

The need for neuro-linguistic programming to develop greater construct validity

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Abstract: *This paper tracks a practitioner's journey through his attempts to understand the nature of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). It draws from the author's self-study, being both a master NLP trainer and a chartered psychologist and also from the author's own PhD research, (Grimley, 2016) which explicitly asked the question 'What is NLP?' The author discusses the importance of finding an answer to this question should NLP as a field, and its application to coaching specifically, wish to validate its modality. Taking from psychometric literature the idea of construct validity, the author concludes that NLP needs to develop a more well defined and standardised definition as well as a more well defined and standardised certificated training route to NLP practitioner before it can usefully answer the question does NLP coaching work in a predictive way? The paper acknowledges and signposts the reader to the important work currently undertaken by the NLP Leadership Summit in this respect. The style of this paper is oriented towards an Action Research paradigm where 'reflection in action and reflection on that reflection in action' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000, p.2) is regarded as an appropriate research protocol to produce valid knowledge for consideration, especially when adopting an insider perspective as was recommended for research into NLP by Einspruch and Forman (1985).*

Keywords: *Neuro-linguistic programming, (NLP), construct validity, research, evidence, reflection.*

Objective

TO PROVIDE THE reader with an informed perspective based upon the grounded theory research of the author, (Grimley, 2016), concerning why NLP still attracts much criticism and is not understood by many, the reasons for this and a proposed solution.

Introduction

Having completed his undergraduate degree in Psychology in 1993 and practitioner certificate in NLP in 1995, the author decided to pursue a psychology career that focused on one to one work and the individual. He registered with the Neurolinguistic Psychotherapy and Counselling Association (NLPtCA), which is a member organisation of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), and began to offer coaching and counselling services. In the interim years he has had much time to reflect on the ethical and professional consideration that NLP as a modality of 40

years standing had done very little to develop itself by way of research and publication in relevant academic journals (Grimley, 2017; Sturt et al., 2012; Tosey & Mathison, 2009; Wake et al., 2013; Witkowski, 2011).

In this paper the author reflects on 23 years of NLP practice making reference to his Ph.D research which was the culmination of living with such professional tension. There is not enough space in this paper to provide details of that research and for those who would like to understand the author's reflections more fully 'What is NLP?' (Grimley, 2016) is published in the *International Coaching Psychology Review*, and provides a more comprehensive context. 15 NLP subject matter experts and 19 NLP informed professionals were interviewed and asked the question 'What is NLP?'. Their answers were transcribed, coded and eight interacting themes emerged from this process.

NLP has not in the past been interested in conducting research, with what little being done peaking in the 1980s (Witkowski, 2011). One participant in the author's PhD research put it this way;

Yes well what you are talking about is interest and funding. I think NLP has not been interested in that because we see it working every day in people's lives and our purpose has been to do business instead of doing research, so there's not been that much interest in it and somebody has to collaborate. (Participant 7, Grimley, 2016).

Even though there have been attempts to do this research on a broad front in Europe where NLP has been applied to psychotherapy (EANLPt, 2018), generally speaking when break out groups begin to go down this road they choose to drop the letters NLP and brand themselves differently to make headway. Examples would be Clean Language, Mental Space Psychology, The Lightning Process, Reconsolidation of Traumatic memories, Research and Recognition Project, and Neuro Semantics (Grimley, 2016). Alongside the domain of psychotherapy, there has been a brief foray into randomised controlled studies to assess the effectiveness of specific NLP patterns in the context of education (Churches & Allan, 2013).

What is NLP?

Tosey and Mathison (2009) are the first to attempt a comprehensive academic review of what NLP is. They describe NLP according to six faces (Figure 1). Tosey and Mathison (2009) found NLP is still based on theory, despite being very practically oriented (the three descriptors above the waterline in Figure 1), however that theory is poorly articulated. They found also that NLP lacks a research ethos and a thorough evidence base, leaving it over reliant on claims that it works and therefore operating as a self-sealing belief system. Often it is the three faces above the waterline that attract the attention the authors argue. They further argue the more 'substantial' aspects of NLP are below

the waterline, being communication in action, methodology and also epistemology. However Grimley (2016) found that even under the waterline, the more 'substantial' aspects of NLP still needed organising further before anything approaching construct validity can be obtained.

