Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP): A Case of Unorthodox Knowledge in HRD?

Paul Tosey

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p.tosey@surrey.ac.uk

Introduction

Wilson (2005, p. 3) describes HRD as representing 'the latest evolutionary stage in the long tradition of training, educating and developing people for the purpose of contributing towards the achievement of individual, organizational and societal objectives'. Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a practice that has become widespread not only in HRD but also in management (Knight, 2002), education (Churches and Terry, 2007), psychotherapy (Wake, 2008), health care (Henwood and Lister, 2007) and more, can be considered part of this stage. In HRD it is used as a method of coaching (Linder-Pelz, 2010), in consulting, and as the subject of management training courses, whether in NLP explicitly or as an approach to subjects such as leadership, communication skills, selling and negotiation.

Tosey and Mathison (2009, p. 24) offer this working description of NLP:

NLP is interested in **how** people communicate, perform skills and create experiences through patterns of thought and behaviour, mediated by language. NLP helps people create more preferable and useful (to them) experiences in the world, typically by attending to and modifying those patterns of thought and behaviour.

This description emphasizes ‘how’ because NLP is typically interested in the process of communication or behaviour rather than its content. For example, NLP has suggested that the strategy used by people who are good at spelling (see Bandler and Grinder, 1979) involves a process comprising three main steps:

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1. visualize the word in your mind’s eye;
2. spell it out to yourself (i.e. not out loud);
3. check whether it is correct through feeling (e.g. a gut sense of whether it is right or not).

It is this strategy – the ‘how’ of spelling – that is of interest in NLP, not the person’s knowledge of words themselves. As illustrated by this spelling strategy, NLP can offer innovative ways of thinking and practising that are alternatives to established knowledge. It is probably more fruitful to think of NLP as a system of practical knowledge that offers a range of heuristics (that is, maps for taking action) than as a rival to academic psychology. By way of analogy, NLP is more like a route map and guide book that offers suggestions or excursions to take by car, than a precise or scientific account of how the car’s engine works.

NLP is also a controversial practice, and attitudes towards it are often sharply opposed. The voices of evangelists and diehard critics can drown out a more nuanced spectrum of views and experiences. NLP may therefore represent an interesting case study of unorthodox knowledge in HRD. This chapter will discuss some of the chief criticisms made of NLP.

How has the concept been defined?

One story goes that the founders of NLP, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, created the phrase ‘neuro-linguistic programming’ with their tongues firmly in their cheeks, and that its quasi-academic obscurity is intentionally mischievous. Yet while NLP is not formally part of any established academic discipline, its constituent terms are neither random nor lacking entirely in connection to academic fields. For example, Grinder spent a year at Rockefeller University where psychologist George A. Miller worked from 1968 until 1979 (Hirst, 1988). Miller, perhaps best known as the originator of the idea that we can hold in mind seven plus or minus two pieces of knowledge at any one time (Miller, 1956), was interested in cognitive neuroscience and psycholinguistics. The term ‘neuro-linguistics’ was first used by Alfred Korzybski (1941, p. xxxviii), a thinker whose work appears to have been introduced to NLP’s founders by the English philosopher Gregory Bateson in the early 1970s.

Dilts et al. (1980, p. 2) offer a reasoned explanation of the terms in the title:

For us, behaviour is programmed by combining and sequencing neural system representations – sights, sounds, feelings, smells and tastes – whether that behaviour involves making a decision, throwing a football, smiling at a member of the opposite sex, visualizing the spelling of a word or teaching physics. A given input stimulus is processed through a

sequence of internal representations, and a specific behavioural outcome is generated.

‘Neuro’ (derived from the Greek neuron for nerve) stands for the fundamental tenet that all behaviour is the result of neurological processes. ‘Linguistic’ (derived from the Latin lingua for language) indicates that neural processes are represented, ordered and sequenced into models and strategies through language and communication systems. ‘Programming’ refers to the process of organizing the components of a system (sensory representations in this case) to achieve specific outcomes.

Where did the term originate?

Accounts of NLP typically fail to acknowledge its historical, cultural and intellectual antecedents. It is sometimes presented as if it sprang, fully formed, from California in the 1970s, independent of social, cultural and historical contexts and influences.

