

Autoethnography in Action: A Reflexive Methodological Approach to Investigating Academic Workload Allocation

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Abstract: This paper positions autoethnography as a rigorous, emotionally reflexive, and ethically grounded methodology for interrogating academic workload allocation in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). Drawing on 31 years of lived academic experience, the study integrates emotional reflexivity and ideographic inquiry to examine how managerialism, coercive governance, and neoliberal accountability mechanisms shape the lived realities of academic labour. Through personal narrative, the research illuminates the emotional, ethical, and political dimensions of academic life, revealing how invisible labour, surveillance, and inequitable workload models produce exhaustion, alienation, and moral injury. Autoethnography is advanced as both a methodological tool and a form of resistance that legitimizes insider knowledge and challenges technocratic paradigms. The study adopts an analytic autoethnographic approach, emphasizing theoretical engagement, institutional critique, and systematic triangulation of reflective journals, institutional documents, policy texts, and critical theory. Emotional reflexivity is employed as an ethical and analytical stance, enabling interrogation of positionality, emotional labour, and moral tensions embedded in academic life. The findings reveal four interrelated themes: the invisibility of care and service work; the manipulation of workload models under managerialism; the emotional toll of academic labour; and symbolic forms of resistance enacted by academics in pursuit of dignity and justice. These insights contribute to scholarship critiquing the erosion of collegial governance and the normalization of performativity in higher education. By situating personal experience within institutional critique, the study demonstrates how autoethnography transforms lived experience into an analytical lens for challenging systemic dysfunctions. It calls for transparent, context-sensitive workload models recognizing the full spectrum of academic labour, including emotional and relational dimensions, and advocates participatory governance prioritizing collegiality, care, and ethical accountability. This paper contributes to methodological innovation in higher education and management research by showing how autoethnography can humanize inquiry, restore academic voice, and inform socially just policy reform, reimagining academic work as a human, ethically engaged, and emotionally invested practice.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Reflexive Methodology, Academic Workload, Distributive Justice, Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of higher education, academic workload allocation has emerged as a deeply contested and politically charged issue (Barrett & Barrett, 2011). While institutional models often present workload distribution as a neutral, technical exercise, such frameworks frequently obscure academic labour's emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions (Gill, 2016). Within South African higher education institutions (HEIs), neoliberal governance and managerialism have reshaped academic identities and institutional cultures, privileging performance metrics and compliance over collegiality and care (Van Vuuren, 2024). Consequently, questions of fairness, transparency, and recognition have become increasingly central to debates about academic work, institutional justice, and professional well-being.

This paper responds to this growing concern and the need for methodological innovation by positioning autoethnography as a rigorous, reflexive, and ethically grounded research approach (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Méndez, 2013). Autoethnography offers a unique epistemological stance that merges personal narrative with critical theory, enabling researchers to interrogate institutional structures from within. It foregrounds the researcher's positionality and emotional entanglement with the research context, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how systemic dysfunctions are experienced at the body, psyche, and identity level.

Drawing on 31 years of academic experience, this study employs autoethnography as a method of inquiry and as a form of resistance, challenging technocratic paradigms and restoring voice to those navigating the complexities of academic labour. Integrating Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and ideographic inquiry, the paper illustrates how autoethnography can illuminate the invisible labour, emotional toll, and ethical contradictions embedded in workload allocation practices. These frameworks anchor the study's reflexive orientation and guide its interpretation of lived academic experience. In doing so, the paper contributes to the growing body of

scholarship that reimagines qualitative research as a transformative and humanising endeavour, capable of informing socially just and context-sensitive policy reform.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Autoethnography as Method and Epistemology

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that links personal experience to broader cultural, institutional, and political contexts. Emerging in the 1980s amid the crisis of representation, it challenged positivist paradigms by positioning the self as both subject and site of inquiry (Méndez, 2013). This approach foregrounds lived experience as a critical source of knowledge, especially where institutional structures obscure emotional and ethical dimensions of academic life.

