

The Experience Matrix

A model of how experience is organized, and a way to make the level of identity specific

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Since 2024, I have been developing a model which I have called the Experience Matrix, and I have devoted a book to it. I see it as an extension of the Neuro-Logical Levels model, for working with changes that we would place at the level of identity. This paper presents the model in broad outline.

Where the question comes from

In the French-speaking NLP world, virtually every training teaches the Logical Levels, or is structured around them; so does, of course, Robert Dilts's NLP University. This may not hold everywhere: other schools have other ways of approaching NLP. Where the model is taught, it is with good reason: distinguishing behaviors, capabilities, beliefs and values is highly relevant in practice. Capabilities allow us to "produce" behaviors, a little as acceleration "produces" speed. And beliefs and values, and more broadly the map of the world, encompass capabilities, what we call in French *savoir-faire*, know-how. Knowledge generates know-how, which in turn generates behaviors.

With its simplicity, the model has everything to appeal.

It is at the level of identity that I found myself questioning. The pyramid follows a very natural hierarchy, that of the English questions: where, what, how, why, who. But once we reach the who, it becomes difficult to be specific. We even speak of identity beliefs: what we call identity very often takes the form of beliefs about oneself.

In thirty years of practice, I have seen NLPers place many things at the level of identity: roles, functions, titles, and even the environment, as when we say "I am Californian" or "I am European."

Now, if there is one essential characteristic of NLP, it is being specific. The levels of behaviors, capabilities, beliefs and values truly are. This is less the case for identity. And so, work at that level relies to a large extent on the practitioner's know-how: two practitioners will not put the same things there, and will not intervene there in the same way. At that point, the model trusts the expertise of the person using it more than it guides it.

The Experience Matrix was born from this observation: the need to make the level of identity more specific. Along the way, I made other changes, which seem to me to account more faithfully for the structure of experience.

Context rather than environment

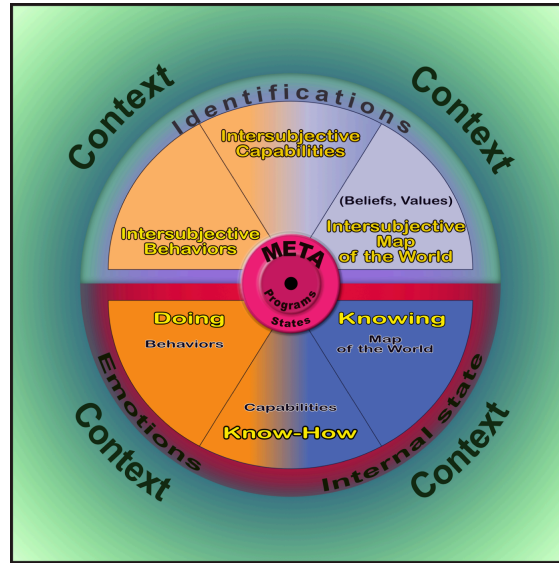


Figure 1 — The Experience Matrix as a whole, immersed in its context.

The first change concerns context. Following Christopher Alexander, I preferred the term context to environment, to give it back its active dimension. Context influences me and I influence it. It is far more than what I observe around me, which is too often reduced to a passive backdrop. The Matrix is immersed in this context, in constant interaction with it.

The Singularity space

The Matrix itself is circular, to convey this dynamic. The circle is divided into two half-circles. The lower half-circle is the Singularity space: what characterizes me as my own. It is contained within the space of internal states, or emotions, which forms the interface between the context and my inner experience. The context triggers internal states; what happens within me, in behaviors, capabilities or map of the world, triggers them too. The internal state therefore sits, quite logically, at the boundary between the context and what I live through.

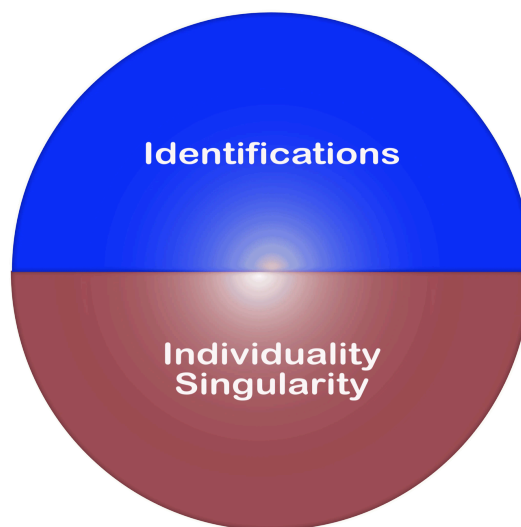


Figure 2 — The two half-circles: Identifications above, Singularity below.

