

The evidence for NLP

Lisa de Rijk, Lucas A.C. Derks, Bruce Grimley
& Jaap Hollander

After 45 years of strong development, global application and ongoing criticism, the contours of what constitutes NLP remain vague, to insiders and outsiders alike. NLP experts use more or less different definitions and criteria for the tools, techniques and foundation principles of NLP. This situation has made it nearly impossible to satisfy the request for research evidence of NLP's effectiveness in coaching.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to commence a discussion of the challenges facing NLP in gaining legitimacy as a coaching approach without an evidence base. The paper critiques the extant literature on NLP coaching, and briefly reviews wider literature of NLP evidence in other contexts, notably the therapy world. This paper offers a summary of and critique of a recent Delphi Poll conducted to identify which of the tools, techniques and theoretical frameworks are considered to be NLP. The paper discusses the challenges for NLP evidencing its effectiveness in coaching and proposes empirical outcome based research utilising the core principles, skills, tools and techniques that have gained consensus in this Delphi Poll.

Keywords: NLP, Neurolinguistic Programming, Coaching, Delphi Poll, Behavioural Change.

Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF this paper is to commence a discussion concerning the use of NLP as a coaching approach when there is little if any empirical evidence to support its application in coaching. The paper commences with a brief history of the development of NLP and moves into a literature review. The review offers a critique of the extant empirical literature on NLP coaching and refers to the existing evidence base for the application of NLP in wider contexts, notably the therapeutic world. The paper then offers a summary of and a reflection on a recent Delphi Poll conducted to identify which of the tools, techniques and theoretical frameworks are considered to be NLP. The rationale for using this method is discussed and critiqued. The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges facing NLP in gaining legitimacy without an evidence base.

History of NLP

NLP was originally modelled by Richard Bandler, John Grinder and Frank Pucelik from the linguistic patterns of psychiatrist and hypnotherapist Milton Erickson, founder of Gestalt therapy Fritz Perls, and pioneer family therapist Virginia Satir (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Grinder, DeLozier & Bandler, 1977). These pieces of work were later integrated with concepts from the general semantics of Korzybski (1933), transformational linguistics by Chomsky (1972), therapeutic communication strategies of Watzlawick (1978) and Bateson (1979), the behavioural psychology of Pavlov (1927), the cybernetic theories of Miller, Galanter and Pribram (1960), the archetypes of Jung (1921, 1972) and the personality theory of Myers and Briggs (Myers, 1962). NLP became mainly spread in the shape of easy reading books and training programmes. The training programs were

only partially standardised and not centrally regulated and the trainees could stem from a wide variety of professional backgrounds.

Beyond this early spread NLP has been incorporated into the coaching world as an applied psychology, enhanced through the development of NLP-based Master's degrees. The first of these was an MA in NLP and Organisational Development at Kingston University. This later evolved into an MA in Applied Coaching at Derby University. Despite a number of students completing these Master's programmes with dissertations focusing on NLP coaching, there is little empirical literature evidencing NLP as an effective coaching approach. Wider literature however does suggest that there is an interest in NLP as a coaching tool (Burton, 2011; Grimley, 2013; Henwood & Lister, 2007; Linder-Pelz, 2010; O'Connor & Lages, 2004). Each of these publications are methodological, providing a 'how-to' of the coaching process rather than evidence of the effectiveness of NLP coaching.

NLP as a contested applied psychology

Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) is a contested applied psychology that has only limited evidence for its effectiveness under specific controlled clinical conditions (Gray & Bourke, 2015; Gray, Budden-Potts & Bourke, 2017; Gray & Teall, 2017; Tylee et al., 2017; Wake et al., 2013). NLP appears to be rather a methodology to gather information than a specific therapeutic or coaching method. It is based on practical principles rather than on a theory and as such NLP users are focussed on how people conduct their behaviours rather than on why the behaviours are present. This has often caused a flow of diffuse negative evaluation from social scientists, in the shape of criticism about missing regulations, theoretical underpinning, research evidence and ethics, aimed at something vague and undefined.

More widely there are many critics of NLP who view NLP as variably a pseudoscience, pop psychology or even a cult, with no evidence base for its effectiveness (Druckman & Swets, 1988; Heap, 1988; Sharpley, 1987). Wake

et al. (2013 pp.194–216) have responded to the criticism regarding lack of evidence for NLP's effectiveness noting that, much of the research on NLP until very recently, has been based on the researchers flawed assumptions about its theory: *'many of the myths have been perpetuated by the continual reliance on a series of ill-informed studies that proceeded on the belief that the preferred representation system (PRS) (the preferred sensory system that someone uses to receive information) was some kind of theoretical foundation upon which the rest of NLP depended. Anyone who has carefully read the literature... would have discovered that the concept fell quickly from favour as unverifiable...Despite a fairly steady stream of research that supports many of the basic concepts of NLP, researchers return to the flawed data from 30 years ago'* (p.195).