Defined as an autobiographical genre connecting personal experience to cultural contexts, autoethnography enables critical interrogation of systemic dysfunctions through narrative, emotion, and reflexive analysis (Poulos, 2021). Contemporary practice blends evocative and analytic trajectories: the evocative strand emphasizes emotional resonance, while the analytic strand theorizes experience within social frameworks (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2021; Anderson, 2006; Qutoshi, 2015). This hybrid approach legitimizes subjective experience as analytic evidence and challenges the division between researcher and researched.

Epistemologically, autoethnography situates personal narratives within systemic and historical forces (Holman Jones, 2005), surfacing invisible emotional labour, ethical tensions, and identity negotiations often excluded from formal workload models (du Toit, 2025). Reflexivity is central, guiding researchers to examine assumptions, positionality, and emotional entanglements, while upholding ethical responsibility in representing self and others (Bourdieu, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Joy, Rojas-Gaviria & Peña-Moreno, 2024; Pillow, 2003).

While critiques highlight subjectivity and limited generalizability (Walford, 2004), these overlook autoethnography's interpretive and transformative aims. It prioritizes situated understanding over positivist generalization, revealing the intersection of personal and institutional realities (Bochner & Ellis, 2006; Poulos, 2021). In this study, autoethnography serves as both method and epistemology, uniting self and structure, emotion and theory, and experience and critique, offering a reformative lens on institutional inequities in South African higher education workload allocation.

2.2 Reflexivity, Power, and Positionality in Autoethnographic Research

Autoethnography is more than a methodological choice; it is a reflexive, ethically complex, and politically engaged mode of inquiry (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). It requires researchers to confront their embeddedness within institutional structures and the emotional, epistemological, and ethical entanglements that shape knowledge production. In higher education, neoliberal governance has intensified managerial control and eroded collegiality (Gill, 2016), making reflexivity a political act: a practice of agency, resistance, and accountability. In South Africa, these tensions are amplified by colonial legacies and bureaucratic cultures that constrain professional autonomy (Fataar, 2018; Van Vuuren, 2024). These reflexive principles underpin the study's investigation of workload allocation, guiding analysis of moral tensions and institutional inequities.

2.2.1 Bourdieu's Reflexive Sociology: Field, Habitus, and Symbolic Violence

Bourdieu's reflexive sociology offers a critical lens for understanding how researchers are shaped by, and implicated in, the academic field. His concept of habitus—shaped by gendered, classed, and institutional experiences—explains how symbolic violence is reproduced through performance metrics, compliance cultures, and managerial authoritarianism (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In South African higher education, this violence manifests in coercive governance regimes that discipline academic labour and suppress dissent (Fataar, 2018).

Neoliberal regimes of visibility and performativity pressure academics to present themselves as auditable entities, subject to surveillance and competitive individualism (Gill, 2016). Reflexivity functions as resistance, enabling researchers to confront internalized norms and reveal mechanisms of domination. Autoethnography allows the integration of personal experience with institutional analysis, showing how academic identities are negotiated within managerial structures (Wall, 2006).

2.2.2 Reflexivity as Ethical Practice

Reflexivity is not an optional methodological add-on but a core ethical commitment. It requires ongoing self-scrutiny, critical evaluation of positionality, and relational accountability. Finlay (2002) argues that reflexivity strengthens qualitative validity by making the researcher's situatedness visible. Pillow (2003) emphasizes that reflexivity must be context-sensitive, visible, and disruptive. Ethical reflexivity is integral to this study, ensuring sensitivity to institutional hierarchies, labour inequalities, and personal bias.

In autoethnography, ethical reflexivity extends to the responsibility of representing others with integrity, sensitivity, and justice. Sparkes (2024) frames autoethnography as an ethically contested terrain, where relational ethics, informed consent, and representation are fluid and negotiated. This is particularly relevant in insider research, where boundaries between self and other are blurred, and disclosure carries significant stakes.

2.2.3 Researcher Vulnerability and Emotional Labour

Autoethnography foregrounds emotional truth as analytic. Researcher vulnerability, expressed through anxiety, trauma, and moral injury, is central to knowledge production. Emotional labour, often feminized and invisibilized, becomes a site of resistance, particularly in neoliberal academic contexts where care work is undervalued (Crisp, 2022). In South African academia, structural inequities and managerialism amplify exclusion, burnout, and ethical strain (Dhanpat, De Braine & Geldenhuys, 2019).

