

Selected elements of the learning culture at Universities of Third Age in Poland

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Abstract

The article presents the results of analyses regarding some elements of a learning culture of seniors taking advantage of offers of institutions promoting knowledge. Selected elements concerning lifestyle have been analysed for example involvement in activities after classes at Third Age University, values which, as senior citizens argue, can contribute to a successful life, the level of satisfaction resulting from selected areas of life. Data collected in 2013 relating to 9673 people aged over 60 living in Poland selected at random were used for the analysis. Data gathered as part of *Diagnoza Społeczna* Project (*Social Diagnosis* Project www.diagnoza.com) were used as well. Seniors using offers of educational institutions have been compared with seniors not making use of those offers. It has been stated that the differences in terms of a level of activity concern the establishing of interpersonal relations and social activity, participation in culture, a level of life satisfaction. The differences in terms of seniors' opinions in the groups being compared about *Friendship* and *Optimism* as values which are a requirement for a successful life have also been identified.

Key words Senior citizens, Third Age University, learning culture

The concept of successful ageing

Over the last several decades a number of various theories related to the so-called successful ageing which can be described as “optimal ageing” have developed. Bowling and Dieppe having analysed 170 scientific articles about the above mentioned subject, have identified the following theories of successful ageing found in literature: biomedical, sociopsychological and lay views²⁶. The biomedical theories tend to focus on the absence of chronic diseases, minimising the risk of physical and mental disability. The sociopsychological theories hold life satisfaction,

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²⁶A. Bowling, P. Dieppe, (2005), What is successful aging and who should define it? , in “British Medical Journal, 331, 1548-1551. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1559/1/1548.pdf>

social participation, personal development to be key elements of successful ageing. Health, psychological factors, fulfilment of social roles, activity, as well as finances and social relationships are elements of lay views which are the most popular among senior citizens. The sociopsychological concepts assume that an individual can decide on how to age. Some concepts have revealed that adopting a specific lifestyle has an impact on successful ageing²⁷. There is however no common understanding about what lifestyle is required. The activity theory²⁸ has numerous supporters among both the elderly, politicians and individuals involved in providing institutional support in the field of education of senior citizens. According to the activity theory, the different forms of activities undertaken by seniors on a day-to-day basis and their involvement in new forms of activities affect successful ageing. The disengagement theory is based on a different concept²⁹. The theory argues that ageing is a process in which older people no longer participate in society. Both the activity theory and the disengagement theory are subject to criticism resulting from a life model, imposed by the theories, which ensures successful ageing not taking into account different personalities, preferences and older people's experience³⁰. The continuity theory is a kind of compromise³¹. In accordance with the theory, successful ageing involves a continuation of lifestyle chosen some years earlier. In scientific studies while searching for determinants of successful ageing, an effort was made to distinguish positively correlated factors with the variable under consideration as follows: the absence of symptoms of diseases and infirmity; active participation in society, a high level of cognitive and physical functioning³². Furthermore, it has been noted that the spiritual dimension can have considerable importance³³. Successful ageing means healthy ageing and it has been defined by WHO according to its broad definition of health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"³⁴. The documents of the European Union and the World Health Organization refer to the need to encourage the concept of active ageing as the remedy for an ageing European population to improve the health of older people. Active ageing is understood as the "process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age"³⁵ as defined in 2002 by the World Health Organization. It is assumed that a healthy person is active in different areas of life such as social, economic, cultural, spiritual and public life, whereas successful ageing is the result of an active lifestyle.

²⁷ L.Zajac-Lamparska, (2012), *Psychologiczne koncepcje pomyślnego starzenia się*, in "Rocznik Andrologiczny", 89-105.

²⁸ R.J.Havighurst, (1961), Successful aging, in „The Gerontologist”, 1, 1, 8-13.

²⁹ E.Cumming, W.E.Henry, (1961), *Growing Old*, Basic Books, New York.

³⁰ L.Zajac – Lamparska, (2012), *Psychologiczne koncepcje pomyślnego starzenia się człowieka*, in „Rocznik Andragogiczny”, p.93.

³¹ R.C.Atchley, 1989, A Continuity Theory of Normal Aging, in „The Gerontologist”, 29, 2, p.183-190.

