Are You Being Influenced or Manipulated?

Many people ask me if NLP is manipulative.

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*"You can never really live anyone else's life, not even your child's. The influence you exert is through your own life, and what you've become yourself." - Eleanor Roosevelt*

In teaching Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) over the years, I’ve often been asked by new students whether NLP is a form of manipulation.

“Isn’t [NLP](http://www.nlp.com/) all about getting people to do what they don’t want to do?”

That’s a little bit like saying that a hammer is a tool of destruction. Sure, it can be used to smash up a set of fine china. But most hammers I’ve ever seen have been used to build something, not bust something apart. In the same way, NLP is a tool, and how that tool is used depends on the underlying [motivation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/motivation) of the person who wields it.

You can think of it as the difference between *influence* and *manipulation*. I checked these words out in the dictionary and actually they are pretty close in definition. They both involve “producing an effect in another person without apparent exertion of force.”

But manipulation is defined as “having control over others by having the ability to influence their behavior (emotions) and their actions so things can go in the manipulator’s favor” and “to control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage.” In my experience, a manipulator tends to play on others’ fears, greed (a form of [fear](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/fear)) or [guilt](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/guilt). Those being manipulated feel pressured, trapped, or angry.

In contrast, the word influence has an ancient root in the Middle English word for “emanation of the stars.” Definitions include “the emanation of moral or [spiritual](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/spirituality) force.” People who are influential tend to be [charismatic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/charisma) and admirable. We are inspired by them and aspire to be like them. We feel good around them. (Of course, not all influences are good, but have you noticed that we need to say “bad” influence to clarify a negative effect, but we never have to add “bad” to manipulation?)

When I think of manipulation, I think of someone who cares only about his own needs, a person who puts his self-interest above that of others. For instance, toddlers, who are naturally self-centered and convinced of their own omnipotence, can be excellent manipulators. They’re savvy enough to have figured out Mom or Dad’s hot buttons and they’ll push those buttons relentlessly to get exactly what they want.

Many adults grow out of this type of manipulation – but some don’t. A family member of mine admits that she uses her emotionality to bend others to her will. She simply hasn’t figured out alternative ways (that would be more pleasant for her and all the rest of us!) to get what she wants.

Compared to manipulation, influence has a more positive connotation that takes into consideration others’ needs and desires. As parents, we want to influence our kids to be healthy and safe. As friends, we want to influence our friends to happy and fulfilled. As business owners, we want to influence our clients to be successful and prosperous. We want what is best for those in our “sphere of influence.”

Influence has many components. It’s based on strong rapport, clear and congruent communication, and awareness and understanding of others. We all naturally have these basic abilities to some extent. But like all skills, we can learn to be better.

Back to the hammer. If you want to build a house, don’t you want the best hammer you can get? Would you ever think, “Yeah, I want to build a house but I’m not going to use tools.” Would you worry that “If I use tools to build the house and learn how to use them properly, would that be an unfair advantage?” Of course not! If you want to be an effective influencer, NLP is one of the best tools you can learn.

Could someone learn to use a hammer to be destructive? Yes. Could they use NLP to manipulate? Yep. But in my experience, that’s very rare and in our training courses, we emphasize the ethical use of all techniques.  The truth is that there is no “mind control” tool (with the exception of extreme brainwashing techniques) someone could use to make another person do something that is unacceptable to his or her personal beliefs or values.

I’ll close with a quote I like from the author George Elliot:

*"Blessed is the influence of one true, loving human soul on another."*

To you and your positive influence on the world!

Matt James, on Psychologytoday.com