

Why NLP needs to obtain academic credibility

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Introduction

In the 40 or so years NLP has been in existence it has demonstrated a reliance on anecdotal evidence to demonstrate to potential clients "it works". This has been moderately successful as evidenced by the continuance of NLP in the market place for creative solutions in many sectors. This is despite the prediction of some academics that NLP would disappear within a decade because of a lack of scientific rigour and its apparently fad/ cult like status, (Elich, Thompson, & Miller, 1985).

NLP can of course continue in this vein. It may provide a living for a number of NLP Association owners and their trainers / Practitioners world-wide and generate further adherents. However if we wish NLP to be something other than a popular activity dressed up as a profession I would like to reason in this article why I think we need to do more.

Professional

In this article when I use the word professional I do so in the way some in the Coaching world use it. I think this is appropriate as coaching is another one of those commercial activities that many would argue has not reached full professional status, yet is on the verge of doing so on account of assiduous work in connecting all the dots which need connecting to constitute professional practice, and of course one of those is strong relationships with the academic world.

The word professional is a bit like NLP, confusing because there are many definitions and these are interpreted in different ways. Most professions require at least 7 years of training to obtain the necessary qualifications and experience and then the "professional" is just at the beginning of their journey. Grant and Cavanagh (2004, p. 3) have summarized professional status as defined by several key criteria:

(1) Significant barriers to entry

- (2) A shared common body of knowledge rather than proprietary systems
- (3) Formal qualifications at university level
- (4) Regulatory bodies with the power to admit discipline and meaningfully sanction members
- (5) An enforceable code of ethics
- (6) Same form of state-sanctioned licensing or regulation for certain professions, or parts of professions

I can fully appreciate that some will regard these criteria as too onerous and not particularly useful, however I would question such an attitude IF we are serious about NLP becoming a respected profession in its own right.

As we know NLP is a Meta discipline in that we model other professionals and started in the world of psychotherapy. So an NLP psychotherapist for example would meet all the criteria of Grant and Cavanagh (2004) in my ideal world. The same would be true for other applications of NLP such as coaching, or business administration, etc.

Sometimes the word professional is used as an adjective rather than a noun within NLP circles. In seeking to generate a personal map of "What is NLP?" Grimley, (2015), found in interview one participant pointing out:

"I don't class myself as an NLP person at my identity level but probably what I do class myself at an identity level is a professional so I apply my professionalism to whatever field I happen to be in at the time so I was professional as an accountant and therefore professional is knowing my scope of practice as an accountant I knew what I could do and what I couldn't do. I wouldn't stand there and say I can do a really complex tax return which has got inheritance tax and capital gains etc etc. If you really want me to do your tax return the first thing I will say is I am not an expert on tax returns if you still really wanted me to do your tax returns I will do it if you have just got a P 60 and that's all that goes on your tax return, fine, but I knew my scope of practice, I knew what I could do, I knew what I couldn't and that is part of being a professional which I am." (Participant 10 66:37- 67:31 Grimley, 2015)

Clinical psychologists would question the validity of "scope of practice" claimed by one of the Co-Founders of NLP when he says, "we can reliably get rid of a phobia in 10 minutes every single time". (Bandler, 2008)

This may imply that NLP practitioners can produce an explicit representation of a tacit structure which can be taught to others so that, in the context of a phobia, upon congruent application of this pattern, a phobia will always be cured in 10 minutes. Those within the NLP world however who believe this statement and approach to be a misrepresentation of NLP, leave themselves open to misrepresentation and accusations of a lack of professionalism by not publically distancing themselves from such claims. Similarly those who believe the practice of determining whether a lie is being told through looking at eye accessing cues should distance themselves from such practice in their NLP trainings and make it clear what the evidence base for their practice is. (Wiseman, Watt, ten Brinke, Porter, Couper, & Rankin, 2012).

The poor reputation of NLP is then seen as deserved by those outside as warranted, even for those who provide good quality trainings, when they do not distance themselves from the more problematic areas of NLP, two of which are provided above.

In this respect the words of Sharpley in his review of NLP in 1987 are relevant;

"...it puts NLP in the same category as psychoanalysis, that is, with principles not easily demonstrated in laboratory settings but, nevertheless, strongly supported by clinicians in the field" (Sharpley 1987, p.105.)