Emotional honesty and personal narrative are essential to understanding lived experience (Muncey, 2010). The discomfort of first-person writing is not incidental but integral to autoethnography's transformative potential (Wall, 2006). Audit cultures and pseudo-events (Alvesson, 2013) valorize quantifiable outputs while devaluing collegiality and care, producing shame, anxiety, and exhaustion. By highlighting these realities, autoethnography critiques dominant discourses of productivity and efficiency.

2.2.4 Positionality and Ethical Complexity

Entwined positionality (Bolade-Ogunfodun, Adisa & Mordi, 2022) emphasizes the interplay between a researcher's cultural background, emotional landscape, and institutional embeddedness. In autoethnography, positionality is negotiated and shaped by intersecting forces of marginalization and privilege. In South African HEIs, the researcher's identity as both insider and critic navigates toxic leadership, emotional exhaustion, and ethical dilemmas.

Autoethnography amplifies silent voices and hidden wounds, offering a humanizing lens to critique and reimagine institutional cultures. Sparkes (2024) advocates for situated, dialogic, and embodied ethics rather than rigid checklists. Ethical negotiation includes acknowledging limits to anonymity, contested informed consent, and the potential harms and emancipatory possibilities of difficult disclosures. Reflexive scholarship in South Africa must engage critically with colonial legacies, positioning self-study as both critique and transformation (Burman, 2024).

Reflexivity, positionality, and ethical accountability provide the scaffolding through which workload allocation is interrogated. They enable a situated understanding of how hierarchies, managerial norms, and emotional labour shape academic work. Through this lens, autoethnography becomes a method of inquiry, resistance, and ethical critique of inequitable institutional practices.

3. Methodology: Autoethnography Enriched Through Emotional Reflexivity and Ideographic Inquiry

This study employs autoethnography as its central methodological and epistemological framework, situating the researcher's lived experience within broader institutional, socio-cultural, and political contexts. As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) describe, autoethnography functions as a method and a form of knowledge production, merging self-reflection with analytic interpretation. Unlike journaling or memoir, autoethnography involves systematic analysis, interpretation, and triangulation of multiple qualitative sources, including reflective journals, institutional documents (e.g., workload spreadsheets, meeting minutes), policy texts (e.g., teaching and learning frameworks, performance management guidelines), and theoretical literature, to construct a multilayered understanding of academic workload allocation (Holman Jones, 2005; Ibrahim et al, 2023).

This study extends traditional autoethnography by explicitly integrating emotional reflexivity and ideographic inquiry as dual analytical lenses, offering a distinct approach to examining the affective, cognitive, and structural dimensions of academic work.

Reflexivity is the ethical, political, and analytical lens through which this research is conducted. The researcher continually interrogates positionality, assumptions, and emotional responses to organizational structures, ensuring that inquiry remains attuned to moral and institutional responsibilities. Positionality acknowledges insider/outsider perspectives, identity, and socio-cultural location, shaping the interpretation of hierarchical structures, decision-making processes, and professional interactions. Reflexive engagement foregrounds the emotional labour inherent in academic work, including experiences of affective strain and moral injury, highlighting the human cost of managerialism and coercive accountability mechanisms (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003; Sparkes, 2024).

The methodology is further enriched through ideographic inquiry, which integrates cognition, emotion, and lived experience to explore academic life's nuanced and embodied realities (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). This approach allows the researcher to systematically connect personal experience with institutional structures, producing insight into how emotional reflexivity mediates engagement with professional responsibilities. Emotional labour, often feminized and undervalued, is treated not as anecdotal but as analytically significant (Bae, 2025; Muncey, 2010).

This study adopts an analytic autoethnographic approach (Anderson, 2006), which differs from evocative autoethnography by emphasizing theoretical engagement, systematic data analysis, and institutional critique. While evocative autoethnography prioritizes emotional resonance and storytelling, the analytic strand is more suited to this study's aim of theorizing workload allocation within neoliberal governance and organizational justice (Bochner & Ellis, 2006).

