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*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1666613> since 2018-04-16T10:39:14Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1016/j.j.paid.2015.12.009

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Running head: THE TRANSLATION OF POLITICAL TALK INTO ACTION

**When political talk translates into political action: The role of personality traits**

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**When political talk translates into political action: The role of personality traits**

## Abstract

Discussing politics in everyday life is quite common but it is not clear how talking politics should prompt the desire to become politically active. We compared two ideas: Information gain, i.e., political talk translates into action when people receive information about activities and organizations; and social influence, i.e., political talk translates into action when people perceive their friends as politically active. Our main goal was to address the role played by two personality traits – Openness to Experience and Agreeableness – within these processes. Adopting a longitudinal design ( $N = 895$ , sample of youths surveyed twice), we found that political talk promotes political participation over time when people perceive their discussion partners as politically active and that this effect is especially pronounced for agreeable people. Findings from this study provided support to the idea that political talk translates into political action under the condition of social influence and for people who are particularly susceptible to social conformity.

*Keywords:* political talk; personality traits; political participation; social influence; longitudinal design

## 1. Introduction

The notion that human behavior is the outcome of both individual dispositions *and* situations has a long history in personality and social psychology (Lewin, 1939). However, only recently the interaction between personality and environmental factors has been used to explain political behaviors. Mondak and colleagues (2010) proposed an integrative framework stressing the heuristic value of acknowledging person-situation interactions in the study of personality effects on political behaviors. That is, just as the expression of personality effects might depend on the situation, the effects of environmental or situational circumstances on political behaviors might be contingent upon personality traits. In sum, the authors advocate for a careful consideration of processes detailed in terms of how, why, and in what conditions personality traits and situational factors are expected to affect political behavior (Mondak et al., 2010).

We relied on this framework to study the still unclear effects of interpersonal discussion about politics on political engagement. Empirical research has shown that the effects of political talk extend to a broad spectrum of participatory actions (e.g., Eveland & Hively, 2009; Klofstad, 2011); and this seems to be especially true when people are engaged in informal political conversation with their peers (Klofstad, 2007; 2011). The extensive efforts made to identify the features of political talk that can boost political participation (e.g., the degree of disagreement with discussion partners, see for example Mutz, 2002) have been rarely complemented by the study of individual characteristics of the discussants. In a few cases researchers investigated the role played by discussants' political attributes, such as individual predisposition to participate in politics (Klofstad, 2009), or socio-demographic characteristics (McClurg, 2003), but personality predispositions have been largely neglected.

In this study we addressed the moderating role played by personality traits on the effects of political talk on political participation. In a review of the literature on this topic, Schmitt-Beck and Lup (2013) suggested two explanations as to why everyday political talk is likely to translate into political action. The first one is related to the gain of relevant political information during

interpersonal discussions, whereas the second one refers to a process of social influence. Given that to date “findings are thus inconclusive as to which of the two mechanisms is more important with regard to participation” (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013, p. 526), we compared these two ideas with a focus on personality traits: *Who* is more likely to be receptive to political conversations?

### *1.1 Information Gaining*

Information gain refers to the fact that during political talk people are provided with low-cost politically relevant information that can easily be used to direct political actions, either in terms of electoral behaviors or of involvement in political activities. People may be exposed to a variety of political information, such as virtues and vices of the candidates running in the elections and their stands on political issues, or about political events that are about to take place. In light of the traditional view of political participation as being determined by the tradeoff between costs and benefits (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), information gain during everyday political talk should considerably decrease the costs related to the process of information gathering and, accordingly, increase the likelihood of participation (Klofstad, 2011). Moreover, given that individual resources (time, cognitive ability) are limited, receiving information in everyday political talk provides an opportunity to gain political information investing minimal efforts (McClurg, 2003). This idea is further supported by empirical findings showing that political talk is more influential when discussants are politically expert (e.g., Klofstad, 2011), indirectly indicating that people consider expert peers as important sources of political information.