From a professional perspective it is very important not to miss Sharpley's reminder concerning the lack of evidence to support NLP patterns a little later on in the same text;

"...failure to produce data that support a particular theory from controlled studies does relegate that theory to questionable status in terms of professional accountability". (Sharpley 1987, p.105.)

The reason this is important from a professional practice point of view is that without such empirical evidence it is unprofessional and unethical to make generalisations concerning what an NLP model can accomplish from a specific successful singular or even a successful series of case studies.

Our experience of NLP

I suggest as professional people of many persuasions who use NLP, what attracts and retains our attention is the utility and simplicity of NLP.

In our personal experience as we set about our various tasks in various contexts each day if something triggers an unresourceful state often we are aware of this and have the skill to

go inside make the appropriate adjustment, and as if by magic we continue our day in a more resourceful state had we not access to those many NLP design variables which we believe constitute elements of how we are internally structured. It may have been a simple sub-modality change, it may have been a re-frame, it may have been something more profound and we needed to lock ourselves in the toilet for 10 minutes and change a fundamental belief in this context by doing a change personal history pattern. However as we make use of the NLP design variables in that moment, we are gratified that it seems to work so quickly and most of the time. Tosey and Mathison, (2009) talk of NLP as a very useful tool in the explication interview in the world of research into our phenomenological experience. This is because in the context of the interview NLP is a useful form of guided introspection that seeks to develop a finely-grained first-person account by using distinctions in language, internal sensory representations and imagery that have been incorporated from NLP. Paul Tosey and Jane Mathison have done a great service to NLP by becoming NLP practitioners themselves and then taking what they have found into the academic literature and raising the profile of NLP by making connections between what we do as NLP practitioners and what others, who do not practice NLP do.

In asking the question "What is NLP?" one participant said of NLP:

"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, (therapist's I'm talking about), it is so obvious they are not doing NLP, so what is it that we do?" (Participant 943:30- 44:09. Grimley 2015)

I believe as NLP practitioners in many walks of life we echo the sentiment of participant 9 as we have become unconsciously competent to the extent we are not concerned with providing evidence what we do works, we just know it does in our everyday practice.

Have any of you thought what it would be like to take your driving test again? Maybe the idea of NLP entering academia might feel a bit like this? However in order to demonstrate in a less subjective way that NLP works for other people and for NLP to generate the kind of respectability we believe it deserves I think providing good quality academic research which is published in appropriate peer reviewed journals is necessary. Of course it is up to us, what type of future do we want NLP to have? It is a perfectly valid conclusion to come to when we say "we are quite happy where we are thank you". However I would contend it is not valid, (to my map of the world), to say,

"we are not happy with where we are, we resent the world of academia and especially psychology criticizing us and our lack of rigour and shoddy epistemology"

and then do nothing about it.

Michael Heap puts it this way:

"Is it reasonable then to regard NLP and indeed Milton Erickson (the phenomenon and not the man himself) , very much as products of our consumer culture? A culture that puts a premium on the saleability of a commodity rather than it's real value to the purchaser (two different things); A culture with an eager curiosity for the magical and the miraculous, and one that promotes the celebrity and the 'cult figure'?" (Heap 1988, p.12.)

It is clear to me the proficient NLP practitioner who can self-apply will benefit from the advantages of such proficiency on a regular basis, however if he or she dare mentions in professional circles in order to do this they use NLP the chances are a polite silence will ensue. An observation from the workplace acts as a vignette:

"I well remember, when I worked for a giant Further Education (FE), college, the sense of chilled embarrassment that spread round the room when its Director of Human Resources, whom I reported to indirectly (whilst also representing over 1000 teaching staff in a trade union role during a period of very strained industrial relations), told us in complete seriousness that he was a Certified NLP practitioner." (Schmoller 2006 in Clark 2006)

I remember at a 3 day Grinder workshop in Brighton John encouraging me with my NLP PhD dissertation, however in practice suggesting I never use the 3 letters NLP. My mind read is John was encouraging me to focus on process and experiencing the effectiveness of those processes in action, however not bringing to conscious attention I was an NLP practitioner. It is this double bind in which NLP finds itself in my opinion. It is fine for us to make use of the patterns in our personal and professional lives and leave it at that, however if we want recognition for NLP and the recognition also that it is effective and it works, I go the full circle and say we must embrace academia.

