
Managing the PhD student's beliefs when faced with their task

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Recommended minimum time required: 0.5 hours



Index

Introduction.....	5
1. The map.....	7
2. How your beliefs impact on the process of PhD thesis supervision.....	8
3. Limiting beliefs and enhancing beliefs when faced with work and a PhD student.....	9
4. Cognitive distortions and irrational beliefs.....	11
5. Deconstructing limiting beliefs.....	14

Introduction

1. The map

Do you know the phrase “The map is not the territory?” This is one of the basic assumptions of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming).

Every one of us interprets reality as we receive and experience it through our sensory representational systems (Carrión, 2011).

The knowledge that you possess about your reality, your world, your universe, is influenced by your brain and such information, through a process of internal strategies (you filter information based on your experiences, values and beliefs), giving rise to behaviours.

This is called the *map* to a person's subjective representation of reality.

The mind map is **unique to every one of us**, so when faced with the same situation, for example, every one of us has a different experience (a different way of seeing, thinking, feeling and acting).

2. How your beliefs impact on the process of PhD thesis supervision

According to Dilts (2013), a *belief* is a “generalisation about a certain existing relationship between experiences”. He adds that “they are judgements and assessments about ourselves, others and the world that surrounds us”.

Beliefs are affirmations about how we interpret the world but they aren't necessarily so due to adjusting to the present reality. We accept them as the “truth”.

Beliefs may change and they may influence your work, health, creativity, how you relate to others and whether you fail or succeed.

Carrión (2011) goes further and explains that a *system of beliefs* is a group of beliefs organised around a value.

There are various ideas about beliefs:

- 1) When you believe in something, you accept it as valid.
- 2) If you believe you can do something, it increases the self-fulfilling effect.
- 3) They guide your thoughts and as a result, they condition you.
- 4) They influence your expectations.

Based on this, when faced with supervision, it must be borne in mind that:

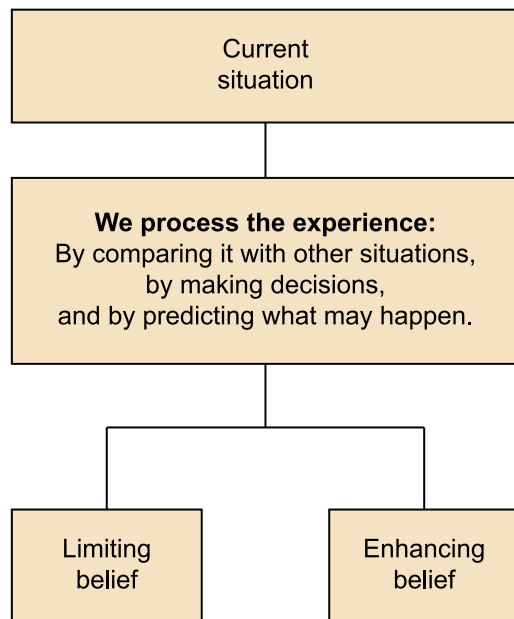
- You have personal beliefs about how supervision work must be conducted.
- You have an image as to how a PhD student has to be.
- You build expectations around that role.
- You create an image about yourself as a supervisor.
- Beliefs play an important role when it comes to defining methodologies and choosing tools.
- They can motivate or demotivate you.
- They form a part of organising knowledge and information.

Reflection

Figure out what your preconceived beliefs are about the role that you carry out. Would you change any of them? If that is the case, what would you change them for?

3. Limiting beliefs and enhancing beliefs when faced with work and a PhD student

Whether it will be a limiting or an enhancing belief is going to depend on:



Source: Adapted from Olivé (2010)

Mario Alonso Puig. Limiting beliefs

Source: <https://youtu.be/Ylv2gGKJWE8>

The source of your beliefs goes back to your experiences, and also the beliefs you have acquired during your childhood through school, your parents and your environment.

Beliefs encompass all areas of your life (family, politics, religion, finances, etc.).

A **limiting belief** is something which stops you. It determines what you want to do at the time of doing something, whether it's making a decision, taking a step forward or tackling a task. It can stop you from developing all of your potential.

If you believe in something that you are saying, the brain has already influenced you with that very thing.

Examples of limiting beliefs:

- This piece of research work is not going to turn out well.

- It's not worth spending any time on this point because we're not going to move forward.
- They haven't prepared enough and I'm going to waste my time.

An **enhancing belief** is something which drives you forward towards your goals. It motivates you and brings the best out in you.

Examples of enhancing beliefs:

- You will learn from any problems and you won't throw in the towel.
- The success of this project will be as a result of the amount of effort by the author.

