

A First Step Towards Understanding the Effect (and Perhaps Potential) of Neuro-Linguistic Programming on Salespeople's Interpersonal Skills

ABSTRACT

This explorative study examines buyer-seller relationships from the perspective of salespeople's interpersonal skills. Reflections from an in-depth case study, supported by a literature review, on how Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) affects salespeople's interpersonal skills are presented. A key finding is that NLP is perceived as a driver in creating long term buyer-seller relationships. It was found that NLP provide knowledge that has a positive effect on a salesperson's mental ability, behavioural response, mutual feelings sensitivity, and thereby the interaction outcome achievability. It is noted that the findings from this case study are *perceived effects* of NLP training, but as such they a) provide valuable in-depth insight into *how* NLP knowledge influences a person's interpersonal skills, b) give food for thought about the potential of NLP for industrial buyer-seller relationships.

Key words: interpersonal skills, neuro-linguistic programming, NLP, B2B salespeople, buyer-seller relationship

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INTRODUCTION

From a marketing relationship or network perspective, existing normative marketing theory suggests that firms facing turbulent environments (e.g. like the current uncertain economic times) should “extend” the firm by developing soft-assembled strategies (Clark, 1999). These strategies include expanding a company's network and *relationship competences*. From a micro perspective such competences or skills are embodied in each individual person in an organisation (Wilkinson and Young, 2005). A soft-assembled strategy involves extending the “organisational mind”, which is the aggregated collective sensing, thinking and responding system of all the people in an organisation. In other words, soft-assembled strategies highlight the value of improving the *relationship/interpersonal skills* of the people in organisations facing turbulent environments.

From another theoretical perspective, researchers within the field of B2B selling have over the years concluded that interpersonal skills are essential in the sales process and that these skills are positively linked to sales performance (Anselmi and Zemanek, 1997; Churchill et al., 1985; Homeburg and Jensen, 2007; Basir et al., 2010). Further, a recent empirical study by Marck, Ennis and Crawford (2010) investigated how the economic downturn has affected the role of the B2B salespeople. In their research they stated that “it was quite evident that nurturing and developing the relationship was the primary role of the salesperson and to keep the link strong during the downturn” (Marck et al., 2010, p. 5). Again, this highlights the value of improving the *relationship/interpersonal skills* of the salespeople in organisations facing turbulent environments.

Despite researchers from both marketing and selling proclaiming that interpersonal skills are essential for companies to survive turbulent environments or uncertain economic times very little academic attention has been given to the widely-used Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) approach in the development of these skills. This is a paradox, because NLP claims to hold the key to improving a person's relational and interpersonal skills (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000; Tosey and Mathison, 2003).

NLP originates from the field of psychotherapy (Dilts et al., 1980), and is today a recognised mode of psychotherapy as neurolinguistic psychotherapy (Wake, 2008). However, NLP is also applied in a range of other areas e.g. coaching, law, teaching, HRM, selling and management (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000). Even though it has been stated within sales literature that NLP training is especially valuable (Jakobsen, 2010; Johnson, 2010) there appears to be little research conducted (Thompson et al., 2002; Wood, 2006; Borg and Freytag, 2010).

The aim of this paper is to begin to address this gap in the literature by undertaking A) a systematic investigation of the NLP phenomenon, B) an exploratory study on the effects of NLP training on B2B salespeople's interpersonal skills to gain some empirical insight on how NLP knowledge influences a salespersons interpersonal skills, and C) to use these findings to evaluate its potential in buyer-seller relationships.

The concept ‘interpersonal skills’ is conceptualized in many different ways (Rentz et al., 2002). In this study we will adopt the interpersonal skills conceptualization and the IPS-EQ model originating from the work of Borg and Johnston (2011). To investigate these issues an in-depth case study (supported with a literature review) has been undertaken using the systematic combining approach suggested by Dubois and Gadde (2002).

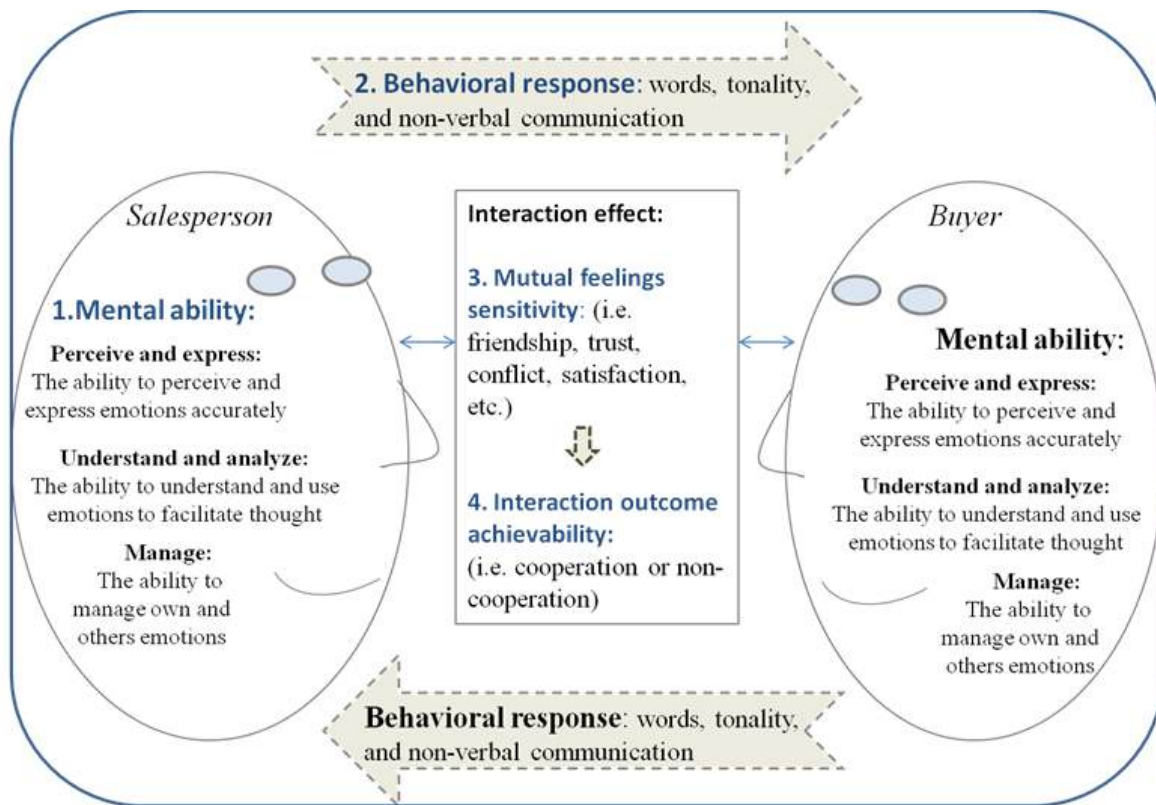
The article is organized as follows. First we will introduce the concept of interpersonal skills and the analytical framework, the IPS-EQ model. Second, the NLP phenomenon is explored and a literature review is conducted. Third, we will elaborate on applicability of NLP in an IMP context. Fourth, methodological issues are addressed. Fifth, the empirical findings are presented. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion about the implications of the findings.

THE INTERPERSONAL SKILLS CONCEPT AND THE IPS-EQ MODEL

According to Leigh, Pulling, and Corner (2001), the number one ranked sales article of the twentieth century was written by Churchill, Ford, Hartley, and Walker. In their meta-analysis of identifying determinants of salespeople’s performance they concluded that *interpersonal skills* are part of a selling skills level, which constitutes the second most important determinant of the performance of a salesperson. In alignment with this seminal work of Churchill et al, the majority of the subsequent researchers investigating the nature of interpersonal skills in buyer-seller relationship likewise have concluded that interpersonal skills and salesperson performance correlate positively (Anselmi and Zemanek, 1997; Homeburg and Jensen, 2007; Basir et al., 2010).

