Beliefs, Values and the Vacuum of Choice

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Abstract: In this article a definition of the concept of ‘beliefs,’ ‘values’ and ‘attitudes’ is first presented, their formation and manifestation are then described, and the relationships between them are delineated. This is followed by a discussion of their crucial role in a therapeutic context, and an investigation of mechanisms for fundamental therapeutic change using Neuro-linguistic programming methodologies, concentrating on ‘submodality change’ and ‘reframing,’ together with a presentation of illustrative examples. This article concludes that one main task of the therapist is to instigate an appropriate relationship with the client, to respect and respond to their needs, and to help effect congruent and lasting positive outcomes in order to allow them to expand to fill the wonderful ‘vacuum of choice’ arising from being in control of one’s own beliefs, values and attitudes.

Keywords: Beliefs, values, attitudes, Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), meta-filters, submodalities, reframing, parasympathetic activation, client-centered therapy, individuation, choice.
Let us start by posing one of several questions of relevance to Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) and therapeutic change, which I intend to answer through the course of this article; a full discussion of many other aspects of language, communication and change are explored elsewhere (see Jemmer, 2004a – b, 2005a – k). The first question is this: what are beliefs? If facts are subjective representations about what actually happened in the past, beliefs are conjectural generalisations about what will happen in the future. They are intangible and unconscious and yet, as McAdams (1993) explains, they still drive our behaviour. Linguistically, beliefs are often prefaced by the ‘modal’ phrases ‘I can... I can’t... I should... I mustn’t... I ought.’ O’Connor and McDermott (2001) sum things up as follows: “When people tell you they believe something, they are either telling you of a value they hold dear or their best guess in the absence of knowledge. Beliefs answer the question ‘Why?’ “. Beliefs are formed from birth and represent one facet of the ‘Programming’ aspect of NLP. Many beliefs are inherited from our parents through our upbringing, and others are formed haphazardly throughout life, especially through sudden unexpected conflict, trauma or confusion. Many beliefs become anchored simply through repetition! Beliefs may be empowering or limiting. However, as we have seen, we can change states and we can change the submodalities of our representational systems. By doing both of these together we can actually replace old, outdated, limiting beliefs with new, empowering ones, as long as this is done in a congruent and ecological way.

Jemmer (2004a) discusses in detail the perceptual filtering process by which we screen the sensory data bombarding us, and in the process create our own personal ‘map of the World.’ O’Connor (2001), gives an excellent summary of the relationships between the world of ‘real experience’ (perceived through sensory filters) and the way in which this is incorporated into the personal map by the application of mental constructs based on our conditioning by, for example, societal, cultural, religious and parental influences.

The process operates in the following way:

‘Pure experience has no meaning. It just is. We give it meaning according to our beliefs, values, preconceptions, likes and dislikes. The meaning of an experience is dependent on the context. Reframing is changing the way you perceive an event and so changing the meaning. When the meaning changes, responses and behaviour will also change.’

In fact, the ‘Meta filters’ mentioned above are nothing but our beliefs, values, attitudes, and so on. Values usually involve ‘nominalization:’ that is, they express processes (such as ‘loving’) as entities (like ‘love’). Values are often acquired by the unconscious modelling of others in our environment, particularly prior to the age of about eight years. We can think of our largely out-of-consciousness values as attractors or repellors of our behaviour; they are fundamental ideas or things which motivate our existence. Values provide the prime motivation for action by generating a ‘kinaesthetic push’; after action, values enable us to judge whether that action was right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. We tend to arrange values hierarchically: when evaluating behaviour, we scrutinize the most important values first. When an individual’s internal values are in conflict, they may display either sequential incongruence (such as by saying ‘I need to speak to her, but ...’) or simultaneous incongruence (such as by nodding the head ‘yes’ whilst saying ‘no’). Beliefs describe generalizations about our actions or needs, and are more conscious that values. Beliefs describe our internal representations: that is, how our internal maps are organized. Core beliefs and values are the most unconscious and pervasive, and determine our personality and sense of identity. Beliefs and values both result from, and justify, our consistent actions. If we notice ourselves acting in a certain way, we tend to justify this by saying that the action must represent a belief. Even though this new belief may conflict with an old one, we subconsciously adopt the new belief in order to remain self-consistent. Attitudes are the most conscious filters, and are
clustered around a value and its attendant beliefs; they can be characterised as the total description of a particular subject within our internal map.

So, to another question: is it possible to change beliefs, values and attitudes? And if so, how do we go about this? In NLP terms the answer is an emphatic 'yes,' and brings us to a discussion about the process of 're-framing.' Every person experiences suffering in their lives, whether it be rejection from someone they find attractive, an embarrassing failure at work, or simply the fact that everyone else seems to have more (money, happiness, sex, etc.) than them. People seem easily to form the strong belief that life is a 'vale of tears' and that we must simply accept suffering as our lot on this mortal coil. Moreover, suffering is something we usually don't like to think about. The question in the NLP context is this: if we had a choice would we selectively delete those moments of pain? What would life be like then?

