Enjoying Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) , the Art of Excellence: Satir's Communication Styles

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Abstract

Why is it that two people confronted with the same circumstances may engender entirely different consequences in communication? Is it because some people are just lucky? Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) tells us that it is not an issue of luck but that it is closely related to how we respond to a situation with conscious awareness. NLP can enable us to envision possibilities that we did not think were in our hands and that we did not dare dream about once we become aware of the existence of such possibilities. After a brief discussion of how NLP originated in the 1970s and its scope, this article will focus on the five communication styles by Virginia Satir, one of the three successful therapists modeled by the originators of NLP. These five styles of communication can be great help in our communication whether we are dealing with learners, teacher candidates or teachers.

Keywords: Neuro Linguistic Programming; modeling excellence; strategies for personal change; techniques for change in learning and teaching; philosophy of communication; Satir's communication styles

Introduction: Origins and Scope of NLP

NLP originated in the early 1970s by Richard Bandler, a computer scientist and Gestalt therapist, and Dr. John Grinder, a linguist and therapist who were interested in understanding the patterns in human thought and behavior (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). They studied three successful therapists of the time: Milton Erickson, the father of modern hypnotherapy; Fritz Perls, the creator of Gestalt therapy; and Virginia Satir, the mother of modern-day family therapy (Revell & Norman, 2000). Their aim in studying these excellent communicators was to find out the difference that makes the difference between people who are excellent, and others in terms of their patterns of thought and behavior. Grinder and Bandler (1976) argued that the three therapists, "psychotherapeutic wizards" had "magical skills" which could be available to other people in a learnable and explicit form (ibid, p. 3). That is to say, they asserted that these behaviors could be modeled and the magic was, in effect, creating the difference that made the difference, thus coining the term, Neuro Linguistic Programming which "has as its core methodology that of modeling" (Grimley, 2016, p.9).

More specifically, *Neuro* relates to the brain and its functioning with particular focus on the three ways of perceiving and representing the world in our brain: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and, in addition, olfactory and gustatory. *Linguistic* refers to the way the language that we use shapes our perspectives and reflects our experience of the world (Revell & Norman, 2000). *Programming* comprises thinking and behavioral patterns that we have learned through experience. NLP is said to be the art and science of personal excellence as it can guide you in understanding and modeling your own successes (O'Connor & Seymour, 1995) (For a more detailed discussion of these three constructs, see Gül Peker, 2020). When viewed from this perspective, it can be said that NLP is indeed the art of excellence.

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a thorough review of the NLP studies as regards teaching and learning as they were conducted in different contexts and with quite different foci with the result that the scopes of the   articles are vast and hard to categorize. (See Carey, Churches, Hutchinson, Jones, & Tosey, 2010 for a literature review of NLP studies done between 1975-2009 and 1966-2009.) A brief overview of the topics covered and techniques and strategies that are proven to be effective in teaching and learning in the studies conducted after 2000 are as follows: metaprograms and the unconscious factors of students' educational experience (Brown, 2005); NLP strategies in educational organizations (Tomlinson, 2004); the role of NLP in emotional appraisals of learning tasks (Gül Peker, 2010b) ; gains in speaking activities among fifth graders in terms of the use of required vocabulary and grammar (Botero & Mendoza, 2017); the use of the Disney creativity strategy on students' higher order thinking (Amirnudin & Saleh, 2020) and NLP strategies in academic achievement, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking (Zhang, Davarpanah & Izadpanah, 2023).

Further, studies done with teachers in order to explore whether they use NLP techniques and strategies reveal that teachers who use such strategies can help them to create rapport with their learners and thereby cultivate better learning possibilities (Pishghadam & Sayesteh, 2014). Training in NLP techniques is also said to improve teachers' reflective teaching (Marashi & Abedi, 2017) as well as a working knowledge of NLP which can create significant change in a teacher's repertoire (Rayati, 2021). In addition, strategies such as visualization, brain gym, learning styles, metaprograms, modeling and metaphor are noted to bring gains in learning (Targutay, 2010). Yet another gain relates to the use of   NLP as a tool that psychologists can offer to schools particularly to help with exam anxiety (Kudliskis & Burden, 2009).

