New Directions for Evaluation

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Building "Policy as Social Practice" Into Evaluation

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1 | Introduction

The inspiration for this Special Issue and the editors' notes that follow come from observations the guest editors have made regarding the recent state of evaluation, particularly in the Australian context. The guest editors met in 2020 when the first (Alderman) employed the second (Harris) as junior evaluator. The first (Alderman) has been heavily involved in the Australian evaluation landscape for several decades, holding the positions of Chief Evaluator of the Department of Social Services and President of the Australasian Evaluation Society. The second (Harris) came to evaluation in 2020, following the completion of a PhD in international politics. Many of our conversations have highlighted the gap in recent evaluation literature regarding how and why evaluators use relatively well-known and straightforward methodologies. While this is one issue, another is the recent developments in the Australian evaluation context, which simultaneously are indicating a governmental preference for randomized controlled trials (RCTs) but providing less funding for evaluation services overall. As such, this Special Issue draws attention back to well-established but under-discussed methodologies that provide meaningful contributions in funding environments that cannot support experiment designs. The second, third, and fourth articles address this gap by providing renewed focus on benchmarking, environmental scanning, and rapid reconnaissance.

An additional theme comes from the experience the first guest editor (Alderman) had during her tenure in the Department of Social Services. As the Chief Evaluator, the remit to establish external evaluation services to all Commonwealth entities was co-dependent on influencing sound policy positions to address social disadvantage for Australian citizens on social benefits. Therefore, the role of Chief Evaluator was required to be across both program evaluation (tactical domain) and the policy level (strategic domain). As such, requests for the Chief Evaluator to move into the policy design and redesign space continued to increase over time. We address how the evaluation methodologies discussed in this issue can be stretched into the strategic domain, as the requests to operate in this environment appear likely to increase. In the initial concept of this edition, we soon realized the dichotomy between cost-effective methodologies and solving complex policy issues. This prompted the inclusion of the fifth article on strategic environmental assessment (SEA), a strategic methodology used for policy development (and ongoing monitoring and evaluation), borrowed from the field of environmental science. Ironically, this may be a methodology many Australian governments are calling for, but do not know how to ask for, nor have the funding to support.

2 | The Australian Evaluation Landscape

Australian evaluation has a shorter history than its United States and European counterparts. Hence, these debates and discussions may feel like history repeating itself to some. For example, the Australian Evaluation Society was established in 1982, decades after its global counterparts. More recently, the landscape of evaluation in Australia has been changing, and there are both weak signals for change in the environment to suggest that this change is inevitable and warranted, while at the same time, there are also strong signals for stability in the evaluation landscape.

3 | Strong Drivers for Change

This section outlines three strong indicators for change in Australia. The first established a legislative position to require

evaluation practices at the Commonwealth level. The second promoted evaluation on an international plane that reinforced the Commonwealth position. Finally, third, is the support of innovative pilot studies as good practice to establish new programs, service providers, and industry partners.

In Australia, a significant driver for change was when the Australian Government's Department of Finance launched the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act* 2013 (PGPA; Australian Government 2013). This act addresses the governance, performance, and accountability of Commonwealth entities. It further addresses (a) the use and management of public resources by the Commonwealth and Commonwealth entities and (b) the accountability of Commonwealth companies (see *Federal Register of Legislation—Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*). This Act brought about significant change for the Australian Commonwealth entities, whereby a financial portfolio detailing the expenditure of government funds was to be accompanied by a non-financial portfolio, which was to document the outcomes against the objectives for each department or entity. Essentially, this required some kind of qualitative assessment of government expenditure to accompany the already existing financial analysis. The Act clearly acknowledged that blunt financial accounting practices were incapable of capturing nuance in government spending. In 2015, this Act was further developed with the *Enhanced Commonwealth Evaluation Framework* (See Morton and Cook 2018 for a detailed description of the design and development of the PGPA Act.)