Ethical considerations were carefully managed, given the insider perspective and the sensitive nature of the institutional critique. The researcher anonymized institutional references, avoided naming individuals, and ensured that disclosures were framed to protect confidentiality while maintaining analytic integrity. Ethical reflexivity was central to navigating the tensions between transparency, accountability, and relational sensitivity (Koopman, Watling & LaDonna, 2020; Wall, 2006).

Ultimately, this methodology integrates autoethnography, emotional reflexivity, and ideographic inquiry to produce a multilayered, ethically engaged, and politically informed understanding of academic workload allocation. It positions personal narrative as both a method and a form of resistance, offering a humanizing, socially just lens through which institutional practices can be critically examined and reimaged.

4. Findings: Autoethnographic Insights Into Workload Allocation and Academic Well-Being

This autoethnographic inquiry explores how the protagonist's lived experiences of workload allocation within South African HEIs reveal broader systemic dysfunctions. Through emotional reflexivity and critical engagement, the narrative surfaces four interrelated themes illuminating how autoethnography operates as both a method and a form of institutional critique. These findings underscore the epistemological and ethical potential of autoethnography to connect personal experience with structural analysis, as articulated by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), Poulos (2021), and Qutoshi (2015).

4.1 Invisible Labour and Emotional Overload

Autoethnography foregrounds academic labour's emotional and embodied dimensions often excluded from formal workload models. The protagonist's narrative illustrates how teaching responsibilities are easily quantified, while essential but less visible forms of work, such as mentoring, supervision, and student support, are routinely undervalued or omitted. As the protagonist reflects, *the workload template accurately estimates my teaching responsibilities, but it falls short in addressing other crucial aspects of my work, including my academic citizenship and research roles [P1]*. Despite raising these concerns, *my workload failed to accurately represent my responsibilities because it either underestimated or completely omitted the time needed for certain activities [P1]*.

These lived experiences echo critiques by Crisp (2022), who argue that institutional workload models often rationalize labour through metrics that obscure care work, collegial contributions, and intellectual effort. The emotional toll of this invisibility is profound, as the protagonist recounts *working seven days a week, starting at seven in the morning and often continuing until late at night, pushing me toward burnout and leaving me with no time to spend with my family [P1]*. The sense of imbalance and exhaustion culminates in the admission that *achieving a balance between work and home responsibilities feels unattainable [P1]*.

Through this lens, autoethnography becomes a space where such emotional truths gain epistemological legitimacy. As Méndez (2013) emphasizes, it allows affective experiences to emerge as analytic insights that challenge the technocratic paradigms underpinning higher education management. In articulating the exhaustion and invisibility embedded in academic life, the narrative exposes how institutional measurement systems fail to capture academic work's human and relational dimensions.

4.2 Managerialism and Coercive Governance

The protagonist's account reveals that workload allocation is often experienced as a top-down and opaque process driven by managerial imperatives rather than academic realities. The protagonist describes how *the workload process is manipulated to control the budget rather than accurately reflecting the work done or ensuring sufficient staffing [P1]*, noting that this manipulation frequently manifests through *spreadsheets with fabricated numbers designed to achieve 15 teaching hours per week [P1]*. While such figures may appear satisfactory on paper, they fail to capture the intensity and scope of the actual work required.

These reflections resonate with Papadopoulos (2017) and Van Vuuren (2024), who critique workload models as instruments of managerial control that obscure rather than reveal the true nature of academic labour. The protagonist's experience underscores how the lack of consultation and the presence of coercive managerial practices foster environments of mistrust and fear. The protagonist recounts that *senior management has resorted to bullying when concerns are raised [P1]*, a behaviour that *further erodes confidence in leaders who are perceived as out of touch with the realities faced by staff [P1]*.

Autoethnography makes it possible to expose such dynamics from within, legitimizing insider knowledge and positioning the self as a site of resistance against the dehumanizing tendencies of managerialism (Sparkes, 2024; Wall, 2006).