Another strand of research that comprises more specifically language and skill-based gains relates to various aspects of the learning and teaching process. Some of these are spelling (Hamilton, 2003); building teacher-learner congruence by means of classroom discourse (Millrood, 2004); the use of anchoring, framing and mirroring in conjunction with eye accessing and meta questioning techniques to enable the smooth acquisition of the four basic language skills (Ilyas, 2017).

Many theoreticians and academicians have contributed to the development of NLP over the years with "input from many different disciplines" (Gül Peker, 2010a, p. 89). As a result, NLP has now "become an eclectic approach to growth and change in many areas" (ibid), such as business and management (Knight, 2005; Alder, 2017; O'Connor, 1998; Tosey, 2016; Tosey, Mathison & Michelli , 2005); marketing (Skinner & Stephens, 2003); organizations theory and change (Kotera, Sheffield & Van Gordon, 2019); communication (Charvet, 1997; Dixon, Parr, Yarbrough & Rathael, 1986; Laborde, 1995; Rosenberg, 2000); creativity and the structure of innovation (Buzan, 2002; Dilts, Epstein & Dilts, 1991); health and well-being (Dilts, 1990;); clinical therapy (Konefal & Duncan, 1998; Wake, Gray & Bourke, 2013); conflict management among nurse managers (Gökdere-Çınar & Baykal, 2021), coaching (Garratt, 1999; Grimley, 2012) and the treatment of various disorders such as phobias and anxiety disorders (Wake, Gray & Bourke, 2013).

There are also different organizations and associations which have contributed to the dissemination of ideas and concepts put forth in NLP. Some of these are NLP accrediting ones such as the UK Council for Psychotherapy and others educational such as the International NLP Trainers' Association (INALPTA); the Association for NLP (ANLP International CIC) and the Society for Effective Affective Learning (SEAL) (Tosey & Mathison, 2005). The interested reader may also wish to explore the papers presented by both academicians and practitioners at the three international research conferences organized by ANLP in the UK covering the areas of business, psychotherapy, healthcare and education (ANLP, 2008; ANLP, 2010; ANLP, 2012).

NLP offers an inspiring array of techniques, strategies and theories that can be used to reprogram thoughts, emotions, language and behavior and help learners achieve intended personal and professional goals. Awareness-raising, experiential visualization tasks can enable learners to access optimal learning states and create change (Gül Peker, 2010a). For example, by visualizing a desired behavior, it is possible to change not only beliefs but also behavior and feelings. The reason is that a person does not have to physically engage in the desired behavior; the brain can experience it either physiologically or in the brain with the result that either the external or internal experience will comprise experience as recent neuro science has also proven (Damasio, 2000). Some NLP techniques and strategies can enable accelerated learning (Rose & Nicholl, 1997) and help to understand the role of the body in learning and thinking (Hannaford, 1995). Other programming strategies that can bring about powerful personal change comprise presuppositions, representational systems accessing resourceful states and rapport and communication (Craft, 2001; Gawain, 1995; Revell & Norman, 2000; Revell & Norman, 1999) (See Gül Peker, 2010a for a discussion of NLP presuppositions, the techniques of life levels and creative visualization).

Despite the existence of such inspirational and powerful techniques for modeling success in human experience, NLP has also been subject to some skepticism and criticism and described as "a set of strategies rather than a theory or model" (Craft, 2001, p. 125) and "cargo cult

psychology" (Roderique-Davies, 2009, p.58). And yet, as a method, it has much to offer whether in learning and teaching or in fact any other context where human thoughts and beliefs are concerned (Gül Peker, 2020). It is argued that any human behavior can be modeled once you master "the beliefs, the physiology and the strategies that lie behind it" (O'Connnor & Seymour, 1995, p. 182).

This article takes interest in the communication strategies as proposed by Virginia Satir with the aim of demonstrating how we can understand the philosophy of communication and as a result be able to model the language of communication whether we are dealing with colleagues, managers or learners. The next section discusses this language of communication which draws on a philosophy of a humanistic approach that emphasizes the caring nature of communication. This language of communication is discussed within the four communication stances and the communication style as proposed by Virginia Satir (1916-1988) following a brief introduction on Satir's contributions to therapy and communication.

