

# NLP and Wilber's 4 Quadrant model



by Martin Shervington

**H**AVING spent several years studying the writer Ken Wilber's work alongside NLP training, I found myself becoming increasingly curious to know where Neuro linguistic Programming fits into his conception of 'A Theory of Everything' and Integral Psychology. This preliminary article outlines a framework that may help to locate NLP within the boundaries of developmental psychology. My intention at this stage is simply to spark an interest with this short piece. There are further book references at the end that will help the fire to burn more brightly.

Let me begin with a question about a short statement that this article will attempt to unpack: 'What has to be in place for the phrase: "I am an NLP practitioner" to have significance in the world at large?' Here we have a question that could be answered in many different ways. In NLP terms it is a statement about 'identity' (I am...) and also about what I am capable of doing (practising NLP). But for me to be able to make an identity statement which implies my capabilities I must have interpreted what I do in the context of the NLP community which itself arises through external recognition by some formal system (It) that specifies and ratifies the nature of my training. Thus, my identity, I, as an NLP practitioner is intimately correlated with the NLP culture (We) which in turn exists by virtue of a recognised system of certification for specified practices.

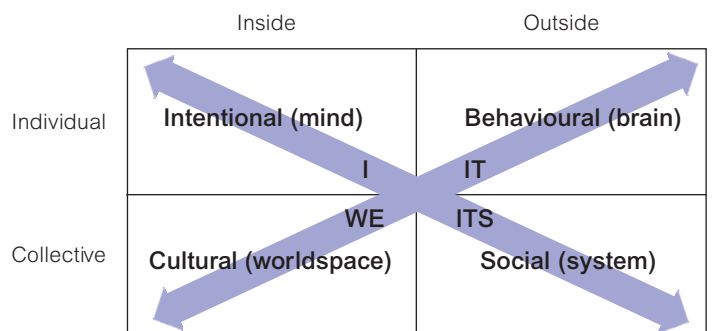
So the statement 'I am an NLP practitioner' exists in four domains – my mind ('I' actually experience what it means to be a practitioner), my brain ('it' reflects my experience through changes in synaptic structure), the culture (the 'We' which places some level of value on my role as practitioner) and the organisational system (Its) which was responsible for endorsing the training I received as a practitioner.

NLP then, as the art and science of subjective experience, can be placed in a larger framework whose recognition may, in turn, help increase its applications, expressed as lines of development, in the world at large.

In order to have a more complete understanding of reality at whatever level of consciousness, Wilber suggests that all four quadrants (I, we, it and its) need to be considered in all life areas. To ignore any one is to reduce 'reality' into something that it is not. Below we will start to unpack and expand the model and its applications.

## The overview

In Ken Wilber's *A Theory of Everything* (one of many of Wilber's books to include this model) he explains that existence has developed through four distinct, but not separate, areas.



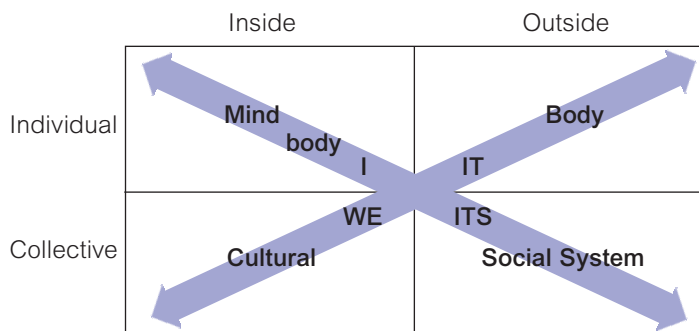
From the moment of the Big Bang at the beginning of time (shown symbolically in the centre), there has been an evolution in different areas. When humans came on the scene, it is expressed through the four areas of "I, we, it and its". They are manifested as: what is going on inside you (your thoughts, perceptions etc.), your body (and brain), the society you live in and the culture (or shared view of the world).

## The Individual quadrants

Before turning to the collective quadrants, let us look at the individual ones: 'I' and 'it'. The suggestion is that there is a direct correlation between the two quadrants and without the brain, there can be no mind. Think to yourself: "I'm going to read a book". You will have experienced the thought: "I'm going to read a book", accompanied by words, or pictures, or both. There is *also* corresponding activity in the brain, i.e. brain wave state alters, dopamine increases etc.

So what is a major difference between the brain and mind? As you know, the brain is a tangible 'thing' that can be *objectively* observed, but for mind you have to ask questions or experience the content. No matter how much external prodding and poking around you do, you will still not find the experience of the thought. (The 'it' and 'its' quadrants are the realms of science and social science – and the tendency has been 'If you can't hit it with a

hammer, it ain't real!') The thought *is* experienced, however. This is the 'I' domain – the inner world of experience; just as valid, but experienced internally. The 'it' or brain domain is not separate from it, but, nonetheless, different.



