Review Article

On "The Prisoner's Dilemma"

An article by Wyatt Woodsmall that appeared in *The NLP Connection,* volume IX, No. 2, 1995

Reviewed by Ian McDermott and Joseph O'Connor

"The Prisoner's Dilemma" is a short article first published in 1989 and reprinted recently in the NLP journal *Connection.** According to an editorial note at the head of the article, Wyatt Woodsmall "still agrees with its conclusions" and plans to write another article "expanding these points." Since his article raises some important questions about the nature of NLP and its presuppositions, we propose to devote our review to it, without waiting for his next.

The article begins provocatively as follows: "NLP is often considered to be highly manipulative, if not downright unethical," and goes on to ask the question, "Is there something in the very nature of NLP that leads to . . . abuse?" Dr Woodsmall's answer is yes. NLP stands accused by him on three counts. We will take them in the order they are raised in the article.

The first he calls *the myth of power*. "NLP seems to be obsessed with the idea of power," he writes. The word "power" is not defined in the article, but we can think of several possible meanings. First, power can be defined as the ability to do or act. NLP supports this meaning: it gives practical skills and encourages flexibility in order to achieve outcomes. However, "power" can also be used in the sense of "control." When power is equated with control, manipulation also comes into the picture and here we share Woodsmall's concern.

First we would like to make a distinction between "influence" and "manipulation". Influence is universal and the purpose of any interaction, whether with yourself or others. Most influence is random and

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* It is summarized in "NLP Abstracts" on page 76 of this issue.

purposeless. If it is premeditated, this does not make it manipulation. The term "manipulation" tends to be used to mean the attempt to produce an outcome that the other person perceives to be at their expense, or contrary to their values, either during or after the interaction. NLP gives powerful influencing skills that *may* be used to manipulate—but that is the decision of the practitioner. The very fact that NLP is a powerful set of communication skills makes it open to abuse. You can travel more easily and quickly in a powerful car than in a slower, less powerful one—you can also do more damage.

There is no guarantee that NLP skills will be used for influence rather than manipulation by the practitioner any more than car salespeople can guarantee the driving skills of the prospective buyer. However we do not believe that there is anything intrinsic about NLP that makes it more likely to be used for manipulation.

Gregory Bateson, who profoundly influenced NLP at its inception, argued in his writings (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind,* pp 309–37) that the idea of "power" is a metaphor from the physical world, and cannot be applied to human communication. Bateson warned against the idea of power. Physical power implies a one-way passage of influence where the person wielding the power impacts on the other person but is not influenced in turn. It also implies that the more power the better and the bigger the return. Neither implication is true. All influence is mutual influence; communication is a loop and not a one-way passage of "power" where one person "makes" another person do something. In order to influence another, we ourselves must be open to influence. On the contrary, small events can have huge consequences; for example a few words spoken by a therapist at the right time can change a person's life. NLP is based on a cybernetic or systems epistemology, not a limited (and certainly not an unlimited) power one.

Whether we talk about power, control, manipulation or influence, there is no guarantee of success, and in that sense, "absolute" or "unlimited" power is nonsense. Although the idea of "unlimited power" may have attracted many people towards NLP, we may regret our association with this metaphor in the long run. We agree with Woodsmall that this idea of power is a myth, but we do not think that NLP subscribes to it.

The second myth Woodsmall describes is "*the myth of positive uncon-*