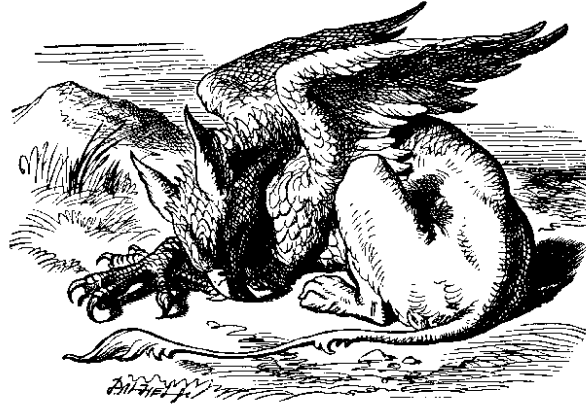


FABULOUS CREATURES OF HRD: A CRITICAL NATURAL HISTORY OF NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING

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'... eastern Libya – is low-lying and sandy, as far as the river Triton, whereas the agricultural region to the west is very hilly, and abounds with forest and animal life. It is here that the huge snakes are found - and lions, elephants, bears, asps and horned asses, not to mention dog-headed men, headless men with eyes in their breasts (I don't vouch for this, but merely repeat what the Libyans say), wild men, and wild women, and a great many other creatures by no means of a fabulous kind.'

(Herodotus 1972:334)

1 The problem

As professional educators working in the field of management learning as teachers, researchers, coaches and trainers, we are aware of diverse attitudes towards that unfamiliar beast, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Like Herodotus, it may be hard to vouch for claims about the nature of NLP, which is portrayed as either marvellous and magical or hideous and dangerous. NLP practitioners certainly purport to offer innovative and highly effective approaches to HRD through coaching, training, consulting and more, and it seems to merit investigation as a creature thriving in this field.

Having spent considerable time in that westward tract, we can vouch that NLP is no domestic pet. It could even be said to have two heads (i.e. it has two founders). But accounts of NLP are often problematic, relying either upon the marketing hype of those with commercial interests in its promulgation, or upon the polemic of its fiercest critics. There is little evidence of dialogue between practitioners and academics, and the two main examples of scholarly books of which we are aware, Esser (2004) and Walker (1996), are not published in the English language.

Consequently, it is difficult for HRD practitioners and academics alike to engage conceptually with NLP. The purpose of this paper is to create such an opportunity, in which our interest is in

developing a research agenda, not in attempting to resolve concerns expressed about the practice of NLP. Why the metaphor of a natural history? Other than that one of us is a zoologist by training, it is a device to help us to find a suitable distance from our subject, through which we offer physical descriptions of this particular creature, and attempt to categorise it and review its habitat and predispositions.

2 Perspective and methodology

We have trained extensively in NLP, use it in our professional work, and have been researching the field for several years, most recently through a funded projectⁱⁱ. This gives us a privileged as well as precarious position, being familiar intellectually and experientially with NLP whilst also seeking detachment from the sometimes partisan nature of the practitioner community. To assist in this we have regularly consulted an academic 'critical friend' to our project.

Our overarching research interest is in 'transformative learning' (Mezirow 1991), applied to management learning (Tosey, Mathison, & Michelli 2005). Intellectually we are informed principally by Bateson's systemic epistemology (Bateson 1979; Bateson 1973), and by recent work applying complexity theory to issues of learning, such as Cooper, Braye and Geyer (2004), Davis and Sumara (2006), and Stacey (2003).

Our research project has three main aims:

1. Supporting the emergence of an NLP research community, and building bridges for increased dialogue between academic and practitioner communities.
2. Developing a critical appraisal of the field.
3. Furthering our work on transformative learning and teaching (which has HRD applications to coaching and mentoring).

This paper addresses the second aim. It is informed by data from multiple sources, though does not offer a formal analysis of these data, which is in progress. The paper is constructed more as a response to the question, 'what are the main critical issues concerning NLP that are likely to be important and interesting to practitioners and researchers in HRD?':

- Direct experience of the NLP community over some twenty years through attendance at trainings, conferences and seminars.
- Conversations and interviews with key informants (experts in the field).
- Literature - NLP publications, academic literature, and media articles.
- Data from two workshops we have organised on the theme of research into NLP, attended by more than forty peopleⁱⁱⁱ.
- Interviews (six to date) with NLP practitioner researchers.
- Interviews (six to date) with trainees (new entrants to the NLP community).
- Stories people have told us about their encounters with NLP.