Satir and Her Philosophy of Communication

> *I believe the greatest gift I can conceive of having from anyone is to be*
> *seen heard, understood and touched by them. The greatest gift I can give*
> *is to see, hear, understand and touch another person. When this is done,*
> *I feel contact has been made.*
>
> Virginia Satir (Making Contact, 1976)

Virginia Satir (1916-1988), who was a pioneer in the field of family therapy, is considered to be a highly distinguished therapist because of her contributions to therapy. She was one of the founders of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, which offered the first formal training program in family therapy. In her career spanning four decades, Satir not only contributed to the training of practitioners in her method and developing programs to support their training, but also played an influential in larger social issues (Banmen, 2002). Satir did not write extensively about the theoretical basis of her work; instead she talked about the constructs of her approach to therapy in her workshops and had the participants experience these constructs through role-plays creating "magic" with her "intimacy and warmth" (Erker, 2017, p. 76). It is said that Satir's work has been very influential by means of the workshops that she conducted for families and individuals in many places in the world (Haber, 2002). Satir has also authored many books, which have been translated into different languages. Thus, Satir's work has left an enduring effect not only in the field of family therapy but also on the current practice of therapy (Banmen & Maki-Banmen, 2014; Erker, 2017).

In particular, what distinguished Satir's model of therapy was that the major goal was to establish a healthy style of communication. The relationship that she herself established with her clients

was based on her high regard for her clients and "seeing each person as unique and important" created a safe environment for change to happen (Erker, 2017, p. 76). Such an approach made her clients feel special and valued. This, coupled with her personal qualities of closeness and kindness to her patients inspired a model of communication that enabled change to happen. Satir's model of communication was what she termed as "making contact" with the client, which was at the core of her approach to communication (Banmen, 2002, p. 18; Satir, 1976). In her therapeutic sessions, Satir made use of "touch, intuition, emotion, personal disclosure, collaboration, and spirituality" in order to bring about change in her clients (Erker, 2017, p.76) (The interested reader may wish to see Banmen, 2002 for the flow of a therapeutic session by Satir). Satir engaged all aspects of the client's self towards change and, later in her career, it was this focus that she developed further to help move her clients and their families toward individual and systemic self-actualization developing a concept of spirituality (Haber, 2002). Satir (1988) argued that everyone "emerges as a bud on a universal spiritual tree" which connects us to each other (p.336). This idea of spirituality does not emanate from any religious context. It denotes "a life force" which we all need "to be open to and to contact" if we want to meet "the challenge of becoming more fully human" (ibid). This idea of spirituality is what Satir (2008) calls "a life force or universal mind" that helps a person understand their beliefs and feelings of self-worth (p.57). That is to say, it is a holistic approach to life (See Banmen, 2002 for a comprehensive discussion of the Satir model, entitled "Personal Iceberg Metaphor"). In fact, Satir was considered to be "an integrative humanist who included body, mind, emotional, and spiritual processes" in order to bring about change in systems "ranging from the molecular to the cosmic" (Haber, 2002, p. 23).

In order to achieve such a caring and humanistic communication, it is essential that we become aware of the behavioral patterns of people when they are under stress. It is argued that such behavioral patterns occur when people have not developed "a solid, appreciative sense of self-worth" (Satir, 1988, p.80). Two observations seem particularly important. First of all, there are five ways that people may use to communicate. Four of these styles, called coping stances, are those that people may behave in when they are under stress and afraid of being rejected: blaming, placating, being super reasonable or distracting. It is said that people mostly use one major coping stance; however, they may also use all of the four coping stances depending on the context. To illustrate, a person may be using the blaming stance at work or distracting at home or placating at a dinner with friends (Banmen, 2002). The fifth stance proposed by Satir is actually the communication style that she developed as a model in which the aim was to create a healthy communication style which is not inhibited or obstructed (Okur, 2020). Satir's model of communication based on the concept of communication stances, developed in the 1960s and 1970s, became a model called the Human Validation Process Model and the Growth Model (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991).