However, a timeline of NLP should probably take us at least as far back as the 1940s.

For example, the self-help movement that emerged in the USA in the mid 20th century may have shaped the identity of NLP more than is usually acknowledged.

NLP’s emphasis on the potential for the person to change themselves, and its promises of empowerment and personal success, reflect an ethos of self-improvement that can be traced back to Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (first published in 1936) and Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). Ideas found virtually unchanged in NLP include Carnegie’s emphasis on appreciating the other person’s point of view and on adjusting one’s own response in order to influence other people, and Peale’s interest in boosting self-confidence.

Other significant influences include the human potential movement. In the 1960s California was a hub of countercultural activity – alternative therapies, new lifestyles, experimental rock music, altered states of consciousness and a drug culture whose values were initially formed by the rejection of materialism, coupled with political dissent that was fuelled by revulsion towards the Vietnam War. It became the centre of the growth movement, epitomized by the Esalen Institute that was founded at Big Sur in 1962, in which Virginia Satir and Fritz Perls were both involved. Satir and Perls would become central influences on early NLP.

Tosey and Mathison (2009) argue that NLP's ideas and approach draw from two main intellectual sources. The first is cybernetics (Wiener, 1965), a cross-disciplinary view of how systems are organized based on feedback, which was developed in the 1940s and 1950s; among the key people involved in this development was Gregory Bateson (Montagnini, 2007), who later became a major influence on NLP. Cybernetics is defined as the science of 'control and communication in the animal and the machine' (Capra, 1996, p. 51), the term being derived from the Greek *kybernetes* meaning 'steersman'.

In cybernetics, the concept of *feedback* refers to information through which a system 'knows' whether or not it is on track to achieve its goal. Positive feedback confirms that it is on track; negative feedback informs it that it needs to alter course. In the case of the thermostat, a temperature lower than the threshold at which the thermostat has been set is negative feedback; this activates the switch and turns the heating on. These terms have, unfortunately, become loaded with implications that distort their original cybernetic usage. *Positive* has somehow acquired the sense of meaning 'praise', being something good and desirable, whereas *negative* is thought of as 'criticism', implying the opposite. In the cybernetic sense, both are equally

necessary to the effective maintenance of a goal-directed activity. There, positive and negative have no emotional valence, but are simply two types of directives that are only meaningful in the context of the achievement of a goal. Life would be impossible without negative feedback because organisms could not regulate themselves.

This conception of feedback gives rise to the notion of *circular causality*, which is key to understanding not only cybernetics but also the essence of Bateson's thinking and, consequently, NLP itself. Imagine a cat sitting on someone's lap, purring as it is being stroked. Did the cat's purring cause the person to start stroking it? Did the stroking cause the purring? From a cybernetic view it is not possible to identify a simple, single cause. In the prevailing Newtonian ways of explaining events, however, every event, 'B', has a physical cause, 'A', that is located outside the event itself and prior to it in time – a red ball lands in the pocket of the billiard table because of the angle, velocity and force of the ball that hit it.

The difference between classic mechanical and cybernetic modes of explanation is highly significant. While Bandler and Grinder do not go so far as to state that NLP is a form of cybernetics, they clearly adopt the central principles of cybernetics when they say that 'the basic unit of analysis in face-to-face communication is the feedback loop' (Bandler and Grinder, 1979, p. 2).

The second intellectual influence is constructivism. Essentially this says that people cannot know 'reality' per se, so inevitably they act according to constructions that they create. Constructivism arrives in NLP largely via the work of the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute in the 1960s, in which Bateson again and also Virginia Satir were involved. The Palo Alto researchers were interested in the relevance of logical types and game theory to human interaction. Significantly, they focused on understanding how patterns of behaviour could form, maintain and resolve problems –

hence their emphasis on the *pragmatics* of human communication (Watzlawick et al., 1967), which also characterizes NLP.