However, although the majority of sales/marketing researchers conclude that interpersonal skills are essential for a salesperson’s success, there is little congruence in its conceptualizations (Borg and Johnston, 2011). In their recent work, Borg and Johnston offer a unifying conceptualization of interpersonal skills via their IPS-EQ model (2011). This model (which constitutes the theoretical foundation for our understating of interpersonal skills) attempts to conceptualize interpersonal skills in a B2B sales process. The model draws on a range of theories including: the *mental ability models approach* in understanding emotional intelligence, the work originating from Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (1997, 1999, 2000), and theories of the relationship between emotions and behavior (Ben Ze’ev, 2000; Lang et al., 1998). The idea behind the communication theory by Mehrabian (1971) is partly adopted. Essentials from the exchanges in industrial marketing and purchasing interactions framework, presented by Bonoma and Johnston (1978), have been included, as well as elements from the selling process in an interpersonal sense framework provided by Bagozzi (1991).

Figure 1: The IPS-EQ Model



Source: adopted from Borg and Johnston (2011)

The IPS-EQ model as depicted in Figure 1, suggests that interpersonal skills is a function of a person's "mental ability", "behavioural response", "mutual feelings sensitivity" and "interaction outcome achievability". The model is dyadic as it includes both parties' perceptions as well as the buyer-seller interaction effect. However, in the following the model will, in line with the purpose of the paper, be explained from the perspective of the salesperson.

Figure 1 indicates characteristics of the salesperson that are central to the interpersonal process. These include a salesperson's "**1. Mental ability**" which is concerned with the ability to perceive and express emotions accurately. This includes the ability to read other people's feelings and to discriminate between honest versus dishonest expressions of feelings. Also included is the capability to understand and analyse emotions and use this assessment. For example, it involves the ability to "mirror the emotions of another person" and thereby take another person's perspective. Finally, this involves the ability to manage emotions in one-self as well as in others. An example would be to know how to calm down after feeling angry or being able to alleviate the anxiety of another person.

A person's "**2. Behavioural response**" is concerned with ways of linking with another. This involves the "communication output" that a person is sending to a receiver; including verbal response, non-verbal response, and tonality of voice. For example, a person with high interpersonal skills would be characterized as "a good listener" and "a good communicator".

The "**3. Mutual feelings sensitivity**" is concerned with the nature of an interaction and includes people's ability to sense the atmosphere of an interaction. By this we mean the

ability of a person to assess if there is a good atmosphere when interacting with one or more people. For example, is there a sense of trust, or friendship between oneself and other participants in the relationship? A person with high mutual feelings sensitivity also has the ability to influence or alter the atmosphere; this might be done via humour or using another strategy that works upon mutual feelings. As the figure indicates, this occurs while the interaction is occurring and requires the capacity to react within that evolving set of circumstances.

A salesperson's "**4. Interaction outcome achievability**" is concerned with the ability to get the outcome that is desired from the interpersonal interaction. This outcome might concern actions of a counterpart, for example being able to gain new information that is needed or getting the other party to do a specific task or to behave in a certain way. And this may involve behaving in ways that are in conjunction with the actions of the other party to achieve desired outcomes.

The interpersonal skills elements explained above are carried out on a conscious level, but these skills are also unconsciously used. For example, a person might not always be aware that he or she is applying his or her mental ability skills as they work to alleviate the anger or frustration of another person. It is suggested that as all people have a certain level of interpersonal skill they, consciously or subconsciously, employ these four elements in human interaction on at least a minimal level.

Further, articulation of the process of interpersonal interaction and the skills contained within the IPS-EQ model highlight the possibility of developing interpersonal skills. This is discussed further in the following sections.

THE NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING PHENOMENON

Einspruch and Forman (1985) have criticized NLP researchers for lacking extensive knowledge about NLP when exploring the phenomenon. To address this critique, an elaboration of this multifaceted phenomenon is undertaken. It is to the best of our knowledge the most comprehensive elaboration of NLP presented thus far within the field of marketing.

NLP started in the 1970s when Richard Bandler and John Grinder, considered the founders of NLP, together with Leslie Cameron-Bandler, Steve Gilligan, Judith DeLozier, Robert Dilts and David Gordon laid down the groundwork for the foundation of NLP at the University of California (McLendon, 1989).

The label 'NLP' reflects the principle 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 et al., 1980). Despite many attempts, no clear, unified, definition of NLP exists. This is likely because those who founded NLP, and those who later were involved in the development of it, have taken NLP in many different directions (O'Conner, 2001) and thus divergent conceptualizations with resulting different definitions exist. Multiple conceptualizations and unclear positioning have left the status of NLP unclear. The extremes of this are represented, for example by Edwards (1995, p.18) who indicates "it's beginning was in the twilight world of psychology, motivation, hypnosis and therapy". Connell (1984, p. 44) claims that "Grinder and Bandler used their expertise in linguistics, psychology and cybernetics to describe the strategies used

by master communicators”. In contrast Wood (2006, p. 197) characterizes NLP as “an approach to human communication that combines cognitive theory, split-brain processing and sensory perception”.

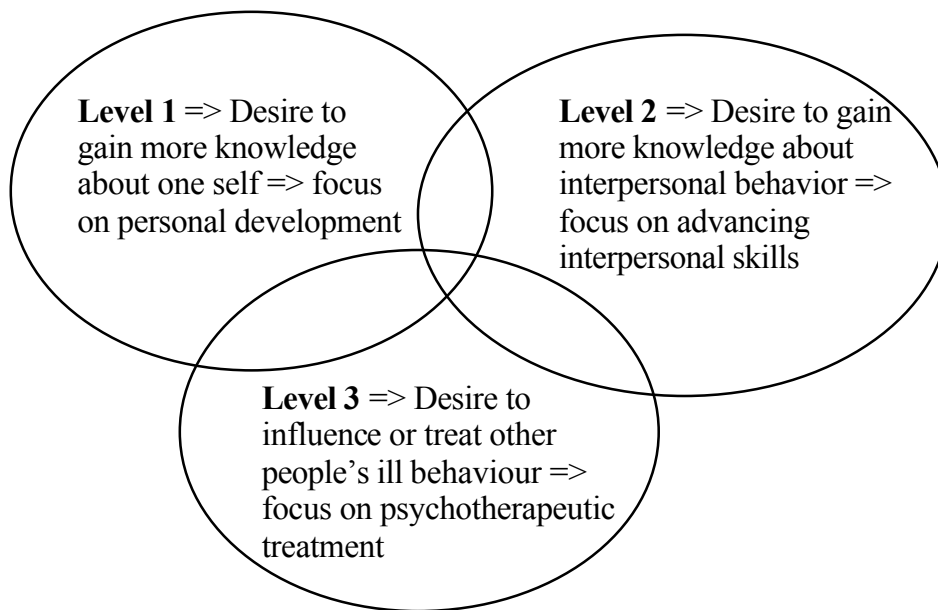
At the most basic level, there is not even agreement as to whether NLP is best described as a theory, a methodology or is simply a collection of techniques (Craft, 2001; Tosey and Mathison, 2003). Early work focussed on techniques, arguing NLP presents “specific tools which can be applied effectively in any human interaction. It offers specific techniques by which a practitioner may usefully organize and re-organize his or her subjective experience or the experiences of a client in order to define and subsequently secure any behavioral outcome” (Dilts et al., 1980, p. 1). As a growing body of work emerged showing systematic results, this comprehension of NLP as being merely “a collection of techniques” was expanded with NLP perceived by some also to be as “a behavioral science, a behavioral model, a set of explicit skills and techniques”. (Dilts and DeLozier 2000 p. 849).