A second observation is that in any communication a person's non-verbal communication is also reflected in their communication through facial expressions, body posture, muscle tone, breathing

tempo, voice tone and gestures. Satir (1985) emphasized that in terms of body language, the four coping stances display different body language. Blamers who always believe that they are in the right may act aggressive using a loud voice and they may be frequently seen as pointing a finger. Placaters go into a low body position although they may be right. As they wish not be seen as confronting anyone, they show that with their body posture. Super Reasonable people seem to be in control all the time and do not show any emotion. They may exhibit signs of stiffness in their body. Distracters are confused and what they say may not make any sense. They may be swinging their arms or legs or walking aimlessly here and there. In short, the people demonstrating these coping stances reflect a low self-worth with their body language On the other hand, a person who is communicating in a caring and humanistic manner shows a relaxed body posture, regular breathing and talking in a confident style (Satir, 1985; Banmen, 2002).

When people are communicating with one another in one of the four coping stances, it shows that they are faced with a problem which they need to deal with. The implication is that the problem is not the problem itself but that coping as it is "the outcome of self-worth, rules of the family systems, and links to the outside world" (Satir & Baldwin, 1983, p. 157). Virginia Satir argued that problems will always exist as they are inherent in life. The important issue is the kind of coping skills that we possess in order to manage these problems. For Satir , coping means the ability to communicate our thoughts in a clear and direct manner. It also means to communicate our feelings in a truthful and gracious manner welcoming the opportunity to change (Banmen, 2002; Satir 1988; Satir & Baldwin, 1983). Correspondingly, the more coping skills we develop, the better we will feel about ourselves.

The four coping stances do not show personality characteristics; they only imply ways of survival under emotional stress which are born out of "limited beliefs and negative emotions" (Haitoglou, 2017, p. 7) that come from out childhood which, ordinarily, we do not usually recognize or feel responsible for (Satir, 1988). That is to say, the way we communicate is learned and unconscious. For example, a baby who does not have any knowledge in interacting with other people learns how to approach new experiences by interacting with those who are responsible for raising them. If this is true, that is to say, if indeed communication is learned, then it can be argued that it is also the case that all elements in any exchange of communication can be changed. To this end, we can make use of "simple strategies to develop clear, concise, loving, and caring communication will allow for a love-rich connection" (Haitoglou, 2017, p. 11).

Satir's contributions in terms of the development of a caring and humanistic communication and the awareness and management of the coping stances greatly influenced the role of communication in NLP, which informs us that by using conscious strategies of rapport one can establish a harmonious relationship (Laborde, 1995; Knight, 2005; Kotera et. al, 2019; Revell & Norman, 2000). A model of communication entitled Nonviolent Communication has also been developed and used as a model of communication in many contexts (Rosenberg, 2000). NLP has made use of models that can help us to get into rapport with other people by using the right body

posture, voice tonality, language, active listening skills, careful observation and congruence (Revell, 2000). In particular, congruence is considered an important concept in establishing rapport. This was one of the essential points that Satir emphasized in her writing and training. She asserted that people who were able to create rapport were those that were consistent and harmonious in their communication, that is to say they were congruent.