3 What is NLP?

Here we offer a concise description, recognising that 'what is NLP?' is a complex question that is contested within the practitioner community itself.

NLP can be described as an approach to communication and personal development, created in the 1970's by Richard Bandler, then a student, and John Grinder, an associate professor of linguistics, at the University of California, Santa Cruz (Bostic St.Clair & Grinder 2001). According to McLendon

(1989:9-10), their collaboration began when Grinder agreed to be faculty supervisor for a Gestalt-based course that Bandler wished to offer at Kresge College.

If taken descriptively, the title denotes that a person is a whole mind-body system, with consistent, patterned connections between neurological processes ('neuro'), language ('linguistic') and learned behavioural strategies ('programming') (Dilts, Bandler, & DeLozier 1980:2). It might also be regarded as a mischievous, and perhaps intentionally provocative, pseudo-academic construction; thus, 'Neuro-Linguistic Programming is a word that I made up to avoid having to be specialized in one field or another' (Bandler & Andreas 1985:7) .

NLP embodies a discourse of self-improvement. It is described as generative rather than remedial (Bandler & Andreas 1985:158) and, like 'positive psychology' (Linley et al. 2006), attends to healthy functioning instead of pathology. The founders' motives were described as 'sharing the resources of all those who are involved in finding ways to help people have better, fuller and richer lives' (Bandler & Grinder 1975b)^{iv}. While applied also to business (McMaster & Grinder 1980), most early publications have a psychotherapeutic emphasis because its original studies were of Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir, the family therapist, and Milton Erickson, the hypnotherapist. NLP has also since become a recognised mode of psychotherapy in the UK^v.

In common with brief therapy (McDermott & Jago 2001), and contemporaneous practices that share core influences, such as Solution-focused Therapy (de Shazer 2005), and Possibility Therapy (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis 1989), NLP challenges the assumption that personal change necessarily involves long-term therapy and insight into the past (Bandler & Grinder 1979:6-7). This reflects both the potential contribution and the contentiousness of NLP, in that it challenges some orthodox notions of human development – indeed a proportion of criticism may arise because NLP threatens vested professional and academic interests.

NLP has proven difficult to define. Its promotional literature emphasises applications and tends to portray NLP as a technology of (for example) 'communication excellence'. It has been criticised (Craft 2001) for being a collection of tools and strategies with no cohering theoretical foundation. Originally, however, NLP was described as a methodology (Bandler & Grinder 1975b:6), the purpose of which was to investigate exemplary communication, not to create a body of practice. Thus Dilts, Bandler and DeLozier (1980) describe it as 'the study of the structure of subjective experience', and the founders continue to emphasise this methodological identity (Bostic St.Clair & Grinder 2001). A third, epistemological dimension is emphasised too (Dilts & DeLozier 2000:849).

In our view NLP is best conceived of as a pragmatic and accessible enquiry method, which is phenomenological in that it enquires into the structure of experience. At best, in our view, it emphasises emergent rather than instrumentally-pursued change. We argue below that while NLP literature rarely articulates any theory, it can be understood theoretically through Bateson's 'cybernetic epistemology' (Morgan 2006:383).

4 How is NLP applied in HRD?

Even if NLP is fabled, it is no stranger to HRD; it occupies the same habitat. As a conservative estimate, some 50,000 participants have attended NLP practitioner training courses in the UK in the past 25 years^{vi}. Participants include professionals such as lawyers, medics, police, managers, teachers and psychotherapists, and NLP is applied in HRD through coaching (especially), training, consulting, and more; it can be used in goal-setting, self-management, presentation skills, leadership, team-building, negotiation and so on. The UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development includes an NLP course in its 2007 training programme^{vii}.

Ponting (2006) identifies that practitioners often use NLP without naming it as such, prominent reasons being its negative connotations for clients, a desire to avoid jargon, or the fact that NLP is just

one ingredient in an eclectic form of practice. Examples of practitioners' accounts can be found in business-orientated NLP literature (Knight 2002), (Molden 2000;Molden 1996) and NLP magazines (e.g. 'Rapport' and 'The Model'). The ANLP website includes case studies of applications in The Financial Training Company, BT and AstraZeneca^{viii}. There is an increasing literature on NLP as an approach to coaching (O'Connor & Lages 2004), and as indicative data, 340 trained NLP practitioners are listed on the website of the UK Association for NLP as offering a specialism in coaching^{ix}.