NLP Push back

In this section I would like to enumerate 5 common reasons from NLP in my experience for not taking this route to provide NLP with greater credibility and responses.

1. Psychology is replete with poor methodology.

This is absolutely the case, however we know it is the case because we know what good methodology looks like and in the academic literature we can constructively criticise researchers so as to develop both their skills and the field as a whole. The NLP response should not be to shy away from doing its own research but rather to engage in good quality research ourselves. As a result of having a history of research and robust discussions about how to research effectively, psychology also provides research of a very good quality. This is possibly one of the reasons it is the 4th most popular A level subject at secondary school in the UK. The British Psychological Society, (BPS) has found:

"Psychology A-level was first examined in 1971 and since that time has attracted more and more candidates each year so that it is now the fourth most popular A-level. This growth has also been mirrored at degree level and psychology is now an important part of the general education of the nation." (BPS, 2013, p. 4.)

2. Researchers do not understand NLP.

This is not a valid excuse in my opinion. Providing this reason often creates more incredulity concerning NLP because if NLP practitioners really believed this, it would be that much more incumbent upon them to do good quality research in order to validate their work. When the early NLP literature makes such unambiguous daims as:

"In order to identify which of the representational systems is the dient's most highly valued one, the therapist *needs only* (emphasis added) to pay attention to the predicates which the dient uses to describe his experience" (Grinder & Bandler, 1976, p.9)

And:

"We would like you to realise that very little of natural language communication is really metaphorical. Most people in describing their experiences even in casual conversation are quite literal. Comments such as "I see what you're saying", are most often communicated by people who organise their world primarily with pictures. These are people whose most highly valued representational system is visual" (Grinder & Bandler, 1976, p.11).

..It is perfectly reasonable that researchers should test these daims. As Sharpley points out it is not necessary to understand the whole of NLP in order to test just one of its daims, just a sufficient amount to research it effectively. In fact if early NLP practitioners

had paid attention to the reviews of Sharpley back in 1984 and 1987 John Grinder would probably not find himself saying so late in the day:

"I would unhesitatingly delete the remarks made by Sandler and myself about most highly valued representational system or sometimes preferred representational system. These terms first appeared in section I of the Structure of Magic, Volume II the presentation of representational systems. What could we have been thinking! The term is itself patently ridiculous." (Grinder & Pucelik, 2013, p. 214).

It is my belief the only way NLP as a field can expedite its credibility is by paying more attention to the critique afforded by those who research it and engage in a critical discourse of its own in the appropriate academic literature.