The Singularity space is made up of two large spaces: behaviors, and the map of the world, which brings together beliefs and values and, more broadly, all our cognitive processes, conscious or not. Capabilities, which are after all nothing but know-how, sit at the intersection of the two. So we do find three spaces, with one difference: they are not stacked. They form neither a hierarchy nor a nesting. Each influences the others in its own way. By representing internal states, behaviors and the map of the world, the Experience Matrix thus incorporates the computation index.

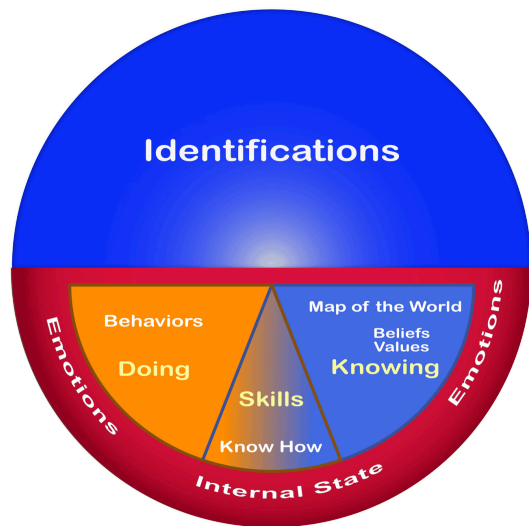


Figure 3 — The Singularity space: Doing, Knowing, and Know-How at their intersection, within the Internal State.

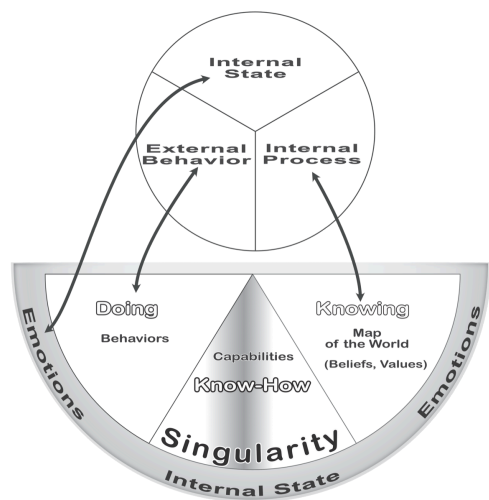


Figure 4 — The computation index mapped onto the Singularity space.

The Identifications space

The upper half-circle is what the Matrix brings that is most new. I have called it the Identifications space, or intersubjective space. It rests on an observation that became very clear to me: when we say "I am," we are not really saying "I am." We are rather saying "I recognize myself as belonging to a category of people," or "I have been recognized as part of it." Far more

often, it is a matter of identification rather than identity. Every imaginable category finds its place there, the very ones we used to place, in a less structured way, at the level of identity.

"I am" thus becomes "I identify with." The change could pass for a semantic nuance. It is much more than that. Faced with "I am," there is not much to be done: if that is what I am, how could I be anything else? Faced with "I identify with," I can intervene. I can work on the choice of the category. I can work on the characteristics of the category I identify with. These are made up of the same three elements as in the Singularity space: behaviors, capabilities and map of the world, but intersubjective, to distinguish them from the spaces of the Singularity.

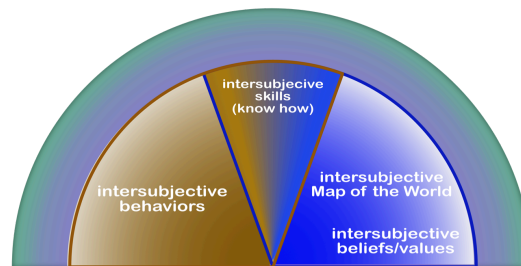


Figure 5 — *The Identifications space: intersubjective behaviors, know-how and map of the world.*

These categories are not personal visions. Most of the time, they are sociological categories, recognized within a culture, a country, a language. Everyone will agree on what a given category of people does, knows how to do, and knows. A doctor, an artist, an adventurer, a hero: all have characteristics that are the object of a consensus. Since these identifications are classes of individuals, they can take the form of archetypes, titles, roles and countless other categories.

An example. A client came to see me because he thought he might be a bad father. We first reframed: "you identify with the category of bad fathers." Then we explored the characteristics of that category, in terms of doing, know-how and knowing. It emerged that forbidding his child certain things did not make him a bad father. We had worked on the category, not on him.

There is a third lever: the relationship itself between the person and the class they identify with. Saying "I identify with" creates a relationship between me and a category. This relationship has its own characteristics; we could speak of submodalities. It may depend on the context, the moment, a period of life. It may be welcome or not. It has an intensity, which varies. I have worked this way with dozens of clients since 2024, and for them it is a liberation: at last having levers, rather than remaining stuck before a problem labeled "identity," on which little can be done short of changing the person. For the practitioner, it is also a marked path where, until now, they had to rely on their know-how alone.