The diagram above shows how, even though the physical 'Body' (capital 'B') is an 'it', the experience of the subjective feelings, emotions and sensations of the 'body' are actual within the 'I' domain. So the 'Body' is objective whereas the 'body' is in the mind (a subjective experience).

In NLP we tend to focus on the upper left quadrant. We tend to be very much in the 'I' domain. And there is no problem with that either. The point of Wilber's model is to show that there are other domains that 'I' is firmly related to and inseparable from. In effect the 'I' cannot exist without the other three domains, but an individual can, however, focus more attention in study and application on this domain (as they could and do with any of the other three).

## The Collective areas

Imagine if you were to sit on a park bench and you didn't see anyone. Ever. Or at the bakery, or the bookstore. It is not possible, as life is dependent upon other people. The lower left (culture) refers to values that we share at a particular point. We 'make meaning' in the world dependent upon the culture that we are in. 'NLP practitioner' will have no meaning at all outside of a quite limited circle of people but, within it there are complex equivalences bounding around. 'That must mean that they have done X, Y And Z.' In other words, there is mutual understanding. Culture does, however, have its own 'it' correlate. This is the social system that it exists within. For example, for the thought 'I am going to eat ice cream on the beach' there must be a system set up whereby a person can obtain ice cream. There must also be a lack of restrictions upon someone eating, either ice cream per se, or at the location of a beach. So the social system governs rules, regulations etc.

On the other hand, the culture will add meaning to this whole event. There is consensus within the cultural worldview as to whether the event is worthwhile, good/bad and so on. There is 'meaning' or interpretation added to the event. NLP is very aware of adding a layer of interpretation to events and, with the above understanding, it becomes easier to understand that both the individual and collective domains will have a relationship to meaning.

## 4 quadrant thinking

Next, let's take a belief through the 4 quadrants.

When you say the belief "I know I can learn 6 step reframing easily", the belief has expression within the four domains of body, mind, culture and society. Thus, 'I' experience the thought as a string of inner dialogue and some visual images. Again, the brain will have dopamine levels alter, synapses fire etc. ('it'). If a different language was spoken, the belief would consist of different symbols or words with different meanings (culture – 'we'). Also, if there were no books, a different thought might be

there. It may be "I'm going to enjoy washing my clothes by the river" (social – 'its').

So the thought is dependent upon other people and the system as well as the individual. Culture is *needed* to develop these thoughts. If there were no people, who would have written the book that you will learn from? Or, how can language develop without people to share it with?

The same goes for the social quadrant. The level of technology (using this term to include agriculture etc.) and the codes of practice present will determine the thought. Culture needs something substantial to operate in e.g. buildings. The book also needs to be printed and distributed.

You wouldn't be reading this page if it was any other way. The belief, "I know I can learn 6 step reframing easily", needs all four quadrants to exist.

## Conclusion – just the beginning

To conclude, when NLP is learned, taught and applied, it exists in the context of the 4 Quadrants. Understanding this, there can be more balance through developing mind, body, culture and social systems. Also, it is very important to know that within Wilber's model there are stages of development in all the quadrants. It may be for another article, or personal reading (see below), but an appreciation of differences between individuals, and in particular cultures, is important in bridging gulfs of understanding. Understanding, for instance, the motivations of a particular worldview (culture) that is very different to one's own is essential on a global scale. How groups of other people make meaning in the world is based in this domain; individual's intentions and behaviours that are embedded within this worldview will then determine the effects on the world around us. There needs to be mutual understanding.

The main purpose of this 4 quadrant model is the applications it has for human understanding of life. Without application it is useful, but limited. As such, finding points of application in business, education, medicine, politics etc are already well underway.

I anticipate NLP being a way that will also help individuals increase this level of understanding, especially when it is seen in relation to Ken Wilber's work. As it has been often commented, it is up to us to seek out useful models and make a difference to those around us. This is one of a handful of models that I believe can make a huge difference to the lives of us all.

[Please note, that anything useful in this article is down to Ken Wilber (any inadequacies are entirely my own).]

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For further reading:

Ken Wilber: *Brief History of Everything; A Theory of Everything; Integral Psychology.*

Robert Kegan: *The Evolving Self*

Beck and Cowan *Spiral Dynamics*; I have not included too much about levels of consciousness within this piece, but even Wilber now finds this a friendly way into explaining this area ('A Theory of Everything' covers this alongside and integrated with Wilber's models).

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