

Is NLP Humanistic?

by Julian Russell

Yes. Much more significant, I believe that NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) is one of the most effective methods of helping people express their potential available in the world today. In his book *Ordinary Ecstasy*, John Rowan says that Humanistic Psychology "is a way of doing science which includes love, involvement and spontaneity, instead of systematically excluding them", and I would add that not only does science need to include these things, but that they are central factors in the flowering of human potential, and in defining the difference between competence and excellence in any worthwhile endeavour.

NLP started in the early 1970's because Richard Bandler was frustrated by the fact that Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir were doing things in demonstrations that they didn't seem to be able to teach to their students. Bandler enlisted the help of John Grinder, Professor of Linguistics at the University of California to study the genius that seemed outside of Perls' and Satir's conscious awareness, and NLP was born. Later they studied other therapists like Milton Erickson, as well as people in other professions such as great teachers, musicians, actors, managers, chief executives, and negotiators. Today NLPers are continuing to model an increasing number of areas of expertise.

Self Choice

So what makes NLP so effective in helping people fulfil their potential?

Firstly, it is based, not on the study of neurosis or pathology, but on the study of wholeness, genius, expertise, artistry, creativity, skillfulness and excellence. All these qualities are immediate: in good NLP training, the participants' attention is systematically drawn to the fact that they are continually expressing these qualities, perhaps fleetingly, perhaps unsystematically, perhaps not in high stress or high-performance contexts, but nevertheless, expressing them on a day-to-day basis.

NLP is goal-orientated: people choose their own futures and their own goals, even if superficial, and this leads to confidence in our ability to grow and change. More significant goals can follow. The client knows best, with the NLPer as a consultant. The unconscious refuses to make "unwise" changes, and any attempts at "unwise" change is usually ineffective anyway. The client learns to think "ecologically". Gregory Bateson defines "wisdom" as being the awareness of the system as a whole. NLP tries to be both an art and a science: the science part is extremely important because to be confident in their ability to grow and change, clients need consistent results.

NLPers are very wary of being limited by their conceptual models, that "the map is not the territory". Hence NLPers allow themselves to use a whole range of approaches, from the behavioural to the transpersonal.

NLP tools are designed to be easily accessible to "the user": as John Grinder puts it "human potential is too important to leave in the hands of the experts".

You are the Expert

The best NLP practitioners embody the "presuppositions" of NLP which are intensely client-orientated and humanistic: these include the following:

- Each of us makes the best choices available to us at any given moment in time. Also that everyone already has everything they need to solve all of their problems (the skill is in helping people access their resources).
- there is a distinction between a person and the behaviour they exhibit; that all their behaviour has a positive intention behind it, even if the behaviour is destructive in that context and that all behaviour is useful in some context or other.
- that the word "resistance", if used with a negative connotation, is a sign of incompetence in the therapist, not a statement about the client.
- that behaviour that seems "crazy" or "bad" from one point of view may seem wise and sane when seen in the context of the system or the environment.
- why be normal?Geniuses aren't (who is anyway?) What on earth is "normal"?

Promise for the Future

Of course NLP has its faults. Like other psychologies, it is open to misuse; like other therapies, here and abroad, people sometimes get accredited who do not bring credit to us; it can be argued that it is too easy to get trained in NLP, that there isn't enough selection. The American hype certainly alienated people within our culture and particularly the psychotherapy community, and some of the early books were rather adolescent.

But hurrah! Adolescence holds the promise of the future. It is a transition between childhood and mature contribution to the world. It has the naivety that is brave enough to create change, to believe in a vision of a better world, to challenge out-dated ways of thinking, to blow away the cobwebs. In fact, my concern is how to keep the creativity, the continued innovation, the youthful folly, the "wild" spirit of the founders of NLP, as we became more accepted, respectable and professionalised.

Our saving grace is that the continuing study of excellence and the refinement of our models are central themes in the NLP. NLP culture is very supportive of those NLPers who express their potential by helping NLP improve its own methodology. NLP is just beginning.

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