

THE SOCIAL PANORAMA MODEL

Self and Others in Mental Space

Lucas Derks

People, like all things, exist in space. Human beings start to represent the space around them probably in the womb. Cognitive linguists gave the name “mental space” to the representation of physical space in the mind. *Mental space* is like a three dimensional unconscious black board on which the cognitive map of reality is drawn.

The physical reality of humans living on earth naturally coincides with a diversity of spatial situations between them. A person’s *model of the social world* is constructed from generalizations about where the person believes he or she is situated relative to others. The way an individual positions him/ herself in regards to others in mental space governs the better part of social behavior and is the foundation of the social side of personality. That is why the spatial characteristics of social imagery provide an effective tool for psychotherapeutic diagnosis and intervention.

Creating the Model – The Why

Being a social psychologist, I searched for NLP extensions for the social part of subjective experience. Early clues came from witnessing the great influence of the imagined size of authority figures. When large images of authorities were shrunken by the subjects, they felt immediate relief. During the development of the *social panorama* model, I was inspired by NLP’s model of the experience of time, the *Time-Line*. This model shows how time is generally represented spatially with the past, the present and the future being projected at different locations in *mental space* (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002).

After experimenting with therapy clients for several years, it became all very obvious--social experience is primarily the result of spatial constructs. *Social Panorama* captures the idea that people live within an imaginary landscape filled with social images. The locations where these social representations appear in this panorama, determine the emotional quality of the relationships. In brief: *relation equals location*. I saw the great potential of this concept and since 1995 I have been traveling around the world to educate people in the application of these ideas.

Why is this Important for NLP?

The strength of the *Social Panorama Model* is primarily found in how it simplifies all kinds of social relationships; and in the tools it provides to improve people’s social lives.

The Social Panorama Model is built on the work of Bandler and Grinder (1979), but is not the result of the *modeling of single outstanding experts* (Bostic St. Clair and Grinder, 2001). It is built from exploring the patterns in the *subjective experience* in a population (thousands) of ordinary people (*population modeling*). I believe that *population modeling* is one of the ways that will enable NLP to develop.

The Scope of Applications: Why it is Relevant

Because almost all human problems have something to do with relationships (have social components), the Social Panorama Model is highly applicable to personal development. Its systematic nature clarifies even the most complicated relational themes. It is an NLP instrument that can, in an often surprisingly simple way, be used to work with relationships with loved ones, friends, colleagues, children, parents, strangers, groups, teams, the deceased, ghosts and gods. It is also applicable in cases where lack of self-worth and self-confidence are problems. It is also a very useful approach when the subject is relationships between groups, tribes, peoples, political parties, departments and organizations (Derks, 2005).

Why is it an innovation in NLP?

The Social Panorama fits in the NLP tradition of working with Sub-Modalities, parts and resources (Bandler, 1985, Bandler and Grinder 1982). The central idea is: that when people feel troubled about relationships, this is the result of how they have unconsciously placed themselves and the others in mental space. This implies that when one's relationship with someone is bad, the mental representation of this person is sited on a *bad spot* in one's social panorama.

Simple as this may sound, it opens the way for *single sided changes* where the client improves his side of the coin by moving his representation of the other to a better location. The place where a person is projected creates an expectation about how they will interact with each other. A change in location implies a shift in that expectation. A relocated social image causes instant emotional changes and will result in different unconscious non-verbal behavior. This generally helps to break the limiting feedback loop between those involved.

For example, if Peter hates John, then Peter has represented John on an unfavorable location in his social panorama. With the aid of special techniques, Peter moves John's image to a better spot in mental space. Now Peter immediately feels different about John. When he meets John in reality, Peter will automatically behave in a more relaxed and tolerant way. John senses this on an unconscious level and may become also less tense. This can cause John to change his attitude towards Peter.

Work with the Social Panorama forces one to focus on the role of the self concept in social life. A relationship always has two sides: (1) the representation of the self in combination with (2) how the other is seen and felt (Augustinos and Innes, 1990). One of my discoveries is the spatial structure of the self concept.

The first step for working with the social panorama model is to distinguish between *real flesh and blood people* and the *mental representations* of people. The latter I started to call

personifications to clarify the difference (Derks, 2005). The social panorama model aims directly at changing these *personifications*. They make up one's model of social reality and so can be used as a tool to help change someone's model of the social world. This work done in the imagination may have a strong and immediate effect on real people's lives. How do we find the personifications and their locations in a reliable way? The first help comes from natural language.

Description of Use: Accessing the Locations of Social Images

Many people describe their relationships in terms of *high, low, in front of, behind, beside, between, close* and *distant*. Example: 'Our children came *between* us'. They are expressing themselves in terms of location. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's early work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) calls these expressions metaphoric. In their more recent work *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1998), they pointed out, that most of our abstract thinking results from generalized bodily experience. In other words, as a child we have seen and felt many large, strong, close, distant and warm people. We generalize these experiences into relational concepts that everybody intuitively understands because we all share these basic experiences. For instance:

Distance: The proximity of personifications has a tremendous influence. People can represent others from galaxies away to within the centre of their bodies. Externally referenced people tend to have more close social representations while internally referenced people tend to have the others at some distance. To feel lonely, one has to represent people far away. Loved ones are not only seen but also felt very near.