At the same time, the United Nations designated 2015 as the *Year of Evaluation*. This created a wealth of opportunities and events to promote evaluation, evaluative thinking, and legitimized evaluation as business as usual within Australian government services. This international event allowed for a plethora of different ways in which to build evaluation capacity in commissioners, emerging evaluators, and key stakeholders such as funders. This international event led to all evaluation societies working closely together to promote evaluation, support emerging evaluators, and build capacity in all levels of government to support and fund evaluative thinking and practice. An Australian outcome of this event was the *Try Test and Learn Fund*, with a budget of AUD$96.1 million, with 52 projects over a 4-year period (2017–2021; Australian Government Department of Social Security 2024). One of the 52 pilots (Kezar 2000) was the *Train and Care* had a budget of AUD$1.2 million with successful outcomes for 100 participants (Australian Department of Social Services 2024). With an evaluation costing of AUD$22,500, this equates to 1.9% of the project budget. In 2022, the evaluation found that this pilot achieved a 100% return on investment within six months of the participants being off unemployment benefits, with a positive savings to the commonwealth within 12 months. This fund is an example of the Australian Department of Social Services' commitment to adopting pilots as a sound research method to test to see whether a program has value and delivers on the objectives to address areas of social need. Individually and together, the PGPA Act, United Nations Year of Evaluation, and the Try, Test, and Learn Fund continue to reinforce evaluation as an inherent good practice at a Commonwealth level and through to program delivery to Australian citizens.

4 | Weak Signals for Change

Despite the above strong drivers for change in the Australian Evaluation landscape, there are also weak signals on the horizon that may indicate a future shift in evaluative thinking and practice. While not clearly documented anywhere in legislation or policy documents, the guest editors have noted a clear shift in how funding for evaluation is distributed. As articulated below, most programs are the implementation of broader policy initiatives, and they are typically implemented by non-government bodies that compete for finite government funding. Similarly, the evaluation of these individual programs has historically gone through a public tendering process, whereby the government calls for quotations. However, there has been a noticeable decrease in the number of evaluation services going through the government tendering process and an increase in the number of evaluations being commissioned by service providers directly. This has undoubtedly saved the government money, but has seen a drastic reduction in money set aside for evaluation services (Australian Evaluation Society 2023). Moreover, it has introduced a new player into the evaluation landscape, who will appear throughout this Special Issue, the uninformed commissioner. This is not meant to denigrate individuals who run these programs but rather indicate their expertise in program delivery and not evaluation. With the delegation of evaluation to the service providers, the guest editors have seen a reduction in funding (albeit noting the government was arguably being overcharged at times) and commissioners who rarely understand what they require and how to ask for it. This environment requires rigorous, but simple and cost-effective methodologies. It is this phenomenon that has driven much of the guest editors' practice over the past 5 years and is why many of the methodologies making up this edition have been selected.

A more recent and curious development was the announcement of the Australian Centre for Evaluation in 2023 (see the Australian Federal Government Minister's Treasury Portfolio 2000 website for media announcement titled "Australian Centre for Evaluation to measure what works"). This was initially viewed with excitement and interest by the guest editors and other evaluators within Australia. However, as more media releases and information came to light, excitement turned to skepticism. The Center has a small footprint, limited funding has been directed to it, and the staffing profile is low (see the Australian Center for Evaluation web page titled "Our team" at evaluation.treasury.gov.au). It appears the Center will only conduct evaluations of select high-priority or impact activities. Primarily, it will act as a capacity-building unit for other governmental and private evaluators. Controversially, the Center has indicated a strong preference for RCTs and other experimental methodologies (see the Australian Government, Treasury Department web page titled "About the Australian Centre for Evaluation" at treasury.gov.au). This has been jarring for many Australian evaluators, particularly in the social services context, given the historical preference for qualitative or mixed methods approaches.

Situated in the Australian Treasury department, the Assistant Minister for the Treasurer Department, Andrew Leigh, addressed the Australian Evaluation Society at its international conferences in 2023 and 2024, regarding the Center. At the 2023 conference, Leigh presented an example from medicine, specifically radical

mastectomies in the context of breast cancer care. Leigh explained RCTs in this field over the past several decades demonstrated how more conservative surgical or non-surgical approaches led to better outcomes for patients. While this development is positive, the example from medicine failed to resonate with an audience overwhelmingly comprised of social program evaluators, leading to confusion regarding whether and how the new Center would expect RCTs in all contexts.