4.3 Emotional Exhaustion and Withdrawal

The protagonist's narrative reveals that emotional exhaustion is not merely personal but structurally induced by unrealistic expectations, constant surveillance, and a lack of institutional support. The protagonist reflects on the competing demands of professional and personal roles, explaining that they *"wear multiple hats - wife, student, lecturer - and it is a constant struggle [P1]*, often accompanied by feelings of guilt for *not giving [their] family the attention they deserve [P1]*. This tension illustrates how the demands of neoliberal academia extend beyond the workplace, encroaching on emotional and familial boundaries.

Over time, these pressures lead to disengagement and withdrawal from academic life. The protagonist acknowledges, *I am one of those faculty members who have withdrawn from the social and emotional life of the university [P1]*, aligning the experience with Ryan's (2012) depiction of *academic zombies*. *These individuals continue to perform their duties while feeling emotionally detached and devalued*. This sense of invisibility is compounded by the perception that *efforts and achievements often go unnoticed or unacknowledged [P1]*, reinforcing feelings of alienation and futility.

These experiences echo Gill's (2016) notion of the *hidden injuries* of neoliberal academia and Jantjies and Botha (2024) observations on toxic leadership cultures that erode morale and identity. Through autoethnography, as Muncey (2010) argues, such emotional vulnerability becomes a legitimate form of knowledge, allowing the researcher to write the self into systems of power and critique, transforming personal struggle into collective insight.

4.4 Resistance and the Search for Dignity

Despite operating within a system characterized by control and managerialism, the protagonist demonstrates a persistent commitment to their students and the ethical core of academic work. The protagonist explains that *"I feel compelled to maintain [my] commitment to teaching and ensuring the continuity of academic activities,*

often at personal cost [P1], reflecting a form of moral resistance grounded in care rather than confrontation. This quiet perseverance reflects the emotional labour of maintaining integrity within an institution that often devalues such commitment.

At the same time, a desire for a more humane and collegial academic environment is articulated, expressing that the protagonist *would prefer to work in a more collegial environment where everyone is recognized as peers, rather than in a hierarchical, controlled setting [P1]*. Their longing for collegiality underscores the tension between academic ideals of collaboration and the bureaucratic realities that fragment and isolate staff.

In this context, resistance is subtle and adaptive rather than overtly revolutionary. The protagonist concedes that *resistance is rather limited, as it aims to alleviate rather than overthrow managerialism [P1]*, suggesting that acts of care, persistence, and ethical commitment constitute everyday defiance. However, this limited resistance coexists with disillusionment, as the protagonist acknowledges that *the university is seen as a problem, something that needs to be escaped from [P1]*.

These reflections align with Sparkes (2013), who emphasize the activist potential of autoethnography to reveal dissent and imagine alternative institutional futures. By situating personal experience within broader critique, autoethnography becomes a transformative methodology that restores voice, exposes injustice, and affirms dignity within constrained academic spaces.

5. Implications for Higher Education Institutions

These implications, grounded in emotional reflexivity, extend the autoethnographic insights from individual experience to institutional reform. The findings illuminate how systemic practices of managerialism and technocratic governance shape academic workload allocation and academic life's emotional and ethical dimensions. By legitimizing personal narrative as analytic evidence, autoethnography provides a transformative lens through which institutional cultures and governance practices can be interrogated and reimagined. As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) argue, autoethnography connects the personal to the political, making visible the affective and moral complexities often obscured by managerial discourse.

One of the most urgent implications is the need to humanize workload models. The protagonist's narrative demonstrates that current systems frequently fail to account for the full spectrum of academic labour, particularly the invisible and relational tasks that sustain teaching, mentoring, and collegial engagement. This observation aligns with Crisp (2022), who critique the reduction of academic work to quantifiable metrics, and Sümer and Eslen-Ziya (2022), who highlights the gendered undervaluation of care work in academia. Autoethnography exposes how these omissions contribute to emotional exhaustion and professional disillusionment. Institutions must therefore move beyond technocratic templates and adopt workload frameworks that are context-sensitive, transparent, and co-designed with academic staff. Such models should reflect disciplinary nuances, accommodate individual circumstances, and recognize the emotional labour embedded in academic work (Gill, 2016; Méndez, 2013).