These social and intellectual influences form the backdrop to the usual, local story of NLP's founding. Fritz Perls, one of the main developers of Gestalt therapy, was an author published by Robert Spitzer. Perls died in 1970, leaving behind him some unfinished work. Spitzer asked Bandler, then aged around 20, to transcribe recordings of Perls at work and edit an uncompleted manuscript, to be published posthumously (i.e. Perls, 1973). Bandler immersed himself in the task, and Spitzer wrote later that Bandler 'came out of it talking and acting like Fritz Perls. I found myself accidentally calling him Fritz on several occasions' (Spitzer, 1992, p. 2). Bandler then met Virginia Satir at a seminar she gave at a property owned by Spitzer, probably in 1972 (Walker, 1996); by this time, Satir had moved on from the Palo Alto institute to become the first director of training at Esalen (Satir, 1978). Spitzer asked Bandler to tape and transcribe a month-long workshop that Satir was due to lead in Canada, intending to turn this material into a book. Bandler was intrigued by Satir's abilities to elicit information from other people, and was fascinated by how she achieved her results. Satir was also impressed with Bandler, describing him as a brilliant young man with a fantastic intellect and a wide-ranging curiosity (Walker, 1996). Towards the end of that workshop, according to O'Connor and Seymour (1990, p. 173):

Virginia had set up a counselling situation and asked how the participants would deal with it, using the material that she had been teaching them. The participants seemed stuck. Richard [Bandler] came storming down from his room and successfully dealt with the problem ...
Richard found himself in the strange situation of knowing more about

Virginia's therapeutic procedures than anyone else, without consciously trying to learn them at all.

These experiences appear to be the origin of the core methodology used in NLP, which is called 'modelling'. This is a kind of reverse engineering applied to human capabilities, 'the mapping of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge' (Bostic St. Clair and Grinder, 2001, p. 271). Modelling can be carried out unconsciously, effectively by observing an exemplar and absorbing their approach – which is essentially what Bandler did while observing Satir at work – or more consciously and analytically by investigating the language patterns, behaviours, sequences of thought and internal imagery that exponents use – which results typically in an explicated process such as the spelling strategy described above. Through modelling, NLP claims to offer a way to identify the key elements of any human capability, such that another person can reproduce that capability. Regardless of whether modelling is conducted consciously or unconsciously, the test of an effective model is pragmatic; in other words, a person employing the model gains the same results as the exemplar who was the source of the model.

Following these experiences, Bandler went on to study at Kresge College, the sixth college established at the University of Santa Cruz, which is where he met the co-founder of NLP, John Grinder. Grinder, after completing his doctorate at the University of San Diego on 'deletion phenomena' (Grinder, 1971), an aspect of contemporary linguistics, joined the University of California, Santa Cruz as an assistant professor in 1970 (Bostic St. Clair and Grinder, 2001). Kresge was a radical experiment in education (Grant and Riesman, 1978), with its ethos and practices based on T-groups, or sensitivity training – a behavioural-science approach to personal growth and organization development founded by Kurt Lewin. It was

intended to be ‘an integrated living/learning environment shared (in principle, at any rate) by students, faculty and staff’ (Bostic St. Clair and Grinder, 2001, p. 142).

Kresge was therefore by no means typical of American college education, nor even of the University of Santa Cruz.

What is most significant in relation to NLP is that Bandler and Grinder, and later Bateson, were involved in the relatively short period during which this experiment in alternative education was at its height. According to Grinder (Bostic St. Clair and Grinder, 2001), he and Bandler met in one of these T-groups. At that time, undergraduates at Kresge could present their own work in order to gain credits. Bandler therefore started a Gestalt group on the campus in the spring of 1972, in which he tried out the interventions and ideas that had emerged from his immersion in Perls’ work. Bandler needed to be supervised by a faculty member in order to deliver his course, and had noted that Grinder had interesting ideas about the relationship between the processes of natural language and ‘the structure of the human mind’ (Bostic St. Clair and Grinder, 2001, p. 143).

The first substantive product of this period, the ‘meta-model’, appeared in print in a book titled ‘The Structure of Magic I’ (Bandler and Grinder, 1975b). Sporting a colourful image of a wizard on the front cover, the book carried a foreword by Gregory Bateson who, with reference to his own previous work on human communication, said: ‘Grinder and Bandler have succeeded in making explicit the syntax of how people avoid change and, therefore, how to assist them in changing’ (Bateson in Bandler and Grinder, 1975b, p. x).