This recent development in Australian evaluation has some striking similarities with the experience in the United States of America around 20 years ago. In 2001, the Bush Administration passed the No Child Left Behind Act 2001; with its objective to increase accountability and improve outcomes for students, particularly those with disadvantages. Grover Whitehurst was appointed the head of the Institute of Education Sciences, the research and evaluation arm that would oversee this. The Institute had a strong preference for RCTs, with Whitehurst publicly stating that "it privileges, or gives preference to, randomized trials because randomized trials are the gold standard for determining effectiveness" (THE Journal Technological Horizons in Education 2004). He would then go on to cite an example from pharmaceuticals, again another medical analogy. An earlier edition of this journal was critical of this approach, suggesting that a methodology-first approach to evaluation is fundamentally flawed (Berry and Eddy 2008; Mabry 2008). This is a common thought in evaluation practice, yet it tends to get lost in the allure of RCTs (Julnes and Rog 2007; Rog 2012; Harris et al. 2025).

In 2024, Leigh returned and joined a panel of Australasian evaluations experts, where RCTs were again discussed as being best practice in evaluation. This led to a spirited debate among the panel about various methodologies, with various individuals arguing that some were better than others. What struck the guest editors was that while the debate about the best methodologies ensued, there was little discussion of context and absolutely no discussion regarding reasoning. The danger in methodological debates is that we risk losing sight of more important considerations like context and reasoning. The circumstances in which an evaluation takes place, what it hopes to discover, and the most overlooked, the logic for discovery, are significantly more important discussions. The following article in this special issue by Harris and Alderman focuses on the key approaches to reasoning in the evaluation context and why evaluators should be significantly more concerned with this debate, rather than the age-old methodological debate of RCTs versus the rest.

In June 2024, the Paul Ramsay Foundation launched a grant round for experimental evaluation funding of overall AUD$2.1 million, and the expectation of granting seven evaluations at AUD$300,000 each. It will be interesting to observe how this grant round unfolds in terms of assessing how many experimental programs are actually funded to test hypotheses within a social policy context. The scope and scale of the experiential programs and the experimental evaluation design will provide some insights as to the current state of experimental program designs in Australia today. This is considered a weak signal as the outcomes are yet to be realized and released in the public domain, therefore, it has the potential to influence change.

In contrast to the conversation about experimental program designs above, the Victorian Federal Government in August 2024 announced an AUD$6.3 million grant for the *Local Government Learn and Earn Pilot Program* led by RMIT University, together with a consortium of several universities and vocational education centers. The guest editors were approached by RMIT University to design an evaluation for this project, where the commissioner had set an evaluation costing of AUD$150,000, which equates to 2.4% of the program budget (Victorian Government 2024). This is an example of where the commissioner, the Victorian Federal Government, has delegated authority for an independent evaluation of the program to the service provider. Although it is an example of evaluation being funded for a program of works funded by the state government, it clearly indicates that evaluation is an element (albeit small) of the overall budget. This constitutes a weak signal for change when you consider that the Paul Ramsay Foundation considers AUD$30,000 a modest amount for an experimental evaluation design, whereas this government budget indicates a significantly lesser amount is sufficient. But are these things mutually exclusive, or can they be symbiotic? Can there be a mutually beneficial relationship between these two different philosophical approaches that enhance evaluative thinking and allow evaluators to move between deductive and inductive reasoning depending on the context of any given situation? Let us take a step back.

5 | Extending the Role of Evaluators From Tactics to Strategy

From an evaluation research perspective, evaluators often use the phrase "it depends" when talking with commissioners about evaluation design. When asked about the evaluation design, an evaluator will say "this depends on ...." Evaluation is always situational, context-specific, and dependent on a set of variables—the time period, the participants, the program under investigation, the resources, the multidisciplinary evaluation team—and the list goes on. Evaluators conduct evaluation research to answer specific research questions. For example: "What is the problem we are trying to solve?"; "Was the intervention implemented as planned?"; "Is the intervention meeting the objectives of the program?"; "Were there any unintended consequences of the program implementation?" Evaluators have a range of methodologies that may be adopted given the situation at hand.