If this explanation accounts for the effects of political talk on political engagement – i.e., political talk translates into action when people receive politically-relevant information – people open to new ideas should be especially susceptible to political conversation with peers. Indeed, individuals scoring high in Openness show intellectual curiosity, a wide range of cultural interests, appreciate novelty and new ideas (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008), and are more receptive to new information (Heinström, 2003). The importance of this personality trait in shaping the responses to political information has been additionally supported by Gerber and colleagues (2013), who showed

that people open to new experiences are broadly persuaded by political appeals, such as voter mobilization messages. Similarly, Hibbing and colleagues (2011) found that discussion partners' political views affected respondents' approval of George Bush only for people scoring high in Openness to Experience. Therefore, according to this view, we expected political talk to enhance political participation only when during such conversations people receive information related to political activities (information gain). This effect should be especially pronounced for people high in Openness to Experience (Hp1).

### *1.2 Social Influence*

The second explanation is related to social influence. According to this idea the effects of political talk are not driven by the content of the conversation itself, but rather by the influence exerted by the social context. In this case, people's desire to conform to social norms plays a central role in explaining reactions to political conversations. Normative social influence can be driven by the mere presence of others or by the perception of their preferences; it is prompted by the desire to be accepted by others and to receive their approval, and drives conformity to the group's beliefs and behaviors (Shepherd, Lane, Tapscott, & Gentile, 2011). Normative social influence should be especially important when considering the effects of political talk with peers among youth. During adolescence and early adulthood the adherence to social norms – which are mainly founded on the perception of valued others' behaviors (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011) – within one's own reference group is a central mechanism accounting for peers influence. Turning back to the classical view on the costs-benefits tradeoff, normative conformity should heighten the benefits associated with participation, in that political actions would represent a way to feel part of one's own social group and get respect of others. Empirical findings showing that intimacy in interpersonal relationship is a fundamental characteristic accounting for the efficacy of political talk in promoting participation and/or political thought indirectly support this view (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991; Kloffstad, 2007).

If this explanation accounts for the effects of political talk on political engagement – i.e., political talk translates into action when people perceive their discussion partners as politically

active – agreeable people should be particularly affected by political discussions with peers given that the engagement in political actions is driven by the desire to adhere to social norms.

Agreeableness indicates the tendency to be kind, considerate, likeable, cooperative, and helpful (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997), and it is the personality factor that is most associated with motives to maintain positive interpersonal relations (Digman, 1997; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002). Social conformity represents an opportunity to adapt one's own behavior to a group standard with the aim of gaining social approval of others and to establish satisfying relationships (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004); therefore, agreeable people should be especially prone to modify their political behavior in accordance with the perceived norms in their social group. For example, Devaraj, Easley, and Crant (2008) found that Agreeableness moderates the relationship between subjective norms related to the use of new information technologies and people's intention to use the technology, suggesting that agreeable people are more sensitive to others' behaviors. According to this view, we expected political talk to enhance political participation only when people perceive that their peers are highly involved in politics (social influence). This effect should be especially pronounced for people with high level of Agreeableness (Hp2).

## **2. Data and Method**

We relied on longitudinal survey data gained in Sweden on a sample of young adults living in \*\*\*, a city of about 130,000 inhabitants which is similar to the country as a whole with regard to its immigration rate, income level, and unemployment rate. The first data collection took place between November 2010 and February 2011, the second one took place between November 2012 and February 2013. The target sample ( $N = 2000$ ) was randomly extracted from \*\*\* population of 22- and 26-years old. Respondents have been surveyed twice, at two year interval. In both waves, the questionnaire was mailed to the target sample, together with a personalized link to the online version of the questionnaire. Participants received a 28 € gift card for their participation. In the first assessment, 1140 youths completed the questionnaire, while 1175 youths completed the questionnaire in the second assessment. We selected only people who participated in both waves ( $N$

= 895, 60.3% women, mean age at  $T_1 = 24.21$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ). Given the purpose of the study we used all the variables as measured at  $T_1$ , with the exception of political participation for which we used information gathered at both time points. The use of longitudinal data allowed us to adequately model the effects of political talk on political engagement over time. That is, we have been able to control for previous level of political engagement as it is possible that politically active youths were initially more likely to discuss politics with their friends.