Andreas (in Wake et al., 2013) refers to the challenges that NLP faces in being accepted as a valid method for psychological change: *'Personalities, turf wars, hangers-on, and marketing get-rich-quick artists have often distracted observers from thoughtfully examining its (NLP's) core principles and methods'*. (p.xii). Some within the NLP community have not been silent to this with the drive towards a more academic and researched approach, which was gaining momentum with the development of a peer reviewed NLP Research Conference and journal, initially hosted at the University of Surrey in 2008. A significant number of research papers have been presented at these conferences and published in the three volumes of the journal (ANLP 2009, 2011, 2013). Yet none of these provide an evidence base for the application of NLP in coaching. Subsequently researchers in the field recognised the need to become less self-referencing and submitted more clinically oriented papers to wider journals for peer review and publication (Bigley et al., 2010; Gray & Bourke, 2015; Gray & Liotta, 2012; Simpson & Dryden, 2011; Stipancic et al., 2010; Wake & Leighton, 2014). Wake et al. (2013) has more recently brought a group of 13 psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and clinicians together, from around the world, to offer a critical appraisal of NLP clinical research to date. Each of the studies included

by Wake (2013) are in therapeutic contexts, where practitioners use NLP as an adjunct to their core clinical or psychological training.

As described above, the published research of NLP has been conducted predominantly in therapeutic communities using specific protocols, composed from the catalogue of techniques that are thought to make up NLP.

Literature review

A literature review was conducted from the main academic databases and a total of 90 articles were retrieved for consideration. The purpose of the literature review was to identify empirical research studies evidencing NLP in coaching. Sixty articles were excluded as they were not in peer reviewed journals. Of 30 articles included for further review 13/30 were discursive papers rather than providing empirical evidence for the effectiveness of NLP as a coaching methodology. These were then excluded from the final literature review. (Grimley, 2009, 2012; Jakovljević 2009; Jenkins, 2009; Kotera, 2018; Kudliskis et al., 2009; Linder-Pelz & Hall, 2007, 2008; Losada, 2009; Mill, 2010; Moliušytė et al., 2013; Ward, 2006).

A further 6/30 articles were book reviews, and 5/30 articles were responses to letters in a journal. 1/30 article was an introduction to a journal edition, and 1/30 article provided an anti-NLP stance, with no empirical data included. Each of these were also excluded from the review.

The remaining 4/30 papers are critiqued here. The first study uses action-based research to assess a benchmarking process that identified coaching competencies in a specific NLP community context (Linder-Pelz, 2014). The second study is similar to this and uses the Access Model of assessing a professions maturity to evaluate the status of the coaching industry in Norway (Svaleng & Grant, 2010). The remaining two studies offer a more empirical research study through a randomised trial of NLP as a coaching approach for developing mental preparation in Judo (Boughattas et al., 2017), and a mixed methods study

measuring the perceived effectiveness of NLP based coaching for SME business owners (Gray et al., 2017).

Linder Pelz (2014) utilises action-based research to assess the development of standards in the NLP coaching field following a benchmarking methodology. Benchmarking is a continuous improvement methodology that is widely used in business development, human resources and professional development. The methodology enables the development of standards and best practice through the identification and development of professional competencies. Linder-Pelz used deductive analysis (Ladkin, 2004) to reflect on the approach adopted by Hall to develop benchmarked competencies for coaches in the NLP based Meta-Coach community. Nine coaches were selected from the coaching community using purposive sampling. The demographics of participants were from seven countries with each participant having attended a minimum of two advanced meta coach trainings.

Linder-Pelz conducted semi-structured interviews and compared the benchmarking of Hall with data from the analysed interviews. A number of skills were identified as core coaching competencies: Support, Listening, Questioning, Meta-Questioning, Receiving Feedback, Giving Feedback, Inducing States. Findings were triangulated through checking of themes and conclusions with study participants. The study does not measure the effectiveness of these skills, neither does it focus on specific NLP skills.

