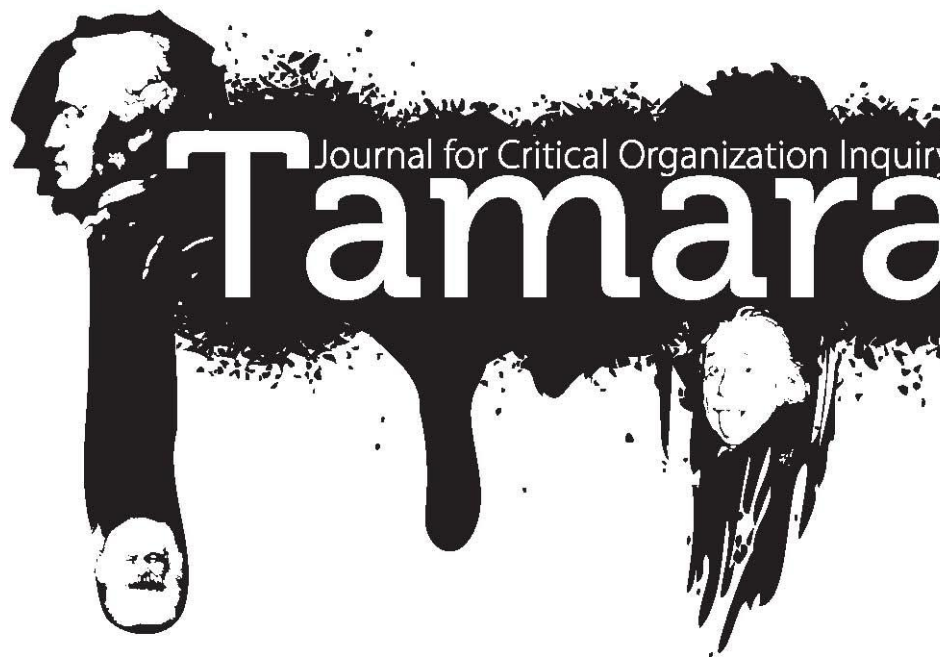


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NLP – origins, concepts and controversies

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Abstract

This article is an introduction to NLP (NeuroLinguistic Programming). The education system, in good Aristotelian tradition, has instill the practice that any introduction must present simple things on which to build further more complex things. However, it can easily be argued that it does not matter where you start (with simple things or with complex things); it is important to continue and do not stop. This is also recommended by this article with its three parts: origins, concepts and controversies. In other words, this article is important to the extent that the reader will read further articles of and about NLP, being a molecule of water spilled into an ocean.

Origins and concepts

The Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) field was born in Santa Cruz, California in the early 1970s, with the support of two founders: John Grinder (a linguist) and Richard Bandler (a psychologist). These two, helped among others by Gregory Bateson, have tried to model theories of three famous psychologists of those times: Milton Erickson, Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir. As a result they wrote several books (for instance, “The structure of magic”, or “Patterns of the hypnotic techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.”) consecrating this field once for all:

“The concept for NLP was originated ten years ago by John Grinder and Richard Bandler. These two men studied the working processes of noted therapists such as Fritz Perls (Gestalt), Virginia Satir (family therapy) and Milton H. Erickson, M.D. (medical hypnosis). They also combined their own skills from three disciplines – linguistics, computers, and Gestalt Psychology” (Dilts & Dilts, 1981: 3).

The three initials of the field refer to the possibility of programming people (P = programming) both neurological (N = neuro) and linguistic (L = linguistic). Therefore, at the very heart of this field, at least in the beginning, the human being was seen from the perspective of his/ her cognitive processes. Again, Robert Dilts has an important word in these matters:

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“<Neuro> (derived from the Greek <neuron> for nerve) stands for the fundamental tenet that all behavior 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) to achieve specific outcomes” (Dilts & Dilts, 1981: 3-4).

At its foundations are several presuppositions that were formulated long after it was established as a psychological field. These presuppositions differ from author to author; however, below, it will be attempted an enumeration of them, an enumeration that isn't exhaustive.