To test whether participants with responses at both time points ( $N = 895$ , coded 1) differed from those who participated only the first time ( $N = 245$ , coded 0), a logistic regression analysis was performed with all study variables included as independent variables. Significant differences were found only for gender (Wald = 14.52,  $p < .001$ ). In general, low Nagelkerke  $R^2$  (.04) indicated that the differences between those who participated in both the assessments and those who responded only to the first one were not substantial.

### 3. Measures

#### 3.1 Main Variables of Interest

**Political participation.** At both time points, participants were asked whether, in the last year, they have been engaged never (1), occasionally (2), or several times (3) in nine different political activities (e.g., signed a petition, contacted a politician or public official). Based on Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s of .66 at  $T_1$  and .75 at  $T_2$ , we computed two mean indexes of political participation.<sup>1</sup>

**Political talk.** Based on previous studies (e.g., Ekström, & Östman, 2013), respondents were asked how often they talked with their best friends about politics or societal issues, and how often they talked about what they heard on the news about what is happening in Sweden and around the world (answers ranging from 1 'Never' to 4 'Very often'). We averaged the items in an index of political talk with friends ( $r = .57$ ).

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<sup>1</sup> Given the low reliability coefficients, we checked whether the items tapped a single dimension of political participation. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (WLSMV estimator) showed that a one-dimension solution fits the data well both at  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .05 at  $T_1$ ; CFI = .97, RMSEA = .04 at  $T_2$ ).



**Personality traits.** The scale is a translation in Swedish of the items in the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999). The BFI consists of 44 items that are distributed along five personality dimensions: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism. The original version of the BFI has shown good reliability, and also both convergent and discriminant validity (e.g., Benet-Martinez & John, 1998; John & Srivastava, 1999). For the purpose of this study we used only mean scores for Agreeableness ( $\alpha = .71$ ) and Openness to Experience ( $\alpha = .75$ ). Examples of items are “I consider myself as someone who: is considerate and kind to almost everyone (Agreeableness), is curious about many different things (Openness to Experience).

**Information received.** Respondents were asked whether the sentence “My best friends have given me information about activities or organizations that I can contact if I want to get engaged in them” applied very well (4) or did not applied at all (1) to their friends.

**Perception of friends’ political activism.** It was measured through the item “My best friends are active in a political organization or in an organization that is concerned with societal issues”, with responses ranging from 1 ‘Doesn’t apply at all’ to 4 ‘Applies very well’.

### *3.2 Control Variables*

To assess whether political talk has an independent effect on political participation, we included in the analyses a set of possible confounding variables – socio-demographic characteristics and political attitudes – that have been linked to political participation (e.g., Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). We included respondents’ gender (1 = female), age, and a proxy for subjective perception of socio-economic status (SES), i.e., whether or not respondents had difficulty in managing expenses for food, rent, household bills, etc. (1 = low SES). Moreover, participants indicated whether, if they really tried, they could manage nine politics-related activities, such as being able to convince others to sign petitions about political or social issues. Responses ranged from 1 ‘I definitely couldn’t manage it’ to 4 ‘I definitely could manage it’. We computed a mean index of political efficacy ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Finally, youths reported whether they were interested in politics and in what is happening in

society. The responses (1 'Not at all interested' to 5 'Very interested') were averaged to provide a single indicator,  $r = .57$ . Table 1 reports correlations between all the variables used in the study.