Understanding Satir's Coping Stances

This section of the article elaborates on the four coping stances introduced in the previous section and the communication style as put forth by Satir (1988). The four stances are universal patterns used by people because they are afraid of being rejected. For this reason, they try to camouflage it in four ways. The first of these stances is the *Blamer* who is "a fault finder, a dictator and a boss who acts superior" (ibid, p. 87). The reason why the Blamer is using this stance can be explicated by looking behind the feeling of the stance: the blamer feels unhappy and is lonely. They may also be experiencing fear. Thus, they blame the other person so that that person will see them as strong. The *Placater* is always trying to please other people, always apologizing and never disagreeing with anyone. The feeling behind this stance is that placaters feel that they are worthless. What they are trying to do by placating not to make the other person angry so that can get their approval. The *Super Reasonable* (also called the *Computer)* is always "very correct and reasonable". They tend to speak with all the facts and data, never showing any feeling. The reason why they feel as such is that are vulnerable. By behaving in such a way, the Super Reasonable feels that no harm will come. The *Distracter* says irrelevant things and can never stay on the point. They always seem to be going on about other things. The feeling that they experience is that nobody really cares and that there is no place for them there. As mentioned, all these coping stances show some of kind coping mechanism in dealing with the underlying fear of rejection by behaving as if the fear of rejection is not there (ibid).
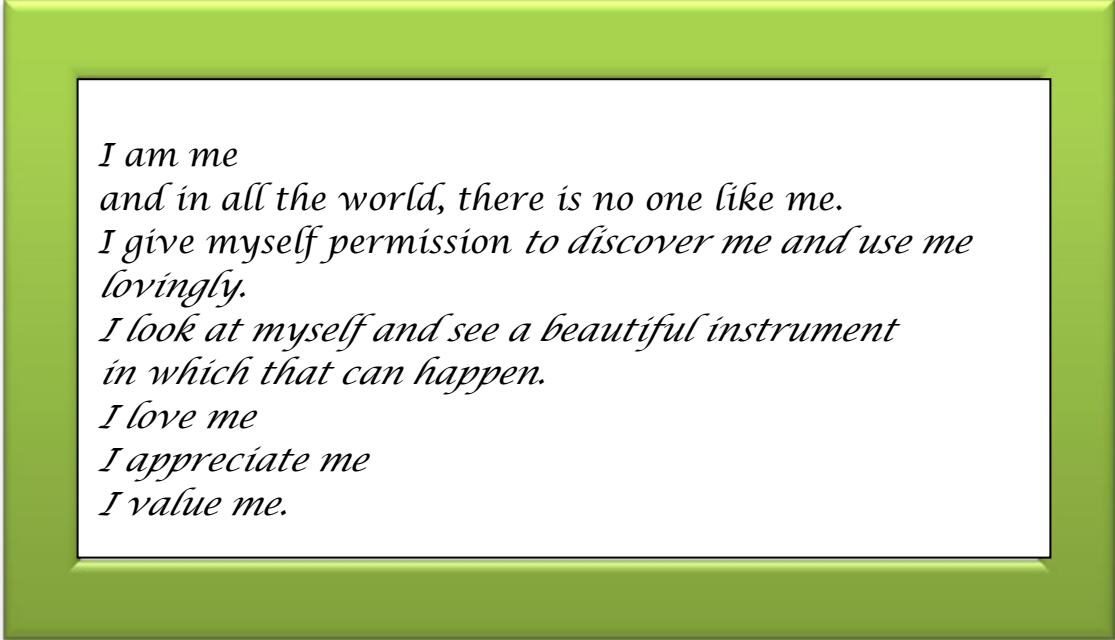
Virginia Satir (1988), emphasizing the importance of body language, demonstrated the different body postures of the four stances in her training and books. Figure 1 shows the illustrations that Satir used in her book. The Blamer is quite conspicuous with their finger pointing to the other person and leaning forward on one leg. The Placater is usually seen kneeling on one knee, head up and one hand put out in a begging manner. The Super Reasonable makes as little movement as possible, standing with a stiff body. The Distracter constantly moves all parts of their body going in different directions. In her workshops, Satir also asked people to get into the body postures of the Blamer, Placater, Super Reasonable and Distracter four stances. This role play technique was a means to understand the other person, empathize with them and improve communication by resolving the conflict non-verbally (See Satir 1985 for a role play used in a keynote address). Figure 1 shows these illustrations as given in Satir (1988).

Superreasonable   Irrelevant   Leveling   Placating   Blaming
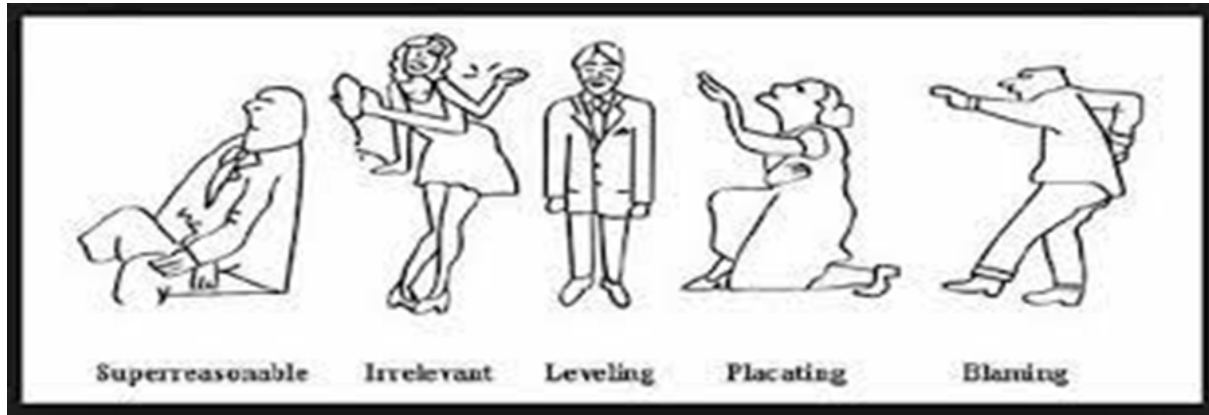
Figure 1. **The Illustrations of Communication Styles from Satir (1988)**