Every individual seems to deal with the suffering that they are bound to feel at some point in his or her own unique way. Some people become very upset and then move on as if it had never happened. Others withdraw, become more cautious or even paralysed by the events. And others seem to thrive on what we would call suffering, seeing each pain as a challenge or someone to fight. A further question asked by NLP relates to how did we each evolve our way of handling emotional pain? How are these built into our maps through beliefs and values? Most of us have a preferred way of coping with pain: one that evolved in an ad-hoc manner in response to experiential learning situations. NLP has modelled individuals who have learned to cope with life's emotional turmoil particularly well, and sees reframing as an important technique used to change the labels on the suffering.

Generally, we tend to put our memories into the broad categories of pain or pleasure. We can diffuse a lot of our past pain by honestly looking at our categories and asking whether they might be relabelled. For example, let us say you are working with a computer and it crashes, destroying your day's work. How do you label the pain? Do you give it a destructive belief label like 'I'm no good with computers'? Or do you give it a constructive one like 'Wow, I'm a good student; I'll learn from that experience and save my work more often in future'? Thus pain experienced in the past can be reframed as a valuable lesson for personal growth, destructive beliefs being exchanged for constructive ones.

In terms of theory, Hall and Bodenhamer (1997) in fact identified seven directions that one can send one's brain off in, providing seven dimensions for reframing- for example: deframing: pulling a piece of meaning apart; reframing: reclassifying some action or idea; pre-framing: setting up a frame ahead of time that establishes a perspective; post-framing: setting up a new time perspective from a future vantage point so that as a person looks back upon an action, it takes on new and different meanings; counter-framing: providing counter examples; outframing: stepping aside from a piece of meaning and setting a new and higher frame about the idea; metaphorical framing: using story, metaphors, and non-propositional language to frame things using an analogous situation. Every frame controls what we pay attention to and how we order our attention. Every frame also controls how we feel, talk, and respond. It is useful to consider some concrete examples to illustrate the theory. These illustrations are taken from Reg Connolly (2005).

1. You're stuck in a traffic jam and are going to be late for an appointment. Instead of fuming and fretting in the belief that everything is conspiring against you to raise your blood pressure and give you a stroke or heart attack, how can you use the situation? Relax and listen to the radio. Plan how you will catch up on things over the course of the day. Mentally rehearse for a forthcoming event. Enjoy the enforced idleness by studying the mannerisms of other drivers, really looking at your surroundings, or watching the clouds in the sky. Realise that in fact you are in control of certain physical functions and can learn to relax, to lower you heart rate and blood pressure.

2. You were planning to go on holiday with your best friend but she lets you down
and chooses not to go after all. For some people it might be all too easy to believe that you are basically unlovely, unpleasant, or unworthy. On the other hand, you could turn the situation around by inviting a different friend, and getting to know him better. Even better, you could experience a totally new adventure by going solo. In this case, you’d also give yourself a golden opportunity to grow in your own relationship with your inner self.

3. A long-planned seaside outing is ruined by rain. Obviously God, and the Elements, hate you personally, and life is awful. However, you could welcome the opportunity to embrace the regenerating, refreshing wind and rain in a beautiful elemental landscape; you could curl up at home with a lovely warm drink, good food, a book you had been meaning to read, and relax fully; you could get on with some study, cleaning, or repairs; you could pick up the phone and make time to speak at length to some old and valued friends.

4. You split up from an intimate relationship. On the one hand you could vent emotion and feel hate, anger and blame towards the ex-partner. You might look inwards and feel isolated and sorry for yourself. But what about this: you have had other relationships in the past and will have more in the future. You have survived and are strong. You know that you can use the intervening time for yourself: living life for yourself, growing, developing. You have a great opportunity to look after yourself and pamper yourself a little by exercising, indulging your interests and hobbies, or extending your career prospects.