But what happens when evaluators are drawn into the policy space? Do they simply apply the usual evaluation methodologies, or is there a need to expand our evaluative or tactical thinking into strategic thinking? This brings to the fore another suite of questions about situational differences between the domains of tactics and strategy. If we think about it from a social services perspective, policy design to address social disadvantage: "What is the area of disadvantage to be addressed?"; "Who is the intended client group?"; "What legislative mechanisms are required to support a positive outcome for this client group?"; or "Will a policy position, national plans with programs to intervene in social disadvantage be enough to have a positive impact?" A strategic lens requires evaluators to extend their evaluative thinking from the tactical to the strategic domain.

The first guest editor (Alderman) held the position of inaugural Chief Evaluator for the Australian Department of Social Services within the Policy Group, and this was the conundrum she faced. As the Chief Evaluator, the remit to establish external evaluation services to all Commonwealth entities was co-dependent on influencing sound policy positions to address social disadvantage for Australian citizens on social benefits. Therefore, the role of Chief Evaluator was required to be across both the tactical domain (evaluation) and the strategic domain (policy), and the requests for the Chief Evaluator to move into the policy design space continued to increase over time. This stretches evaluators and evaluative thinking to move across the full policy cycle to encompass policy design and implementation through to evaluation (also known as policy implementation analysis). The compounding issue in the Australian Department of Social Services was the movement of staff across program teams to the point where some teams were implementing programs where the origins and objectives of the program were somewhat opaque through the loss of corporate knowledge. However, moving between the tactical and strategic domains brings up the issue about which methodology is most appropriate in each domain?

6 | Policy as Social Practice

As we all know, evaluators are methodological experts who move across multiple disciplines, operate in multi-disciplinary teams and engage in the evaluation of grants, programs and projects to determine short-, mid- and long-term outcomes. In the strategic domain, governments use legislation, policy, and national plans as levers to drive social change. When trying to make sense of the strategic and tactical domains found within government the Chief Evaluator found an illustration of "policy as social practice" that clearly identified the separation, and interrelationship, between strategy and tactics (Jarzabkowski 2004; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee. 2009). This, in turn, supports policy designers and evaluation commissioners to clarify their positions and develop an understanding of how strategy informs tactics which in turn informs strategy (Kroll 2018).

In Figure 1 below, this illustration was adapted from an original diagram from a World Bank project which adopted Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to develop a national plan to manage the country's water supply (Hirji and Davis 2009), noting that SEA is unpacked in detail later in Article 5 in this special issue (Kealey and Alderman 2025). This diagram illustrates the strategic domain as legislation, policy and strategy influencing national plans for social change. In turn, the national plans then influence institutions, grants, programs, and projects.

The original diagram had monodirectional arrows indicating influence was one way downward from strategy to tactics (see Figure 1 as presented in Article one by Alderman and Harris of this special issue). However, the guest editors believe that the bidirectional influence of tactical and strategic are clearly articulated at the national level (policy, legislation, strategy, and plans) and at the tactical level (institutions and projects). This diagram provides evaluators with a way of viewing a tactical

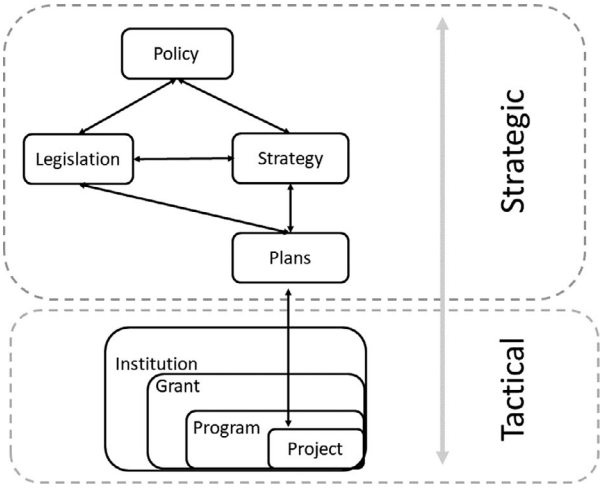

FIGURE 1 | Policy as Social Practice adapted from Hirji and Davis (2009).

position and then to change lenses and view through a strategic lens.

