

Why we need an answer to the question: What is NLP?



By Bruce Grimley

Introduction

I have been involved in NLP since 1995 when I passed my NLP practitioner qualification. This was a 30-day course which included supervision, whilst practising the patterns I learnt on members of the public, and a written exam. On top of this, I had to travel during the week and receive 10 sessions of personal NLP coaching / therapy as well.

Over 20 years later, I have just finished my PhD dissertation which asks the research question: What is NLP? The dissertation is significant in that it is the only PhD dissertation to date which has the identifying letters 'NLP' in both the title and abstract, so



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future students can identify the work as specifically addressing the domain of NLP.

In this article, I would like to discuss why I think the NLP community needs a definitive answer to the question 'what is NLP?' if it is to ever obtain a place around the table when leaders in the world wish to address any of the critical questions





concerning the structure of subjective experience and develop answers and solutions.

Structure

The noun 'structure' is defined in my online dictionary as 'anything composed of parts arranged together in some way; an organisation'.

The motivation for my PhD was to understand precisely what the 'parts' of NLP were and how specifically they were arranged to warrant the form of practice called NLP.

When we move to that high table this is important because the science of psychology has been studying the structure of subjective experience ever since Wilhelm Wundt opened the Institute for Experimental Psychology at the University of Leipzig in 1879 to study such subjective processes as reaction times, sensory processes, and attention in as objective a way as possible. Psychologists of all types currently sit at this high table because of the attention they have paid to replicable results of standardised patterns of intervention despite the common understanding that each human experience is uniquely individual.

Commercial importance

The reason structure is so important to my research question is that when a professional organisation – for instance, the NHS – seeks a solution, they need evidence this solution has been tested in such a way they can make a business case, so they can predict how effective the solution will be and how that will cover their investment costs. It is the nature of business to minimise risk.

For instance, Professor Sturt conducted a Freedom of Information request and discovered that the NHS in the UK spent over £800,000 on NLP from 2006–09, 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.' (*1)

EMDR and Francine Shapiro is an example of somebody who was exposed to NLP and its thinking and wrote publically telling the world how fantastic it was in back in 1985. (*2) Building on this experience she developed a standardised intervention and set about testing it in the context of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She had little more than academic capability and tremendous energy, yet now this intervention in the context of PTSD is recognised the world over as an evidence based intervention and she and her practitioners have a seat at the high table, being recognised by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), tackling this debilitating condition.

The identity of NLP

To use NLP language we could say the definition of a field sits at the highest 'Neuro-logical Level'. Everything below it should naturally flow from that definition. In the world of clinical psychology, a psychodynamic approach is very different from a behaviourist approach which is different from a cognitive approach.

We as a community of practitioners cannot demonstrate to an interested party NLP works unless we collectively agree the parameters of NLP interventions. In other words what is NLP and what is not NLP? What are the constituent parts, how are they derived and how are they put together?

I would respectfully suggest, unless we demonstrate to the world outside the NLP community precisely what the 'parts' of NLP are and how specifically they are arranged to warrant the form of practice called NLP, we will be consistently designated to the popular and commercial self-help status, which for many has cultic associations, and not develop the credibility we would like at that high table. ●



When a professional organisation seeks a solution they need evidence this has been tested

(*1) J Sturt. 'Little evidence for NLP in healthcare'.

(*2) F Shapiro. 'Neuro-linguistic Programming. The new success technology'.

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