The discussion and examples above show the kind of self-talk involved in reframing in terms of values, beliefs and attitudes. Let’s now investigate how to reframe on a level more fundamental than the linguistic. To do this we start by defining the concept of ‘submodalities,’ which are the ‘fine details’ of a particular ‘modality.’ For example, ‘visual’ submodalities are qualities like location, size or distance. They tend to come in contrasting pairs. For example, an image may be associated or dissociated; monochrome or colour; framed or unbounded; fast or slow; focused or blurred. We might ask: ‘Why bother with all this detail?’ A good answer is given by Sherwood (2004) who states: “Submodalities are used in a large number of techniques in NLP - by changing the submodalities of a memory or thought, we can change the effect they have on us. For example, for most people, increasing the brightness and size of a memory will increase the feelings associated with that memory – good or bad!” O’Connor and Dermott (2001) explain the use of submodalities like this: “When we change the structure of the experience by changing the submodalities, then the meaning will also change. When the meaning changes, our internal response will also change.” As we will see below when we discuss beliefs and values, “We can use the methodologies of NLP to apply the submodalities of a true belief to one that we want to believe truly,” as Peta Heskell (2004) tells us. This means that we can actually change what we believe or feel to be important! Bandler and Grinder (1975, 1976), and Battino and South (1999) demonstrate that we can even change bad memories and take away their negative power. Let us say that someone has a behaviour that they feel is objectionable, and which they therefore wish to change.

The first thing one should understand about reframing is the necessity of identifying the ‘positive intention’ of the behaviour which it is desired to change. The task is then to discover how the good intention can be satisfied by other behaviours: how the objectionable behaviour can be replaced by a behaviour lacking the unwanted side-effects. This, in summary, is the nature of reframing. As a concrete example, imagine that a client is worried about their health because they are a chronic smoker. They are worried about their long term health prognosis but believe they cannot give up the habit as they are physically addicted to the nicotine and also psychologically addicted to the calming effects of holding and smoking a cigarette in stressful social situations. One reframe for this client might be to give evidence that the nicotine addiction can be overcome with medical help, and that in fact the smoking has a more stressing than calming effect in a social setting.
Let us now turn our attention to how a therapist gains knowledge of whether a particular reframing strategy has succeeded with a particular client. Of course there are all the usual NLP techniques of monitoring physiology and so on, the overall process of which was summarized by Bandler and Grinder (1982, pp 22-23) in the following statements:

‘There are two parts to the autonomic nervous system: the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. The two tend to balance each other through opposite effects...

‘Sympathetic activation results in increased muscle tension and a readiness to respond physically to some threat. There is more adrenalin, and the skin whitens as the blood vessels and pupils constrict. Parasympathetic activation results in muscle relaxation, flushing of the skin, dilation of the blood vessels, dilation of the pupils, etc. . . . What we have been describing is that people tend to have sympathetic activation when presenting a complaint and considering the reframe. Then they shift to parasympathetic activation when the reframe works, which is what you would expect to occur. If the reframing works, what was perceived as a problem to cope with becomes not a problem at all.’

In summary, in addition to the relabelling process there is a range of other NLP techniques that one can use to ‘reprogram’ the past: this then allows us to design a better future, since our past can determine our future unless we are careful. The concept of reframing is based on the understanding that beliefs and values are not, for any individual, fixed for all time; this frees the individual by allowing a wider range of options that are really choices rather than predetermined, preprogrammed response patterns. In terms of therapeutic approaches, we often restrict ourselves to modifying strategies, states or physiology. However, we find that if changes are not congruent with the client’s values, then these changes regress over time. If we also change values, beliefs and attitudes, then a more permanent change of behaviour is likely to result. In fact, unlike many other learning systems, NLP does not provide a rigid recipe of steps that will only work under rigorously prescribed conditions. Instead it provides a sort of ‘Swiss army knife’ of tools that help keep us on course, positive, successful and happy. We might summarise the application of all these ideas in Dale Carnegie’s phrase: ‘If life gives you lemons: why not choose to make lemonade’?

Of course the fact that we have a choice of beliefs, values and attitudes, and therefore a choice of actions, leaves us with what Yanki Tauber (2005) calls the ‘vacuum of choice.’ Since we can choose, we must choose some course of action or we will never grow and expand to fill the ‘vacuum’ of personal development implicit in the Jungian individuation process. Empowerment to choose congruently and appropriately might be seen as a fundamental goal of therapy. However there exists a paradox. Such empowerment is complex. On the one hand a ‘helper’ might tend to fill the ‘helpee’ full of advice, provide a plethora of resources, and be constantly supportive and available: after all, the helper wants the helpee to succeed - isn’t that the whole point? But, the flipside of this arrangement is that the helper must allow the helpee to ‘take responsibility’, to ‘be themselves,’ to undergo ‘personal development’ - isn’t that the whole point? You can see the conflict: as Tauber (2005) says, “there are many subtle judgements to be made. How much to give and how much to hold back. When to be involved and when to cut loose. To grant independence, but not to abandon. To empower, but not to overwhelm.” The task of the therapist is to instigate an appropriate relationship with the client, to respect and respond to their needs, to help effect congruent and lasting positive outcomes, and allow them to expand to fill that ‘vacuum of choice.’

I hope that this article has gone some way to illuminating how NLP can be used highly efficiently, effectively and almost ‘magically’ to accomplish these ends.
References


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