#### 4. Results

In order to test our hypotheses we ran a moderated regression aimed at predicting the change in political participation between the first and the second assessment as a function of political talk with peers. The model included three steps. In the first one, we entered socio-demographic variables (gender, age, and SES), attitudes towards politics (interest in politics and political efficacy), the lag of the dependent variable (political participation as measured at  $T_1$ ), and the main effects of frequency of political discussion with friends, political information received, perception of friends' political activism, Agreeableness, and Openness (mean centered). In the second step we introduced all the two-way interactions between political talk, information received, and Openness, and between political talk, perception of friends' political activism, and Agreeableness. In the third step we introduced the three-way interactions. Results of the regression model are reported in Table 2: Among the control variables, only political interest positively predicted an increase in political participation. We did not find any statistically significant effect of the frequency of political talk with peers on political participation at  $T_2$ . Moreover, none of the interaction terms related to the information gaining hypothesis were statistically significant, thus  $H_{p1}$  was not confirmed. More interestingly, the two-way interaction between political talk with friends and the perception of their political activism was significant. The simple slope analysis showed that political talk with friends had a positive effect on the increase of political participation when friends were perceived as high politically active (+1  $SD$ ), simple slope = 0.05,  $t(833) = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI [.001, .097], but its effect was not significant when they were perceived as low politically active (-1  $SD$ ), simple slope = -0.01,  $t(833) = -.68$ ,  $p = .50$ , 95% CI [-.052, .025]. In addition, this interactive effect was further qualified by individual level of Agreeableness, as proved by the three-way interaction. In line with  $H_{p2}$ , the simple slope analysis (see Figure 1) showed that political talk had a positive effect on political participation only when friends were perceived as politically active and when

respondents were high in Agreeableness (+1 *SD*), simple slope = 0.12,  $t(831) = 3.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.057, .180], while the other three slopes were not statistically significant. On the whole, these results indicated that political talk does not boost a change in political participation, even when people are provided with information about political activities and even if the recipients of the information are open to new experience. The findings were rather in line with the idea that political talk can enhance political participation mainly through a process of social influence.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand for whom political talk with friends can translate into political actions. The findings showed that the effect of political talk was not pervasive, but it occurred under specific conditions. In line with the idea of an underlying process of social influence, we found that political talk predicted an increase in political participation only when the discussion partners were perceived as being politically active. This evidence is in line with the literature on peers influence showing that the individual perception of peers' behaviors can be considered as a perception of a group norm to which people are willing to conform (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Indeed, the conditional effect we found revealed that discussing politics does not have a mobilizing effect in itself: Instead its effect becomes evident when the discussion takes place with politically active friends, indicating that political conversations represent an opportunity to get in touch with friends' habits. In other words, we showed that neither political talk nor perception of friends' political activism in themselves are substantial predictors of change in political engagement and that only their conjoint effect can boost youths participation. Thus, our data seems to suggest that social influence is likely to be a necessary condition for political discussion to be influential on participation.

Other explanations could account for this effect. For instance, based on the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) according to which people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling, it can be argued that youths use their friends' political behaviors as models. This might in turn affect youths' political engagement through a heightened sense of

political efficacy. However, we also found that the effect of political talk on political participation was further moderated by Agreeableness. This finding added strong support to our social influence hypothesis. Indeed, previous research showed that agreeable people are highly motivated to keep positive relationships (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002) and a long tradition of research in social psychology showed that social conformity is one strategy to fulfill this goal (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

On the whole, the findings presented in this study reveal that – at least in our sample – being engaged in political conversation with friends drives participation in political action when people perceive such actions as normative prescriptive. This is in line with the social psychological theories of reasoned actions and planned behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 1985), according to which the intention to engage in a specific behavior is a function of both attitudes toward the behavior and subjective norms. In this perspective, subjective norms derive from the perception of social influence by significant others and individual motivation to comply with others' expectations. Our findings nicely fit within this theoretical framework, in that we found the perception of friends' political activism (perception of social influence) and Agreeableness (individual motivation to comply with others) to interact with political talk in enhancing political participation. As concerns the effects of political talk, our data indicated that political involvement can be boosted by civic discussion with politically active peers, especially for those people who are highly motivated to maintain positive interpersonal relations.