Ladkin's 12 criteria for action research was used by Linder-Pelz to assess the benchmarking work of Hall for robustness and trustworthiness. Hall's process is reported to have met most of these criteria with participants validating the development of the competencies. Two of the participants reported that the process had not been 'truly democratic' (p.54), however Linder-Pelz does not elucidate further.

Linder-Pelz concludes that Hall's process does meet the criteria for robustness and trustworthiness. Linder-Pelz then compares Hall's process with other approaches in the

coaching field. She suggests that Hall's process is more 'fine-grained' (p.56) because of the development of sensory and behavioural competency indicators rather than the self-report that has been relied on in other coaching benchmarking exercises. Recommendations are made by Linder-Pelz for further research to test reliability and address issues of fairness, as well as studies to measure predictive validity of the benchmarking rating scale. She goes on to propose that the field develop outcome-based research including the development of randomised control trials to compare coaching competencies. This study is the first in the NLP field to attempt to evaluate the development of coach competencies using a specific coaching methodology – meta coaching. Although driven by the developer of meta-coaching, Hall, his use of action-based research has been assessed independently by Linder-Pelz and found to be sufficiently robust to warrant further investigation as an effective coaching approach. Although Linder-Pelz has applied a recognised research methodology to assess the action-based research of Hall, this is an internally assessed benchmarking process driven by Hall as the leader of the NLP meta-coaching community. This paper in itself does not add to the evidencing of NLP tools and techniques within a coaching skill set. We would add therefore to Linder-Pelz's recommendations and suggest that these competencies are generic coaching skills and could be used to develop an NLP coaching protocol that could then be tested for effectiveness.

Svaleng and Grant (2010) also offer a perspective on the development of core competencies of coaches, albeit as a result of the fragmented nature of the coaching community in Norway. The authors suggest that the reason for fragmentation in the field was three-fold: the difference in philosophical tradition between Nordic and North American models of coaching; the content and method of working; and the argument between the rigor offered by academically based programmes and the more practically oriented non-academic programmes.

Rather than extend the debate about competencies, Svaleng and Grant adopted an industry maturation and professionalisation approach, utilising ACCESS criteria to analyse the status of the NLP coaching industry in Norway. Each of the six criteria of Autonomy, Commitment, Collegiality, Extensive education, Service orientation and Special skills and knowledge are discussed in turn. The more these characteristics are shown, the more professional and mature a field is deemed to be.

Svaleng and Grant discuss the challenges of gaining Autonomy as a field because of the dichotomy between the regulation, license to practice and ethical codes required of psychologists and counsellors and the lack of barriers to entry into the wider coaching industry. The authors describe this lose:win scenario with those already holding government 'sanction' (p.8) having more to lose as the field could be opened up to more coaches who lack regulation, leading to credence being given to an unregulated field.

This perception was then evaluated against the criteria of Commitment, with the authors suggesting that a lack of commitment towards nationally recognised standards for all led partially to the derailment of the standard work by the industry. Svaleng and Grant suggest that to address this potential of conflict of interest independent professionals should be included in future standards development.

Svaleng and Grant identified that there was a lack of Collegiality in the industry again because of the different factions across the professional and the general coaching community. The authors refer again to the need for common coaching standards and an educational framework for potentially fostering collegiality and an opportunity for joint identity. This then links to the fourth criterion, Education. Svaleng and Grant call for the inclusion of mental health awareness into coach training, identifying that one in two Norwegians will experience mental health challenges in their lifetime and may use coaching as a socially acceptable form of ther-

apy. The authors refer to an article reporting coachees who had become clinically depressed following coaching and suggest that within Norway, coaches may be subject to prosecution for offering an alternative to public health, i.e. coaching for mental distress.

Service orientation within an ethical framework is identified as the fifth criterion. The authors refer to the lack of enforceable ethical codes globally for coaching and where there is a deemed breach of an ethical code, the coach may lose licensure under organisations such as the ICF yet may continue to practice outside of one of the professional bodies.

The final criterion of Specialist skills and knowledge links back to the lack of competency, standards and ethical framework across the Norwegian coaching industry. The result of the turf war amongst the coaching bodies in Norway resulted in an NLP based Norwegian coaching company developing a Norwegian industry standard for coaching. This has been met by some coaches in the wider coaching industry with a critique that the standard is NLP specific and not coaching specific.