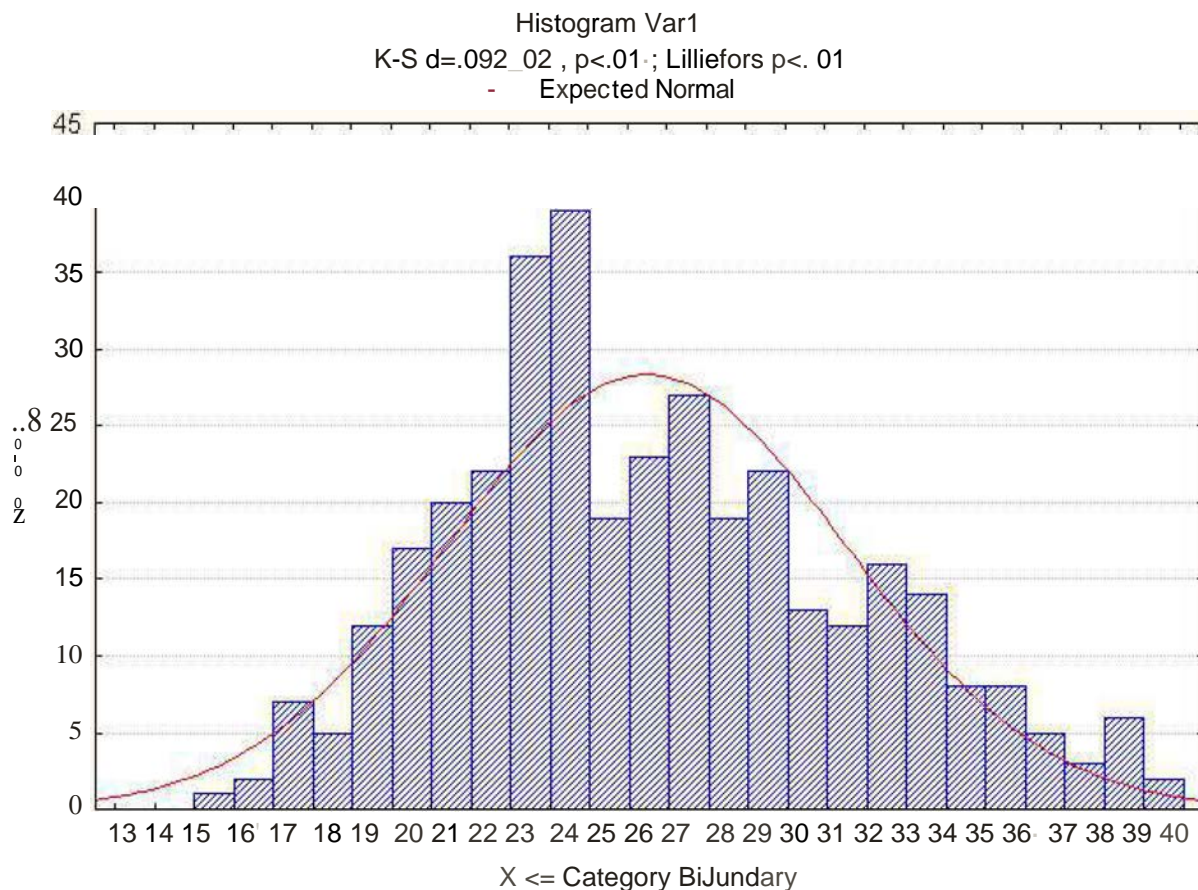
3. Psychology focuses on the norm NLP focuses on excellence.

One of the most popular branches of psychology is clinical psychology and it is known that it focuses on what is wrong with people and seeks ways of addressing that. However coaching psychology, sports psychology, occupational psychology, positive psychology, humanistic psychology, and others often focus on the future, bench mark what works and move clients towards that place.

Bostic St Clair and Grinder, (2001, p. 83) challenge psychologists and asks why their exclusive focus is on the average group. Actually it is not. The only reason psychologists entertain the average group and the normal distribution curve is to provide a statistical context where we can demonstrate using parametric statistics certain experimental results are due to the influence of the experimental variable rather than unknown variables which we have not been able to identify or control. It is standard practice to reject the idea the positive result is due to unknown variables when we get probabilities of 5% or 1%. Without a normal distribution from which to sample from, we have no parametric statistics and thus no probabilities. From sports and dance to business and education the samples we obtain in those areas, when large enough, will fall approximately into a normal distribution. It is only then we understand what excellence is. That is when someone or some group regularly scores at above 3 standard deviations from the norm. Below, (fig 1), is a graph of all the times in my local park run one week. As you would imagine from a random sample of park runners there are some exceptionally good ones who ran between 15 and 17 minutes, the average were around 26 to 27 minutes and the ones who could do with improvement were running between 38 and 40 minutes. If a sporting psychologist were to spend a season coaching one of these athletes one would reasonably expect a significant move to the left in this distribution. Because we have

established our sample comes from a set of scores which fall approximately into a normal distribution we can go further and report whether such a move to the left is statistically significant and due to the operation of coaching, or simply due to the influence of a range of variables which we cannot control such as weather, influence of other athletes, life events, etc. I can say I am a good Park Runner because when compared with this sample my time is consistently to the left of the peak and at my best under 20 minutes. However if I compared myself with just club athletes I might quite simply be average. Conversely if I compared myself with other athletes of my age group, which is 60-64 I would be regarded as excellent and nearly 3 standard deviations to the left. It is only when we measure anybody in the context of a sample we can ascertain whether they are excellent or not and it is for that reason psychologists go out of their way to understand what average performance looks like, simply to understand in respect to that how we can get to excellence.

