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A Critical Examination
of the Place of "Belief" in NLP

Introduction

It seems to me that the lynch-pin of NLP is the area of belief. In the system of logical levels, Belief occupies a mid-way position between Capability, Behaviour and Environment, on the one hand (which, in one way or another, *express* belief), and Identity and Spirituality, on the other (which *inform* belief). My intention in this article is to explore what various NLP exponents understand by belief, and to consider their definitions alongside those of writers outside the world of NLP. I shall then examine the place of belief in the logical levels, before turning to consider whether the beliefs we hold are as susceptible to manipulation as NLP suggests. Before drawing my conclusions, I intend to look at the implications—if the NLP analysis is correct—for deeply-held beliefs, such as religious beliefs.

What NLP exponents understand by belief

In my reading of NLP literature I have not come across what I consider to be an adequate definition of belief or a serious discussion of the nature of belief. In some ways this is understandable because NLP is not a philosophy, nor does it claim to be a theory, but a practical skill to enable its practitioners to achieve excellence in any field. However, there are, quite clearly, a considerable number of theoretical perspectives which support NLP practice, and which do, in fact, provide what is akin to a philosophy or at least a theoretical underpinning for this innovative and exciting approach to self-development. If I am correct in maintaining that belief is the lynch-pin of NLP then it may be that more work needs to be done in defining belief in NLP terms.

It is perhaps surprising that Dilts (1990) in his fascinating book, *Changing Belief Systems with NLP*, does not spend more time on the nature of belief. He in fact devotes a whole chapter to it but, in true

NLP style, is mainly anecdotal in his attempt to say what belief is. His real interest and concern, as with most other NLP writers, is with the *function* of belief rather than its *nature*. He is really far more concerned with the *power* of belief to both *em*power and *disem*power. However, he does say that "beliefs are about things that nobody can know in reality" (p.9), that they "have to do with the future" (p.14), and that "a belief is a generalization about a relationship between experiences" (p.20). This idea of belief as "generalization" is developed by Dilts in three ways in the following contexts: causal relations, meaning relationships, limits. But, in his expansion on each of these three areas, he focuses far more on function than he does on nature.

In *Using Your Brain for a Change* (1985), Bandler notes that "the word "belief" is a somewhat vague concept to most people" (p.104). It must be said that, in terms of what belief is, Bandler, like Dilts, does not enlighten us that much either so that, for his readers, the concept continues to be vague! He does say that "beliefs are really phenomenal things" (p.103) but he can't mean that literally. Again, the focus has presumably shifted to function because what Bandler really goes on to explore is the way in which beliefs inspire behaviours of various kinds. It is presumably these which are "phenomenal", in that the things people do can presumably be traced back to *why* they do them, and the "Why?", as Dilts (1990) points out, is the question of "beliefs".