Nonetheless, this study had some limitations. First, we relied on survey data: For this reason we were not able to take under control a potential selection bias, i.e. individuals who like to discuss politics and participate in politics might also choose to associate with discussants who are politically active. However, including stringent controls in the statistical models minimized the threat that our results are due to some particular characteristics of the respondents. In addition, self-report measures might be subjected to response biases, social desirability being considered of the major threat. However, we believe that social desirability should not undermine the strength of our

results to a large extent. The degree to which social desirability biases respondents' answers to political questions varies from country to country. For instance, in Sweden (where we conducted our study) people seem to be less affected by the social desirability bias when reporting voting behavior, plausibly because it is a country where honesty is highly valued (Karp & Brockington, 2005). Additionally, social desirability seems to be a stable substantive trait (Furnham, 1986). Given that we controlled for political engagement at T<sub>1</sub> when predicting T<sub>2</sub>, systematic tendencies to provide socially desirable responses should be partialled out. Second, we relies on single items to assess perception of friends' political activism and political information received. It is generally preferable to use composite scales, therefore a replication of these results with multiple indicators for these two factors would provide more precise estimates. Finally, given the emphasis on the importance of political discussion with peers (Klofstad, 2011), we decided to focus solely on friends as discussion partners. However, previous research showed that people tend to discuss politics with a variety of targets (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012) and that the choice of the context in which and the persons with whom people engage in political conversations depend on a mix of socio-demographic and personality characteristics (Hibbing et al., 2011). Thus, the hypotheses we tested in this study should be retested considering also other discussion partners, such as parents, spouses, and colleagues.

## 6. Conclusions

The results from this study contributed to the recent debate on the role of personality in politics. In regard to the relationship between personality traits and everyday political discussion, research efforts up to date have been directed toward the understanding of how personality affects the involvement in discussion (Mondak & Halperin, 2008), the size of political social networks (Mondak et al., 2010), the exposure to political disagreement (Mondak et al., 2010), and the settings in which people discuss politics (Hibbing et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the role that personality can play in shaping the reactions to political discussion has been much more neglected. In addressing the question of *who* is more susceptible to political talk, we found that personality predispositions

matter. By recognizing the role played by youths' individuality we offered a rich and full description of the interplay between the social environment and personal characteristics.

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Figure and tables' captions

Table 1. Zero-order correlations between all the variables used in the study

Table 2. Moderated regression model predicting political participation, test of the information gaining hypothesis and the social influence hypothesis

Figure 1. Moderating effect of the perception of friends' political activism and Agreeableness on the relationship between political talk and political participation.

1 Table 1.

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender (1 = female)	-.03	.05	-.11**	-.03	.00	.01	.01	.15***	-.01	.10**	.07*
2. Age	-	-.04	.03	-.04	-.03	-.01	-.01	-.02	.03	.11**	.03
3. SES (1 = low)		-	-.05	-.05	-.04	.05	.04	-.06	-.03	.07*	.06
4. Interest in politics			-	.45***	.56***	.25***	.22***	.02	.32***	.38***	.37***
5. Political efficacy				-	.38***	.23***	.23***	.02	.36***	.35***	.31***
6. Political talk					-	.35***	.30***	.02	.29***	.37***	.33***
7. Political information received						-	.59***	-.05	.16***	.29***	.25***
8. Perception of friends' activism							-	-.07*	.17***	.35***	.33***
9. Agreeableness								-	.03	.05	.04
10. Openness to Experience									-	.30***	.26***
11. Political participation T <sub>1</sub>										-	.65***
12. Political participation T <sub>2</sub>											-