The following unpack the individual elements found within the diagram:

- **Policy**. The policy setting establishes goals and the principles that will guide national plans.
- **Legislation**. The legislation offers strong guidance to policy and national plans.
- **Strategy** is defined as a high-level plan to achieve one or more goals under conditions of uncertainty. Strategy is important as the resources available to achieve these goals are often limited. A strategy is then the description of how the goals will be achieved by the resources.
- **Plans**. At a national level, plans offer guidance to institutions and department on how to design the grants, programs and projects.
- **Institutions** or departments who deliver programs intended to improve the outcomes for participants.
- **Grant**. These offer opportunities to shape a sector, change practice for service providers and encourage the development of programs or projects to assist in changing the outcomes for participants.
- **Program**. These offer cyclical interventions designed to directly change the behavior and increase opportunities to overcome barriers for participants.
- **Project**. These offer linear activities that usually only occur once, perhaps to address an infrastructure issue.

7 | Case Example: The Australian National Redress Scheme as Social Policy

The following case example illustrates how the Australian Government's National Redress Scheme emerged from a Royal Commission, which was supported by legislation, policy, and national plans. Its development was driven by bipartisan support

at the federal level, together with state and territory signatories, and finally signatories from individual institutions. The Redress Scheme emerged as a recommendation from a Royal Commission into the Institutional Abuse of Children (Australian Government 2018). This Scheme was designed for: "People who experienced child sexual abuse while in an institution. The Scheme helps people access redress and can connect them to free confidential Redress Support Services."

7.1 | Strategic Domain

Legislation: In 2012, the Australian Prime Minister, announced that she would recommend to the Governor-General that a Royal Commission be appointed to inquire into institutional responses to child abuse. As a result of the final report from this Royal Commission, in 2018 recommendations were embedded within legislation to establish the National Redress Scheme.

Policy: The policy position was that "The National Redress Scheme:

- acknowledges the widespread sexual abuse of children in Australian institutions
- recognizes the suffering endured by survivors
- holds institutions accountable for the abuse
- helps people who experienced institutional child sexual abuse gain access to counselling, a direct personal response, and a redress payment." (Australian Government 2018)

Plans: The Australian Department of Social Services was delegated responsibility for the development of a national plan to implement the National Redress Scheme which included each state and territory to sign up to the Scheme. All states and territories signed up.

7.2 | Tactical Domain

Institutions identified by the Royal Commission: Individual institutions were then required to sign up to the National Redress Scheme. As many of the institutions were non-profit organizations, the Australian Charities Commission had the delegated power to review an institution's charitable status should they fail to sign up to the National Redress Scheme.

Project: The Australian Department of Social Services established a project team to administer the National Redress Scheme. Clients were provided with a supportive and straightforward application process for compensation.

Process evaluation: The legislation was extremely explicit that evaluation was required, although no clients were to be contacted as their evidence was already documented within the Royal Commission and such contact could cause harm. Therefore, process evaluation was stipulated as an appropriate evaluation methodology.

8 | Setting the Scene for This Special Issue

The Editor's Notes has set the scene for this Special Issue of *New Directions for Evaluation*. Within the Australian evaluation landscape there are strong drivers for change in the PGPA Act, United Nations Year of Evaluation and the Australian Department of Social Services' Try, Test, and Learn Fund that consolidate evaluation as embedded practice. In more recent years, there are also weak signals for change such as the establishment of the Australian Centre for Evaluation, funding opportunities for experimental evaluation design and continued low budgets for evaluation that provide the evaluation community potential opportunities for change. However, the rhetoric at the last two Australian Evaluation Society conferences really brought to the foreground the guest editors' concerns about what constitutes evaluation best practice? Is there really a debate between RCTs and other evaluation methodologies? Or should the debate really be about, "What is the best evaluation methodology for the context in which a program is situated?" The guest editors strongly believe the decision-making context should start earlier at the philosophical approach to reasoning. The context and current understanding of the program to be evaluated will determine whether deductive or inductive reasoning is the most appropriate approach. This in turn will lead to an appropriate evaluation methodology. Therefore, the guest editors have laid out the Special Issue in the following manner to support the symbiotic nature of experimental and non-experimental program and evaluation designs.