5 Issues for a critical natural history

What are the key research issues? The lack of research-based investigation is significant, as is the lack of dialogue between practitioner and academic communities, whose perceptions of each other often seem characterised by misapprehension, mistrust or both.

The desires most frequently expressed by practitioners (e.g. at our workshops) are for legitimisation and respectability. They want NLP, and presumably by extension themselves and their practice, to be seen as valid. Accompanying this is a frequent (if not universal) perception that the role of research is to prove NLP's efficacy. While this is essential in tightly regulated health professions, and is being pursued currently by a major NLP project in the USA^x, this represents a narrow view of research that emphasises utilitarian outcomes rather than, say, sociological, anthropological, historical and critical possibilities. Practitioners rarely see NLP and its community as the potential focus of research, as distinct from the beneficiaries.

A similar narrowness also characterises academic work on NLP to date. Most published studies, which we review briefly below, are experimental tests of selected claims made in the NLP literature. Beyond these, literature written by academics shows that NLP can provoke strong reactions^{xi}, yet commentary is often polemical more than enquiry-based (Hollander 1999). For example, Eisner (2000) argues that as a psychotherapy NLP has no sound empirical or theoretical basis; Eisner's critique, however, is levelled at many therapies and may be considered scientific. In HRD, Megginson and Clutterbuck (2005:9) express their views in, frankly, extraordinary terms.

We now discuss five prominent issues, reflecting concerns expressed by the practitioner community as well as NLP's critics.

5.1 Origins: whence came this creature?

It is rare in the NLP literature to find NLP located in its historical context. The most extensive reference work in the field (Dilts & DeLozier 2000) has an index entry 'historical overview of NLP', yet the corresponding text comprises just two paragraphs with a standard description of the origins in Santa Cruz in the 1970's. Walker (1996) shows greater interest in the figures who influenced NLP.

There are interesting gaps and silences around this story. For example, little is stated in print about Bandler and Grinder's lives and influences prior to Santa Cruz, apart from outline details of Grinder's career (Dilts & DeLozier 2000:460).

A silence that especially interests us concerns Gregory Bateson's perspective, whose ideas are widely acknowledged in NLP as central influences. Bateson lived in California in the 1970's (Bostic St.Clair & Grinder 2001:117-8), (Lipset 1980:279); Bandler and Grinder were by chance his neighbours and, like him, were exploring communication and the mechanisms of perception. Bateson also enabled Bandler and Grinder to meet Milton Erickson (Bostic St.Clair & Grinder 2001:175-8). Yet apart from Bateson's foreword to 'The Structure of Magic' (Bandler & Grinder 1975b:ix-xi), there is no comment on this episode, or on the nature of his collaboration with Bandler

and Grinder, from Bateson's perspective. It is ignored in reviews of Bateson's work (Harries-Jones 1995); (Lipset 1980), and is not mentioned in Bateson's published writing. Our enquiries to the Bateson archive at the University of Santa Cruz^{xii} have yielded just three documents, which throw no further light on this collaboration.

A possible explanation for Bateson's silence following the 1975 foreword is provided by Mary Catherine Bateson, the daughter of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, who says that 'even in psychiatric contexts, he resisted the transformation of his ideas into specific strategies of intervention' (Bateson 2000b:87).

5.2 The environment and its influence

As noted above, NLP practitioners seldom see NLP and its community as the potential focus or 'subject' of research. NLP literature has rarely (to our knowledge) attempted to locate NLP in its social and cultural context, or to review its discourses and salient features.

For example, NLP originated not only temporally in the heyday of the human potential movement^{xiii}, but also geographically in California, close to Esalen, where Perls and Satir had been prominent participants^{xiv}. Mike Pedler comments that 'NLP is indeed from California but has travelled well' (Molden 1996:xi).

In common with the aspirations of the human potential movement, NLP takes issue with the archaeological emphasis of Freudians, on digging into the past in order to understand the present. NLP is firmly constructivist in the sense that it perceives all experience, including memories, as (re)created in the present. In that sense, memories are located in a perceptual past – they no more exist in an actual past than representations of goals exist in an actual future. A belief that the past is objectively real, and that therefore that the meaning of the past is unchangeable, is fallacious according to NLP.