There remain simplified conceptualizations of NLP suggesting that NLP has its focus on advancing people’s psychological skills for understanding and influencing people (O’Conner and Seymour 2002). For example, Thompsen et al. (2002, p. 292) states that NLP “helps you to understand yourself and others and teaches you how to communicate effectively with others in order to build better relationships with them”. However in contrast, Andreas and Faulkner (1994) suggest that NLP is the “study of human excellence”. John Grinder defines NLP as “an accelerated learning strategy, by which one can discover and use patterns in the world” (O’Conner, 2001). Finally, Tosey and Mathison (2009, p. 24) integrate the skills and science perspectives presenting NLP as being about interest in “how people communicate, perform skills and create experiences through patterns of thought and behaviour, mediated by language. NLP helps people create more preferable and useful (to them) experiences of the world, typically by attending to and modifying those patterns of thought and behaviour”.

According to Dilts and DeLozier the words “neuro linguistic programming” indicate the sciences from which NLP draws from, namely neurological, linguistic and cognitive sciences (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, p. 850). This is much in line with Tosey and Mathison (2009, p.183), which state that “today, it can potentially draw on perception from disciplines such as cognitive linguistic, neuroscience and cognitive psychology”.

An attempt to integrate these perspectives can be found in the partial explanation by Borg and Freytag (2010) which considers the various *reasons* for obtaining NLP knowledge. As illustrated in Figure 2 they argue that there are three reasons (or levels) for obtaining NLP knowledge. **Level one** deals with the individual’s desire for self or personal development (Alder, 1992; Tosey and Mathison, 2010a, Bandler, 2005). **Level two** deals with the desire to improve one’s knowledge of human interaction and improve one’s interpersonal skills level (Tosey and Mathison, 2003; Thompson, 2002; Laborde, 2008). The **third level** links to NLP’s psychotherapeutic origin and deals with the desire to influence or change another person’s behaviour (Dilts et al., 1980).

Figure 2: Reasons for Obtaining NLP Training



Source: adopted from Borg and Freytag (2010)

As the figure indicates, Borg and Freytag (2010) argue that a degree of overlap exists between the three levels. This may be the reason there is an ongoing debate about the ethics of applying NLP in a business and selling context (Haviv, 2007, Tosey and Mathison, 2010a). In other words there is a debate as to whether a technique that was intended to unlock the deeper processes of the mind as part of psychiatric treatment is being used inappropriately. Perhaps this view also explains the doubtful reputation that NLP has in some countries, and the unwillingness of businesses that employ NLP to promote the fact that they are providing NLP training for their employees (Tosey and Mathison, 2009).

The research in this paper is positioned within level 2 which has its focus on NLP's effect on interpersonal/relational skills advancement. Furthermore, this research will adopt the perspective that NLP (among other things) is one of the world's most popular forms of interpersonal skill and communication training (Tosey and Mathison, 2003). Therefore we adopt Thompsen et al.'s (2002, p. 292) definition which states that NLP "helps you to understand yourself and others and teaches you how to communicate effectively with others in order to build better relationships with them".

The NLP phenomenon presents challenges to those that seek to research it because it has not developed or evolved within a traditional scientific model. Many of the NLP models or techniques have only sporadically published academic documentation of their validity.

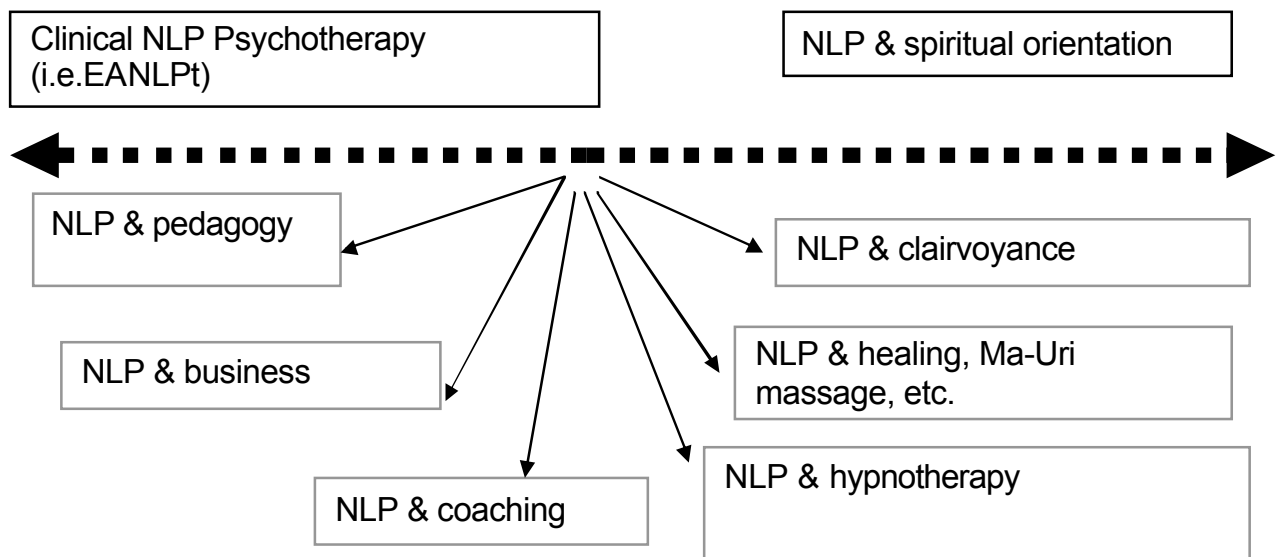
This non-evidence based approach by the founders of NLP has led parts of the scientific establishment to take a critical view of NLP (Drenth, 2008). Some categorize it as 'pseudoscience' (Deville, 2005), on the other hand, an investigation conducted by Tosey et al. (2005) showed that NLP does build on academic theory and that the theoretical roots of NLP include gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969), person-centred counseling (Rogers, 1961), transformational grammar (Grinder and Elgin, 1973), behavioural psychology, cybernetics (Ashby, 1965), the Palo Alto school of brief therapy (Watzlawick et al., 1967), Ericksonian hypnotherapy (Bandler and Grinder, 1975a; Grinder et al., 1977), and cybernetic

epistemology of Gregory Batson (1973; Tosey and Mathison, 2003). However, Tosey and Mathison (2010a) suggested that the existing body of empirical research do not support definitive conclusions about the value of NLP.

The lack of evidence is in part due to the contexts in which NLP is used. Training is conducted by self established training institutions or businesses. This development outside established medical/academic systems has led to limited control or standardisation (i.e. of the required amount of training to obtain a certain NLP degree). Instead the field has been left open for those interested to explore whatever its principles led them to, and wherever their personal interests take them. Today, the NLP community cannot be regarded as a uniform field, but has diversified into various streams, e.g. new coding NLP, systemic NLP, DHE, and EANLPt are terms indicating different forms of NLP.