The fifth stance, as can also be seen in the figure, is actually a communication style advocated by Satir (1988) and entitled *Leveling.* It is a productive and constructive style which is geared towards solving or dealing a problem in a creative way. Levelers do not believe that there are threats to their self-worth; as a result, their goal is mutual problem-solving. Their communication is based on expressing oneself without using any of the four stances mentioned, blaming, placating, being super reasonable or distracting. Leveling is actually a response that is genuine and straightforward and whole hearted. Levelers are true to what they think indicating the presence of awareness, opennness and connection which is interpersonal, connected to self and also to their spirituality (Satir, 1988). Their communication is whole in the sense that body, thoughts and feelings are in harmony and and therefore congruent. As mentioned, their body language also reflects this congruence, that is to say, their non-verbal and verbal messages match. This congruent approach shows that Satir was "an integrative humanist who included body, mind, emotional, and spiritual processes to transform systems ranging from the molecular to the cosmic" (Haber, 2002, p. 23). Satir (1988) drew attention to the importance of acknowledging one's self-worth and believing in the power of one's uniqueness as can be seen in the following quote:

> *I am me*
> *and in all the world, there is no one like me.*
> *I give myself permission to discover me and use me*
> *lovingly.*
> *I look at myself and see a beautiful instrument*
> *in which that can happen.*
> *I love me*
> *I appreciate me*
> *I value me.*

Satir, V., Banmen, J., & Gerber, J. (1985). Meditations and Inspirations

Identifying Communication Styles

This section of the article looks at sample excerpts that may be uttered in the five communication styles discussed thus far with the aim of making clear how the coping stances are used in daily life. Four of these samples have been written for the purposes of this article, and the fifth is taken from Virginia Satir's 1985 Keynote address. The context is an office with focus on the writing of an official report. The excerpts also include possible body postures.

Blamer

I've just looked at your report..My God..you are soo off the target. It's just not good enough. How can you be so irresponsible? You're always doing this! What's the matter with you?

You may have had no difficulty in identifying this coping stance as it is one that most of us use quite regularly in the day to day running of our lives whether we are at work, at home or else where. It is the blamer strategy used by the boss in communicating with an employee in an imaginary situation. This excerpt demonstrates the choice of words of blame and how they find fault with the other person while communicating about a report that they have asked the other person to write. The body language also reflects this bossy style which shows the person leaning forward on one leg and a finger always pointing to the other person in a threatening manner .

Placater

The next sample of a coping stance is one that would be done by a placater:

Oh, Mr. Deep. I'm so so so sorry. Please don't get angry with me. I really didn't mean to upset you. If you think the report is badly written I can throw it away. Oh my God, that was really really terrible of me. Oh God, I shouldn't even exist.

This stance is also quite easy to identify since we may witness people demonstrating such a strategy at work while communicating with their boss. In this imaginary context, the employee is trying to please the boss in order to avoid any confrontation or fear of rejection. As mentioned, this is also reflected in the body language of the Placater who usually kneels on one knee, head up and one hand put out in a begging manner.

Super Reasonable
The third sample is that of the Super Reasonable who may speak in the following manner:

It's great that you asked that question because I just happen to have a report from the Northern Instıtute of Statistics in which there is data given about this kind of report. If we were to talk about those statistcs, I can say that there is 100 % probabality of such a report covering the basic goals and activities of our company. I think you will be more informed when you read it. Thank you.

