

Erickson's work has given rise to an array of other approaches, such as solution-focused work, Rossi's mind-body work, neuro-linguistic programming and, of course, Zeig's own work, and for that reason alone, some knowledge of what Erickson himself actually said is extremely important. This book can be read in about three hours and should excite those of us who are also interested in existential approaches. Interestingly, while it is one of the core principles, namely utilization of the client's individuality, that fits relatively easily into existential therapy, its partial location within the patient's unconscious makes such accommodation with Erickson difficult. Yet, despite that, there is a real sense of authenticity in the world-view of Erickson, and the fact that he refused to codify the individual into the artificial grammar of illness and diagnosis is something to be welcomed.

Dr R.G. Hill

Brief NLP Therapy

Ian McDermott and Wendy Jago. (2001). London: Sage. Paperback. £18.99.

If hypnosis instils a sense of curiosity, then NLP tends to elicit a degree of concern. I would argue that this is less to do with its actual substance, than the constructions, both literary and organisationally, that support it. Neuro-linguistic programming, to give it its full and rather pretentious title, can often appear cult-like, yet began as an eminently sensible and reasonable approach to the question of what made a good therapist. Focusing on excellence in communication, three therapists were identified as being worthy of therapeutic autopsy. These were Perls, Erickson and Satir. While Erickson is probably the most well known of the three, he was, as the above review has pointed out, neither a theory builder, nor technique builder. The other two therapists were also extremely individualistic despite, particularly in the case of Perls, a semblance of theory. Interestingly, it is only Erickson who merits a reference under the further reading section of this book, which I find rather predictable and is indicative of where I think NLP has gone wrong:

Milton Erickson, Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir each had significant presuppositions, which their approaches to their clients, their view of their own role and that of the client in creating change, and of the very relationship of 'problems' and 'solutions' to the human condition. Characteristically, NLP first identified or extrapolated and then formulated these presuppositions.'

(McDermott & Jago, 2002, p 31-32).

Here, the use of the word ‘characteristically’ strikes me as eminently misleading. NLP cannot come into existence on the basis of an analysis of such presuppositions and also lay claim to this being a characteristic approach.

I note this because I believe that at the heart of the problem with NLP is its attempt to codify itself, to claim both coherence and to define itself on the basis of certain ‘characteristics.’ This is of course not unique to NLP; many therapies strive for this, but in the context of clinical work with clients, as opposed to its business use, seeming coherence matters rather less than whether elements of an approach can be used to good effect. Thus, most clinicians are willing to forgo coherence of theory in favour of an intervention or technique that works. After all we know that it is therapist qualities that are more important in determining outcome than the actual theoretical approach, provided that the minimum level of theory intervention is benign i.e. a placebo. The strength of NLP appears to me to lie in its original goal, yet frequently there appears to be undue concern placed upon technique. Indeed, much of what is identified as NLP is used in other therapies and may well have originated in NLP, but one gets the feeling that stripping a technique from the NLP frame, would be considered inappropriate.

McDermot and Jago have on the whole though written a thoughtful book, which does contain many useful interventions that can be utilised with clients. Moreover, there is a refreshing degree of scepticism around some of NLP’s ideas: ‘Another important range of information which NLP has given us concerns eye-accessing cues, and some common patterns have been noted in the Eye Accessing Cues Schematic. As with any schematic representation it is a simplification.’ (McDermott & Jago, 2002, p.95). They present a good array of case material and the early chapters on ‘Change’ and ‘Presuppositions’ are excellent. I was less convinced by the two chapters on ‘NLP benefits to the client’ and ‘NLP benefits to the therapist’ particularly as the authors seemed to have switched from analysis to advertising. In their defence the authors are writing as NLP practitioners and do, I think, communicate their sense of both wonder and excitement at what they do with their clients, as opposed to ‘to’ them.

As an overview of the field I think this is definitely worth reading and is far more digestible than Bandler and Grinder’s own works. Yet sadly while NLP has developed, it still remains a black hole for most clinicians, particularly clinical psychologists. I understand entirely the reasons behind this ring fencing of therapies, yet if NLP returned to its basic premise of what is excellence in communication, it would speak directly to therapists in the NHS. The result could be the possibility of enhanced therapeutic outcomes.

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