

## NLP and Psychology: A bridge too far?

Have you ever been confused about NLP? What it is, where it came from or how it relates to the other theories about people and learning that you carry around in your head? If you have answered 'yes' to any or all of these questions then believe me, you are not the only one!

As both a training consultant with a background in psychology and someone who has been trained in NLP it often feels as if I am in the middle of two warring factions; the NLP camp and the psychology camp. Both seem to be opposed to the other and although a few people like myself have a foot in both camps, even we sometimes become inadvertently embroiled in some of the rather nasty arguments that rage on various internet forums. Many of the psychologists and training consultants I speak to are themselves unsure about how NLP relates to psychology so I will explore some of those links below.

NLP is described in many different ways, which is confusing at best! Dr. Harry Alder calls it "*the study of subjective experience*". Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour in their book, *Introducing NLP*, say that, "*NLP represents an attitude of mind and a way of being in the world. ... NLP is the art and science of personal excellence. The purpose of NLP is to be useful, to increase choice and to enhance the quality of life*". However, although the strapline of their book is "*The new psychology of personal excellence*", they do not go on to explain or explore in any depth the links that NLP has with psychology.

As some of you reading this article may know, the roots of NLP lie in its development by John Grinder and Richard Bandler in the early 1970's at the University of California in Santa Cruz where Bandler was a psychology student at the time and Grinder had both a degree in psychology and a PhD in linguistics. Their early development of NLP as a 'discipline' occurred predominantly through their 'modelling' of the techniques of three psychologists: Fritz Perls the originator of Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir a prominent family therapist and Milton Ericson the originator of Ericsonian hypnotherapy. The NLP tool of modelling involves sub-dividing techniques and strategies down into their smallest constituent parts and carefully recording them so that they can be copied rather like a blueprint. In this way, if you want to be an excellent trainer for example, you find an excellent trainer and study them, modelling exactly what they do so that you can also do it later. Of course this is an over-simplification of quite a complex technique, and NLP now includes many more tools, models and ideas than those originally expressed by its developers.

Two of the major criticisms of NLP from psychologists and HR practitioners are that firstly, it is not rigorous or scientific in its approach. And that secondly, regardless of whether the tools and techniques of NLP are successful in practice, (and they very often are), critics of NLP say that its tools and techniques are at best expedient and at worst, that they could be potentially psychologically damaging in the hands of unskilled practitioners. This is, I think, a criticism that could be levelled at many training and psychological interventions and not just at NLP. However, at its root, NLP is based on sound psychological principles that have been tried and tested and developed over many years of research.

As a science, psychology is relatively young. The heritage of psychology as we know it today dates back to the late nineteenth century with a developing interest in "*the science of mental life*", (James, 1890). In fact the debate still continues within the psychological community as to the degree to which psychology is really a 'science' and the degree to which it is an 'art'. Within the field of psychology there are many different areas of psychological interest: behavioural psychology, educational psychology and cognitive psychology for example. The British Psychological Society (BPS) currently has more than twenty special interest groups that encompass the various 'schools' and interests of psychology.

Humanistic psychology is one such school and is an umbrella term for an approach to psychology rather than a specific set of methodologies or theories. The humanistic movement developed in the late 1950's as a reaction against the focus at that time on psychoanalysis and the unconscious mind. Humanistic psychology includes a variety of methodologies which are consciously applied and sought to be consciously understood for the promotion of self-development, personal growth and the achievement of human potential. Many of the things in fact that NLP also seeks to encourage. The fathers of the humanistic movement in America were George Kelly, Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls and Abraham Maslow, who

is probably best known in the U.K. for his 'hierarchy of needs' theory, where self-actualization, (becoming all that one is capable of becoming), sits at the top of his model. This suggests that not only does NLP have a rich heritage in psychology, it could be described as humanistic psychology and many of the models and tools which we apply within the field of HR also have a strong psychological lineage.

Thinking Styles® is a psychometric instrument that has its roots very firmly in NLP. It is an example of how the rigorous approach required by psychology has been applied to the area of Neuro Linguistic Programming. It is the first psychometric instrument to focus exclusively on identifying and measuring people's preferences for different styles of thinking; what psychology calls their cognitive styles. It also therefore 'bridges the gap' between NLP and psychology in a way acceptable to both camps.

A bridge too far? Not any more.

**Key Points:**

1. The founders of NLP, Bandler and Grinder, had psychology backgrounds when they originally developed NLP through the modelling of psychologists recognised as excellent within their fields.
2. The NLP approach to personal excellence and self-achievement developed in the 1970's after the American 'humanistic' psychology movement, which had developed in the late 1950's from the English and European humanistic movement. Therefore I would suggest that NLP emerged from psychology and could be described as consistent with a humanistic approach.
3. Thinking Styles provides a bridge over which some degree of agreement and mutual understanding can be reached between the two disciplines of NLP and psychology.
4. In the table below are some examples of the parallels between NLP and Psychology.

Psychology	NLP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meta-cognition / cognitive filters</li> <li>• Cognitive styles</li> <li>• Sensory representational systems</li> <li>• Humanistic approach</li> <li>• Theory of mind</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meta-programmes / meta-filters</li> <li>• Thinking styles</li> <li>• Sensory representational systems</li> <li>• The NLP approach and ethos</li> <li>• Individual's 'map of the world'</li> </ul>

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