Some concerns have been raised through this theoretical discussion by Svaleng and Grant, the most important of which is the issue of non-psychologists working with mental health issues. The authors conclude with a call for collegiality amongst the Norwegian coaching industry towards the development of ethical coaching standards and practice. The article by Svaleng and Grant appears to be more of a meta-comment on the status of the coaching community in Norway and does not add evidence for NLP as a coaching tool. The authors do not offer a critique of the wider NLP community in Norway, nor do they comment on how the development of NLP based coaching standards was accepted by other Nordic NLP organisations.

The final 2/30 papers Boughattas et al. (2017) and Gray et al. (2011) offer empirical studies in the sports and SME arenas. These are reviewed here.

Boughattas et al. (2017) conducted a control trial measuring the effectiveness of some NLP techniques as a form of mental preparation for judo competitors. The authors have been unable to access a translated copy of this article therefore a summary is provided from the available abstract and we have been unable to critique the approach taken by the authors. The study measures a group of 20 judokas from the national judo team against a control group. Coaching techniques used included setting fitness goals and anchoring from NLP. The study group demonstrated improvements in mental skills in the male group, and in both groups, the study found that utilising the anchoring technique enabled improvement in the ability to solicit mental skills. Anchoring is a technique based on operant conditioning, enabling the accessing of positive resource states that can be utilised across contexts. As we have not been able to access the full article we are not able to provide a critique of the methodology or findings.

Gray et al's (2011) research is a mixed methods study measuring the perceived benefits of coaching by SME business owners. Random sampling was utilised to recruit 30 managers, with a further 16 recruited utilising theoretical sampling ($N=46$). The mixed-methods approach of semi-structured interviews was triangulated with a 60-question quantitative questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed using competencies from the National Occupational Standards for Managers. The study authors used Framework as the data analysis tool. 13/22 coaches were reported as NLP ($N=12$) or psychotherapy trained. These coaches were chosen by 73 per cent of the coachee cohort. The authors report this as statistically significant. Coachees referred to their selection of these therapeutically informed coaches as a 'sanity' or 'personal health check' rather than for a specific coaching outcome. The results of this study demonstrated that coaches utilised coaching more for the perceived personal development opportunity that coaching offered. Two main benefits

were reported to have been gained from the coaching: managing self-control and managing self-emotions. This would support the selection criteria stated earlier of the desire for a personal health check. The authors report limitations of the study as a small sample size from which generalisations cannot be made. Additionally the authors suggest that the immediacy of data collection post coaching and subsequent findings cannot be extrapolated to longer term benefits. Similar to the Linder-Pelz (2014) study, there is no assessment of the efficacy of NLP as a coaching model using any of the tools and techniques that are considered to be NLP.

In summary, there are no empirical studies that offer evidence for the effectiveness of coaching based solely on NLP tools and techniques. Linder-Pelz (2014) and Svaleng and Grant (2010) both offer a theoretical review of existing coaching practice with the development of NLP based coaching standards, in meta coaching as a development out of NLP (Linder-Pelz, 2014) and in one NLP Association in Norway (Svaleng & Grant, 2010). Both of these papers could be developed further to inform research studies measuring outcomes in NLP coaching.

Methods

The authors recognised that for NLP to develop evidence of its effectiveness in coaching there needed to be a way of defining NLP specific tools and techniques that could be used in a coaching context and measured for their efficacy and effectiveness. It is from this stance that the authors conducted a Delphi Poll to gain consensus within the field of NLP of precisely what constitutes NLP. This section summarises the rationale for methodological choice of a Delphi Poll, describes the application of the methodology selected and presents the results.

Boughattas (2017) and Gray's (2011) studies both offer NLP coaching interventions to specific client groups, yet do not specifically describe the methodology used within the coaching therefore it is not possible to correlate the use of NLP technique to

outcome. The Norwegian study by Svaleng and Grant (2010) is a theoretical commentary on the status of coaching in Norway that has seen an NLP based coaching association drive forward standards for that specific modality. The paper by Linder-Pelz (2014) offers a commentary of a benchmarking process for the development of core competencies in an off shoot from NLP, meta coaching. It is against this backdrop of lack of coding or utilisation of a specific NLP methodology that we conducted a Delphi Poll. The purpose of this was to try and reach common agreement of what can be identified as NLP. It is then anticipated that the NLP coaching industry can follow the innovative research studies within the NLP therapy community (Gray & Bourke, 2015; Gray, Budden-Potts & Bourke, 2017; Gray & Teall, 2017; Tylee et al., 2017; Wake et al., 2013) and conduct outcome-based studies that measure the effectiveness of NLP coaching.