To enquire whether NLP works before developing reference points concerning what NLP is, is to put the cart before the horse. Sturt (2012) makes a similar point after a Freedom of Information request revealed that the NHS in the UK spent over £800,000 on NLP from 2006–9, and a further estimated £105,000 on training staff. She says; 'the very fact that there is no agreed definition of NLP indicates how little evidence we have of its benefits.' (Sturt et al., 2012; Sturt, 2012b).

Construct validity is important because it concerns the nature of something. Bartram and Lindley (1994) tell us validity is dependent on reliability. When NLP practitioners have reliability and in their experience they see what they do works on a regular basis, (test-retest reliability), it is then incumbent upon them to tell the world what it is that regularly works so others can test what they do, validate their claims and learn from that process. The confusion this brings about when NLP practitioners cannot do this is nicely illustrated by participant 9 in the author's research,

I went to a day thing only a month ago with psychotherapists from all sorts of schools and I sit and I listen and you are given a case study and they say what they are going to do and after all this time I still go; 'none of you are doing anything remotely like NLP.' You know it is really hard to put your finger on exactly what that is, that when you see another practitioner working (therapists I'm talking about), it is so obvious they are not doing NLP, so what is it that we do? (Participant 9, Grimley 2015)

In attempting to define NLP from an insider's perspective using a grounded theory methodology, Grimley (2016) found NLP naturally was divided into eight interacting themes These were:



Figure 1: The Six Faces of NLP after Tosey and Mathison (2009, pp.13–24).
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- NLP is commercially motivated.
- NLP is saturated in anecdotal evidence.
- NLP is lacking in published empirical evidence.
- NLP has historical and current disagreement.
- NLP wants to be ‘accepted’, but is disappointed with the continual pattern of not being accepted by ‘mainstream’.
- NLP has a lack of standardised definition, curriculum and professional practice code.
- Development of break out groups, dissatisfied with the culture of disagreement

within NLP sometimes using a different brand.

- All NLP practice is generally associated with worst practice.

One of the participants in the author’s research made the point this was a good description of the current state of NLP but did not constitute a theory, so it was necessary to clarify what ‘theory’ meant in this context:

‘A theory for the purpose of this research was regarded as a coherent group of tested general propositions, commonly regarded as correct, that can be used as principles of explanation and prediction for a class of phenomena. From

this research the 8 ‘propositions’ or categories which emerged from the substantive and theoretical coding are regarded as both interacting and stable, thus the theory is not only explanatory and descriptive but it is also predictive of NLP practice in the future. The propositions are regarded as tested in the sense that not only did they emerge from the source data but were fed back to those who provided the data for both clarification and amendment before saturation of the data was reached.’ Grimley (2016, p.58).

The lack of coherence in defining NLP from a theoretical perspective can be appreciated by listing just 14 of many attempts, with the

Table 1: 14 descriptions of NLP within the context of definition.

1	'Defies easy description' (Overdurf Et Silverton, 1998, p.viii).
2	'The unexpected by-product of the collaboration of John Grinder and Richard Bandler to formalise impactful patterns of communication' (Dilts et al. 1980, p.ii).
3	'In some respects it is simple. An internationally prominent practice in business, management development and professional education, a method used by facilitators of various kinds – coaches, trainers and consultants – who claim to offer some innovative and highly effective approaches to human development... in other respects NLP resembles more of a mystery story.' (Tosey Et Mathison, 2009, p.3).
4	'An explicit and powerful model of human experience and communication' (Andreas 1979, p.i).
5	'The study of the structure of subjectivity' (Dilts et al. 1980, p.ii).
6	'A behavioural model that consists of a series of tools and techniques modelled on performance excellence' (Wake, 2010, p.7).
7	'A model from cognitive psychology' (James Et Woodsmall, 1988, p.3).
8	'The art and science of personal excellence' (Alder Et Heather, 1998, p.xii).
9	'An extension of linguistics, neurology or psychology' (Dilts et al., 1980, p.i).
10	'The Frankenstein Grandchild of Post Ericksonian Hypnosis' (Brown, 2007, p.128)
11	'It is not a set of techniques it is an attitude.' (Bandler, 1985, p.155).
12	'Whatever works' (Attributed to Robert Dilts. Evans, 2018).
13	'A user oriented metaphor designed to generate behavioural options quickly and effectively' (Dilts et al., 1980, p.12).
14	'A modelling technology whose specific subject matter is the set of differences that makes the difference between the performance of geniuses and that of average performers in the same field or activity' (Bostic St. Clair Et Grinder, 2001, p.50).

below excerpts all contextualised within discussions on the definition of NLP, see Table 1 below.

