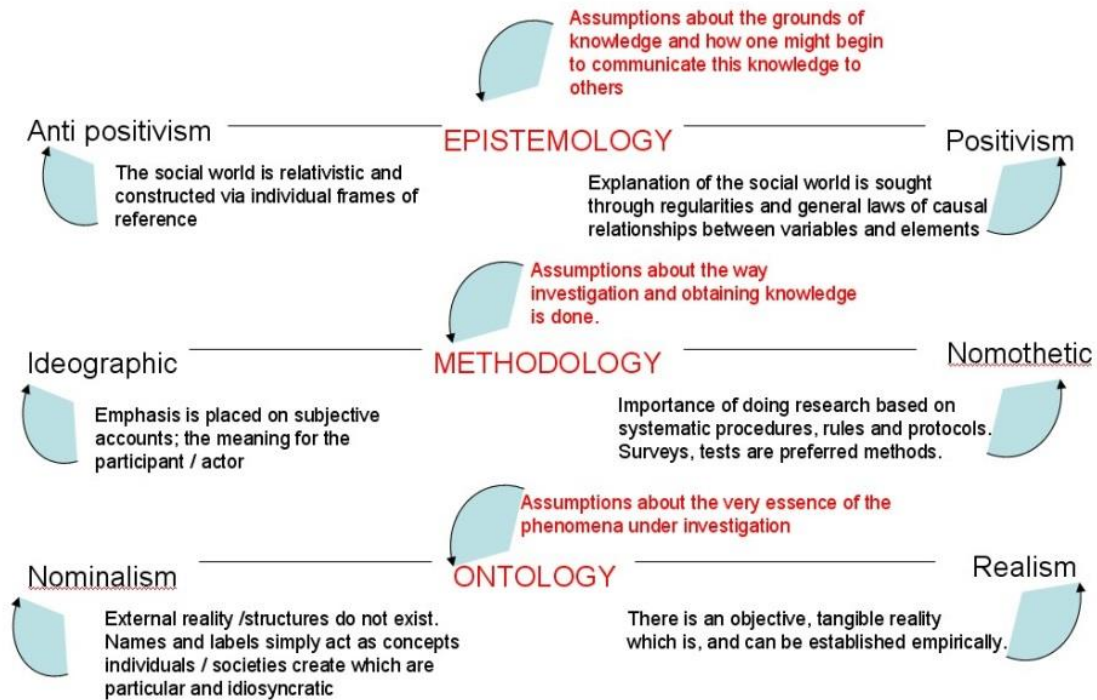


# NLP Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology.

By Bruce Grimley. July 2016.

## The ultimate frame



Grimley, 2013 p2

**Ontology** asks questions about the very essence of our being and existence.

The Ontology of NLP is that there is an objective reality, however we cannot map it perfectly due to our limited sensory scope and intelligence. What we can do is build representations of what we believe the external world to be and act as if such representations were true. Successful people build representations which are useful and obtain valued outcomes, unsuccessful people build representations which are not useful and limit them in their professional and personal lives.

**Epistemology** asks questions, given our ontology, about what is the nature of such knowledge produced and what are the grounds for such production. Gregory Bateson, mentor to the Co-Founders of NLP, saw Ontology and Epistemology as inextricably intertwined.

The Epistemology of NLP is that our knowledge is subjective and constructed through individual frames of reference. As such the nature of NLP knowledge is that it is embodied. This sets up two aspects of NLP knowledge. It is positivist in that through modelling, (NLP methodology), elegant patterns are developed which, when followed, anecdotally produce success within a certain context. (For example matching, pacing and leading in counselling). However because NLP knowledge is

embodied and created through our experience it is also delivered differently by different people in different contexts and calibrating how these patterns are to be delivered in any context is also a form of knowledge which is often described as “skill”. NLP knowledge thus is both positivist and at the same time anti-positivist. It is the claim of NLP that Patterns developed are the Patterns of people who perform at the very top of their craft. In this sense NLP can be described as following the path of Positive Psychology, (Seligman, 2000) *The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and the *Psychology of Expertise*, (Ericsson, 2016)

**Methodology** asks questions about how we investigate and produce the knowledge we have.

For NLP the methodology has always been modeling. However given our Ontology (limited sensory scope and intelligence) there is a split in the NLP community concerning what NLP modeling is.

The Co-Founder of NLP, Dr John Grinder is adamant that if we use our conscious mind to model we simply take on board data which meets the criteria of our own existing unconscious models. He believes in order to model in accordance with the NLP methodology we must learn to suspend our own filtering as much as possible to upload the conscious and unconscious skill of our exemplar in an uncontaminated way.

Fran Burgess, (2014), believes such a perspective is only one of 13 different ways of NLP modelling which are currently subsumed into 4 categories: Intuitive, expressive, metaphoric and cognitive modelling.

In accordance with the positivist aspect of NLP Epistemology, an NLP model, (however produced), is only an NLP model when we can demonstrate empirically that on execution of a particular set of patterns within a defined context, specific outcomes are regularly forthcoming within a certain time frame.

#### ***A note on Ontology and Epistemology***

*“By his claim that (given the fallibility of our sensory awareness) what can be known about the world is equivalent for all practical purposes to what is understood to exist, he unifies epistemology and ontology and transcends the whole idealism/realism argument. Mary Catherine Bateson's explanatory paragraph graph in *Angels Fear* (19) emphasizes that, for Gregory and herself, "because what is, is identical for all human purposes with what can be known, there can be no clear line between epistemology and ontology." Bateson's understanding of the mental nature of all living systems is his ontology.”* (Charlton, 2008)

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