In Article 1 of this special issue Alderman and Harris (2025) discuss two ongoing philosophical debates within research and evaluation—philosophical approaches and approaches to reasoning. These debates are highly relevant to evaluation practice with Alderman and Harris arguing for the need for evaluators and commissioners of evaluations to have a clear understanding of approaches and reasoning. Rather than taking a stance on these debates, the authors emphasize the importance of evaluators understanding how their philosophical approach (holism or reductionism) and approach to reasoning (deductive, inductive, or abductive) impact their evaluation and methodological choices. Alderman and Harris argue that evaluators must be aware of these choices and have an in-depth understanding of their evaluation context prior to adopting a philosophical and reasoning approach. The authors present a decision-tree framework guiding evaluators through these choices to make sound, contextually appropriate methodological choices. Rather than prescribe one approach as superior, the authors encourage evaluators to make deliberate, informed decisions regarding their evaluation questions.

In Article 2, Alderman and Murray (2025) explore best practice benchmarking (BPB) as a rigorous evaluation methodology that has potential to support organizations in gathering structured comparisons of products, services, and processes to support organizational decisions. The authors position BPB within a deductive reasoning framework as a methodology enabling evaluators to assess factors such as competitiveness, uniqueness, and contemporary relevance within their organizational context. The authors extend discussions of BPB into the policy borrowing domain as a key influence on strategic decision-making. The authors draw on their real-world

internal evaluation experiences to outline the applicability of BPB at both tactical (evaluation) and strategic (policy) levels highlighting the dual processes of knowing sharing and transfer.

In Article 3, Harris and Brooker (2025) examine environmental scanning as an evaluation methodology designed to identify internal and external trends influencing the present and future success of an organization. The authors provide an overview of environmental scanning as a holistic, inductive methodology for synthesizing diverse information sources. This methodology provides organizations with a comprehensive understanding of the contextual environment their programs and policies operate within. From a practical perspective, the article explains how thematic analysis of scan results supports tactical and strategic decision-making by an organization's management, evaluation commissioners, and policymakers. Harris and Brooker further outline the practical applications of adopting environmental scanning as a rigorous, yet flexible methodology that can be integrated into an evaluator's everyday practice to enhance program and policy outcomes for their clients.

In Article 4, Murray and Alderman (2025) present rapid reconnaissance as a fast, multidisciplinary data-gathering evaluation methodology originating in sociological and rural research in the 1960s. Rapid reconnaissance is explored as an initial exploratory exercise employing three key techniques: proxies (leveraging evaluator expertise to determine data saturation), sondeos (facilitating cultural orientation), and rapid assessment procedures (holistic, communication-driven techniques). In this article, authors Murray and Alderman (2025) explore the broader applicability of rapid reconnaissance beyond its original developmental evaluation context, including its use in organizational and higher education settings. Drawing on their internal evaluator experience within the higher education sector, the authors illustrate its practical application in course enhancement discussions, highlighting its value as a versatile and efficient evaluation tool.

In Article 5, Kealey and Alderman (2025) explore strategic environmental assessment (SEA) as a high-level planning and decision-making methodology drawn from environmental science and developmental planning. Designed to assess cumulative impacts of programs, policies, and plans over the long-term (up to 100 years) the authors present SEA as a holistic, inductive methodology providing evaluators with a framework for addressing sustainability and informing decision-making at both strategic and tactical levels of an organization. The authors argue that by integrating sustainability and long-term knowledge creation into evaluation, practitioners can enhance their ability to work across both strategic and tactical domains. The article provides an overview of SEA methodologies and demonstrates how evaluators can apply SEA principles to enrich their practice and inform sustainable decision-making.

In the concluding article, Article 6 of this special issue, Harris and Kealey (2025) draw together key themes from across the introductory and methodological articles. The authors reflect on the special issue's exploration of established evaluation methodologies and their relevance in addressing contemporary complex and ambiguous challenges. While recognizing the importance of innovation in evaluation practice, Harris and Kealey (2025) advocate for revisiting foundational methodologies—benchmarking, environmental scanning, rapid reconnaissance, and strategic environmental assessment (SEA). By bridging strategic and tactical evaluation spaces, these methodological approaches offer evaluators valuable tools to enhance their practice and contribute to high-level decision-making. Given the limited attention these methodologies have received in the evaluation literature, the authors argue that by understanding philosophical and methodological choices, evaluators and their commissioners can produce evaluation outcomes that contribute to high-level decision-making.

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