If modelling is the core methodology of NLP, then ‘meta-model’ is its central and fundamental content. As noted above, NLP is typically interested in the process of communication or behaviour rather than its content. The ‘meta-model’ conceived

of grammar and syntax as mirroring cognitive processes, and therefore provides a means by which to understand people's ways of making sense. The model categorizes certain linguistic transformations, or ways in which the 'surface structure' of verbal communication can differ from the 'deep structure', which was assumed to be a fuller description of experience. The model also identifies corresponding questions that are designed to recover the detail of the 'deep structure'. Applications of the model range from psychotherapy, where the practitioners' concern may be to gain deeper understanding of the client's inner world, to business, where the need may be for precision in communication (McMaster and Grinder, 1980).

What has been its history since?

We have portrayed NLP as having six 'faces' (Tosey and Mathison, 2009) that reflect its evolving and diverse identities since its founding in the 1970s. The first 'face' is what we have called 'practical magic'. This refers to the naturally occurring patterns of 'excellent communication' that were derived from observing and analysing leading psychotherapists Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls and later hypnotherapist Milton Erickson (Bandler and Grinder, 1975a) in the 1970s. The reference to 'magic' denotes the fact that the results achieved by Satir, Perls and Erickson appeared to many observers to be magical. Bandler and Grinder's contribution was to find a way to account for the difference in effectiveness between these practitioners and others.

The second 'face' is the *methodology* developed through those original NLP studies, which is called 'modelling', as described in the previous section. Emphasis on modelling as the essence of NLP sometimes leads to NLP being described as a form of (applied) 'study', as in 'the study of the structure of subjective experience' (Dilts et al., 1980). For example, Robert Dilts has derived a model of the creative process used by Walt Disney by studying Disney's own accounts of the way he worked (Dilts,

1994). The codified pattern, known as the ‘Disney creativity strategy’ often appears in the repertoire of NLP techniques and it has been used with arts students in higher education (Beeden, 2009).

Just from these first two ‘faces’, one can appreciate that ambiguity arises about the scope and identity of NLP, since it refers both to the *products* of ‘modelling’ (the first face) and to the *methodology* itself, which can (supposedly) be applied to any human capability. This leads to a situation where the rather confusing claim is sometimes made that any human behaviour that works ‘is’ NLP.

Our third face of NLP is a philosophy or set of beliefs about the world. In NLP these beliefs are represented typically by a set of what are called ‘presuppositions’, an example of which is ‘the meaning of your communication is the response that you get’. These presuppositions are of interest because they tell us something about the theoretical and intellectual heritage from which NLP is derived, despite a frequent denial from NLP circles that it has any concern with theory. The presupposition cited above is one of several that can be traced back to the science of cybernetics (Tosey and Mathison, 2009).

The fourth identity of NLP is as a technology. Starting in the late 1970s, NLP was made available through training courses as a method to enhance communication and performance. The technology was codified as a ‘body of knowledge’ comprising the frameworks and techniques described in NLP literature. These have been derived from NLP’s insights into effective communication in many fields, including ways in which those insights have been pieced together to create novel techniques. An example is ‘six step reframing’ (Bandler and Grinder, 1979), a process through which a facilitator enables a person to ask their own unconscious for creative solutions to a

problem, which combines the Palo Alto group's work on reframing with Milton Erickson's use of 'hypnotic' language.

The fifth face is as a commercial product, part of the 'self-help' industry, reflected in the many artefacts (e.g. books, audio, video) and events (e.g. seminars, certificated training courses, conferences) available to be consumed. As an indication of the scale of this activity, about 50 training schools operate in the UK alone. It is important to note that NLP training is a highly competitive commercial market and is offered through a number of brands that are often seeking participants' allegiance to certain versions of NLP, with their related views and practices. It includes organizations that act both as training providers and as essentially self-appointed authorities that regulate their own particular brand of NLP certification, both directly and through other affiliated training organizations. There is no overarching body that governs or regulates the entire field.