Even without a unified definition, NLP has defied expectation and rather than fall into a state of decline as predicted by some academics (Elich et al., 1985), it has retained its popularity. In light of the eight rather negative descriptors found above, the author wanted to understand why NLP's continued popularity existed in the light of his research. Reflection on his own NLP journey of over 20 years and further questioning of participants generated an answer in the form of an acronym; PEAS which stood for;

- P.** **P**rocess oriented, **P**ragmatic, **P**ositive, **P**layful, **P**henomenological, eliciting **P**atterns, and **P**racticing within the **P**resuppositions of NLP.
- E.** **E**clectic, **E**xperimental, **E**xperiential, with a focus on obtaining **E**legance/**E**cology in all practitioners do.
- A.** Focused on **A**pplication rather than theorising, however evidence for the effectiveness of such application is mainly **A**ncedotal.
- S.** **S**ystemic in orientation with a strong emphasis on **S**ales in the market place for ideas and utility. A focus on **S**tructure rather than content.

These themes the author found are highly favoured by customers in the market place for self-development and coaching. NLP in taking an ideographic and anti-positivist approach that can be all things to all people has enjoyed great popularity with one participant pointing this out as one of the signature strengths of NLP:

While the nature of NLP has led to the fragmentation and issues that the field currently has, I believe it may have also been directly responsible for NLP being a huge and successful field. I say this to mean that NLP was always commercial, eschewed science (while borrowing eclectically and heavily from it) and didn't try to self-regulate. This meant it has really become quite a big field over the last 40 years. There aren't many

other personal development modalities that have quite so many trainers, so many practitioners and made such a huge impact across so many domains. You find NLP now being used in or accepted by HR, Leadership, Coaching, Psychotherapy, Training, Education, Negotiation, etc., etc. Indeed, it is difficult to identify any other personal development modality that is as big or as extant. So while the commercialisation, etc. of NLP has been bad from one perspective it has helped the promulgation of NLP, its take up by trainers (looking to make a buck doing something they've become infatuated in) and its spread around the world. (Participant 12. Personal communication, 15 June, 2015).

The need to assess NLP holistically

Talking about the ethical aspect of NLP coaching, Grant (2001) makes an assessment of Anthony Robbins and his development of NLP called Neuro-Associative Conditioning (NAC), saying that

The exaggerated claims made by Robbins as to the efficacy of NAC may well be harmful to individuals experiencing strong dysphoric states, and could increase their sense of failure when the promised results do not eventuate. Indeed, it could well be argued that Robbins' marketing of NAC comes close to breaking the Code of Ethics of the Australian Psychological Society (1997) (Grant, 2001, p.236.)

Sixteen years later Robbins owns 33 companies and expects to generate \$6 billion in annual revenues this year says, Mazarakis and Feloni (2017). Being commercially successful is one of the drivers for NLP practitioners (Grimley, 2016) and when assessing NLP practice it is important one understands NLP in the wider context of the eight themes uncovered in the author's research. Robbins' separation from NLP to trade under the NAC brand illustrates the relevance of commercial orientation in defining the field of NLP and is archived for us by Hall, (2010);

...Another Bandler lawsuit occurred sometime later (1988 or 1989) against Tony Robbins.

That one was against Robbins because he was not certifying people as NLP Practitioners or Master Practitioners through The Society of NLP. Settled in 1990 out of court with Tony promising to 'certify people through the Society and pay his \$200 for each one certified in NLP,' he promptly stopped training 'NLP' as such and invented a new name, NAC – Neural Associative Conditioning. (Hall, 2010).