A review of the extant popular literature available on the web about the various ways NLP is used/advertised is summarized in Figure 3. This presents a continuum along which broad grouping applications that include “NLP” are positioned and shows that there are two extremes – spiritual orientation and psychotherapy. Considerable “spiritual orientation” is embedded in a number of utilizations of NLP techniques. This is in line with Bromley (2007) and Bovbjerg (2001) who argue that NLP is merely a new age phenomenon; However there is another cluster of applications at the other extreme that are more grounded in the psychotherapeutic roots and orientation of NLP, in line with Wake (2008) who argues that NLP is an accredited mode of psychotherapy. On the continuum business applications of NLP, of which many forms of sales training is part. It is highly likely that the orientation of most NLP schools offering sales training is positioned on the left side as showed in Figure 3 however it is probable that there is variation as to exactly where they would sit.

Figure 3: The Spectra of NLP Training Facilities



Source: Own production based on internet desk research on NLP and its training institutions

Knowledge as to the exact number of NLP training facilities/schools in existence, or the number of people who have had NLP training does not exist. Tosey and Mathiason (2009)

suggest that 50 training schools are registered in United Kingdom alone. A simple search on Google of “NLP” resulted in more than twenty-five million hits. It is beyond the scope of this analysis to investigate all of these but a sampling of these hits provides support for the assertion that NLP has developed into one of the world’s most popular forms of interpersonal skill and communication training (Tosey and Mathison, 2003) with many of the sampled hits addressing its effectiveness, including testimonials, etc.

As is illustrated in Figure 3, we conclude it is inappropriate to make general statements about NLP as it is not a unified field. This research is positioned within the context of “NLP and business” as the focus is on the effect of NLP in selling in mainstream business. However a review of the academic business literature highlights that there is a wide range of activities included in the context of “NLP and business”. These include negotiation (LaBorde, 2006), training and education (Brown, 2002; Lavan, 2002, Ludwig and Mendendez, 1985, Tosey and Mathison, 2010a), management (Tosey et al., 2005, Knight, 2002), innovation (Alder, 1992, 1994; Dilts and Bonissone, 1993), TQM and business excellence (Ashok and Santhakumar, 2002; Singh and Abraham, 2008), Human Resource Development (Georges, 1996; Tosey and Mathison, 2007).

In addition there is a substantial amount of popular literature focussing on NLP in *selling*. This work focuses on preaching the value of NLP to salespeople (e.g. Bagley and Reese, 1987; Jakobsen, 2010; Johnson, 2010; O’Connor and Prior, 1995). These popular books do not provide hard evidence as to the effectiveness of NLP but present techniques claimed to be NLP-focussed that are alleged to assist in building relationships and trust and thereby to create more sales.

An academic literature review on a number of online databases (Springer, EBSCO, Wiley, Emerald, PsycInfo and JSTOR) in sales/marketing disclose that little published research exists involving the application of NLP. The few pieces in marketing that exist focuses on the effect of NLP use. For example, Woods’ (2004) concludes that NLP is valuable in a brand marketing context; Skinner and Stephens (2003) argue that NLP can be effectively applied in connection with marketing communication; and Mainwaring and Skinner (2009) suggest that NLP has value in connection with charity marketing communication. However, this work does not address the underlying reasons as to why NLP assists in achievement of improved outcomes.

The literature review identified eight articles involving the link between NLP and selling; these are displayed in Table 1. The table summarizes the nature of the research undertaken, the NLP techniques¹ used and the main findings of the research. A clear pattern emerges. All eight articles show that use of NLP techniques like ‘Rapport’, and ‘Preferred Representational Systems’ (with considerable overlap of the techniques used/considered) are associated with improved sales interaction. This is much in line with the assertions of popular literature. However, none of these papers explore the research question posed in this paper - whether NLP training improves interpersonal skills and that it is this that in turn improves selling ability. We conclude from this analysis that there is an existing gap in the extant literature and a need for further investigation into this process of how NLP can assist (or not) in interpersonal skill development.

¹ It is out of the scope of this paper to introduce and describe all the various techniques; instead we refer to the work of O’Connor and Prior (1995, p. 211-216) for a short introduction of the techniques.

Table 1: NLP Research in the Field of Selling

Researchers	Empirical	NLP Methodology	Main findings in relation to NLP and selling
Singh and Abraham (2008)	Yes	NLP presuppositions PRS*, Disney's model, Reframing Meta Programs	NLP has the capacity to build up the organizational capabilities, such as improved communication, aligning goals, reducing resistance to organizational change.
Borg and Freytag (2010)	Yes	Rapport, PRS* Calibration, NLP presuppositions, Sensory Acuity	This case illustrate a way of applying NLP which has the potential to not only influence the individual salesperson's relational skills but also the relational skills of the entire organisation
Connell (1984)		Mirroring Anchoring PRS*	Salespeople who learn what NLP is and how to use it show improvement in their sales.
Nickels et al. (1983)	No	PRS*, Predicates Eye cues model Rapport building Rapport skills Pacing	NLP is particularly useful to salespeople in their relationships with customers. Rapport building skills, obtained via NLP, increases awareness and listening skills, two of the keys to effectiveness in selling and interpersonal relationships in general.
Thompson et al. (2002)	Yes	No specific NLP technique mentioned	NLP training lead to significant increase in the adaptive selling measure provided by Spiro and Weitz (1990).
Wood (2006)	Yes	Rapport, PRS* Predicates	Provides evidence about the NLP theory about predicates and PRS*. Provide incremental evidence that the NLP framework of establishing rapport through nonverbal signals merits additional investigation.
Nancarrow and Penn (1998)	Yes	Rapport, PRS* Mirroring, Matching Predicates	Many telemarketing organisations (in UK) use NLP to foster rapport. Suggest that the probability for long lasting relationships <i>may</i> be increased by the application of instant rapport techniques (like NLP) – the lubricants of social exchange.
DeCormier and Jackson (1998)	No	Mirroring PRS*	NLP is applicable in salespersons introduction phase in the personal selling process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred Representational Systems 			

THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF NLP TO THE BUYER-SELLER RELATIONSHIP THEORY

“A business is not an island” (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989) is one of the most frequently used quotes in the IMP literature and refers to business working in networks. Businesses as well as human beings are part of a larger network and develop through and in this network (Freytag and Philipsen, 2010). A central tenant of this is that a firm cannot control their network, that indeed no one is in control (Wilkinson and Young 2002) and that the normative directions for businesses are therefore limited (Wilkinson and Young 2005).

However while accepting this view, we argue the focal firm *can*, to a certain extent, direct and control the response it sends to the rest of the network. This perception is in alignment with the normative direction, or the soft-assembled strategy, prescribed to firms facing uncertain economic times (Wilkinson and Young 2005). As discussed in the introduction of this paper, soft-assembled strategies highlight the value of improving the

relationship/interpersonal skills of the people in an organisation as it increases the relational competence of the organisation (Borg and Freytag, 2010).

According to Hallén and Sandström (1991) interpersonal skills are critical elements in relationship atmosphere which includes power balance, co-operativeness, and empathy/closeness. Enhanced interpersonal skills contributes to an understanding of actors' emotional perceptions and views on interaction and build relational competence (Phan et al 2005). The notion of relationship atmosphere is closely related to actors' perceptions and interactions of what can be done in a relationship (Hallén and Sandström, 1991). While this 'actors' perspective can include various levels ranging from the individual to the firms (Håkansson and Johanson, 1992, p. 28) we argue (in line with Wilkinson and Young 2002) that the individuals in a firm and their individual activities coalesce in a bottom-up self-organising way and thus create the relationship and network atmospheres in which firms operate. It follows that the systematic attempts to build individuals' skills across parts of an organisation will likely impact upon the organisation, the relationships that the organisation is part of and the network that contains those relationships.