<http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/29/2/183.abstract>

³² J.W.Rowe, R.L. Kahn, (1999), Successful aging, in „The Gerontologist” 37, 433-440.

³³ M.R.Crowther, M.W.Parker, W.A.Achenbaum, W.L.Larimore., H.G.Koenig, (2002), Rowe and Kahn's model of successful aging revisited: positive spirituality – the forgotten factor, in "The Gerontologist" 42, 5, 613-620.

³⁴<http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html>

³⁵ WHO: Active Ageing: A Policy Framework World Health Organization, (2002), http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2002who_nmh_nph_02.8.pdf

Social and cultural perspective of learning

Researchers who deal with education note that people learn through participation in the community, or their activity in society. It has also been noted that “a learning process is put between a biography and social and cultural space in which they live and their experience is shaped (...) Learning tends to be characterized by tensions occurring between what is individual and what is social”³⁶. Such knowledge is not the theoretical one, but it is a part of identity of individuals based on experience gained, which means that it is closely related to biographies of individuals. Gert Biesta³⁷ explains *learning cultures*; and the concept of culture is used in anthropological terms – culture is considered as the way of acting, the way of being. Learning culture of the community is related to the lifestyle of its members. A lifestyle means “culturally determined ways of life: life models, reasons for certain behaviour values, directives and measures serving their objectives (...)”³⁸. According to Biesta, learning cultures are not contexts in which people learn, but they are social practices through which people learn. They can be characterised by describing how people understand and value learning; in what circumstances they learn; what forms of activity they participate in; how they organise a learning process (a teaching process); what forms of learning they undertake; how learning is supported in the community; what examples of interpersonal contacts are. It should be noted that specific learning cultures can allow, support, hinder or exclude some types of learning. While describing a learning culture it should be taken into account which learning opportunities are available for people from a specific culture and which learning opportunities are blocked.

Learning cultures at Polish Universities of Third Age

Educational institutions for senior citizens such as Third Age Universities (TAUs) play a key role in the process of promoting the concept of active ageing among the elderly. Their educational offer includes not only health, law, economy, sports activities, but also the use of new technologies as well as they encourage older people to take up self-study. The stated objectives of TAU are³⁹:

- dissemination of educational initiatives
- mental stimulation of the elderly as well as their intellectual, social and physical involvement
- expending seniors' knowledge and skills

³⁶ K. Illeris, (2006), Trzy wymiary uczenia się. Poznawcze, emocjonalne i społeczne ramy współczesnej teorii uczenia się, DSWE TWP Publishing House, Wrocław, p.131.

³⁷ G.Biesta, (2013), Od kultur uczenia się do kultur edukacyjnych. Wartości i sądy w badaniach pedagogicznych oraz w pracy nad postęпами w kształceniu, in „Teraźniejszość. Człowiek. Edukacja” 61, 1, 47-58.

P. Hodkinson, G.Biesta., D.James, (2004), Towards a Cultural Theory of College-based Learning, British Educational Researcher Association Annual Conference, <http://education.exeter.ac.uk/tlc/publications.htm>

³⁸ A.Tyszka, (1971), *Uczestnictwo w kulturze. O różnorodności stylów życia*, Warszawa: PWN, 1971, p.104.

³⁹ <http://www.utw.pl/index.php?id=10>

- facilitating relations with institutions such as: health care service, cultural centres, rehabilitation centres and other institutions
- engage students in activities for the surrounding environment
- maintain social ties and interpersonal communication among seniors

Therefore, the aim of TAU is to create conditions for successful ageing of people making use of their offer.

In 2012 there were about 400 TAUs in Poland and their number is increasing⁴⁰. To compare, the number of TAUs was 60 in 2005. Each of these universities has its own specific learning culture, but there are also some noticeable simplicities occurring at all Polish TAUs. Hence, in my article I would like to focus on those elements of learning culture that are not related to methods of teaching or a kind of educational offer. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize elements concerning a lifestyle of students from Third Age Universities, their way of perceiving the world, the value system which may undoubtedly create the learning climate, support and promote certain types of behaviours of participants of TAUs.

