisis and instability in a society, and doubts about the current policy begin to swirl. A space grows where new ideas are internalized in a society. However, external conditions only decide per se the framework of actions in which ideas exist. Whether a specific new idea can acquire political influence and exclude the existing ideas depends on the relationship among external conditions, the new ideas and the dominant idea within a society, and their harmony in a society. Additionally, it depends on whether policy entrepreneurs reflect on new ideas in policy processes. If a problem occurs in enacting the ideas, whether it successfully enacts the ideas depends on many more conditions: whether the problem is solved, whether policy entrepreneurs recognize that problem, or whether policy entrepreneurs debate and decide to make that idea an issue. In cases where ideas about policy behaviours spread throughout the society as a whole, a strong consensus exists about that idea within a society. At that time, the clearer distinction the idea can provide about 'what is appropriate and what is not' for the policy behavior in a society, the more influence it will exert on foreign policy. (45)

Normally, ideas change gradually. However, a change in the meaning structure in ideas occurs most readily at critical junctures. A critical juncture is defined as the deepest crisis suffered by such external events as requests from allies and international organizations or such internal events as faults in policies themselves. An example of a critical juncture is the 9/11 terrorist attack in America. When a critical juncture emerges, it gives birth to a change that refurbishes the atmosphere or uncertainty, and the existing meaning structure, which decides the logic of appropriateness and has gained

a consensus within the society, is challenged as invalid in the actual situation. However, a meaning structure is transformed more quickly than an ordinary state through effective transactions of critical junctures and policy entrepreneurs. A policy entrepreneur is normally comprised of policymakers who invigorate the existing meaning structure and re-interpret it. (46) As a result of interaction between critical junctures and policy entrepreneurs, the quantity of information which is contradicted with the meaning structure reaches an unbearable level, a policy window (window for change/window of opportunity) is opened through which the meaning structure changes within a society. Whether the policy window is opened depends on the ability of policy entrepreneurs to coordinate new or alternative meaning structures about what is appropriate. These interactions between critical junctures and policy entrepreneurs can be analyzed by process-tracing.

When domestic pressure on policy decisions increases or the existing dominant idea is weakened by speech acts through debates, a critical juncture also emerges and pressure fuels changes in policy and the dominant idea. The transformation from transactions between critical junctures and policy entrepreneurs is reflected in parliamentary discussions.

Against such pressures for transformation, society can only dispense with surface changes without making any deep changes. In this case, policy entrepreneurs grant new meaning, motivations, or an unconventional basis to an action to existing ideas by reconstituting and activating dormant ideas. (47) After this process is accepted in society, internalization occurs in which actions that are valid for the above idea are regarded as appropriate and reasonable among the members of a society. Now the idea can be institutionalized. The more discussions and policy, which reflect the reconstituted ideal basis, match the ideas shared by a society, the higher rises its validity among the members in a society. (48)

Government can veer away from the existing ideal basis. Because such decisions lack ideal groundings, such ideas and foreign policy decisions are confirmed. In that case, ideal elements are unstably bound for definite foreign policy or are discussed in a different manner. Extreme cases also exist where different policy behaviours are grounded by being tied to the same ideal element. (49)

However, if society cannot dispose with such a process, the demand for new ideas increases and ideas become transformative. Skepticism grows against the existing idea and policy since they lack sufficient grounding. As result, policy entrepreneurs reinterpret the ideal fundamentals and framework for the behaviours in the discourse or act as unconventional behaviours and withdraw their policies based on the previous

ideal fundamentals. (50) Such policy transformation happens widely and continuously, even if pressure at home disappears that promotes odd ideas.

(2) Availability of discourse analysis

Ideas cannot be processed deductively. However, discourse presents a series of social and political sets of ideas and material interests and discourse reconstitutes ideas and material interests. Discourse analysis explains well how the ideas, values and expectations for behaviours overcome stereotyped institutions and cultural barriers and adopt to transformations. Additionally, behaviour patterns, which relate to the ideas and are specialized in each situation, and the legitimization for such behaviours are educed in the discourse, as if they were catalyzed. Thus, discourse analysis concretely describes aspects of the ideas and the beliefs of collective actors and values and socially shared expectations for foreign policy that are reflected in parliamentary discussions. Additionally, discourse analysis clarifies the duality of structure between agency and structure in conversational form. Discourse analysis clarifies the transformation based on the dynamic reciprocity effect between foreign policy and ideas.

Discourse analysis also provides a structure and framework that connect such various elements as the perceptions of individuals and groups, and bureaucracy politics within a framework of mid-term theories.⁽⁵²⁾

Discourse analysis is also useful for global governance studies. Global activities are formed not only of interests but also discussions that define the interests of actors and issues. We cannot understand the transition of political authorities and the existence of ideas and norms that constitute global governance without noticing discourse. Moreover, so that actors voluntarily obey non-hierarchical governance, rules and norms are required whose efficiency, legitimacy, and authority are high. For this point, discourse analysis is useful as a way to verify how actors comply with rules and norms and build a social order.