Finally, NLP is available as a mode used by professionals in HRD and other fields, including coaching, consulting, training, psychotherapy and more. It is worth noting that NeuroLinguistic psychotherapy is accredited by the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapies (UKCP) (Table 5.1).

What claims have been made for it?

Probably three main claims are made for NLP:

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1. Through 'modelling', it provides a methodology for studying 'excellence'.
2. It is a method that can be used to bring about personal change for clients (typically by professional helpers).

3. It is a set of techniques that can be used by anyone, in private as well as professional settings, to enhance communication and performance.

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With reference to these claims, modelling appears to have exciting potential but lacks the detailed evaluation and documented examples that could make it more convincing to people outside the community of NLP practitioners. Apart from publications based on the work that was undertaken with Milton Erickson (Bandler and Grinder, 1975a; Grinder et al., 1977), which include transcript data, the preferred approach in NLP has been to evidence claims for modelling through behavioural demonstration. In other words, the criterion for success and validity is that the modeller can reproduce the capability that has been studied. From my personal knowledge, perhaps the most extensive modelling project ever undertaken is that through which James Lawley and Penny Tompkins used their NLP training in a project lasting several years to study the therapeutic practice of David Grove, which is known as ‘Clean Language’ (Lawley and Tompkins, 2000; Sullivan and Rees, 2008). Whereas modelling outputs such as the spelling strategy and the Disney creativity strategy mentioned above are specific capabilities, Lawley and Tompkins have codified an entire approach.

The claims made for NLP as a method of personal change have relied to a great extent on anecdote and live demonstrations on stage. This is not to suggest that anecdotes are without value; see for example Isabel Losada’s account (Losada, 2001, pp. 200–201) of someone overcoming their fear of travelling in lifts. The experiences of practitioners constitute a body of evidence, if one that may be difficult to evaluate.

Documented evidence is patchy, however, and has also been hampered by some disdain shown towards formal research since NLP’s inception. The body of formal research that does exist is small, inconclusive (Heap, 1988), dated (mostly

from the 1980s and the early 1990s) and methodologically narrow, though it is accurate to say that it offers little substantive support for NLP (for a detailed discussion see Tosey and Mathison, 2009). Yet its findings tend to be cited as if they were conclusive and authoritative (e.g. von Bergen et al., 1997), and the additional research that could have developed interim conclusions has not been conducted. NLP has been in something of a catch-22; it is dismissed because it is said that there is no evidence for it, yet there is no evidence for it at least in part because research is not being done.

It must be acknowledged that NLP is by no means alone in HRD in this respect – for example, how often are strategies for managing organizational change offered by consulting organizations thoroughly evidence based? The question of what provides for an evidence-based approach is as complex and contested in HRD as in other fields (McGoldrick et al., 2002; Hamlin, 2007).

Increasingly, NLP practitioners, especially those in the psychotherapy profession, are committed to improving this evidence base. The Association for NLP has supported two international research conferences since 2008, and there is also a welcome trend in recent NLP literature for authors to consider relevant research findings from mainstream psychology and other disciplines (e.g. Bolstad, 2002; Churches and Terry, 2007; Linder-Pelz, 2010; Wake, 2008). This marks a shift of attitude towards research, and usefully counters a tendency for NLP training courses and literature to recycle knowledge that has been in circulation since the 1970s.

On the other hand, a claim often made for NLP by practitioners – which troubles people who are unfamiliar with NLP – is simply that ‘it works!’ (e.g. the foreword to Henwood and Lister, 2007). Indeed, Bostic St. Clair and Grinder (2001, p. 3) make the breathtaking claim that the widespread dissemination of NLP ‘can be

accounted for by a simple observation – the patterning they (i.e. Grinder and Bandler) modeled and coded works. It works across cultures, generations, genders, age groups and fields of application.’ This claim is, of course, highly problematic. To suggest that any method is successful in all cases is simply not credible; in the field of health care the standard of effectiveness is to better the rate of success of the placebo effect. Ironically perhaps, an evidence-based, sceptical approach is typically encouraged in NLP training where trainers exhort participants to test NLP’s claims for themselves. Unfortunately, this invitation tends to overlook issues such as that of how rigorous and systematic participants will be in record keeping – for example, will they notice successes but ignore failures? Peer pressure and social conformity also serve to make this kind of testing unreliable.