As can be seen from the report *Zoom na UTW (Zoom to TAU Research Report)*, Third Age Universities in Poland operate within structures of other institutions, for example higher education schools, libraries, cultural centres. TAUs share rooms where classes take place with other users, so seniors cannot use places on their own terms. The analysis of the use of space, conducted by authors of the report, leads to the conclusion that “University of Third Age does not stand for a place, but mainly for people”⁴¹. Seniors “colonise” places not related to classes, for instance they meet in local cafes after lectures. Interviews with participants of UTA⁴² reveal that apart from acquiring knowledge during lectures, workshops and classes, a wide range of other benefits should be taken into consideration. The attitude of participants towards studying is an element which makes a learning culture at TAU different from a learning culture at other higher educational institutions. Above all, a sort of celebration of a lecture day (an upbeat atmosphere and neat clothes) as well as taking part in classes enhance the importance of senior citizens. They are proud to be able to take part in lectures and lecture topics inspire them to have a conversation as well as they feel that they are aware of current social issues. In opinions of the respondents, attending classes at TAU has an impact on re-evaluating old age and improving the image of the elderly. While interviewing, seniors emphasized that it is time to make friends and it is also time of personal development. They noted that the elderly become more open-minded and energetic. The educational offer of TAUs usually includes lectures and classes (in groups or selections), works hops, courses. Moreover, a range of events is organized as part of the activity of Universities of Third Age. Classes are often given by teachers as well as professionals such as doctors, lawyers, employees of local institutions (e.g. police officers). People working for TAU do volunteer work. In addition, almost one third of participants of TAU engage in work for the benefit of other participants, e.g. support in times of illness, spiritual support, help in everyday life. 50% of Polish TAUs carry out actions for the local community and people who are not students of Universities of

⁴⁰ Zoom na UTW. Raport z badania, http://zoomnautw.pl/wpcontent/uploads/2012/05/Zoom_na_UTW_RAPORT_calosciowy_www.pdf

⁴¹ Ibid. p.39

⁴² Ibid. p.53

Third Age. Women, especially widows, tend to predominate among participants⁴³. The research conducted by B.Ziębińska indicates that students of TAU have a higher level of formal education compared to the total population, 45% of them possess higher education qualifications and they are in a good financial situation. A half of senior citizens attending classes had worked as officials before retirement, one out of 5 people was a teacher. Participants of TAU are people who remain socially active. More than a half of them are members of other social organizations⁴⁴.

The objectives of the paper and its method

Presenting some elements related to a learning culture in a group of students of TAU is the objective of the article. Selected elements connected with a lifestyle: involvement in forms of activity after classes at TAU, values which, as seniors argue, can contribute to a successful life, the level of satisfaction resulting from selected areas of life were considered. A group of students of TAU was compared with regard to studied variables with seniors who were not students of TAU.

The following issues have been raised:

- What is lifestyle of Polish seniors making use of educational institutions such as Universities of Third Age, or to what extent they differ from seniors who do not use the offers of educational institutions?
 - A)** Are there any differences with regard to social life?
 - B)** Are there any differences with regard to participation in culture?
 - C)** Are there any differences with regard to spiritual life?
- What is a satisfaction level of seniors taking advantage of educational offers concerning the quality of life?
- What are values, according to seniors in compared groups, of a key condition for a successful, happy life?

Data made available in the framework of the *Diagnoza Społeczna* Project (the *Social Diagnosis Project* www.diagnoza.com) have been analysed in order to answer the questions. The objective of the project is a diagnosis of the conditions and quality of the Poles. The research is regularly conducted [at intervals of several years] on a random sample of the Poles and is based on a panel form. Two rounds of research have been carried out so far: in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013. "The results of the Social Diagnosis reveal not only the current state of Polish society, but allow us to follow how it has changed over the last 10 years. What is more, taking into account earlier research on the quality of life in Poland, it even gives us an insight into nearly the entire process of system

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴B. Ziębińska, (2007), Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku jako instytucje przeciwdziałające marginalizacji osób starszych (Universities of Third Age as institutions preventing the marginalization of older people) , <http://www.sbc.org.pl/Content/7028/doktorat2757.pdf>

transformation⁴⁵. The *Social Diagnosis* is public in nature and a database collected during the research can be downloaded free of charge from the website: www.diagnoza.com.