If taken to extreme, this view even implies that one can choose one's identity - a view predicated on the idea that a person can exert conscious control over their mechanisms of perception and meaning. This is contrary to Bateson's views (Bateson 1979), and represents a naively individualistic view of how identity is formed. The human potential movement is indeed characterised by a radical intent to liberate people from oppressive social roles and expectations (Rowan 2001); yet to take a further step and suppose that identity is wholly within the conscious control of an individual, is epistemologically flawed. It is understandable that, to the extent that such a view may have taken hold in NLP, 'history' is cast as not only irrelevant but also potentially pernicious.

Culturally, NLP may be seen as embodying aspects of 'The American Dream' in its emphasis on the pursuit of individual happiness and success. In the 1980's it incorporated the emergent meme of 'excellence' that had begun to appear in the field of business (Peters & Waterman 1982)^{xv}. This term still appears in NLP publicity^{xvi}, through probably less often than a decade ago. The interest in excellence could be seen as a mutation of NLP's original focus on healthy human functioning, itself a reaction against the pathology-focused psychological establishment. From health the focus may have shifted to excellence and genius (Dilts 1994), but perhaps with insufficient acknowledgement of the attendant risks of elitism.

We speculate that this hypothesised mutation may be reflected in a tendency within the community to present oneself as a success and to downplay or deny imperfection. In a field that professes to believe that virtually any human achievement is open to any individual, and which claims to have identified the means by which excellence can be attained, how does one explain ordinariness? By implication, the ordinary individual must either lack the intelligence to recognise and use those tools, or lack the motivation or will to realise their full potential.

There is also the possibility of enquiring into NLP's own social form and functioning as a community of practice. Here one encounters literature that compares human potential movements with religion (Fromm 1950), including sociological literature on 'new religious movements' (Robbins 1988); (Westley 1983). More extreme charges that appeared formerly on Wikipedia^{xvii}, such that (for example) NLP constitutes a cult, have been removed, and a frequently cited suggestion that NLP has links with Scientology appears to be completely without foundation. Nevertheless it is pertinent to examine NLP as a form of community of practice and to ask how it functions.

In that connection we are particularly interested in Grinder's comments (Bostic St.Clair & Grinder 2001:121-2) on personality traits that he believes he and Bandler shared. We feel we share very few of these characteristics, so Grinder's list leaves us curious indeed about our own affinity with the field.

In our experience there is a prominent discourse of power and control, reflected, for example, in claims made to possess the authority to define NLP; to have access to the truth about NLP's history and development; to have legal or moral ownership of NLP, its practices and models; and to have the right to license others to practise. It must be a matter for exploration elsewhere whether this type of discourse is peculiar to NLP or characteristic of emergent fields of practice - psychoanalysis springs to mind as a comparison - especially those that have charismatic founders.

In a similar vein, we note that an evidence-based, sceptical approach is typically espoused in NLP trainings, exhorting participants to test NLP's claims for themselves. However, there appears to be little awareness of the potential for peer pressure, concern for social acceptability, and the propensity to believe in something for which one has paid substantial amounts of money, to militate against an evidence-based, sceptical approach.

Another possible line of enquiry is that of gender. According to McLendon (1989:27) and Dilts and DeLozier (2000:852), other people including Bandler and Grinder's partners were also closely involved in the development of NLP. While Leslie Cameron Bandler and Judith DeLozier have indeed appeared as authors (Cameron-Bandler, Gordon, & Lebeau 1985); (DeLozier & Grindler 1987); (Dilts & DeLozier 2000); it is interesting that there appears to be no published discussion of gender issues anywhere in the field^{xviii}. For example, no article in the Letterworth journal, *NLP World*, addresses this issue^{xix}. The term 'gender' is an example of what NLP would call a 'nominalisation', whereby 'a process word in the Deep Structure appears as an event word, or noun, in the Surface Structure' (Bandler & Grinder 1975b:74), hence an NLP perspective on the perceptual structure and behavioural process of 'gendering' could be of interest.

Overall, there seems to be a need for greater reflexivity in the field. Developing a critical awareness of the discourse of excellence, and of issues of power and gender, would surely be helpful. NLP could make an interesting contribution by modelling processes such as socialisation. For the purposes of a natural history, it seems vital to understand the situatedness and functioning of this fabulous creature, yet this is largely neglected in the field's literature.

5.3 Genus

To what family of creatures does NLP belong? In particular, how is it related, distantly or otherwise, to the fauna of the academic world?

NLP was created in order to be used. The founders explicitly espoused an anti-theoretical, pragmatic, utilitarian stance, for example: 'We have *no* idea about the "real" nature of things, and we're not particularly interested in what's "true". The function of modeling^{xx} is to arrive at descriptions which are *useful*.' (Bandler & Grinder 1979:7).