Often academics in attempting to characterise NLP in accordance with positivist criteria struggle to appreciate the value of anecdotal evidence and the evidence of individual case studies (Briner, 2016). This is because they don't fundamentally understand NLP as an open system which continually reinvents itself according to what is popular and what NLP practitioners find to be useful and effective in psychology and related disciplines at the time.

Writing in 1985 when NLP was in its heyday, academics concluded their brief report thus:

It is as if NLP has achieved something akin to cult status when it may be nothing more than another psychological fad that will go its merry way until it is replaced by the next fad. Elich, Thompson & Miller, 1985, p.625)

During this same period Sharpley (1984, 1987) and Heap, (1988, 1988b, 1989) were conducting reviews of research in an attempt to understand the evidence for eye accessing cues (EAC) and Preferred Representational systems, but again not in the context of other aspects of NLP which emerged from the author's research. Wake et al., (2013) also critique the reductionist nature of this research pointing out it missed the point and the studies were not reflective of the tenets and practices of NLP. Such a reductionist research orientation also was the case with the research of Wiseman et al. (2012) when his team researched the straw man argument that one can tell through eye accessing cues whether or not somebody else is lying or not.

Entropy of NLP knowledge

When one looks at the beginning of NLP we see a talented man who had a natural proclivity for imitation, Richard Bandler. In researching for the book *Eye Witness to Therapy* (Perls, 1973), Dr Robert Spitzer, Bandler's employer, said Bandler used to come away from the headphones and films sounding and acting just like Fritz Perls, to such an extent that Spitzer found himself calling Bandler 'Fritz' on several occasions (Spitzer, 1992, p.2). As a result of adopting the Perl's persona Bandler found along with Frank Pucelik at Santa Cruz University, they were good at running Gestalt workshops, but did not know how they were achieving the successful outcomes. Subsequently Bandler contacted an Associate Professor at Santa Cruz University who specialised in language. Grinder agreed to look at the language they used through his specialised filters and noticed the similarity between the language patterns of Bandler and Pucelik and those elicited through Transformational Grammar (TG). (Grinder & Elgin, 1973; Bostic St. Clair & Grinder, 2001).

The NLP **model** that was the outcome of the Perls modelling project, along with further similar modeling of Virginia Satir, was the Meta Model and resulted in the first two NLP books; *The Structure of Magic Volumes 1 and 2* (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Grinder & Bandler, 1976). Even though the *Structure of Magic* obtained favourable words from Gregory Bateson, the mentor to NLP in the early days, the subsequent volumes which represented the Milton Model did not attract such favour from him. After suggesting that they model Milton Erickson, Bateson's response to *Patterns volumes 1 and 2* (Bandler & Grinder, 1975b; Grinder et al., 1977) was 'shoddy epistemology' (Bostic St. Clair & Grinder, 2001, p.117). It may have been the distraction of great demand for workshops and associated revenue towards the end of the 1970s that resulted in this decline concerning reflection and theoretical development, however what seems apparent is entropy continues to this day with Tosey and Mathison (2009) saying

the knowledge base is somewhat anachronistic being rooted in the 1970s and currently being recycled rather than extended. The possible exception to this rule is the work of those who have extended NLP in certain areas yet dropped the name, with a few examples being given above.

When we look at learning cycle theory (Kolb, 1976), it is possible the Achilles heel of NLP is it has focused almost exclusively on concrete experience and active experimentation and excluded the development of reflective observation and of theoretical/conceptual understanding. When Kolb tells us; 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984, p.38), NLP practitioners have focused on the experience aspect and the effective transformation of that experience in certain contexts to the exclusion of theory building. This is aptly emphasised by the co-founders of NLP when they say,

Neuro-linguistic programming is the discipline whose domain is the structure of subjective experience. It makes no commitment to theory, but rather has the status of a model – a set of procedures whose usefulness not truthfulness is to be the measure of its worth (Dilts et al., 1980, Foreword, Paragraph 2).