The IPS-EQ model (Figure 1) reflects an individual perspective. But it depicts process (see Young 2011 for further discussion of the importance of this) and thereby contributes to the relationship atmosphere concept. There are also fairly obvious links between elements of relationship atmosphere and the IPS-EQ model presented in Figure 1. Specifically power balance and cooperativeness can be seen to influence and be influenced by "interaction outcome achievability" part of the interaction effect; similarly empathy is part of (and affects and is affected by) the "mental ability" and closeness is part of the "mutual feeling sensitivity" element of the IPS-EQ.

This is in line with buyer-seller literature that concludes that sale is correlating with the ability to create closer relationships, commitment, feelings and trust (e.g. Andersen, 2006; Georges, 2006). More specifically there is literature that highlights the value of interpersonal skills in relationship building. For example, Gray (2004) suggests that interpersonal skills of the alliance manager are essential in creating trust and thereby a success factor in business partnering.

The ability to trust and to build it is at the center of discussions of development of relationships. For example Håkansson, Harrison and Waluszewski (2004, p.23) argue that "building some degree of trust and commitment appears a necessary condition for conducting economic exchange transactions". The causes and consequences of trust has been substantially researched in business setting and there is also a small body of work that recognizes that at the heart of trust is emotional capability (e.g. Young, 2006) which is also at the centre of IPS-EQ model depicted in Figure 1.

Correspondingly, in the NLP literature the concept of trust is a central theme and part of the key behavioural model in NLP (see Figure 3). According to NLP trust is created via an interpersonal rapport building process involving NLP methodologies like matching/mirroring, sensory acuity, representational systems (Laborde, 1994). In other words, adherents of NLP claim it provides knowledge which influences interaction effects like trust.

METHODOLOGY

The research goal of this paper is to undertake an explorative study on the *perceived effect* of NLP knowledge on B2B salespeople's interpersonal skills. Linking to this goal, the research question of the article is: how do salespeople perceive the effect of their NLP training?

The choice of research design was guided by issues researchers exploring the NLP phenomenon have previously faced. As previously discussed NLP incorporates many different models and techniques. We avoid consideration of these. Instead we only seek to explore the perceived effect of NLP training on a person's interpersonal skills. A number of problems and issues associated with this kind of exploration have been noted by others. First the perceptions of informants about NLP may lack validity as NLP is absorbed and effectuated by human beings on a subconscious level and therefore it is argued cannot be researched in this way Sharply (1987). We recognize this limitation and seek only to study the *perceived effects* of NLP training on a person's interpersonal skills. Here, we do not seek to uncover the actual effects of NLP on sales effectiveness (this would require additional data sources) only perceived effectiveness and the role that NLP has in this. These perceptions are analyzed at a deep level however, allowing some insights into the credibility and quality of our informant's reflections. Specifically, the primary analyst of the informants' voice has both expertise in qualitative analysis and insights into NLP processes via her two year's masters practitioner degree in NLP training.

This latter qualification enables the analysis of informants' discussions about NLP and its impact upon them to address a number of the criticisms leveled at previous research. Einspruch and Forman (1985) have criticized existing NLP research for serious errors; including (a) lack of understanding the concepts of pattern recognition and inadequate control of context; (b) unfamiliarity with NLP as an approach to therapy; (c) lack of familiarity with the NLP 'Meta-Model' of linguistic communication; (d) failure to consider the role of stimulus-response associations; (e) inadequate interviewer training and definitions of rapport; and, (f) logical mistakes.

Research Design

The need to explore the deep processes that characterize the development of interpersonal skills and the response to training dictates the use of an in-depth case study applying a systematic combining logic. This design allows the researchers to go 'back and forth' from one type of research activity to another and between empirical observations and theory, as this expands the researchers understanding of both theory and empirical phenomena (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Further, the case study method allows gathering considerably detailed data (Yin, 2009). Also, case studies are especially appropriate for exploring new areas (Leonard-Barton, 1990) and where the focus furthermore is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Eisenhardt, 1989).

From December 2008 data has been collected through three sources: A. Interviews. B. Secondary data such as company announcements, strategy papers and other internal documentation. C. Observation during meetings. A total of 20 hours of interviews and 15 hours of observations have been carried out with the focal firm. The interview informants include: management, HR, marketing, front line sales people and the sales coach team. The focus in the following reporting of the case is on the interviews.

Different types of interviews were included, ranging from in-depth and focus group interviews to informal interviews that occurred spontaneously. Informants were chosen by means of theoretical sampling, i.e. on the basis of the expected level of new insights they could bring (Flick, 2006). The in-depth and focus group interviews used sequential visual displays of the IPS-EQ used as well as constructed vignettes exemplifying the four levels of the IPS-EQ model to stimulate discussion. This was combined with a narrative inquiry or evaluating questions methodology (Halkier, 2008). This involved encouraging informants to tell stories, relate experiences, reflections and to make “before and after” NLP training evaluations. This interview style was chosen because as Burr (1995) and Richardson (1990) argue, people tend to organize their experiences over time into a narrative form. Secondly, a narrative inquiry is less focused on what historical accounts, i.e. what has happened, but has its focus on what meaning people have derived from what has happened. As such, this methodology allows interviewers access to “unknown” information and is excellent for exploratory work (Matthews and Ross, 2010).

The data was analysed and categorized using a grid analysis (Gammack and Stephens, 1994), and also used the method of linking the axial coding and theoretical frameworks (Flick, 2006). This is done in order to compare and explore similarities and differences across the various sources, and to extract the *perceived effects* of NLP training on each of the 4 elements of the IPS-EQ model.

Brief Case Description

The focal case is one of Denmark’s leading financial service providers, founded in 1851, with a turnover of 9,522 million DKK and employing approximately 4,000 people. The focal firm claims to serve approximately 1 million customers – 513,000 customers directly via 49 private centres (private business area). 85,000 business customers directly via 24 business centres (business to business area). And 500,000 customers are handled by the partnering banks (partner business to business area). Similarly, all customer groups are served via the Internet. Approximately 65% of the company’s staff are dealing with sales and have some degree of customer contact.

In 1999, the focal firm started its investments in a “sales coach network” philosophy. The idea with this network of coaches was that they would provide selected sales coaches with an NLP coach education. It was then intended that these sales coaches would give training and guidance for the rest of the sales people in the organisation. The intention is that 80% of their time the sales coaches would work alongside the rest of the sales people in the organisation coaching, nurturing and providing guidance to them. This was augmented with mandatory attendance by all new salespeople at a 3 day sales training programme, which would include NLP techniques. This training included the practicing customer buyer interaction and how to use various learned methods in those interactions.

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

During the interview process it became clear that a) the degree of in-depth knowledge about NLP methodology varied a lot among the interviewees, b) some of the perceived effects of NLP training were perceived to impact on more than one element of the IPS-EQ model. This was in line with informant’s perceptions of the IPS-EQ model (which guided much of the discussion), as it acknowledged that the four elements – “mental ability”, “behavioural

response”, “mutual feelings sensitivity”, and “interaction outcome achievability”- are interrelated.