This emphasis on usefulness has led some NLP practitioners either to claim that NLP has no theory, or that theoretical considerations are insignificant. The impression that NLP is anti-academic was probably compounded by the appearance of the term 'magic' in the luridly-covered early publications. It is often missed that Bandler and Grinder's explicit project was to show that the abilities of charismatic practitioners, which many perceived to be magical, in fact had structure and could be learnt by others (Bandler & Grinder 1975b:6). Although much NLP literature is written for popular markets and seldom attempts theoretical discussion, the early publications^{xxi} (Bandler & Grinder 1975b); (Grinder & Bandler 1976); (Bandler & Grinder 1975a); (Grinder, DeLozier, & Bandler 1977) are quite formal and conceptual in their approach.^{xxii}

To employ Argyris' (1999) terms, Bandler and Grinder were mainly interested in theory in use. Their intent, we surmise, was to emphasise action and to avoid abstract intellectualising. Their claims to be uninterested in theory might therefore be deliberately disingenuous and provocative, as well as a critique of the notion that cognitive understanding is a necessary precursor to effective practice.

An additional difficulty is that although its founders originally identified NLP as broadly associated with the concerns and endeavours of psychology (Bandler & Grinder 1975b:1), NLP is not the obvious remit of any established discipline. Craft (2001:131) argues that principally NLP 'draws on the fundamental assumptions of the theoretical framework of social constructivism'. This is consistent with its classification as an Experiential Constructivist therapy, yet NLP appears to draw on all three groups of learning theory identified by Craft - learning as growth (the influence of human potential), and learning as 'association' (e.g. techniques such as 'anchoring', (Bandler & Grinder 1979)), as well as constructivism.

This eclecticism results in apparent internal inconsistencies in NLP's contents and practices. Hence our use of Tenniel's image of a gryphon, a beast that is (usually) part-lion, part-eagle, and part-horse, is probably appropriate in this respect. NLP shows explicit influences from behavioural psychology, cybernetics (Ashby 1965), cognitive psychology (Miller, Gallanter, & Pribram 1960), and the Palo Alto school of brief therapy (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson 1968). Bandler and Grinder (1975b) cite philosophical influences such as Vaihinger and Korzybski; Bostic St. Clair and Grinder (2001) cite Chomsky, Bateson, Erickson and Turing as intellectual antecedents to NLP. Walker (1996:111) argues that each of NLP's basic principles (presuppositions) is sourced in the work of one or more of Bateson, Korzybski, Erickson, Perls or Satir.

The nature of these influences is sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit. For example, a reluctance to intellectualise, and specific practices such as the notion of 'parts', and use of physical space and locations, are characteristic of Fritz Perls' Gestalt Therapy. This connection is acknowledged by Dilts and DeLozier (2000) and further developed by Walker (1996); Perls is a declared exemplar (Bandler & Grinder 1975b), and Dilts states^{xxiii} that Bandler began to study Perls' practice through editing transcripts for one of his books, i.e. (Perls 1973). Yet there is rarely explicit attribution of specific practices to Perls or his predecessors; Dilts and DeLozier (2000:1021) do acknowledge Moreno as the source of what Dilts terms 'psychogeography' in NLP, and Bolstad (2002) traces the notion of parts from Perls back to Assagioli, Moreno and others.

There is also the question of how effectively NLP links to contemporary developments in related academic disciplines. There are risks of 'cherry-picking' from fields of study without appreciating its complexities and controversies, as well simply being out of date. Thus Robbie (2000) notes that the meta-model has not been updated to reflect developments in Chomsky's thinking.

On the other hand, there is evidence of close attention to recent work in cognitive linguistics by Lakoff and Johnson (1999) from NLP authors such as Andreas (2006) and Derks (2005), as well as Lawley and Tompkins (2000) in the related field of Symbolic Modelling. Aspects of NLP's language models appear to be supported by recent work such as Fauconnier and Turner (2002)

and Chafe (1994). Recent work in the field of neuroscience on 'mirror neurons' also appears to provide an explanation for some elements of NLP (Mathison 2007).

Can NLP be said to have an underlying theoretical coherence? The idea that all knowledge systems need to have a unifying theoretical framework is challenged by, for example, Feyerabend's (1975) notion of 'epistemological anarchy', and is not borne out by history. For instance, Darwin's theory of Evolution drew on Sociology, population studies, questions from Natural Theology, the emerging science of Geology, the comparative anatomy and idea of homology first articulated by Goethe, and a series of underlying explanatory metaphors directly derived from a manufacturing industrial society with emerging capitalist values. The term 'theory' is also applied to anything from a single hypothesised explanation (my theory about X...) to grand explanatory schemes.