2 \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ 

3

1 Table 2.

	Political participation T <sub>2</sub>		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Gender (1 = female)	.03	.03	.04
Age	-.03	-.02	-.02
SES (1 = low)	.02	.03	.02
Political efficacy	.03	.04	.04
Interest in politics	.12***	.12***	.12***
Political participation T <sub>1</sub>	.54***	.53***	.53***
Political talk	.02	.03	.03
Information received	-.02	-.01	-.03
Perception of friends' activism	.11***	.07	.07
Openness to Experience	.03	.03	.02
Agreeableness	.01	-.01	-.03
<b>Information gain Hp</b>			
Talk*information		-.04	-.03
Talk*openness		-.02	-.02
Information*openness		.05	.04
Talk*information*openness			.04
<b>Social Influence Hp</b>			
Talk*friends' activism		.08*	.08*
Talk*agreeableness		.06*	.06*
Friends' activism*agreeableness		.04	.00
Talk*friends' activism*agreeableness			.10**
R <sup>2</sup> (Adj.)	.449	.457	.464
ΔF (df)	64.03 (11, 839)***	2.94 (6, 833)**	6.39 (2, 831)**

2 Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .05$

3

4

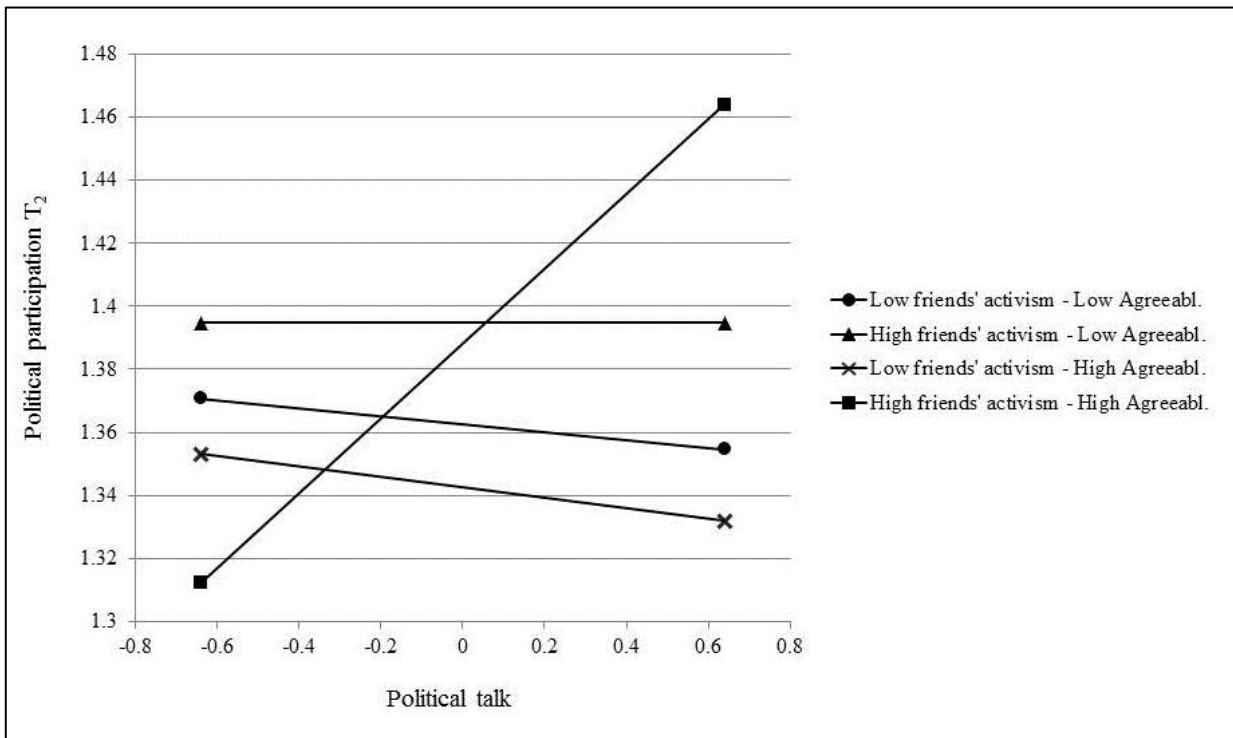
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1 Figure 1.



2