Delphi poll

It is against the above discussion and a drive towards a more evidence-based field that the authors decided to conduct a Delphi Poll within the NLP Training Community to identify the core elements of NLP's concepts, principles, tools and techniques. This would then enable the codifying of the technology for future research.

A Delphi Poll can be used to ascertain the views of experts particularly when the problem being investigated is complex and where there is a hierarchical structure of expertise (Cantrill et al., 1996; Linstone, 1978; Walker et al., 1996). The methodology is specifically designed to be used as a group communication process where there is a difference of opinion and is particularly useful in real world situations (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The technique uses a number of iterations of data collection from a panel of subjects to develop consensus of opinion.

NLP has already been included in a Delphi Poll (Norcross et al., 2006) assessing experts' opinions on discredited psy-

chological methods, with NLP scoring 3.87 (3=possibly discredited, 4=probably discredited). In comparison, the same poll scored EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing) at 3.06. EMDR is a therapeutic approach to trauma that developed out of Shapiro's (1985) observation of the eye tracking process in NLP that can be used to manage trauma responses. However, unknown to many, EMDR shares its historic roots with NLP but developed into a NICE (National Institute of Clinical healthcare Excellence) approved evidence-based trauma treatment, i.e. it is an NLP based protocol, albeit a very limited set of NLP derived tools, whereas NLP appears to have more tools than any one expert can master.

The authors of this paper started the Delphi Poll process by searching for a widely agreed upon catalogue of tools and techniques that are considered to be the core to NLP (Hollander et al., 2016). An initial list was developed utilising the standards laid out by the International Association for NLP. This list was compared with the standards set out by the Institute for Eclectic Psychology (IEP). The data was then compared to other NLP training associations globally and further refined after a comparison with the Encyclopaedia of NLP (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000). Items were omitted if they were highly specific, internationally unfamiliar or explicitly attributed to another school of psychology or psychotherapy. It should be noted however that NLP was developed through the modelling of perceived experts in the therapy field, hence it does hold similarities to many other therapeutic approaches. Where NLP differs from other approaches is by providing a model of 'how' to act, e.g. unconditional positive regard is a core condition of person-centred counselling, NLP may refer to this as a process of gaining rapport with processes of how this can be achieved. This initial list of tools and techniques resulted in 78 items.

The second phase of the Poll recruited all members from the so called 'International NLP leadership Summit' which informed

the final list (Hollander et al., 2017). The Leadership Summit (www.nlpleadershipsummit.org) is an international group with about 120 members that have yearly meetings. Membership criteria for the group are that members have been teaching NLP for over 15 years, are reputed as leaders in the field and as authors of NLP literature.

Among the inclusion criteria for the Poll were core skills and techniques that were listed by more than 10 major international NLP training accreditation institutes. Techniques were included irrespective of their contextual application e.g. education, therapy, business, coaching etc. Finally, a total of 112 techniques were listed and subdivided into seven categories. Four false techniques were also included to check for false negatives.

Categories were distinguished on the basis of the presuppositions and areas of basic competence that underpin NLP, the conceptual distinctions that are thought to support the NLP tools and stem from other psychologies, the practitioner attitudinal components, the implicit and explicit theory of change and finally the skills and techniques taught in trainings.

The categories were codified as:

- Axioms
 - Premises about experience
 - Premises about communication and change
- Method
 - Distinctions
 - Attitude
 - Model of change
- Technology
 - Skills
 - Techniques.

Items were listed alphabetically in the Delphi Poll, with a description offered for each element.

The items consisted of the standard names of the piece of NLP tested. The basic question was: Does this belong to NLP? The response options were on a three-point Likert scale

with the scales being yes (score of 1), no (0), and don't know (-1). The researchers were clear that they wanted to elicit responses where there may be lack of knowledge of the source of a technique, or uncertainty about the inclusion of a technique as core NLP as this would also give insight into the spread and adoption of the more recent developments within the field.

Expert panel

The panel of experts ($N=59$) were selected from the NLP leadership summit. This group of experts had a combined NLP teaching experience of 1363 years, with the minimum NLP teaching experience of each expert being greater than 20 years. The combined experience of the experts included a total of 231 books authored on NLP.

Results

The aim of this Poll was to establish a very clear overview about what the experts from within the NLP community considered to belong to NLP. This question was pressing because of the wide range of applications that are on the market under the umbrella of the NLP name. The unbridled creative development over the last 45 years, where there was no central platform to decide what was NLP or not, created a situation of freedom on the one hand but an impossible situation for researchers if it came to testing the value of NLP tools let alone testing its effectiveness in its entirety. To solve this, a cut-off percentage of 70 per cent agreement was chosen (Hollander et al., 2018) for a criteria to be included. The rationale was, that when the agreement was less than this number, the concept, principle or technique could still be very valuable, but was not widely recognised as NLP. After the raw data was analysed and reported (Appendices 1–3), the mean scores were analysed (Appendices 4–7).

