

## Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP)

Defined as the "art and science of personal excellence", this technique claims to cure phobias in as little as 15 minutes, improve learning and memory as well as to increase the skills needed excel at selling and negotiating. Websites advertise that NLP will also improve your skills in seduction. NLP claims to model the way outstanding performers think and act in such a way that anyone can use to bring about similar outstanding results. Various called a technology, a series of techniques, a model, an attitude, a system, a methodology, it is said to unlock secrets, but is not generally claimed to be a magic pill.

One of the founders, Richard Bandler, claims that the name NLP was "phrased on the fly from several book titles on the floor of the car one night when a policeman asked his occupation". From such beginnings, the words now have specific meanings so that 'neuro' relates to the fact that all behaviour stems from neurological processes, such as sight, hearing etc., 'linguistic' relates to the fact that we use language to order thoughts and behaviour, and 'programming' describes the ways we choose to organise ideas and actions to produce results.

There appear to be several ways in which NLP is being promoted — for use by therapists, motivators, or as a self-help programme presented in seminars, books and tapes. As a result, the methods are slightly different, ranging from a type of hypnotism used by therapists in which the therapist holds two fingers in front of the patient's face and follows a set of eye movements

encouraged in the patient while asking certain questions, to question and answer sessions. The hypnosis sessions may last for weeks during which time phobias, childhood trauma, depression and multiple personality disorders are 'cured'. The therapist matches and mirrors the patient's behaviour to gain rapport and gives unexpected responses to the patient's statements.

One example quoted by originators Bandler and Grinder, involves shocking a patient who says he wants to commit suicide, by answering "Wonderful!" By giving the least expected response, the therapist claims to be able to interrupt the patient and gain instant rapport with him. Therapy then proceeds with the therapist asking the patient to wait until he has received three months' therapy, and if that fails, then the therapist will agree to help the patient commit suicide. He asks such helpful questions such as "Who would you like to find your body?" "Have you composed your suicide note?" "Would you like me to help you write it?" Needless to say, the therapist is confident that his therapy will cure the patient within the imposed time limit.

Other techniques used in NLP include reframing, pacing and anchoring. Bandler and Grinder in discussing reframing insist that every experience and behaviour in the world is appropriate, given some context and some frame. An example of a 'single content reframe' that they quote involves curing an anorexic by shutting her in a room with family members and 'a large pot of hotdogs', which the family is to force her to eat.

When their attempts fail after the 15-minute time limit, the therapist orders them out of the room and attacks the patient verbally, saying, "Now how long have you been using this as a way of getting you family's attention?" They claim that this method cures 80% of anorexics by breaking the anorexic cycle. 'Pacing' is gaining and maintaining rapport with another person and 'joining them in their model of the world', and 'anchoring' is the 'process by which any stimulus or representation gets connected to and triggers a response'.

NLP is dense with such jargon, no doubt aimed at sounding scientific. Other examples include metaprograms, left-brain, right-brain, inner teams, multiple personalities, enchanted rings (of communication), submodalities, anchors (resource anchors, chaining anchors and collapsing anchors), modal operators of possibilities/necessity, complex equivalence and so on. (Reading an NLP book requires enormous stamina to wade through the jargon and identify anything meaningful, though the anecdotes are amusing at times.)

One of the main tenets of NLP is that people communicate either through visual, auditory or kinaesthetic interpretations and that these can be identified through studying eye movements and auditory cues. If a person looks upwards, he is accessing visual imagery, downwards and he is accessing kinaesthetic or body sensations; if he looks straight ahead he is accessing auditory cues, to the left and he is remembering or to the right and he is constructing. Auditory cues allow a therapist to identify whether he is using visual

imagery ("I see a way.."), auditory ("That sounds right..."), or kinaesthetic ("I feel we should..."). By taking up these cues, therapists are able to communicate better.

There is no evidence that there is any correlation between eye movements and visual imagery or language choices, indicating it is based on at least one flawed theory. The proponents of NLP agree that it is not based on theory, however, but is based on the process of model making. These do not have to be correct or true or even perfectly formed. A model has only to be useful. If it isn't useful it can be discarded and another one used. There are no controlled studies to prove that these methods are correct. The practice is to 'pretend that the model works, try it, notice the results and if it doesn't work, try something else'.

#### Does it work?

A National Research Council committee found no significant evidence that NLP's theories are sound or that its practices are effective, and the US Army Research Institute after investigating NLP also concluded that it was ineffective in improving influence or skilled motor performance. Many individuals have expressed incredulity and disgust at the methods used in therapy and stopped after only one session.

NLP appears to be a very lucrative field with certified practitioners in at least 38 countries. Courses available range from an introductory class that may be free, to diploma courses lasting 150 hours spread over 20 days. Special courses aimed

at applying NLP to particular areas, such as education, business, music, acupuncture, counselling, psychotherapy and hypnotherapy are available.

Bookstores stock many examples of NLP books but a local university library is curiously devoid of them, despite having a psychology department. NLP is not mentioned in mainstream psychology textbooks either. It is not a science despite its advertising claims.

#### References:

Reframing. Richard Bandler and John Grinder. Real People Press. 1992.

Crazy Therapies. Margaret Thaler Singer and Janja Lalich. Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1996.

Introducing Neurolinguistic Programming. Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour. Aquarian/Thorsons. 1990

NLP the new art and science of getting what you want. Dr Harry Alder. Piatkus. 1994



New Zealand Committee for Scientific Investigation  
of Claims of the Paranormal (Inc.)

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Sitting cross-armed at a meeting might not mean that someone is "blocking you out" or "getting defensive". She may just be cold or have a backache or simply feel comfortable sitting that way. It is dangerous to read too much into nonverbal behavior.

Bob Carroll, *The Skeptic's Dictionary*