On the other hand, since the work of interpretation advances based on subjective actions by researchers, limitations naturally exist in the objectivity of analysis. Discourse analysis has the risk of excessive voluntarism because it may be overly deterministic with regard to the role of ideas. Material interests qua material interest are ignored in favour of regarding everything as socially constructed within a given idea. (53) Moreover, discourse analysis does not distinguish between when ideas and discourse exert a causal influence and when they do not. In discourse analysis, identifying discourse as an independent variable is difficult, and general criteria are missing for such identification. (54)

Furthermore, some argue that discourse is often 'cheap.' To identify important and relevant discourse, two steps are needed; in the synchronic step, a wide selection of texts is read including those by politicians and individuals. In the diachronic step, political processes are studied in more detail, and the moves made by leading politicians are focused on.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Conclusion

This paper summarized previous research about the relationship among ideas, discourse, and policy, all of which enjoy a mutual, reciprocal relationship as well as a circular relationship with which they influence each other. In addition, differing from the previous researches that regard ideas as stable and unchangeable structures that offer one-sided influence on actors, both ideas and policy transform each other through discourse. To thoroughly understand discourse, the institutional context must be investigated.

Changes in ideas and policies can be grasped in two ways. First, we can use the concepts of policy entrepreneur, critical junctures and policy windows using policy-tracing. Another way to grasp the changes in ideas and policies is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis clarifies a transformation at the idea level, a *duality of structure*, which is mutual reciprocity between agency and structure, and intersubjectivity among the actors. At that time, it is useful also to analyze the policy processes by process-tracing so as to identify the important and relevant discourse.

(Notes)

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- (3) Vivien A. Schmidt, "Comparative Institutional Analysis," in Todd Landmann and Neil Robinson, eds., *The sage handbook of comparative politics* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009), p. 135.
- (4) Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox, "Ideas and Politics," in Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox, eds. *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010a), p. 3.
- (5)Henning Boekle, Jörg Nadoll, Bernhard Stahl, "Identität, Diskurs und vergleichende Analyse

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- (11) *Ibid*.
- (12) Vivien Schmidt, "Take ideas and discourse seriously," Kôji Ono, ed., Constructivistic political theory and comparative politics (Kyoto: Minerva, 2010b), p. 81.
- (13)Jal Mehta, "The Varied Roles of Ideas in Politics. From "Whether" to "How"," in Cox and Béland, eds. op. cit., p. 27.
- (14) *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 37.
- (15) *Ibid.*, pp. 42f.
- (16) Daniel Béland, "Ideas, institutions, policy change," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16:5, August 2009, p. 707.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 709.
- (18)Schmidt (2010a), op. cit., p. 56.
- (19)Cf. Jennifer Milliken, "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods," *European Journal of International Relations*, 5, No. 2, 1999, p. 238.
- (20)Schmidt and Radaelli, op. cit., p. 206.
- (21) *Ibid.*, pp. 197ff.
- (22)Jörg Nadoll, "Forschungsdesign-Nationale Identität und Diskursanalyse," in Britta Joerißen, Bernhard Stahl, eds., Europäische Außenpolitik und nationale Identität. Vergleichende Diskurs- und Verhaltensstudien zu Dänemark, Deutschland, Frankreich, Griechenland, Italien und Niederlanden (Bonn: Europa Union Verlag, 2003), S. 172.
- (23) Vivien A. Schmidt, Democracy in Europe. The EU and National Polities (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 251f.
- (24) Schmidt and Radaelli, op. cit., p. 201.
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- (32)Boekle et al., op. cit., p. 11.
- (33)Cf. Thomas Risse, "Deutsche Identität und Außenpolitik," in Siegmar Schmidt, Gunther Hellmann, Reinhard Wolf, eds., *Handbuch zur deutschen Außenpolitik* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), pp. 52, 60.
- (34) Nadoll, op. cit., p. 172.
- (35) Ibid.
- (36) *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- (37) Ibid., p. 172.
- (38) Ibid., p. 175.
- (39)Schmidt and Radaelli, op. cit., p. 202.
- (40) *Ibid.*, pp. 184, 197.
- (41)Schmidt (2010a), op. cit., p. 55.
- (42)Schmidt (2010b), op. cit., p. 89.
- (43) *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.
- (44)Béland, op. cit., p. 702.
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- (47) Nadoll, op. cit., p. 175.
- (48) Stahl and Harnisch, op. cit., p. 35.
- (49) Nadoll, a. a. O., p. 176.
- (50) *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- (51)Cf. Schmidt and Radaelli, op. cit., pp. 206f.
- (52)Henrik Larsen, Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis. France, Britain and Europe (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 21.
- (53)Schmidt (2009), op. cit., pp. 136f.
- (54) *Ibid*.
- (55) Wæver (2004), op. cit., p. 172.

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