Vertical: The size of a personification is easily measured by whether their eyes are seen above or below one's own eye level. Size translates into importance. For the experience of power and authority the balance between the size of the self image and the size of the image of the other is decisive.

Horizontal: Many people use left/right to differentiate between good/bad; nice/nasty.

Side by side: Most people experience side by side as cooperative and as one might expect, opposed to each other as conflicting. However, nose to nose with a smile may be positive but nasty with a serious expression.

How the Model Works: Techniques for Finding the Location of a Personification

In the context of psychotherapy, most clients follow instructions quite easily. The three approaches below are reliable ways for finding the locations of problematic personifications. When people are not able to follow these steps, it is wise to check other aspects of the cooperation. However, some individuals are just trying too hard; they don't trust the validity of the vague unconscious knowledge that comes into awareness this way. They need to be educated first. For instance, let them imagine they are seated in their living room, and then ask them to point out the location of a piece of furniture. When they can do that, make them move it to an unfavorable place: 'Put the piano in front of the TV.' Their reactions will help to point out what it is that they need to do for working with the social panorama. 'How do you know that the piano stands there... and should stay there?'

Ways to find the Location of a Personification

We reduce what we want to know about a personification to its *direction, distance, eye level* and *the direction in which it is looking*, all from the perspective of the subject.

A) From *the feeling that belongs to a relationship*.

1. Have the client evoke the feeling that belongs to the relationship that is being explored.
2. As soon as the client is associated in the feeling, ask him to point at the direction in which he *senses* the person involved. (or '*sees with his eyes closed*', or '*Where he notices the person*', or '*where is the picture in your mind of that person*')
3. Ask to point out the exact distance, the eye level and the direction in which the eyes are looking.

B) From *all the people in the world*.

1. Ask the client think about humanity in his own way and then invite him to feel himself in the middle of all the people in the world: in an associated manner.
2. Ask the client to name the personification with his inner voice and then point out where, among all those people, the person involved is located or.
3. As soon as the client points out the location, ask about eye level and eye direction.

Changing relationships unilaterally

Moving a personification.

The formula *relationship=location* implies that a personification with whom the relationship is not satisfactory should be moved to a better spot. The central question then is: *Where to?* The simplest approach is to ask the client *to where* he thinks the personification should move, but experience shows that this does not always give the best results. In that case a consultant can *suggest and test* locations on the basis of *universal patterns* (Derks,1995). These are:

1. The intensity of social feelings increases the closer a personification comes, and attenuates as it moves away.
2. The higher above eye level a personification rises, the greater its influence. Lower it and the influence decreases.
3. The direction in which a personification is looking means attention.
4. Personifications that are straight in front get much attention and have a great influence.
5. Personifications that are straight in front mean confrontation or intimacy depending on the facial expression.
6. Personifications that are straight in front may interfere with the self-image.
7. Personifications with the same eye direction have shared attention.
8. Personifications at the back, who look in the same direction as the subject, are either supporting or controlling.
9. Shared locations (two personifications on the same spot) often result in identity confusion.
10. Bi-locations and tri-locations cause uncertain relationships and show role conflict.
11. Domination and authority are present when the other appears higher, closer, broader and/or lighter than the self-image.

A coach or therapist can assist someone in finding a suitable location for a personification with the help of the above directions. Quite often this may not be precise enough. For finding *the exact* spot one may use the following technique:

Using Reference Personifications

1. Determine the location of the problematic personification.
2. Determine the location of a reference personification. ‘Do you know someone with whom you have a relationship similar to what you *would like* with the problem person?’ When the client identifies someone, find his or her location in the client’s social panorama. Ask if the two *real people* know each other. (If they know each other, one needs to make sure that both, the problem personification and the reference personification, end up at a suitable location. If they don’t know each other, then the reference personification is from a different *social context* and can go to ‘sleep’. Since we only need the reference to identify the appropriate location.)
3. Have the client shift the problematic personification in the direction of the place of the reference personification. ‘How far did the problem personification manage to move?’
4. Check if this new position is satisfactory.
5. If it is, then go on the closing procedure (see below)
6. If not, (and this usually happens) add lacking abilities to the problematic personification. (See next technique)

Enrichment with missing abilities:

1. Establish the *target location* to which the problem personification must be moved.
2. Ask what *ability* the problem personification *lacks* that prevents him/her from being able to reach this *target location*. Ask the client name this capability.
3. Next, remember a time when he strongly and clearly did apply this capability him/herself and let him/her associate in that experience.
4. When client is intensely associated in using this capability, ask him or her to attach a color to it and to imagine being surrounded by this color.
5. Now use the color as an imaginary medium to send the ability to the problem personification. (If there is more than one capability involved, repeat steps 2 to 6.)
6. Check if the problem personification has reached a satisfactory location.
7. If he has not, go back to 5. If he has, do the next *closing procedure*.