As mentioned, the Super Reasonable talks only with facts and data so as to sound correct and reasonable.The aim is to avoid any possible criticism. The Super Reasonable makes as little movement as possible; in fact their body may look quite stiff with no show of any emotion.

Distracter
The fourth coping stance would be demonstrated in the following way:

Hah hah ha…(laughing hysterically). I know that someone would come up with this. Hah hah ha…You know.. that reminds me of a joke..a joke..hah hah…cup of tea? My my my..your hair looks gorgeous. You know what? This room could do with a bit of redecorating. It looks a bit depressing, doesn't it?

The Distracter is taking the focus away from the report and thus, in their own way, avoiding any blame or confrontation that may be directed at them. The position stance of the Distracter is quite conspicuous as they may constantly be moving all parts of their body with arms and hands moving in opposite directions and making exaggerated gestures.

Leveler
The last sample is that of Leveling. As mentioned, it is an excerpt taken from Satir's 1985 Key Note address and is as follows:
"One of the nicest things that anybody can do is to share what they feel. And I feel that you've done that for me. Doesn't necessarily mean that we're together in what we're doing 'cause I

don't know if I understand completely what you're saying and I don't know if you understand completely what I am saying. But I really like the fact that you've taken the trouble. You have taken the interest to be able to share this with me. Can we talk further about it?"

This excerpt exemplifies the caring and humanistic aspect of communication in the pursuit of such a purpose and the resulting the choice of words. It acknowledges any feelings that may have arisen during the communication and, as mentioned, expressing them in a truthful and graceful manner which is argued to be crucial in any exhange of communication. Attention is also drawn to the fact that there are more levels that can be seen on the surface and which constitues only a small segment of what is happening in the communication as discussed in the Personal Iceberg Metaphor.

More recently, Satir's communication styles with the corresponding body postures have been developed and theorized into "Stance-Dances" (Haitoglou, 2017). The suggested "flow Stance-Dances" are meant to be used in place of the four stress stances (ibid, p. 12). These poses are a blend of the body postures as in the Satir model, yoga and Siberian dance . It is argued that by consciously changing our physiology, we can change our neurology and, as a result, we can initiate change. Thus, it seems crucial to pay attention to the physical as well as the cognitive dimension as this awareness can pave the way for positive systemic change which will be without one's cognitive awareness (ibid).

Concluding Remarks

This article has discussed Virginia Satir's philosophy of communication that has influenced the communication model of building rapport in NLP following a brief introduction to the contexts in which NLP has been investigated and used. The four coping stances and a communication style used by people in any exchange of communication as argued by Satir (1988) have been reviewed. These coping stances are actually survival skills which we have learned in our childhood as ways of helping us manage any threat to our self-worth. Each stance has a particular physiology that can be brought to our conscious awareness. In addition, if that physical stance is changed, it can lead to positive cognitive change. It is crucial to understand and become aware of the four coping stances as they can prevent us from engaging in a healthy communication which is whole, caring and pays respect to the other person.

Leveling, the communication style suggested by Satir is a humanistic and caring philosophy which is at the heart of the communication style that she wrote about and believed in passionately. Satir (1988) always stressed the importance of being centered which for her meant reaching the "wise and calm part of ourselves" arguing that we could do this " when we are calm inside, when we feel good about ourselves, and when we know how to take positive approaches" (p.338) (For a sample relaxation exercise for centering see Satir, 1988, pp. 338-339). In recent years, we continue to see the emergence of work that supports the principles of the Satir model such as mindfulness and positive psychology (Carlock, 2017).

It is the hope of this article to have drawn attention to an approach that can bring us peace, harmony, respect for oneself and others and achieve excellence in communication. In effect, we can and must take responsibility to attract and create those positive and caring circumstances in order to achieve excellence not only in communication but also our professional lives. Perhaps the best way to achieve this is by coming together as "a circle of scholars" comprising teachers, learners and academicians "beyond borders" (Nunn, 2015, p.54) who can collaborate, investigate, share and learn from each other. Such learning may enable us to understand and envisage diverse ways of how we can actually build and maintain working theories of a caring and humanistic communication that will grow and flourish in our professional "community of practice" (Fullan, 2016, p. 91; Nunn, 2015, p.52).

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