In an interesting development, it seems that contemporary research findings from academic disciplines such as cognitive linguistics and neuroscience may be offering support to NLP’s ideas and practices. For example, the main principle that Bandler and Grinder drew from their practical investigations was that communication activated a variety of sense-making processes, and that these could be identified. Fauconnier (1999, p. 615) reports a very similar perspective from contemporary cognitive linguistics:

An important general point for cognitive scientists is that language does not directly carry meaning. Rather, it serves as a powerful means of prompting dynamic on-line constructions of meaning that go far beyond anything explicitly provided by the lexical and grammatical forms.

This view is also receiving support in neuroscientific literature. For example, Richardson et al. (2003) have shown that when people listen to certain types of words

or phrases, particular neuronal networks in identifiable areas of their brains are activated. Pecher et al. (2004) claim that words activate events in the sensory-motor system of the brain and play a critical role in understanding; Grossman et al. (2006) propose that words represent certain types of categories and activate different parts of the temporal-occipital part of the brain; and Yokoyama and his colleagues (2006) have demonstrated that verbs elicit greater activation of a part of the brain called the left middle temporal gyrus than do nouns. Leynes et al. (2006) claim that inviting people to remember a past experience activates different patterns of neuronal responses to asking them to imagine a future activity. Rizzolatti and his colleagues (2001), and Tettamanti et al. (2005), suggest that we understand an action (and therefore words that represent an action) because the motor representation of that action is activated in our brain by its 'mirror neurons'. Whenever we communicate, we are not simply exchanging information, but directly activating certain neurological processes in ourselves and others.

Whilst such evidence must be used with caution, due to the propensity for promulgating 'neuro-myths' based on partial understanding, the findings cited above appear promising.

What criticisms have been made to date?

As well as concerns about the evidence base, as discussed above, the criticisms most commonly made of NLP are that it is a 'pseudoscience', that it lacks theory and that it is manipulative.

The allegation of being a 'pseudoscience' originates from a positivist, falsificationist perspective that by no means singles out NLP. It also challenges a wide range of training, development and organizational change practices found in HRD. If applied strictly, most of these practices would probably have to be regarded as

pseudoscientific too. For example, Eisner (2000) critiques not only NLP but also Gestalt therapy, Psychosynthesis and more – in short, any approach to psychotherapy that has not been supported by a dominant form of research, namely clinical trials. Beyerstein (1990, p. 34), similarly, insists that ‘double-blind, placebo-controlled evaluations of all medical, psychological, and educational interventions are essential’.

One feature of NLP that leads to scepticism, especially from academics, is the difficulty of identifying its theoretical base. Indeed, practitioners can deny that theory has any relevance to NLP at all. This seems ironic given NLP’s reverence for Bateson, who deplored the lack of effective theory in the social sciences, and its roots in cybernetics, as explained above. There is an interesting range of issues behind this stance, some of which raise issues about the nature of knowledge:

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1. For the purposes of identifying effective patterns of behaviour, NLP is firmly pragmatist – as noted it is interested in the criterion of ‘what works’, not with what is ‘true’. It is concerned with studying what people actually do, not what they may believe or espouse that they do.

2. In our culture, intellectual, conceptual knowledge is often privileged over practical, experiential knowledge. NLP is interested in holistic and non-conventional forms of knowledge. For example, people are considered to use two modes of processing, a rational, analytic mode and a more intuitive, holistic mode. The rational mode, which is the mode that can formulate and debate theory, is ineffective for certain purposes, such as that it might not directly enable someone to act effectively.