What is perhaps more common is to select a relatively established and recognised theoretical frame through which to enquire into particular issues. Does NLP attempt anything like this? Bostic St.Clair and Grinder (2001) argue that the essence of NLP probably lies in the (methodological) principles of modelling; Young (2004) claims to offer a unifying theory of NLP, though in our view he offers, at best, an alternative conceptual description of the field. To some extent NLP can be considered transdisciplinary, innovating by questioning disciplinary orthodoxy and working across theoretical boundaries.

Nevertheless, we argue that NLP can be regarded as belonging to a systemic family of theory, particularly as developed by Bateson. Bateson's work, as with systemic thinking generally, is cross-disciplinary, which may compound NLP's lack of fit with standard academic disciplinary boundaries. The nature of this position (which would need a separate article to explore) would seem to entail the following principles:

- human behaviour is structured cybernetically;
- knowing is fundamentally embodied and symbolic (Lakoff & Johnson 1999);
- perceptions are constructed (in the present), yet we cannot be aware consciously of, nor can we direct consciously, our processes of perception;
- there is a complex, recursive relationship between perception, experience, meaning and action, through which change emerges.

For most of its existence, theory in NLP has been represented by a set of 'presuppositions' (Dilts & DeLozier 2000:1000-4) . While expressed aphoristically and varying in their logical type, therefore appearing at times to be mere slogans, these lend support to the contention that NLP is fundamentally systemic. For example, 'there is no failure, only feedback' expresses a fundamental axiom of cybernetics.

In our view NLP can be regarded as an emergent knowledge system founded on coherent cybernetic principles. We own that this represents our construction of the theory of NLP, though it seems congruent with the contents of the field. NLP has not articulated or presented itself as theoretically robust, so has provided no theoretical rationale for its perceived inconsistencies.

5.4 Viability

According to the theory of aerodynamics, bumblebees cannot fly - yet they do. Similarly, NLP is dismissed as theoretically impossible or implausible. The disadvantage compared with bumblebees is that NLP has not demonstrated that it can fly. The cry, 'show me the evidence', has not yet been answered convincingly.

Among methods and instrument used in HRD, NLP is not alone in this respect (see for example (Coffield et al. 2004) on learning styles), so we should be wary of using double standards. Even so, it is relevant to ask what the evidence to date does say.

The literature in academic journals is minimal; in the field of HRD see (Georges 1996), (Ashok & Santhakumar 2002), (Thompson, Courtney, & Dickson 2002). There has been virtually no published investigation into how NLP is used in practice. The empirical research consists largely of laboratory-based studies from the 1980's and 1990's, which investigated two particular notions from within NLP, the 'eye movement' model (Bandler & Grinder 1979), and the notion of the 'primary representational system', according to which individuals have a preferred sensory mode of internal imagery indicated by their linguistic predicates (Grinder & Bandler 1976).

Heap (1988) and Sharpley (1987), in particular, have argued that on the basis of the extant studies, these particular claims of NLP cannot be accepted. Heap conducted a meta-analysis of these and appears entirely justified in criticising the unequivocal claims made in NLP literature. It is notable, however, that Heap's meta-analysis included many postgraduate dissertations. His bibliography refers only to sources of abstracts of those dissertation studies, not to the dissertations themselves. Thus his meta-analysis appears based on the *reported* outcomes of these studies, not on critical appraisal of their methodology or validity.

Beck and Beck (1984), Einspruch and Forman (1985), and Bostic St.Clair and Grinder (2001) have also argued that the types of study reviewed by Heap are characterised by problems affecting their reliability, including inaccurate understanding of NLP's claims and invalid procedures due to (for example) the inadequate training of interviewers, who therefore may not have been competent at the NLP techniques being tested. Heap himself offers only an 'interim verdict' and acknowledges Einspruch and Forman's view that 'the effectiveness of NLP therapy undertaken in authentic clinical contexts of trained practitioners has not yet been properly investigated' (Heap 1988:276).

Given these concerns, we suggest that the existing body of empirical research cannot support definitive conclusions about NLP. It seems clear that there is no substantive support for NLP in this body of empirical research, yet it also seems insufficient to dismiss NLP.