TG the early theoretical base for NLP

For Grinder and DeLozier there was a recognition of the dangers of a model based too much on language and syntax in that it removed perceptual choices leading to what they called a Jackdaw epistemological stance of only being able to appreciate what surrounds us from one perspective (Grinder & DeLozier, 1987, p.xix). In this sense the critique of Jackendoff was anticipated when he pointed out the syntactocentric architecture

of TG is a mistake and talks of both semantics and phonology as being generative as well as syntax (Jackendoff, 2002, p.107).

Indeed in that TG already existed and the Meta model and Milton model were mapped from that as well as the exemplars is accepted (Bostic St. Clair & Grinder, 2001). However, we are told the non-verbal patterning which had been modelled had no comparable initial stable code to utilise. These NLP design variables; (patterning of essential variables uncovered and partially coded by Bandler and Grinder), were arrived at inductively and include rapport, manipulation of state, multiple perceptual positions, certain anchoring formats and framing. In NLP when we begin to include these NLP design variables we move considerably away from the epistemology of TG and its syntactocentric assumptions. Bostic St. Clair and Grinder (2001), attempt to clarify for us what each and every NLP pattern boils down to, using the language of F1 to refer to initial uptake of information and transformation of data through our sensory systems and F2 to refer to the interaction of such transformed data with our linguistic representational system:

1. The Meta Model, designed to verbally challenge the mapping between first access to the outside world through our senses (F1), and our linguistically mediated mental maps (F2).
2. Operations defined over representational systems and their sub-modalities, for example the Swish technique.
3. Reframing patterns, where representations are placed in a different cognitive structure.
4. Anchoring, where undifferentiated ¹groupings of representations are

¹ '...they are not undifferentiated, on the contrary, they are rather precisely differentiated (far more so that a linguistic label would offer), but rather are unnamed, unlabelled, managed by the non-dominant hemisphere without (in fact, ideally better without) any left hemisphere intrusions – like labelling. This is, of course, yet another example of the essential role and power of both hemispheric functions and the crucial importance of calibration as the mother of all skills sets in the application of NLP'. Grinder, personal communication, 9 August, 2014).

brought together for purposes of integration.

5. The Milton Model, where representations at F1 (first access through our senses to the world) are shifted by using F2 (linguistically mediated maps) patterning without the need to map those representations into the client's conscious understanding. (Bostic St. Clair & Grinder, 2001, pp.198–199).

Ontology, epistemology and frustration

When we begin to factor in these other NLP design variables subsequent to the Meta Model the author's research suggested that NLP indeed may have moved its practitioners away from a jackdaw epistemology, however, they have replaced it with another ornithological metaphor, that of a magpie epistemology:

Magpies, as we all know, like shiny things which often makes them symbols of superficiality. As Handler and Gable wrote in their wonderful book The New History in an Old Museum about Colonial Williamsburg, 'a magpie is a bird that weaves odd trinkets – tinfoil, gum wrappers, coloured yarn – into its nest. (Rizzo, 2013, Para 4).

Derks (2000) seems frustrated when he notes number 4 from above, 'anchoring', has been borrowed from Behaviourist Psychology and integrated into the NLP toolkit, and in the way a magpie would integrate, without any consideration to ecology, ontology, epistemology or methodology

Before 'NLP' existed, people were confronted with the Meta Model, the 4Tuple, the Milton Model and the Satir categories. But after putting these inside the magical box, it was the box that drew all the attention. Now people started to argue about the box, its color, its size, how it compared to other boxes and whether it was really new and whether it was ethical. For instance, instead of asking if the use of anchors is supported by scientific research, people wonder if 'NLP' is scientifically sound. But

anchors are just another name for classical conditioning, something based on the Pavlovian paradigm (Derks, 2000).

Indeed as Rizzo (2013) points out the trouble with magpie epistemology, which she contrasts with mole epistemology, is that magpies need to be trained to weave their shiny objects into a coherent whole and not only see, but present to the public, the interconnected and nuanced coherence.

Concerning NLP epistemology and construct validity, and how a singular NLP technique is not viewed as a coherent part of a larger interconnected whole, a similar voice has been heard from an academic reviewer who was confused at the mention of NLP when a visualisation technique was tested, known within NLP circles as The Phobia Cure;

The attempt in this manuscript to apply a randomised control trial design is to be applauded. However, the case for why 'NLP' should warrant our attention after 40 years of failing to produce any evidence is not established. As such, I would strip away any reference to 'NLP' and focus purely on calling the intervention what it actually is – a visualisation technique. (Arroll & Henwood, 2017, p.25).