Closing procedure:

1. Ask the client to imagine *fixating* or *locking* the former problem personification by ‘mouse clicking’ in its new place.
2. Test the ecology: ‘Imagine that this is how you must relate to this person for the rest of your life. What would you lose?’ and/or ‘Imagine that you meet this person and he behaves in the same old rotten way. How would you react?’ and/or ‘Come on help me out, be creative – think of an objection to this change!’
3. Deal with all objections with the appropriate NLP processes.

Framing the Transfer of Resources to Others

Many NLP techniques transfer resources to the others in one's mind. In most such procedures a capability that is naturally used in context X, but not in context Y, is transferred from context X to context Y. In the Social Panorama, you transfer resources from the client A, who has the ability, to personification B who lacks it. This is based on the idea that the client A and the personification B are both *parts* of the same human mind. For the human psyche there is no such thing as real people; the mind knows only personifications: social representations. To help clients to grasp this point we may try the following framings:

1. You give your ability to the imperfect copy of the other that you have made in your mind. In that way you improve your hated copy.
2. The ugly image that you had of the other person was not accurate and neither is the improved one that you have created depicting reality. It is immaterial whether or not it is real; the point is that you now can deal with each other.
3. If you believe that someone lacks a capability, the way you interact with him will keep him from showing that he can do it at least a little bit.

Psychosomatic Symptoms Caused by a Personification

Chronic physical symptoms can be the result of the influence of personifications. Usually the feelings towards these personifications are strong (hate, fear or love) and they are perceived in/or near the client's body – usually close to the physical symptoms. It is possible that the client is not aware of their existence. This personification can cause a continuous tension in muscles, skin or organs with chronic symptoms as a result. Such a personification can be moved by the Social Panorama techniques presented here.

Deep Rooted Social Personality Traits

With countless clients, my colleagues (Walker, 1996) and I explored what we call the family panorama and the important role of family ties and intimate relations in mental health. We presumed that early family ties had great influence on social development and so explored the spatial configuration of families through regression. With the aid of simple hypnotic techniques, we assisted clients to go back in time to revive their childhood. They are stimulated to explore the locations of mum, dad, their siblings and the other family members.

Supported by developmental psychology (Greenspan, 1997), one can state that the configuration of the family in early childhood forms the blueprint for the social side of personality. Disturbing social personality traits: unproductive patterns that people maintain with other people are often rooted before age six within the *family panorama*. Working with the family panorama from childhood has proven to be one of the most effective and elegant approaches to personality change.

The Spiritual Panorama

The representation of the social world is not limited to living humans. With the same principles of personifications in mental space, people represent virtual comrades, imaginary creations like the characters in novels, the death, ancestors, spirits, gods, saints, angels, aliens and ghost.

In 1996 this resulted in the so called *spiritual panorama*, a tool that enables therapists to approach religious issues in a content free, process oriented and secular way. With the increasing popularity of *the spiritual level* in NLP, this is a useful instrument to prevent NLP from slipping away into new age religiosity.

Exploring Self-Awareness

It is often difficult to find the right vocabulary to speak of our ‘selves’, mainly because much of the experience is inaccessible to reason. When it comes to expressing our true self we find refuge in metaphor. If we stop trying to talk about it, then we are left with the sensations, images and internal voices (Andreas, 2001).

The social panorama model concentrates on the ‘speechless’, non-lingual side of the self, the awareness that precedes the use of language. How do you know that you are someone? What do you feel, see, smell, taste and hear? This search brings people to their ‘social core’ and at the same time helps them and us to escape from philosophizing about the exact meaning of terms like ‘identity’, ‘self’, ‘ego’, ‘myself’ and ‘me’ etc. Because the self is always present wherever one goes, it operates like a steady habituated background experience. In other words, we are always ourselves but that is so normal that we only notice it when there is something unusual about it.

Conclusion

NLP is the study of the structure of subjective experience and its applications (Andreas et. al. 1994). There has been a large focus on modeling in NLP but the distinctions and concepts by which the subjective experience is described in NLP are far more fundamental for the Social Panorama. The NLP sub-Modalities, parts and resources, became the main building blocks of the Social Panorama Model.

The Social Panorama rests on the concepts of *parts* and *personifications*. It shows how *space* is more than just another *sub-modality*, but the very heart of cognition. Beyond all of that, the Social Panorama opens one’s eyes to the overwhelmingly sophisticated social skills that most humans possess. And it brings the huge part of our unconscious mind that is occupied with social calculations to light. These highly intelligent unconscious resources are extremely powerful

Where does it not work? Where or how could it be misused?

The Social Panorama makes use of the existing unconscious social potential of the subject. It cannot go beyond the range of the client’s social competencies. However the model does offer guidelines for how to train socially challenged (autistic, sociopathic) individuals to improve their skills. The model has a great potential to be misused in the hands of exploiting personalities.

About the author:

Lucas Derks is a Dutch social psychologist who pioneered with NLP at the end of the seventies. His fascination with the realistic psychology NLP is based on, made him devote his career to this since 1984. The scientific explanation of the role of resources in psychotherapeutic change and the application of NLP in creative professions preceded the development of the social panorama model in 1995.

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