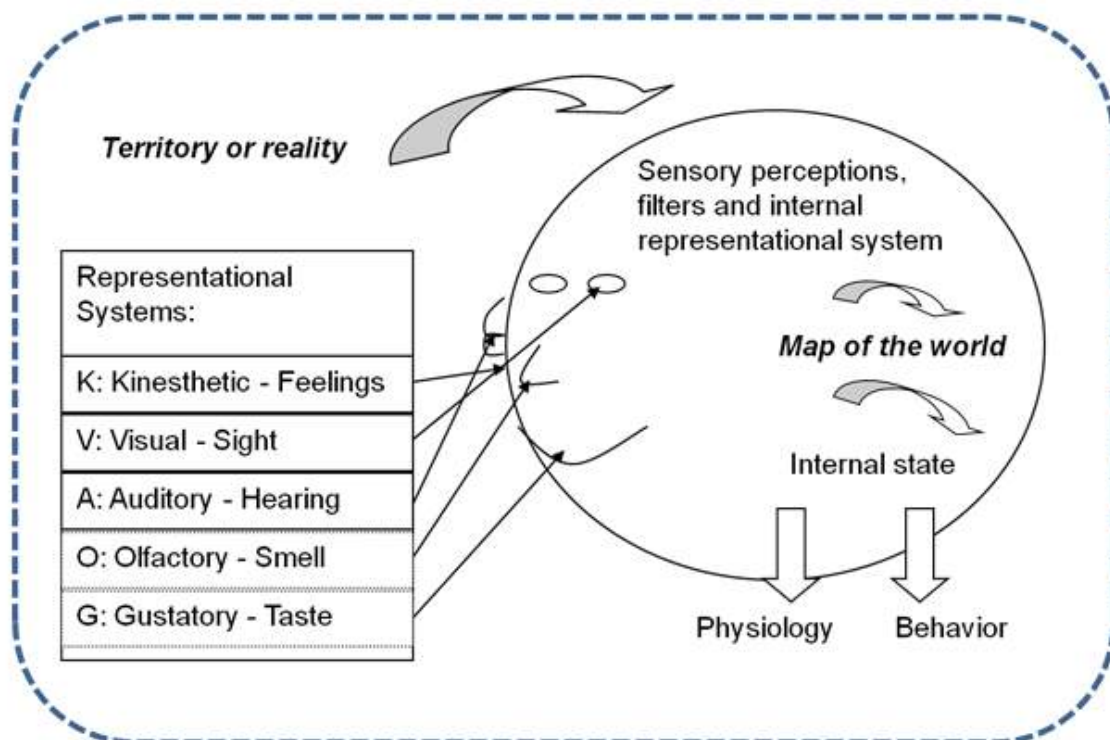
While recognizing that these elements are very much interrelated in informants’ minds, the findings are presented within the IPS-EQ model framework, with each element considered in turn. This enables us to better distinguish the complex elements of a person’s interpersonal skills.

Findings Linked to the “Mental Ability” Element of the IPS-EQ Model

This particular element of the IPS-EQ model builds on the emotional intelligence theory (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 1997, 1999, 2000) and is concerned about a person’s ability to perceive and express emotions, understanding and analyse emotions and finally, manage emotions (for further explanation of IPS-EQ please see figure 1).

The dominant NLP methodology which by the interviewees where perceived to have an effect on this mental ability element is linked to one of NLP’s key presuppositions. Furthermore, it interlinks with the key behavioural model of NLP, illustrated in figure 4, which focuses on how individuals take in information from surroundings, mentally represent these inputs in the brain to form a map of the world, which then impacts on the persons internal state and guide the persons behaviour.

Figure 4: The Behavioural Model in NLP



Source: adapted from Dilts and DeLozier, 2000; Dyrting, 2003; Hansen, 2005; Knight, 2002; O'Connor, 2002

In other words, the model suggests that every person has his or her own individual map of the world, which is different from the territory (reality), and that no individual map of the world is any more “true” than any other. In other words the model emphasizes that each human

being has his/hers own subjective construction on their reality (map of the world), which might not be the same as the reality.

Further, the model suggests a person gets an extremely large amount of information units, some say millions of bits of information each second (Dyrting, 2003; Hansen, 2005). However, this amount of information is absorbed in our unconscious and conscious mind, which then again affects our behavior. Miller (1957) stated that most people can consciously respond to about seven, plus or minus two “chunks” of information. This finding seems to be valid in the neuroscience today – as it is mentioned by Solms (2003, p. 90) “If we compare the consciousness with the amount of information we can withhold in the psyche at any given time, then the consciousness can obtain only seven information units”.

Neuroscience does not know exactly the amount of information our mind-body obtains in a second – only that we are in our conscious mind able to register approx. 7 information units. What neuroscience knows is that the human brain contains between 10^{11} – 10^{13} neurons (or nerve cells) and each one of these neurons are able to communicate (send and receive messages) with up to 10,000 others. The brain consists of very large sets of nerve cell networks, each network is extremely complex. It is the belief that all human knowledge and information in some way is coded into these networks (Gazzaniga, 2002).

All the information we get every moment enters and processes via our sensory system, which is part of our nervous system. A sensory system consists of systems for vision, hearing, somatic sensation (touch), taste and olfaction (smell) – the 5 senses (see Figure 4). All of this information is channeled via our internal filters and is hereafter represented by the brain into our own internal maps of the world. This internal map of the world constitutes then the reality from which ones internal state is based on and is reflected in our behavior and physiology.

It was argued by the informants that knowledge (and NLP training) about NLP’s behavioral model (Figure 4) impacts a person’s mental ability in different ways. First, it was proclaimed that NLP extends a person’s *patience* regarding the customer’s different views and attitudes. Second, the knowledge created *curiosity* to explore the buyers “map of the world”. A central part of their NLP training was focused on training the participant’s ability to explore and understand another person’s “map of the world”. Third, the training underlined for the informants that not all customers are alike and that they therefore have different needs. It was explained by one informant like this:

“NLP knowledge has expanded my conscious awareness and I now accept that it is his world, not mine. Further, NLP has given me some tools to explore what goes on in the mind of the customer, this allows me to better understand and meet the customer in his world”

Part of the internal state element from Figure 4 links to emotions, therefore as the model suggests, to a certain degree emotions are a driver of human behavior (actions) and physiology (e.g. like getting red in the face or having sweaty palms when nervous).

This notion that emotions play a central role in behavior has been introduced in the buyer-seller literature. For example Andersen and Kumar (2006, p. 522) states that “a lack of positive personal chemistry is an often-cited reason why business relationships either fail to develop and/or sustain”. And Young (2006) has highlighted the diversity of emotions in business relationships. However, the impact of emotions, emotional wisdom, and emotional

intelligence in a selling context is less investigated and more research is called for (Bagozzi et al., 2010; Deeter-Schmelz and Sojka, 2003).

In this study, it was suggested by the interviewees that emotions do play a *key role* in selling. It was mentioned that the essence in selling is to create some form of behavioral action of the buyer (also linking to the teaching in Figure 4), i.e. signing a contract, identifying another member of the buying center, or making a transfer of money, product, etc. In relation to emotions in selling one informant stated that “*the basis of my selling is that the customer likes me as a person*”. This person perceives positive emotion, from the buying part towards the seller, as fundamental in selling. This is in line with Jobber and Lancaster (2009, p. 319) who state that “liking a specific salesperson will positively affect a buyer’s attitude towards the products recommended by that person”.

NLP knowledge, gained via the behavioral model (Figure 4), was perceived to have different effects on a salespersons mental ability and the emotional aspect of selling. First, it was claimed that the simple notion that emotions influence one’s behavior has led salespeople to “*speak to customer’s emotions*”. One salesperson explained that he spoke to the anxiety of a customer (because their sales office were locally based, whereas the competitors sales office were located further away, and he played on the fact that the customer was keen on having them close to his business). In similar vein, Festinger (1975) presented his cognitive dissonance theory linking anxiety to buying. Second, NLP knowledge, gained from the behavioral model had, according to the informants, underlined the necessity of “*not to engage in own emotions*” during a sales meeting, involving e.g. the ability *not* to take emotional remarks personally. Third, it was suggested by the interviewees that NLP knowledge increases the ability to adapt to customer expectations by adapting their own expectations and linking these to customers’ emotions. This capability is part of an NLP philosophy, which is labeled “*behavioral flexibility*”, which relates to the ability to vary one’s own behavior in order to adapt to a particular situation or to elicit a particular response from another person (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000).