The coercive managerialism described in the protagonist's narrative mirrors the systemic hierarchies that shape academic workload allocation across South African higher education. The study underscores how the erosion of collegial governance and the normalization of surveillance and bullying reflect broader critiques of neoliberal governance (Ball, 2003; Van Vuuren, 2024). Autoethnography offers a counter-narrative to these practices by legitimizing insider knowledge and emotional truth. It invites institutional leaders to engage in reflexive dialogue about power, ethics, and accountability. As Sparkes (2024) and Poulos (2021) emphasize, autoethnography is not merely a method but a philosophical stance that demands vulnerability, relational ethics, and moral responsibility. Its integration into institutional research and leadership practice can foster more empathetic, inclusive, and responsive governance.

Furthermore, the emotional toll of academic labour documented in this study calls for fundamentally rethinking institutional approaches to staff well-being. Rather than relying on superficial wellness programs or standardized online modules, HEIs must address the structural conditions that produce burnout, anxiety, and moral injury. Autoethnographic research offers a rich foundation for designing well-being initiatives grounded in lived experience and distributive justice (Finlay, 2002). It encourages institutions to recognize emotional labour as legitimate work and to create environments where care, dignity, and professional integrity are actively supported.

Finally, this study positions autoethnography as a valuable tool for ethical policy reform. By connecting personal narrative with institutional critique, autoethnography enables universities to identify blind spots in governance,

understand the unintended consequences of performance-driven cultures, and co-create policies that reflect the values of equity, collegiality, and academic freedom. Integrating autoethnographic insights into participatory policy design can help institutions co-create fairer, more context-sensitive workload frameworks that embody emotional reflexivity, inclusivity, and justice. As Qutoshi (2015) argues, autoethnography is a transformative research paradigm that not only represents lived realities but reimagines them through reflexive engagement and critical dialogue. Its application in higher education supports the development of policies that are both efficient, ethically grounded, and socially just.

6. Conclusion

Grounded in emotional reflexivity, this paper affirms autoethnography as a rigorous, reflexive, and ethically grounded methodology for interrogating academic workload allocation in South African HEIs. By centering the protagonist's lived experience, the study demonstrates how autoethnography transcends narrative description to become a transformative mode of inquiry that exposes academic labour's emotional, political, and structural dimensions.

The findings illustrate how emotionally reflexive analysis enables the researcher to connect personal experience with broader institutional critique. The protagonist's reflections on invisible and emotional labour, managerial opacity, and quiet resistance reveal how workload models function not as neutral tools, but as mechanisms of control shaped by neoliberal governance and performative cultures. These insights resonate with the literature on symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), emotional labour (Gill, 2016), and institutional injustice (Papadopoulos, 2017).

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the power of autoethnography to legitimize insider knowledge, foreground emotional truth, and challenge dominant discourses. As Poulos (2021) and Sparkes (2024) argue, autoethnography is not merely a method; it is a philosophical stance that embraces complexity, vulnerability, and ethical accountability. The protagonist's narrative exemplifies how reflexivity, positionality, and emotional engagement can illuminate the hidden injuries of academic life and offer a humanizing lens for institutional reform.

In reflecting on the journey undertaken through this autoethnographic inquiry, it becomes evident that the personal is not only political but also profoundly pedagogical. By tracing the contours of lived experience within the bureaucratic and emotionally charged terrain of academic workload allocation, this study affirms the capacity of autoethnography to illuminate the often-invisible dimensions of academic labour. It is through the deliberate act of writing the self into the institution that the researcher reclaims agency, challenges the epistemic violence of managerialism, and gestures toward more humane and just futures in higher education. In doing so, this work does not merely critique the structures that constrain academic life, it offers a call to reimagine them through the lens of care, dignity, and ethical responsibility.

Ethics Declaration

This study employed an autoethnographic research design based solely on the lived experiences and reflections of the researcher. No human participants, interviews, surveys, or third-party personal data were involved. Consequently, formal ethical clearance was not required in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines.

AI Declaration

Limited use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools was employed in the preparation of this manuscript. AI was used solely for language editing, grammatical refinement and improving clarity of expression. No AI tools were used to generate original ideas, analyse data or produce substantive content. All interpretations, arguments and conclusions are the sole work of the author.

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