Content validity and the NLP leadership summit

That the construct of NLP is not really clear seems to be supported by the co-founder, John Grinder, who after describing what NLP is, tells us that for 99 per cent of people in the world NLP has nothing to do with what he had just described as NLP (Inspirative, 2008b, 3:50). However maybe the NLP world can agree on what does go inside the box, even if the arms and legs, and head and chest might resemble what Brown refers to as 'Frankenstein's Grandchild' (Brown, 2007, p.128). Content validity is related to construct validity (Bartram & Lindley, 1994) and by improving this we can begin to build a more coherent construct.

One of the participants in the author's research put it this way in answer to the question 'What is NLP?'

So, that can all be thrown into this list, because it's that we, as NLPers agree, yes, yes, and yes and maybe it will have 100 items. It can be put somewhere, like the safe of the International Association of NLP in Switzerland, where organisations say, 'Yes, that's what we agree on' (Participant 14., Grimley, 2015).

This indeed is precisely an ongoing project for a group within the NLP Leadership Summit (2018), a group of experienced NLP practitioners founded in 2012 who associate with the intention of learning from each other and developing NLP practice around the world. The group is headed by Jaap Hollander and Lucas Derks and was created after recognising the difficulty and many impasses defining NLP produces. They came up with the idea of a vote of what NLP is and what it is not in an attempt to solve the quality problem due to a lack of standardisation within NLP;

When consistency is lacking, NLP is weakened as a brand. Brands of soap, for instance, are cautious to always use the same formula. If different soap factories would use different ingredients and package them in the same wrapper, the public would no longer buy that brand of soap. They would never know what they would find inside the wrapper. (Hollander et al., 2016, p.31).

So in 2016, over 40 years after those first two NLP volumes describing the modeling of Perls and Satir, when being confronted with the question 'What NLP is and what it is not?' Hollander et al. (2016, p.29) agreed it is still 'Not a simple discussion'. However it could be. As Hollander et al. (2016) point out in the Netherlands a three wheeled car is in fact legally a motor cycle. The authors argue this confusing state of affairs is remedied by asking 100 car engineers who have been practicing for 15 years

whether a three-wheeled vehicle with an engine is a car or a motorcycle they will say it is a car, but clever manufacturers have created three wheeled cars to allow people with no car license to legally drive them. Thus this initially confusing state of affairs is easily remedied by having access to expert knowledge that can agree and answer the question is a three-wheeled vehicle a car or a motorcycle? The sub-title of Hollander et al. (2016) is; 'Using Expert Validation to Define the Boundaries of NLP' and is a useful project that can hopefully harness the expert knowledge of the NLP Leadership Summit in the same way as 100 car engineers, to at least have a unified understanding as to what the **content** of a standardised NLP curriculum could look like.

In helping the NLP community understand what happened at the 2018 NLP Leadership Summit, Hall (2018) points to some of the problems NLP still needs to address: Misuse of NLP, variation in Standards; no international body, lack of clarity about what NLP is and what 'Practitioner' means, lack of supervision, lack of research, little assessment of competence (Hall, 2018, p.6).

At the same 2018 Summit Turner provided her understanding, referring to the voting of what NLP is and what it is not according to the 'elders'; (NLP practitioners with over 20 years of experience):

The items listed by the elders to answer the question 'What is NLP' do reflect what trainers are familiar with, and possibly choose to teach or ignore. Listening to exchanges and comments, I was reminded how over the years training standards have evolved to sequence the history of NLP developments. Eye-movements, predicates, the meta-model and so on are taught at first often making it difficult for participants to apprehend NLP overall as a coherent system. The Master Practitioner level standards usually take the same tack, ending curiously enough with some notions of modelling – hopefully providing a new base from which the newly certified Master-Practitioner will continue learning and integrating although this

does not always seem to be the case. (Turner, 2018 p.151).