This proclaimed positive impact of NLP on a person’s behavioral flexibility has been tested by Thompson et al.(2002). In their research they found that NLP training had an effect on a person’s ability to perform adaptive selling, which is the ability to altering the sales behaviors during customer interaction (Weitz et al., 1986). (In their experiment on NLP effectiveness, Thompson et al (2002) tested respondents according to Spiro and Weitz’s (1990) adaptive selling scale.)

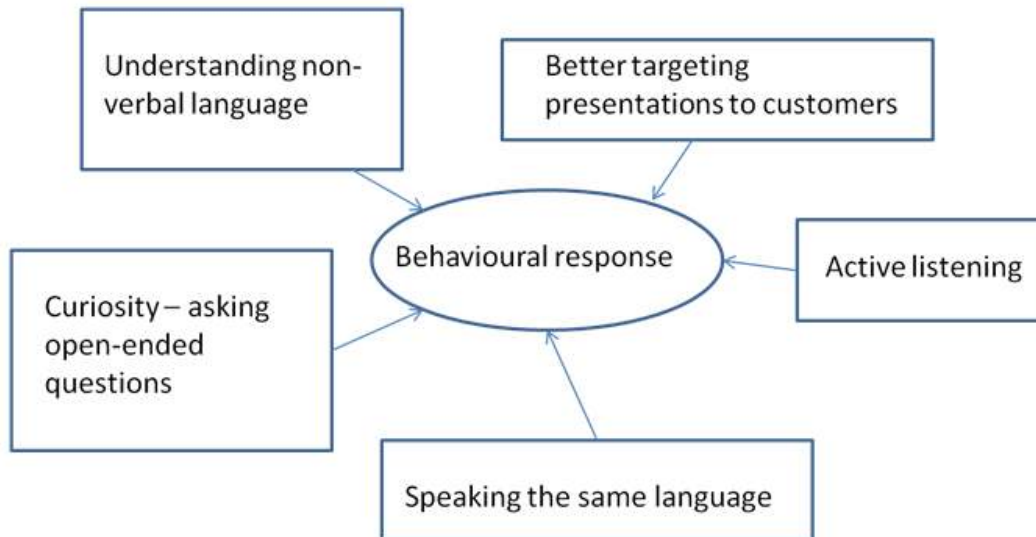
Findings Linked to the “Behavioural Response” IPS-EQ Element

The “behavioural response” element of IPS-EQ model was explained in figure 1.

According to interviewees, another NLP presupposition taught in NLP training is reflected in the behavioural response element of IPS-EQ. For example, one informant said when discussing this, “*the meaning of the communication is the response it elicits, regardless of the intent of the communicator*”. This perceived effect of NLP training had an impact on how a salesperson would communicate with customers. In other words, informants accepted that as NLP posits, it is the salesperson’s responsibility that the customer receives the message according to the intended message. This involves probing and explaining the message in various ways until sure that the customer has actually received the message accurately.

Figure 5 summaries five different effects of NLP training on a person’s behavioural response that were identified by informants. Each of these five effects will be explained below.

Figure 5: Perceived Effects of NLP on a Person’s Behavioural Response



Informants agreed that NLP training specifically enhances a person’s ability to read non-verbal language; in NLP language it is called enhancing a person’s *sensory acuity*. Further, the NLP students were taught that “*a person cannot not communicate – your body language will always communicate*”. Academic research by Wood (2006) suggests that, in selling, nonverbal communication accounts for 60-70 percent of all interpersonal communication; which underlines the potential value of understanding and mastering this particular ability.

In the literature review, illustrated in Table 1, nearly all researchers who have studied NLP mention the NLP methodology that addresses a person’s Preferred Representational Systems (PRS) as essential in selling. Similarly, PRS was identified as essential by all informants. The PRS methodology is linked to NLP’s key behavioral model, (Figure 4). This model asserts that each person has a preferred sensory system (which they use to represent in their mind the information units they get). The hypothesis linked to PRS is that a salesperson should apply the words (in NLP language called *predicates*) which link to the customers PRS and then they are “*speaking the same language*” as the customer and “*meeting the customer in his world*”. Wood (2006) tested this NLP hypothesis (with respect to three representational systems – visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) and found some support for this claim.

Similarly, informants mentioned that knowledge gained via their NLP training about a person’s PRS was perceived valuable for them when presenting a product/service. Interviewees stated that they would alter their sales presentation to match the customers PRS. For example if they believed a customer to be visual oriented (see Figure 4) then the salesperson would include more figures, use the appropriate predicates, and apply metaphors in his/her selling approach, all in the pursuit to match the language or the PRS of the customer.

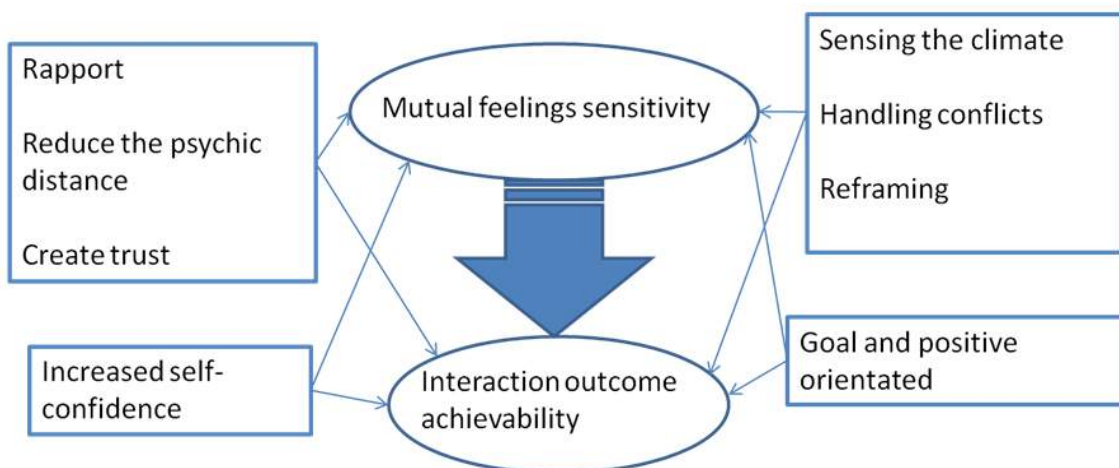
‘Active listening’ and ‘Curiosity’ are the two remaining elements that, according to the informants, were perceived to be substantially affected as a result of their NLP training. The two elements are interrelated, thus it was explained by the interviewees that NLP’s ‘*meta model*’ and ‘*meta programs*’ had together impacted their active listening skills and their active questioning techniques. These techniques were used in the quest to gain more knowledge about the personality of a particular customer. According to NLP literature is the meta model part of the early NLP work and deals with understanding a person’s specific language patterns, where as the meta programs are concerned with defining typical patterns or thinking styles of a particular individual (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000).