The data on Polish senior citizens [people aged 60 or above] gathered in 2013 by means of a questionnaire have been used by me.

Table 1. A characteristics of surveyed people

Gender:		
Female		N=5586
Male		N=4087
Total		N=9673
Age:		
Females	M	71,5
	Median	70
	SD	8,9
Males	M	69,9
	Median	68
	SD	8,09
Participation at TAUs or other institutions promoting knowledge	Yes	N=68
	No	N=9606

Source: own analysis based on Social Monitoring (2013). Social Diagnosis: an intergrated database. www.diagnozaa.com, access 13.02.2014

The data relating to people who were 60 or above in 2013 have been chosen to conduct analyses. There were 9673 people, that is 5586 women and 4087 men. Students of Third Age University and other institutions promoting knowledge constitute about 0,7% of the surveyed group. A statistical analysis has been performed using the Statistica 10.0 software. Due to the failure of the assumption of normality of the distribution, in some cases, *U* Mann Whitney test has been used for examining the difference between layout of variables [in table 2 and 4]. The test was chosen as a nonparametric variant of a t-student test. The two proportions test [table 3 and 5] has been used in order to carry out a statistical analysis regarding differences between the proportions of people meeting a specific criterion.

The style of life of Polish senior citizens

According to a conception of a successful ageing by Rowe and Kahn, successful ageing requires being active from an individual⁴⁶. The authors emphasize the role of forms of activity related to building interpersonal relations and productive activity which has a social value (e.g. as a part of volunteering). In the analysis, regarding the style of life of senior citizens, the collected data concerned issues such as frequency of meeting other people, participation in cultural and religious events (table 2). Moreover, it has been checked as to what extent the compared groups care

⁴⁵ <http://diagnoza.com/>

⁴⁶ J.W.Rowe, R.L.Kahn, (1999), Successful aging, in „The Gerontologist” 37, 433-440.

about their physical condition: whether they exercise or not and how much time they spend watching TV (table 3). The ability to use ICT tools (e.g. a computer, the Internet) may decrease the possibility of social exclusion of senior citizens, therefore being one of conditions of a successful ageing. Taking all of that into consideration, it has been examined whether the compared senior groups take advantage of modern technologies (table 3).

Table 2. A characteristics of selected elements of style of life in the senior citizens group, making use of educational offers as well as those not making use of such offers

A type of activity	Seniors not making use of educational institutions offers			Seniors making use of TAU offers or other institutions promoting knowledge			z	p
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD		
Participation in social meetings last month	8112	0,9	1,9	68	2,7	1,9	-10,8	0,00
Number of friends	8174	6,3	6,6	67	9	8,8	-3,7	0,00
Number of friends in a family a senior is in touch with regularly	8219	7,7	6,3	68	8,2	4,8	-1,6	0,1
Number of close friends a senior is in touch with regularly	8139	4,3	4,9	68	8,4	8,5	-6,4	0,00
Number of friends a senior is in touch with regularly	8058	4,9	6,3	66	10,6	13,4	-5,2	0,00
Participation in religious services (a number monthly)	8225	3,5	3,9	67	4,6	6,3	-1,2	0,2

Eating out (a number last month)	8015	0,2	1,1	66	1,1	1,7	-10,5	0,00
Going to the cinema, theater, concert (a number last month)	8013	0,1	0,7	67	0,98	1,3	-12,8	0,00

Source: own materials based on: Social Monitoring Council (2013). Social diagnosis: an integrated database. www.diagnoza.com, access 13.02.2014

The data in table 2 show that the style of life of students of TAU differs significantly from the style of life of the rest of members of Polish seniors population.

The results of statistical analysis presented in table 2 and 3 show that TAU's aims have been achieved. The seniors participating in activities organized by TAU have a more active lifestyle than the others. They have a bigger number of friends and acquaintances whom they are in touch with, they take part in cultural events, they go to the cinema, theatre or restaurant more frequently. Comparing the lifestyle of TAU's students and those not being students of TAU, it can be observed that individuals, making use of educational institutions services, take actions favouring how to remain healthy to a larger extent. For example, they go in for sports or exercise. In a group of TAU students, 24% of students do not exercise at all. In a group of seniors not being TAU students, a proportion of such individuals is 81%.