Fig. 1. Race times at Huntingdon park run. Normal Distribution



4. NLP is not amenable to statistical testing.

This is just not true. I would go so far as to say totally the opposite. The methodology of NLP is modelling and the focus of such modeling projects are those who are regarded as

excellent. There are certain aspects which can readily be measured even concerning fluid enterprises such as business. We don't take Richard Branson's word that he is an excellent business person, we need to look at such things which are easily measurable, like growth, turnover, percentage of market share. Even variables like innovation and corporate social responsibility can be measured and compared quite easily. Secondly, using the same metrics we can measure over time whether or not the modeller has been able to replicate these successes over a period of time. Finally using the same metrics it is possible to see if after training eager participants in the patterns which emerged from the original modelling project, those participants assimilate these patterns and behaviourally demonstrate the same success. Of course such a research project would take considerable time and expertise, however in 40 years of existence it is a set of activities NLP has seen fit not to pursue.

5. It is too expensive to do good research.

If we take as a model the work of Francine Shapiro who did not have a large budget when she began to build her EMDR process we can see this belief is not valid. What she did have was a certain proclivity for clinical work and research and leadership capabilities. She started with small samples, developed her model and began to discuss her findings in a modest way in the academic literature. The rest is history.

I would say NLP as a field does not have this proclivity, indeed it seems to attract people who do not have an interest in research. A basic research curriculum and an understanding of basic concepts such as internal and external validity and reliability have never been a part of the NLP DNA. Consequently people who have been trained in NLP feel nothing is wrong when they ape the comments of someone like Richard Bandler saying I can cure a phobia in 10 minutes. Of course such a statement congruently delivered is very attractive to someone who has a phobia, and money will pass hands. However it is for this reason NLP is where it is, money often passes hands on the basis of marketing statements which have no proven basis in good research. Until this changes, NLP will be seen as unprofessional, unethical and by those who already have made up their minds a form of pyramid sales within a guru culture.

Interestingly those few within NLP who have done good research recognise that it is not the pattern which makes the difference, but the application of that pattern within each individual context. It is for this reason Einspruch and Forman recommended

"First, and *perhaps most important*, (my emphasis), researchers should be trained by competent NLP practitioners for an appropriate duration of time. Training should include pattern recognition skills and a foundation in the presuppositions of

NLP to provide an adequate framework for understanding NLP as an approach to therapy." (Einspruch & Forman, 1985.)

The research of Zaharia, Reiner and Schütz (2015) brings to the reader's attention the fact that in one of the 12 studies reviewed, the range of NLP therapist experience was 10 to 20 years. They also signpost the reader to the extensive European Association of Psychotherapy (EAP) education needed to qualify for the European Certificate of Psychotherapy, (ECP). Since 1989 when in Austria the coaching and counselling law opened the door for a professional NLP qualification, Peter Schutz, (2016) and his team developed an educational process which has led to a government coaching licence. However this involves 37 days at NLP Practitioner training, 37 days at NLP Master Practitioner training, documented coaching practice and 80 hours of crisis intervention which is supervised. The psychotherapy training, (EAP), under a different government ministry is twice the length having a 5 year NLPt curriculum.

However even with this attention to detail in the context of the very first of NLP models, psychotherapy, the authors point out there's is the *first* meta-analysis evaluating the effectiveness of NLP therapy for individuals with social/psychological problems.

They conclude in a sober voice which is indeed contrasted with the marketing hyperbole more often associated with NLP:

"Neuro-Linguistic Psychotherapy as a psychotherapeutic modality grounded in theoretical frameworks, methodologies and interventions scientifically developed, including models developed by NLP, shows results that can hold its ground in comparison with other psychotherapeutic methods." (Zaharia, Reiner & Schütz. 2015, p. 355.)

Conclusion

In the above discussion I have outlined why I think NLP must embrace academia if it is going to change the poor reputation it has in mainstream education. I fully appreciate that many will not see this as necessary. However to those, I have provided what I believe to be sound reasons for such a belief.

Biography

Bruce Grimley is managing director of Achieving Lives Ltd and specialises in the use of NLP within coaching and counselling contexts. His recent book, "The Theory and Practice of NLP Coaching" published in 2013 by Sage is the first to look at NLP through the lens of a UK chartered psychologist and his PhD dissertation asked the tantalizing question what is NLP? www.achieving-lives.co.uk

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