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With regard to the emphasis on the first point – ‘what works’ – there is clearly potential support from several quarters. I have noted the Palo Alto group’s similar emphasis on the *pragmatics* of communication (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 13). Dilts and DeLozier (2000) refer to William James’ pragmatist philosophy. Bateson, commenting on his view that accepted scientific principles are flawed epistemologically, said ‘you and I are able to get along in the world and fly to Hawaii and read papers on psychiatry and find our places around these tables and in general function reasonably like human beings in spite of very deep error. The erroneous premises, in fact, *work*’ (Bateson, 2000, pp. 486–487). What remains to be done is to explore NLP’s position systematically in relation to, say, Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism.

In relation to the second point, NLP authors have refused to privilege the intellect and have discouraged the temptation to create a belief system out of conceptual knowing. They have also explored ‘unorthodox’ forms of knowledge from outside Western scientific traditions, especially in DeLozier and Grinder’s (1987) reformulation of NLP as ‘New Code’ in the 1980s. That book, titled ‘Turtles All The Way Down’, was something of a reaction against the codified, propositional form of early NLP. It was strongly influenced, for example, by Carlos Castaneda’s series about (ostensibly) the system of knowledge of a Yaqui Indian sorcerer (e.g. Castaneda, 1970), as well as by experiences of Congolese drumming. Bateson figures again, for example through reference to his anthropological work in Bali, where he developed ideas about art as a form of knowledge (Bateson, 2000).

NLP has developed a reputation for sometimes being practised manipulatively, perhaps through people who are attracted to its discourse of enhancing personal power. The prevalence of concern about the motives of practitioners is worrying. NLP

is not *inherently* manipulative, and Hayes (2006, p. 12) suggests that ‘the key is to be able to identify those who work well and ethically within NLP – thankfully, they can be found’. Ethical practice is supported actively and unequivocally by codes of conduct such as that produced by the Association for NLP, and the types of ethical reasoning likely to be needed in NLP are discussed by Tosey and Mathison (2009).

Some of the concerns expressed are based on the view that it is inappropriate or unethical to communicate with another person’s unconscious without their knowledge and consent. However, it is impossible not to influence other people because that is the nature of communication itself. All who interact with others, professionally and personally, do so at both conscious and unconscious levels, and for good or ill. The debate needs to be not about *whether or not* people exercise influence in the first place, but about *how* someone influences other people through their communication. From this perspective there is a complex ethical dimension to all human interaction. Given that NLP acknowledges this influence and makes it an explicit part of the practice, it offers the potential advantage that the practitioner can make informed choices. At best, NLP can raise people’s awareness of how they may be influencing other people and can encourage them to be more responsible for the effects they have on other people. Arguably, it provides a public service through educating people about such language patterns, and the ability to recognize when others are influencing us.

What alternatives have been suggested?

NLP exists in a marketplace for training, education and development services. As a methodology, there are probably no direct alternatives to NLP’s ‘modelling’. As a method used by professional helpers, it is most closely related to systemic and solution-focused approaches to coaching and consultancy, and to Clean Language.

Many practitioners use NLP as one ingredient in an eclectic approach. As a set of techniques it competes with many forms of adult education and interpersonal skills training, particularly accelerated learning.

Conclusion

NLP represents a long-established if still unorthodox and problematic form of knowledge within HRD, which is used in training, leadership development, coaching and consultancy. It is a complex and contested field, which presents diverse 'faces' to the outside world. This chapter has discussed its definitions, origins and development. Three main claims for NLP as a practice have been identified, and three major criticisms have been explored. There appears to be an obvious need for further research into its claims. This chapter concludes that NLP offers a highly pragmatic and accessible approach to communication and people development that can help with a wide variety of needs for effective performance, change and learning, based on novel and subtle understandings of the relationships between language, inner worlds and behaviour.

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Table 5.1 The six faces of NLP

Face	Content
‘Practical magic’	Patterns of communication derived from early exemplars (Perls, Satir, Erickson).
Methodology	Modelling (the process used to study those exemplars, and which can in principle be applied to any instance of human excellence).
Philosophy	Presuppositions – underlying principles that reflect NLP’s world view.
Technology	A multiplicity of techniques and codified practices that may be presented as the ‘content’ of NLP.
‘Self-help’ product	Training courses (with levels of certifications), books, media, etc.
Professional modality	A mode of professional help as used in (e.g.) psychotherapy, coaching.