What of the specific nature of the original NLP studies? The form the data took, and the analysis procedures used, were for many years unexplained in any published source (it must be borne in mind that Bandler and Grinder never wrote for an academic audience, therefore it would seem unfair retrospectively to impose academic expectations on writing that was produced for a different purpose^{xxiv}). Satir (Bandler & Grinder 1975b:vii) refers to the authors studying hours of video and audio material; as noted above, Dilts and DeLozier (2000) and McLendon (1989:5-7) indicate that the data about Perls, who died in 1970, were from transcripts and manuscripts that Bandler edited.

Bostic St.Clair and Grinder (2001) now provide a retrospective account of how the meta-model emerged through both empirical work and the application of theory from transformational grammar (Grinder's field of expertise). This account describes repeated behavioural testing of the language patterns that formed the meta-model.

For NLP the problem remains that notions of evidence seldom satisfy the standards expected by academic reviewers, even if the weight of anecdotal reports of its efficacy suggest that something of value is being experienced. Fortunately the need for critical evaluation and research is increasingly acknowledged by NLP practitioners (Hancox & Bass 1995), (Hollander 1999), (Miller 2005), and as noted above the field has initiated a major project to gather evidence of efficacy in relation to health. In our view, NLP's claims warrant systematic research, preferably through diverse methodological approaches. It is especially notable, and unfortunate, that there is an almost total silence from users.

5.5 Habits

This creature's habits have acquired a poor reputation, as acknowledged by Bandler and Grinder (1979:7). Many people have heard that NLP can be manipulative, or have had an experience that they describe as such.

Of particular relevance to HRD are concerns about the instrumental use of NLP - meeting the practitioner's needs rather than those of the client – and the fact that minimal training is perceived by participants as constituting a licence to practise. For example, a standard practitioner training of some twelve days may be the sum total undertaken before a person offers themselves as an NLP-trained coach.

The ethics of any HRD practice merit extended discussion in relation to relevant theory, for which we do not have space here, so we set out some initial thoughts on these issues rather than attempting to examine them in detail.

Fundamentally, it seems to us that NLP exists to support human flourishing. We find grains of truth in many of NLP's claims as well as the criticisms. Yet in our experience there are outstanding exemplars of ethical practice in the field of NLP and we would challenge the suggestion, as made in (Megginson & Clutterbuck 2005), that NLP is inherently more amenable to unprofessional use than other modes of working.

One irony is that someone who uses NLP instrumentally for gain at another person's expense is violating the very presuppositions on which NLP is based, as well as its published codes of conduct^{xxv}. In other words, epistemologically NLP espouses a relational view of the world, such that person A's actions towards person B necessarily have consequences for their relationship (e.g. for the degree of trust). This also recapitulates Bateson's concerns about turning epistemology into technique, and raises questions about how thoroughly NLP training courses address the relationship between those presuppositions and the ethics of practice.

A related question is of the status of a practitioner certificate. Although in theory dependent on competence, clients would probably be unwise to rely on NLP certificates as attesting to more than attendance at a course. Also, with the exception of specific psychotherapy trainings, most NLP courses are designed for a wide audience that may include aspiring coaches alongside people from other fields whose main desire is often to explore how NLP can enhance their work. Thus a standard NLP practitioner training caters for a variety of learners and is not designed as a dedicated training for coaches.

This might lead to the view that greater regulation is needed. However, this too is a complex matter that is taxing the field of coaching generally. Among other things it is politically contentious (Postle 2007), and in tension with the democratic, self-help ideals sometimes espoused within NLP (Bandler & Andreas 1985).

A particular issue is that NLP explicitly acknowledges the inevitability that everyday communication has both conscious and unconscious aspects. It is impossible for all communication to be overt and conscious, just as in order to make sense of the phrase 'don't think of pink elephants', one cannot not think of pink elephants, as is recognised by Bateson (Bateson 2000a:137) and by the Palo Alto school among others. Consideration of the NLP 'Milton Model' (Dilts & DeLozier 2000:776), comprising hypnotic language patterns used by Milton Erickson MD, shows that everyday language use will incorporate such 'covert' patterns, regardless of whether the speaker has any knowledge of NLP. Readers who are convinced that they do not influence others through their language are invited to compare their own utterances with the 'clean language' (Lawley & Tompkins 2000), a model of questions designed to stay as close as possible to a person's own phenomenology.