“What are these presuppositions? (...):

1. Every behavior is potentially communication (Bateson, Perls, Satir, Erickson)
2. Mind and body are part of the same cybernetic system (Bateson, Perls, Satir, Erickson)
3. People have all the resources they need to make changes (Perls, Satir, Erickson)
4. People orientate themselves by their internal maps, their model of the world, and not to the world itself (Korzybski)
5. The map is not the territory (Korzybski)
6. People make the best choices that present themselves to them (Satir)
7. Choice is better than no choice (Satir)
8. Every behavior is generated by a positive intention (Satir)
9. The meaning of a communication is the response it elicits, not the intention of the communicator (Erickson)
10. Resistance is a message about the communicator (or therapist) (Erickson)
11. If what you are doing isn't working, do something different (Erickson)
12. There is no failure, only feedback (Erickson)
13. The most flexible variable controls the system (Ashby's law of requisite variety)
14. Everything that a human being can do can be modeled (Bandler and Grinder)” (Tosey & Mathison, 2009: 98-99).

Being an evolving field, the NLP concepts cannot be fully presented, as the number of them is continually increasing. However, a map drawn in 2016 by Gabriel Suci, is presented below. And the reader is asked to keep in mind both the year when this map was drawn, and the fact that the author's formation in this field is not yet completed (the author having completed only the NLP Practitioner training).

Psychologists	Questions	Levels	Models	Techniques	Positions	Times
Awakener	Who else? What else?	Spirituality	Metaphor		5 th Universe	Eternity
Sponsor	Who?	Identity		Meta- Programs	4 th System	
Mentor	Why?	Values	Milton	Frames	3 rd (Observer)	*In time
Teacher	How?	Outcomes		Strategies	2 nd (Other) 1 st (Self)	*Through time
Coach	What?	Behaviors	Meta	Anchors	0 th ***	
Caretaker & Guide	Where? When?	Environment		Sub/ Modalities		

Controversies

Concerning the origins of this field and the number of its founders NLP can be considered controversial. As it was observed, in 1981, Robert Dilts considered that John Grinder and Richard Bandler are the two founders of the field. However, in 2012, John Grinder stated that the field has three (and not two) founders, Frank Pucelik also having an important role in the birth of the NLP (Grinder & Pucelik, 2012: 19).

Another controversial issue is related to the areas of application of the three initials (namely, NLP). In 1981, Robert Dilts stated that the NLP trend deal with the cognitive processes of a man/ woman. However, in 2009, the same author considered that also the man’s/ woman’s body is important, and – also – the field in which they coexist. Therefore, a NLP practitioner aims to make changes in the following areas: the cognitive mind, the somatic mind, and the field mind (Gilligan & Dilts, 2009: 26-29).

Consequently neither of the underlying presuppositions have escaped controversy. Thus, as stated, the number of them differs from author to author. However, Robert Dilts argued that the NLP field is based, in fact, on two presuppositions: a) the mind is not the territory, and b) the body and the mind are systemic processes. This statement must be regarded as follows: Dilts doesn’t deny the fact that there is a body of presuppositions, but he tries to organize it according to two presuppositions. Therefore, there are two main presuppositions at the foundation of this field, as well as a multitude of secondary presuppositions derived from them (Dilts, 1994: 221-222).

Finally, one of the most striking controversies is that the NLP field can be considered unscientific, and therefore the concepts with which it operates are illusory and do not yield results. In fact, this critique is based on four articles presented in well-known journals: Sharpley (1984, 1987), Heap (1988) and Witkowski (2010). These articles reduce the enormous number of concepts to just one – namely modalities/ submodalities. Practically, these authors argue that NLP is defined only by modalities and submodalities. This assertion is supported by second/ third hand readings, being a presupposition that doesn’t even appear in any list of NLP authors. However, after this assertion was made, the four articles seek to find out whether the concept of modalities/ submodalities is working in everyday life. So, the three authors, at the end of the four articles, state – according to a rather dangerous scientific practice – that the concept of modalities/ submodalities is unscientific, which (by generalization) means that the NLP field is unscientific. And from there it was only a step to consider the NLP field as an illegal practice (Gray, Liotta, Wake & Cheal, 2013).

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