Changing beliefs and behaviours is a basic requirement to see something that you have already judged with a new pair of eyes or something that you don't believe in.

The Pursuit of Happiness. Columbia Pictures, 2006

Fuente: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCj32hjByxc&feature=youtu.be>

4. Cognitive distortions and irrational beliefs

These concepts come from the approach that is known today as Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy that was started by Albert Ellis in the 1950s with many variants and schools of thought, including the noteworthy theories of Dr Aaron T. Beck.

Within your cognitive processes, automatic thoughts, cognitive distortions and irrational beliefs can be found.

1) Automatic thoughts

These are a flow of thoughts; a sort of internal self-dialogue that is difficult to turn off given that they are intrusive.

As Clark, Beck and Alford (1999, cited in Riso, 2009) state, their features include:

- They are fleeting.
- Very specific.
- Spontaneous.
- Plausible.
- They are undisputed.
- Feelings are connected.
- They can manifest themselves in a visual or verbal way, or both at the same time.
- They tend to dramatise a situation.

Sometimes, “once again” is an automatic thought that triggers a whole series of limiting and distortive ideas that you accept as valid.

2) Cognitive distortions

Cognitive distortion is an error in the processing of information. The majority of the time these are presented in the form of automatic thoughts. These ideas come from the approach that is known today as Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy.

Among the most frequent cognitive distortions we have:

- **Negative filtering** Attention is only paid to the negative aspects of a situation, while the positive aspects are filtered out. For example, “when supervising a thesis, there was one point where I felt lost”. In this case, the

person didn't see that it only happened at a certain point, while they continued to read the whole section to be supervised.

- **Polarised thinking** Things are black or white and there is no middle ground. Words such as *everything*, *never*, *always*, *good* are used.
- **Mind reading** This refers to when a person knows what others are thinking. For example, "He thinks that I'm not working properly".
- **Predicting the future** This is when a negative future is predicted such as "the work isn't going to be finished on time".
- **Catastrophising** The worst outcome possible is imagined and the person won't feel able to handle it. For example, "I won't be able to cope with failure".
- **Over-generalisation** Generalisation is prompted through isolated cases, leading to a valid conclusion. For example, "given it's not been submitted, the project will be abandoned now".
- **Labelling** This is when something or someone is labelled. For example, "he is idle".
- **"I must" or "I have to"** You set yourself obligations and rigid rules that should be applied no matter what. For example, "I have to supervise 4 projects in 2 hours".
- **Personalisation** Either a person is blamed for something negative that has happened or they believe that others have a negative attitude towards them.
- **Shifting the blame** This is where "the issue is dodged" and a person doesn't accept responsibility for a mistake.
- **Magnifying and minimising** Either the facts are magnified in a disproportionate way or their importance is diminished.

3) Irrational beliefs:

These are absolutist and dogmatic.

There are 10 basic irrational beliefs that can be summarised as:

- I have to act appropriately so that they pass me.
- You must act in a kind, fair and considerate way with me.
- I have to achieve things without much effort or inconvenience.

As can be seen, these are described as obligations and duties and they generate anxiety.

5. Deconstructing limiting beliefs

It is important to learn how to deconstruct limiting beliefs so that you become empowered and move forward in achieving your goals.

A formula for deconstructing these beliefs would be:

1) Challenging the belief

- On what facts are you basing it on?
- Is there an exception?
- Does it help you or hold you back?
- What use is it to you?
- Does it open or shut off possibilities? Which ones?
- If this belief were not true, what would you do?

2) Searching for proof that the belief may be false to see if it causes any cognitive distortion and refutes it.

3) Creating an enhancing belief

4) Formulating questions to enhance or associate a certain strength with an action

The story of the hammer – P. Watzlawick (2003)

A man wants to hang a painting. He has the nail, but not the hammer. His neighbour has one. So then, the man decides to ask his neighbour if he could lend him his hammer. But then he has a doubt:

“What if he doesn't want to lend me it? Now I remember that he greeted me in a distracted way yesterday. Maybe he was in a hurry. But maybe he wasn't in a hurry and it was a pretext, and the man holds something against me. What could it be? I didn't do anything to him; he may have got something into his head. If someone asked me if they could borrow a tool from me, I would lend it to them straight away. Why shouldn't he do it too? How can someone refuse to do someone a favour as simple as that? People like him make other people's lives a misery. And he already thinks that I only depend on him. All because he has a hammer. Well that is the final straw”.

So the man hurries around to the neighbour's house and rings the bell. The door is opened, and before the neighbour has time to say “hello”, the man furiously shouts “you can keep your hammer, you idiot!”.