For the author, in Turner’s account it is the words ‘possibly’, ‘difficult to apprehend NLP overall as a coherent system’, ‘curiously enough’, ‘some notions’, ‘hopefully’, ‘does not always seem to be the case’, which create the NLP zeitgeist as something rather lovely, but also something incredibly vague, intangible and incomprehensible to many, a bit like the magpie’s nest. The ‘notion’ of modelling which Turner talks of can be appreciated as just that when we realise Burgess (2014) identified eleven different types of NLP modelling within three categories (see Figure 2); intuitive, metaphoric and cognitive modelling (Burgess, 2014). With Grinder being insistent on 10 types of modelling which Burgess refers to in her latest research of 15 years as have nothing to do with NLP, then NLP seems to be at odds with itself and is not elegant, congruent or coherent. The essence of what is under investigation (ontology), how we know it is real and how we test it for ‘reality’ (epistemology) and how

we investigate and obtain this knowledge (methodology) not only is quite different for each person in the NLP world, but also not thoroughly discussed, evidenced and shared in the appropriate academic journals for the contexts within which such NLP patterns operate.

Pure NLP as a failed ideal

Grinder’s insistence that 99 per cent of practitioners are not doing NLP, but rather teaching the application of NLP patterns is a bit like Ellis claiming the psychologists who had taken over his institute and removed him from the board of directors were moving REBT away from what he intended in the 1960s and 1970s. (Carey & Hurley, 2005).

Participant 5 (Grimley, 2015), talks of NLP as a set of patterns which can be generalised to different contexts, she says:

The whole idea of training people as practitioners, it’s still operating inside an old frame where people think of NLP as a therapy or now may be as a form of coaching and so if you think about it that way you are turn-



Figure 2: The Methodologies Framework. After Burgess, (2014, p.94).

ing out NLP practitioners with the skill to coach others, that's all fine but that's just one area of application of NLP so if you are to teach NLP, what are the fundamental patterns that would be appropriate to teach somebody? (my emphasis). I don't know if you could even call them a practitioner however there are some fundamental patterns that are a part of the body of NLP and when people incorporate those patterns they can generalise those patterns to a context whether it be therapeutic, educational, personal relationship, self-management, intra personal creating a distinction between conscious and unconscious mind and how they live in the world (Participant 5, Grimley, 2015).

The patterns she alludes to would probably fall into a category of patterns subsumed by the five NLP patterns mentioned above (Bostic St. Clair & Grinder, 2001). However even if such basic NLP patterns could be generalised to a context and taught, Bostic St. Clair and Grinder (2001) and Burgess (2014), are quite adamant that the application of such patterning could and indeed should be tested. This is where NLP also really falls down, it has just not done this research in the 40 years it has been in existence and it is this failure that possibly cause Tosey and Mathison (2009, p.173) to equate NLP to a social movement fulfilling the equivalent needs of a pseudo-religion. The experiential and experimental nature of many NLP group trainings certainly may be enough to scare many into tarring the whole enterprise with a cultic brush. The resolution in the minds of Tosey and Mathison (2009) is that NLP is still a system of belief in which Guru like figures hold out the promise of changing lives possibly expecting allegiance to their authority (Op. cit., p.174). Elsewhere NLP is likened to Dianetics which also 'worked' (Op. cit., p.126) and popular self-help movements like Norman Vincent Peals 'The Power of Positive Thinking' (1952) and Dale Carnegie's 'How to win friends and influence people' (1953) (Op. cit., p.39).

To his credit, Grinder is quite explicit about how to do NLP, with number 5 below being eminently falsifiable (Popper, 1959):

1. Identification of an appropriate model/exemplar.
2. Adopt a 'know nothing' state and suspend all of your cognitive filters. Attend only to sensory patterns. This is known as unconscious uptake.
3. Rehearsal of the assimilated pattern until one can match the performance of the exemplar within the same time frame and context and produce the same results. Until this can be done behaviourally one continues with stage 2 and loops back to stage 3 until this can be achieved.
4. Code the assimilated pattern and the pattern within the exemplar. Within NLP this is still regarded as an art. According to Grinder there is no known useful and explicit strategy for digitalizing analogue processes (Bostic St. Clair & Grinder, 2001, p.146).
5. Test the coded pattern by training interested learners in it. Do they achieve the same mastery as measured by behavioural outcomes within the same time frame and context as the exemplar?