A situation concerning smoking is quite similar: 3% of smokers in a group of TAU students, and 17% of smokers in the other group. Watching TV for a long time is associated with a passive lifestyle. Considering that, TAU students also differ statistically from a population of other seniors. Those who aren't students of TAU make a group of 26% Polish seniors who watch TV more than 4 hours daily while TAU students make a group of 13%. In a population involved in making use of educational institutions' offers, there is a larger proportion of individuals who do not watch TV at all (17,6%) or watch TV very little (less than an hour daily). They make a group of 6,7% in a group of seniors not making use of such offers. A TAU group is also less affected by a social exclusion related to a lack of computer or Internet skills. Almost 70% of students can use a computer and the Internet. Just to make a comparison: in the other senior group, approximately 20% of seniors used the Internet and a computer in 2013. TAU students are more active in a local community. 66% of them were active in their community within the last two years. In a population of other Polish seniors, it was only 11%. The lifestyle of seniors making use of TAU offer is not less 'familial' than of

those who do not make use of such an offer. They stay in touch with approximately 8 persons from their family circle, and this number does not significantly differ from a number of family members the other seniors in a population stay in touch with. However, TAU students have more friends whom they regularly meet (approx. 10 persons) and close friends (approx. 8 persons). In a population of seniors not making use of TAU offer, an average number of close friends is 4, and friends – 5. In a month preceding the research, the TAU group socialized more often. There are no major statistical differences when it comes to a participation in a religious life. Both compared groups participate in religious services approximately 4 times a month.

Table 3. A characteristics of selected lifestyle elements in a group of seniors making use of educational offers, and seniors not making use of such offers (% refers to those who answered the question)

A type of activity	Seniors not making use of educational institutions offers		Seniors making use of TAU offers or other institutions promoting knowledge		Significance of differences (the result regarding two proportions test)
	n	%	n	%	
Watching TV for max. 1 hour daily	553	6,73	12	17,64	p<0,01
Watching TV for more than 4 hours daily	2142	26	9	13,2	p<0,05
Using the computer	1597	19	45	66	p<0,01
Using the Internet	1613	20	47	69	p<0,01

A number of seniors who do not exercise	6637	81	16	24	p<0,01
A number of seniors smoking cigarettes	1401	17	2	3	p<0,01
Taking actions to promote a local community (during the last two years)	882	11	44	66	p<0,01

Source: own analysis based on: Social Monitoring Council (2013). Social diagnosis: an integrated database. www.diagnoza.com, access 13.02.2014

The level of satisfaction of Polish seniors regarding their quality of life

A subjective evaluation of various aspects of senior's own life can be one of indicators of a successful ageing. Table 4 presents the seniors' evaluations concerning a level of satisfaction when it comes to selected areas of a personal and social life. The researched group was asked to evaluate the level of their satisfaction regarding the following areas of life on the scale from 1 to 6. The numbers refer to: 1- very satisfied, 2 – satisfied, 3 – quite satisfied, 4 – quite dissatisfied, 5 – dissatisfied, 6 – very dissatisfied.

The results show a higher level of satisfaction regarding the majority of analyzed areas in a group of TAU students. Evaluations made by the respondents present a higher level of satisfaction in a group of TAU students in such areas as: health, relations with friends, a situation in their country, life achievements. The area which does not differentiate two researched populations is a satisfaction from relations among family members, a satisfaction from marriage and having children. The level of satisfaction from those two life aspects is high and similar in a group of seniors both making use and not making use of educational offers of various institutions.