Some criticisms^{xxvi} of NLP appear based on the view that all communication can, and should, be explicit and overt, such that a client is always able to exercise conscious choice over the process. Any practice that does not do this is regarded as inherently unethical, and therefore NLP is seen as manipulative because it entails the possibility of covert communication. We therefore feel that this

position is epistemologically naïve, and untenable. Indeed it seems potentially dangerous because it denies that covert communication is present in all forms of helping. NLP has the advantage that it makes these language patterns explicit to clients and consumers, who can therefore be informed and forearmed - the ethical issue is of how the practitioner makes use of that knowledge.

The need for ethics to be in the foreground of NLP's development is paramount - no less, but no more, important to investigate than for any other HRD methodology.

6 Review and conclusion

We have asked, 'what are the main critical issues concerning NLP that are likely to be important and interesting to practitioners and researchers in HRD?'. In summary, NLP appears to be a creature that is widespread in HRD, but little researched. Accounts of NLP may offer fable more than fact or critical analysis. We have suggested that NLP can be thought of as a practical epistemology, which may be theorised through Bateson's work. Our 'natural history' has considered its origins, features and genus, has examined the evidence for its viability, and has identified criticisms of its habits. These issues indicate possible lines of HRD research that could include theorising, contextualising, evidencing and evaluating the practice.

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ⁱ Sir John Tenniel's illustration of the gryphon from 'Alice in Wonderland', en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griffin, accessed 11.4.2007.

ⁱⁱ www.NLPresearch.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Details at www.NLPresearch.org

^{iv} This text is from the book jacket.

^v UK Council for Psychotherapy: http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/experiential_constructivist.html, accessed 11.4.2007.

^{vi} Personal communication with the Association for NLP.

^{vii} <http://www.cipd.co.uk/CMSTraining/Homepage.htm?duplink=1> accessed 25.4.2007

^{viii} <http://www.anlp.org/casestudies.asp?CatName=Links%20and%20Resources&CatID=20&PageID=123>, accessed 11.4.2007.

^{ix} <http://www.anlp.org/>, accessed 22.3.2007. Of these, 218 specify 'business coaching'.

^x <http://www.nlpiash.org/> accessed 11.4.2007.

^{xi} Our critical friend points out that NLP has undeniably been a commercial success, which could be a source of envy from academics working in related fields.

^{xii} 'The collection consists of correspondence, manuscripts, notebooks, octopus and cetacean observation records, published and unpublished articles, tape recordings and films dating from the late 1940s to 1980.' <http://bob.ucsc.edu/library/infonotes/Spec.html>, accessed 11.4.2007.

^{xiii} Acknowledged by NLP author Michael Hall, see http://www.neurosemantics.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=463&Itemid=199, accessed 12.1.2007.

^{xiv} See <http://www.gestalt.org/fritz.htm>, accessed 11.4.2007;
<http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/satir2.html>, accessed 11.4.2007.

^{xv} The term 'competence' was still being used in the mid-1980's, for example by (Cameron-Bandler, Gordon, & Lebeau 1985).

^{xvi} For example, <http://www.john-seymour-associates.co.uk/whatisnlp.htm>, accessed 11.4.2007;
<http://www.nlpexcellence.com/> accessed 24.4.2007.

^{xvii} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuro-linguistic_programming, accessed 25.4.2007

^{xviii} Women in the NLP community are certainly aware of this issue, and we are grateful to Judith Lowe of PPD Learning for her views on this subject.

^{xix} The term does not appear in the title of any article, nor is the topic addressed substantively in any contribution.

^{xx} 'Modeling', e.g. (Dilts 1998), is the core methodology of NLP, the process through which exemplars' effective practices can be learnt by others.

^{xxi} We believe the term NLP first appeared in a published work in 1979 (Bandler & Grinder 1979).

^{xxii} In a letter dated 10th January 1974, Bateson describes 'The Structure of Magic' – at that time not yet published - as 'a rather dry and formal linguistic analysis' (source: Gregory Bateson archive, University of Santa Cruz).

^{xxiii} <http://www.nlp.com/bandbio.htm>, accessed 11.4.2007.

^{xxiv} The authors did include more data in their studies of Erickson (Bandler & Grinder 1975a); (Grinder, DeLozier, & Bandler 1977).

^{xxv} For example the ANLP general code of ethics (<http://www.anlp.org/>, accessed 11.4.2007); the NLPtCA code of ethics for psychotherapists (<http://www.nlptca.com/ethics.php>, accessed 11.4.2007).

^{xxvi} Personal communication.