

NLP : What Goes On in Your Head?

By Bruce Farrow, Master Trainer of NLP

The mind is a fascinating thing and over the years, it has caused much heated debate (and still does) on what exactly occurs in our mind.

For a long time psychologists essentially sat in two separate camps – the behavioral psychologists and the cognitive psychologists – both with opposing views.

These days they are not quite as separated as they were and believe that human thought process is influenced by both arguments – they are not exclusive.

In the NLP world, we take both sides of the concepts and utilise them to assist people to change thought processes and/or reactions to things or circumstances, thus helping people to think differently and consequently get different results.

Some Background



John B. Watson

In 1913, John B. Watson, an American psychologist, launched the concept of behaviourism with an address at Columbia University. He stated that behaviourism relates to any behaviour that can be directly observed. The assumption is that we learn by associating certain events with certain consequences, and will behave in the way with the most desirable consequences. There is also an assumption that when events happen together, they become associated and either event will have the same response. In behaviourism there is no difference between animals or humans in the way they behave.

He conducted the radical “Little Albert” experiment where he took a nine month old baby and allowed a white rat to run around in the room with the baby. When the rat got near the baby, the baby reached out to touch it because it had no fear or no frame of reference. This was repeated and the baby showed no emotion towards the rat, just curiosity. Then one day when the baby reached

out to touch the rat, Watson struck an iron bar with a hammer creating a very loud noise. After that the baby screamed every time the rat came into the room – he had associated the rat (conditioned stimulus) with the loud noise (unconditioned stimulus.)

Cognitive Psychology has a radically different approach to what we do in our heads. In 387BC, Plato suggested that the brain was the “seat” of mental processes. Over the ages many people had put forward theories on how our minds worked but it wasn’t until the 1960s that Cognitive psychology took off. It was fuelled by the interest, during the Second World War, on human performance under stress, the development of computer science in the late 1950s and Noam Chomsky’s attack on behaviourism in 1959. This led to what is now known as the cognitive revolution. Cognitive psychology makes the assumption that humans have the capacity to process and organise information in their mind. It differentiates between animals and humans. It looks less at observable behaviour and more with the thought processes behind it. Cognitive psychology attempts to understand concepts such as memory and decision making.

How Does NLP View the Mind from a Cognitive Approach

In the NLP world, the theory is that the mind has processes that we run in our heads. We call these strategies. This comes from the original work of Miller, Galanter and Pribram who wrote the “Plans and Structure of Behaviour” in 1960 where they suggested that human behaviour was not just the process of stimulus response, it was more than that and involved some processes in the mind between the two. They were attempting to unify the field of psychology.

Miller, Galanter and Pribram showed that there were similarities between computer programming and how the mind is programmed and introduced something called the TOTE model which explains what you do in your head when you do something.

When we look at strategies (or the processes that we run in our heads) in the field of NLP we understand that the human mind goes through a sequence of steps to reach an outcome. That outcome is pretty much the same every time, so, if we have a behaviour that is not working for us, then we need to change that strategy.

The video on the right is taken from our NLP Master Practitioner pre course study programme and explains the TOTE model in a simple way. This is what you do in your head when you do something.

Now, it is REALLY hard to try and change a strategy consciously. However, what NLP brings to the table, are methods of discovering what those strategies are and ways of changing them at an UNCONSCIOUS level so that they next time a person runs that particular strategy, they automatically run the new one.

The human being runs hundreds or thousands of strategies every day and for everything we do, we will have a whole string of strategies surrounding it. For example, we don’t just have an eating strategy. We will probably first run our motivation to eat strategy, then a deciding on what we will eat, then a convincing strategy to convince ourselves we are doing the right thing and then a reassurance strategy to reassure ourselves that we have eaten enough. There could be more too!

What NLP can do is to separate the strategies out – a vital process if we are to find out where a problem lies in someone’s behaviour.

Let me use an example in a sporting context. A golfer hits a golf ball and you might say that is one strategy.

However, it is surrounded by other strategies. If he has a problem with a particular shot we would look at all the strategies surrounding the shot to find out where the problem lies – and then fix it. The first thing we would have to do is to separate the strategies out.

The video on the right (taken from our NLP Master Practitioner Video Programme) explains this further.

Once we have the sequence of strategies we would then elicit each one to discover possible problems and then change that strategy to fix the problem. Please note this is just an example and strategies relate to EVERYTHING that we do – not just in sport!

NLP and Behaviourism

If we go back to the Little Albert experiment, the child was conditioned into having a response of fear when the rat was introduced into the room. This was simply a case of stimulus response which was first advocated by Edwin Twitmyer and Ivan Pavlov back in 1903. We know this happens and the NLP world looked at ways we can use this.

So on the basis that you can be ‘conditioner’ to respond in a particular way (either emotionally or behaviourally) we looked to use this in a positive way. In essence the NLP world said that if you can be conditioned to respond ‘negatively’ to a situation then you could also be conditioned to respond ‘positively’ to the same situation.

In NLP we call this anchoring and we utilise passed good experiences and ‘link’ them to a certain stimulus thus the client can access those good experiences/feelings at any time they wish. In addition to this we utilise a collection of good experiences to ‘squash’ a particular bad feeling. This is called collapse anchoring.

The last thing we can use anchoring for is to create a chain of experiences that lead to a specific outcome thus, essentially, creating a new strategy for the client. Hence in this way NLP has used elements of cognitive and behavioural psychology and brought them together AND, most importantly, discovered processes that help a client change their thinking.

NLP is not about labelling people – it is about understanding how their mind operates and creating change at the unconscious level.