However despite such explication of what NLP is, it is the case that in over 40 years NLP has not produced one pattern which has been tested and shown to demonstrate significant predictive validity within a context of application that accords with best research practice with Wake et al. (2013, p.1) reminding us; 'There are no 'A' studies yet completed for NLP techniques'

Conclusion

Both the content and the construct of NLP are not yet sufficiently well-defined and agreed upon by experts in the field. This lack of agreement extends to who is regarded as legitimately qualified to practice NLP as there is no current standardised curriculum at NLP practitioner level or NLP Master practitioner level. This means asking the

question does NLP work is meaningless. The NLP Leadership Summit was created in 2012 because it recognised that professionals within the NLP community disagreed about many things and it wanted rather to emphasise the areas of agreement (Hall, 2012). Disagreement amongst trainers and practitioners of NLP was one characteristic identifier of NLP in the research of Grimley (2016). It is sincerely hoped that the continuance of the NLP Leadership Summit can productively address the other seven identifiers by focusing on what the author found to be positive in NLP as represented in the acronym PEAS. Until that time arrives the author argues there is not sufficient understanding of the construct of NLP to meaningfully ask the

question ‘does NLP work?’ Subsequent to research into specific applications of NLP patterns in particular contexts it is more appropriate to explore and ask whether a certain technique works as did the academic reviewer of the work of Arroll and Henwood (2017). Hopefully as more of this empirical work is done, alongside it a more standardised and bounded construct of NLP can emerge to be fed back into the academic literature and used to inform future research and NLP curricular.

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A personal perspective on neuro-linguistic programming: Reflecting on the tension between personal experience and evidence-based practice

Anthony M. Grant

Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) has been a significant presence in the business training and personal development fields since at least the early 1980s. NLP as a change methodology has attracted significant controversy over the years with claims and counter claims as to its effectiveness and validity. Although there is little to no empirical support for the central tenants of NLP, many coaches, psychologists and reputable agents of change who are otherwise committed to an evidence-based approach to their practice, utilise and engage with NLP methodologies. Not surprisingly, such practitioners often experience dissonance, tension and confusion about NLP. In this paper I reflect on the tension between my personal experience of NLP and my own commitment to an evidence-based approach to coaching. My assumption here is that the tension and ambivalence that I have personally experienced in relation to NLP is not singularly mine and that others have experienced similar feelings. I conclude that, coupled with the lack of empirical evidence for many core NLP constructs, the multiple misrepresentations made by many in the NLP industry over a significant period of time have effectively ruined the NLP brand. The demise of NLP is a salutary lesson for all who are engaged in the personal or professional development genre. This serves to remind us to ensure that our coaching methodologies and the broader coaching industry remain firmly grounded in evidence-based approaches, that we adhere to professional ethical standards and through practicing critical thinking and open-mindedness we remain forever vigilant against the onset of 'guruism'.

Keywords: *Neuro-linguistic programming, evidence-based coaching, coaching psychology, evidence-based practice.*

NEURO-LINGUISTIC programming. The very phrase 'Neuro-linguistic programming' (NLP) may well have elicited more passionate negative and/or positive knee-jerk reactions than any other phrase in the psychological domain. Indeed the history of NLP is replete with passionate controversies, vigorous claims and counter-claims about everything from its effectiveness to its actual definition (Biswal & Prusty, 2011; Suciu, 2017). This is in addition to the fervent debates about the partisan nature of the practitioner community and the relative status of various NLP training schools, and the role and character traits of

NLP founders and 'thought leaders' (Tosey & Mathison, 2007). Without a doubt, this is a convoluted, complex and contested area (for an informed discussion on these issues see Tosey & Mathison, 2009a).

Conceived in the US during the early 1970s, NLP has held a significant presence in the business training and personal development fields since at least the early 1980s. NLP as a change methodology has been heavily marketed in a wide range of areas including change management (Potter, 2018), leadership development (Joey & Yazdanifard, 2015) and personal development issues ranging from 'quit smoking

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