Similarly, in the selling literature, the two capabilities ‘active listening and curiosity’ are proclaimed valuable for salespeople (Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Comer and Drollinger, 1999). Jobber and Lancaster (2009) state that interest in people are a key quality for sale people and further they even suggest that the number one success factor in selling is a salesperson’s “listening skills”. Again this highlights the potential of NLP, if training actually has the ability to enhance the listening and curiosity capability of a person.

Findings Linked to the “Mutual Feelings Sensitivity” and “Interaction Outcome Achievability” IPS-EQ Elements

The remaining two elements of the IPS-EQ model and the perceived effect of NLP training on these will be addressed together. This is because the perceived effects of NLP are overlapping both IPS-EQ elements – ‘Mutual feelings sensitivity’ and ‘Interaction outcome achievability’. The suggested effects of NLP training on these two elements are displayed in the below Figure 6.

Figure 6: Perceived Effects of NLP on a Person’s Mutual Feelings Sensitivity and Interaction Outcome Achievability



The ability to create rapport is a key element in NLP and is likewise proclaimed essential in selling (Campbell et al., 2006; Nickels et al., 1983; Wood, 2006). It is defined as “the process of building and maintaining a relationship of mutual trust and understanding” (O’Connor and Prior, 1995, p. 215). One interviewee explained the effect of his NLP training which link to rapport building in the following manner: “*I have via NLP learned to create bodily rapport (via mirroring my bodily posture to my customer), rapport in words (speaking the same*

language as my customer), using the same tonality and tone (as my customer), and creating rapport in opinions and values (by having the same views as the customer). Via this teaching I have learned to reduce the psychic distance between me and the customer and remove interference on the line and thereby create trust. Removing interference on the line is essential before I can start explaining about our actual services”.

According to Laborde (1994) is the rapport element in our everyday human interaction, we unconsciously establish some level of rapport – it seems to be a natural feature among most people when they get together. Laborde suggests that good rapport is characterized by a sense of ease with another, trust, and easy flow of dialog. Informants reflect this view, seeing rapport as a prerequisite to trust.

In marketing literature trust has been proclaimed to have a positive influence on buyer-seller relationship development (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), especially in B2B selling (Liu and Leach, 2001). In similar vein, Lichtenthal and Tellefsen (2001) delineate the value of buyer-seller similarity which also links to the rapport concept (as explained by last interview quote). This once more gives food for thought about the potential of NLP, which train people in the ability to establish rapport and thereby influence the mutual feeling of trust.

A second effect of NLP training, visualized in Figure 6, has to do with the ability of sensing and altering the climate or atmosphere. Specific NLP methodologies mentioned, which were perceived by the interviewees to be of value for example in handling conflicts, were the *“reframing technique”* or the ability to go into *“meta-position”*. Reframing is concerned with changing the way of understanding a statement or behavior to give it another meaning, and meta-position focuses on the viewpoint we are aware of at any given moment (O’Connor and Prior, 1995). In NLP training, changing viewpoints is an important consideration, this can be achieved by adopting someone else’s viewpoint or adopting a meta-position where one acts as an objective observer. Specifically, NLP students are trained to see a problem or a conflict from one’s own glasses, the glasses of the counterpart and the glasses of an imaginary third person, who sees the conflict in an objective manner. These techniques also interlink with the *“behavioral flexibility”* as explained earlier.

The final two perceived effects of NLP training has to do with *“increased self-confidence”* and being *“goal and positive oriented”*. Figure 2 addresses the first of these, suggesting that the ‘level one’ reason for obtaining NLP training is associated with a desire for self or personal development. However, Thompson et al. (2002) measured the effect of NLP on people’s self-esteem and self-efficacy and found a short-term effect, but no long lasting effect on these concepts. The second effect of goal and positive orientation links to another NLP presupposition, which focuses on setting goals (e.g. the TOTE model) and finding peoples’ *“positive intention”*. The positive intention is linked to the presupposition that underlying any behavior is a positive intention for the person acting out a specific behavior; it is focused on what it gets for the person who acts in a specific way (O’Connor and Prior, 1995). The goal and positive orientation was explained by one interviewee like this: *“For example I use future pacing before I meet a customer, meaning that I think ahead in time and reflect on what felling will I have when the meeting with the client is over, and I see a positive outcome and set the goals with the meeting before I actually go to the meeting”.*

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In 1985 Einspruch and Forman concluded that it was not then possible to determine the validity of either NLP concepts or whether NLP-based therapeutic procedures are effective. In 2010 Tosey and Mathison concluded that the existing body of empirical research did not support definitive conclusions about the effects of NLP. As has been illustrated in this paper NLP is extensive, multifaceted and non-aligned. This raises the question as to whether it will ever be possible for academia to give any precise verdict as to the value of NLP as no definitive conceptualisation is likely to emerge. However the problem is an important one. We argue that it is essential and valuable to start exploring this world wide phenomenon and illustrate a research method that can serve as an important starting point for this exploration.

Our findings highlight the value of grounding NLP research into a comprehensive elaboration of NLP. To the best of our knowledge this has not been done in any other marketing or sales work. The combination of the core frameworks of NLP combined with the IPS-EQ that has been introduced into the marketing literature allows effective analysis of the narratives of salespeople about their perceptions of the impact of their NLP training.

These narratives suggest NLP *has* considerable effects on salespersons perceived interpersonal skills. This approach to analysis allows us to further demonstrate a likely way or ways the NLP techniques influence a salesperson's interpersonal skills. This is via their influence upon mental ability, behavioural response, mutual feelings sensitivity, and thereby the interaction outcome achievability. This pattern of results indicates that NLP does hold part of the key to improving a person's relational and interpersonal skills.

To a certain degree the authors agree with Nancarrow and Penn (1998) when they state that NLP might be among the lubricants of social exchange. This claim also captures the potential for the buyer-seller relationship development literature. Especially, researchers interested in relationship competences, relationship atmosphere and trust might be interested in the potential value of NLP. There are also obvious implications for managers. If sales skills generally and more specifically a salesperson's ability to build trust and commitment are a necessary condition for conducting economic exchange transactions (as claimed by Håkansson, Harrison and Waluszewski, 2004) and NLP has the potential to enhance these skills, then NLP training represents an important potential competitive advantage. Arguably firms already recognize this intuitively as evidenced by the substantial investment in this training in many parts of the world.

The value of high relationship/interpersonal skills was highlighted in the introductory part of this paper. There, it was mentioned that not only do salespeople with higher interpersonal skills perform better, but these skills also seem to be even more valuable in an economic recession period. This paper offers important first hints in understanding the effect of NLP training and it suggests that there seems to be some evidence to the proclaimed thesis that NLP in fact has the ability to enhance a salesperson's relationship/interpersonal skills.

Implications of these findings for practitioners are that first, all their extensive investments in NLP training are not "a waste of money". Second, these potential investments might be exploited further in targeted salespeople training programmes. Third, knowledge about interpersonal skills and training in related areas might be valuable in a salesperson selection process. Fourth, it brings food-for-thought on what the whole organisation (and not only the salespeople) might gain if trained in NLP.

Even through this research is “a first step” towards understanding the effect and perhaps potential of this complex phenomenon we believe to have laid down the pathway for, and encourage further research into this widely-applied phenomenon. Future research will consider the deeper processes that characterize the development of interpersonal skills for salespeople and the way in which these correspond to NLP training. The training itself and the validity of its claims (i.e. it is possible to link what is actually done to what is claimed) can also be examined. Further research can also consider the unconscious impacts of NLP, using non narrative methods (e.g. role play) and applying more deeply interpretative methods of analysis including observation to analysis of interviews with salespeople. Additional sources of data including secondary data, interviews with managers, trainers and customers can also be applied.

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