Table 4. The level of satisfaction from selected areas of life in a group of seniors making use of educational offers and seniors not making use of such offers

The level of satisfaction (on the scale from 1 to 6), the higher value the lower level of satisfaction	Seniors not making use of educational institutions offers			Seniors making use of TAU offers or other institutions promoting knowledge			z	p
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD		
Family relations	8182	2,1 1	0,9	68	2,1	0,8	-0,53	0,6
Financial situation of one's own family	8178	3,3	1,3	68	2,9	1,04	2,06	0,04
Relations with a circle of friends	7753	2,6	0,9	67	2,1	0,7	3,8	0,00
Health	8213	3,7	1,3	68	3,4	1,2	2,0	0,04
Life achievements	8182	3,0	1,1	68	2,5	0,8	3,6	0,00
Situation in the country	8164	4,5	1,2	68	4,1	1,2	3,1	0,00
The housing conditions	8216	2,5	1,1	68	1,9	0,8	4,6	0,00
A place of living	8219	2,4	0,9	68	2,2	0,9	2,0	0,04
Future perspectives	7968	3,7	1,3	64	3,3	1,5	2,6	0,01
Sexual life	4144	3,4	1,3	31	2,9	1,2	2,2	0,02

One's own education	8074	3,1	1,2	67	2,4	0,9	5,2	0,00
The way of spending leisure time	8161	2,9	1,1	68	2,5	0,9	2,7	0,01
Children	1753	1,9	0,9	62	1,8	0,8	0,7	0,4
Marriage	5345	2,1	0,9	40	2,1	1,2	0,5	0,6
Safety at a place of living	8188	2,6	0,9	68	2,7	0,9	-1,96	0,05

Source: own analysis based on: Social Monitoring Council (2013). Social diagnosis: an integrated database. www.diagnoza.com, access 13.02.2014

Values conditioning a successful and happy life according to Polish seniors

Table 5 describes values which, according to Polish seniors, condition a successful and happy life. In the first places, both in the group of a TAU population and in the population of all seniors, there is *Health*, and in the next two ones there are *Children* and *A Happy Marriage*. Then there are some differences when it comes to two populations being analyzed: a group of TAU students lists such values as *Cheerfulness* and *optimism* (23%). However, this value is not that important for the group of other Polish seniors (9%). They value *Work* (16%), *Honesty* (12%), and most of all a value that is *God* (23%) more. The group of TAU students appreciates these values too, but in the next places, just after *Cheerfulness* and *optimism*. Statistically significant differences refer to a proportion of respondents listing *Friends* as a condition of a happy life. In the group of TAU students it is 12%, and in the other population of seniors it is almost 5%.

Table 5. Conditions of a successful, happy life in the opinion of seniors making use of educational offers, and those not making use of such offers (% refers to those who answered the question)

Conditions of a happy life	Seniors not making use of educational institutions offers		Seniors making use of TAU offers or other institutions promoting knowledge		Significance of differences – two proportions test
	N	%	N	%	
Health	6219	75,4	47	69,1	Not significant

Children	4337	52,6	36	52,9	Not significant
Happy marriage	4026	48,8	36	52,9	Not significant
Providence, God	1903	23,1	13	19,1	Not significant
Money	1791	21,7	10	14,7	Not significant
Work	1365	16,5	8	11,8	Not significant
Honesty	1008	12,2	13	19,1	Not significant
Kindliness and respect of the people around	700	8,5	6	8,8	Not significant
Cheerfulness and optimism	749	9,1	16	23,5	p<0,01
Friends	401	4,9	8	11,8	p<0,01
Strong personality	349	4,2	2	2,9	Not significant
Freedom	139	1,7	3	4,4	p<0,1

Source: own analysis based on: Social Monitoring Council (2013). Social diagnosis: an integrated database. www.diagnoza.com, access 13.02.2014

Conclusion

In the situation of demographical changes which we have to deal with in Europe, the actions promoting seniors' activation are very significant both when it comes to the life quality of seniors themselves and functioning of the whole society. Third Age Universities and other institutions promoting widely understood education of seniors play a very important role in this scope. The results of analysis regarding the culture of learning of those making use of offers promoting knowledge presented in this article show that seniors making use of such offer differ quite significantly from the group of seniors not making use of educational institutions' offers. They way they spend time, their attitudes towards reality in which they live, create successful practices of non-formal learning. Making use of forms of institutional education of seniors, participation in a community of active people, having an optimistic attitude to life, form the attitudes and styles of life of participants of such a form of education in compliance with all the aims set by educational institutions.

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