The Meta space and the point of identity

One last space occupies the center of the circle: the Meta space. It contains meta-states and metaprograms. The notion of meta is reflexive by nature; the Meta space is therefore the space of reflexive consciousness, the place where I am both the observer and the object observed.

And at the exact center of the circle, there is a point. In geometry, a point has no surface: nothing can be put in it. This point represents identity. It becomes an emergent property, arising from the whole of my experience, from the Singularity space as well as from identifications, conscious or not. It is like a hologram, and it can only be acted upon through all the spaces that generate it.

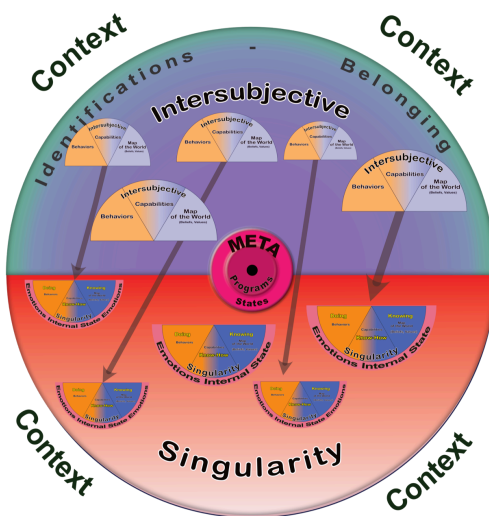


Figure 6 — How identifications give rise to parts: each identification takes shape within the Singularity as a part, with its own doing, know-how and knowing.

The arrow of time

We could stop there. But rotate the plane of the Matrix by ninety degrees: the point then appears as the cross-section of an axis, an arrow. That arrow is the arrow of time. The Experience Matrix of one moment follows that of the previous moment, and so on back to the most distant part of my past; I can also imagine those of my future. Identity, which had no thickness, finds a representation in duration: the self as narrative. I am the story I tell about what I have lived and about how I lived it.

It is this narrative that makes me unique.

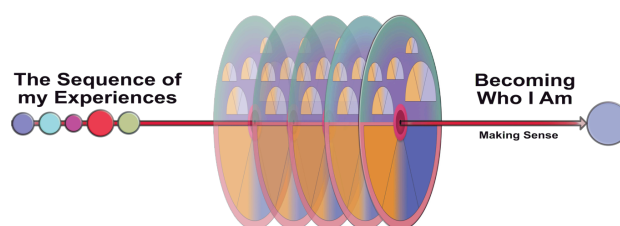


Figure 7 — The arrow of time: successive Experience Matrices form the self as narrative.

Video: rotating the Matrix to reveal the dimension of time

In the spirit of NLP 2.0

That is the model in broad outline. There is much more to say, and my book on the Experience Matrix gives all the details. It also opens up several lines of research. In my book, I already relate it to Ken Wilber's four quadrants and to his stages of development. And I am currently working on bringing the concepts of Carl Gustav Jung together with the Matrix: archetypes as identifications, the ego, the Self... It is fascinating work.

This model is part of an idea I have long defended, which I call NLP 2.0, by analogy with Web 2.0 and with open-source software: an NLP in which every NLPer can create, improve and modify models, and put them at the service of practitioners. The Experience Matrix hopes to be a contribution in that spirit.

About the author

I have practiced NLP since 1997. I was trained by Anne Pierard and certified as an NLP Master Practitioner at the Institut Ressources, in Brussels. That same year I founded the "[Atelier PNL](#)", a community of practitioners that is still active today. Its Facebook group, [PNListe](#), has more than 8,500 members, a record for a group dedicated to French-speaking NLP

An engineer by training and a systems analyst, I specialized in modeling, which I consider to be the process at the heart of NLP. It was a meeting with Stephen Gilligan, in 1998, that led me to model what aikido, which I have long practiced and taught, brings to everyday life. The result was AikiCom, an approach of "martial kindness" that I describe in my book *In Search of Martial Kindness*.

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Useful links

- *The Experience Matrix*, the book: skillmodeling.com/resources/books/the-experience-matrix · Amazon.com
- Skill Modeling, my website on modeling: skillmodeling.com
- About me: skillmodeling.com/about/christian-vanhenten
- *In Search of Martial Kindness*: skillmodeling.com/resources/books/in-search-of-martial-kindness · Amazon.com
- Atelier PNL, the French-speaking NLP community I founded: atelierpnl.eu
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