Each of the components of the conceptual model, which was based on the original presuppositions of NLP, were agreed by 88–100 per cent of the respondents. The map is not the territory, which was adopted

from Korzybski's (1933) work, was agreed with by all respondents. The only principle that did not gain consensus agreement was the mind operating with a feed forward system that predicts the future. Each of the premises about communication and change reached consensus agreement, which provides universal support for the presuppositions. This data is presented in Appendix 1.

In considering the theoretical framework of distinctions, attitude and model of change, there is more disagreement with certain approaches in the method. Each of the original methods are supported by more than 70 per cent of the respondents. Newer methods such as meta and core states have less agreement. Where methods have been brought across from other disciplines rather than modelled, there is almost universal disagreement, i.e Graves drives. This suggests that the leadership group recognises that Graves drive is an adopted rather than modelled method. When considering the attitude of NLP, only 44 per cent of respondents agreed that Coach state was core to NLP. This raises a question of whether NLP is coaching. The model of change as a method was universally agreed by the majority (Appendix 2).

Each respondent was asked about their agreement with the skills, tools and techniques offered within the NLP model. There is universal agreement with the core linguistic patterns that were originally modelled by Bandler, Grinder et al. When newer skills such as the LAB profile (63 per cent agreement) and clean language (32 per cent) were considered, there was less agreement. Even newer skills such as Mindsonar metaprofile analysis had less agreement (24 per cent). Of the techniques assessed there are lower levels of agreement, compared to the skills, where the majority consensus for a specific skill was in almost every instance was 98–100 per cent. The techniques that reached consensus found an agreement score of 73–85 per cent. Again these were for techniques that emerged from earlier in the NLP history and those techniques that were newer find less agreement (Appendix 3).

After the initial raw data was analysed, the data was revisited to ascertain the mean scores and Standard Deviation (SD). The lower the SD score, the more significant the findings were. This process saw a considerable change in the ranking of some of the tools and techniques (Appendix 4). This further reinforced greater acceptance of techniques that emerged from the original teachings, suggesting that these techniques have held true through time.

When the conceptual model was analysed for mean scores there was almost no variation from the raw data scores (Appendix 5). Only one model changed and developed more agreement, *people make the best choice available to them*. The meaning for this is not known and could be investigated through qualitative inquiry. The same minimal change occurred for assessing the Mean and SD for the methods (Appendix 6).

There were some changes when analysing the mean score and SD of the tools and techniques (Appendix 7). Some of the techniques gained greater consensus. These were the meta-mirror format which was described in the early writings in NLP, and remodeling which is a newer variation of the modeling process upon which NLP was founded, amongst others. One of the false techniques gained greater consensus when the mean and SD scores were included – the Godiva Chocolate Pattern!

Discussion

The lack of evidence for both the content and effectiveness of NLP coaching is unsurprising given the diverse and mainly non-theoretical nature of the field. By conducting a Delphi Poll and through the quality of data that emerged it is possible to offer some conclusions about what can be considered to be NLP, which then makes it potentially easier to evidence. There is some commonality of agreement of which tools, techniques and appear to belong to NLP. Of these components some of them are being used as protocol delivered interventions to treat clinical conditions such as PTSD (post traumatic

stress disorder) and depression. For instance, one of the most classic approaches to extend a person's capabilities particularly in depression, is 'The New Behaviour Generator.' This tool has a 97 per cent agreement score, with a mean score of 2.97 and is ranked 9. Equally the VKD (visual-kinaesthetic dissociation) trauma process has a 98 per cent agreement rate with a mean score of 2.97. This process is the foundation of a series of controlled trials conducted and published in the US, where the protocol has been used with veterans suffering from PTSD (Gray & Bourke, 2015; Gray, Budden-Potts & Bourke, 2017).

An analysis of the 79 elements that was agreed through the Delphi Poll shows that nearly all of them date from before 1990 and can be found in each of the core textbooks dating from that era. At that time the communication among NLP practitioners was much tighter than after 2000. There were less people involved and they were trained by fewer trainers, therefore the coherence in what was transmitted would have had more commonality. Through the development of international journals, initially with Anchorpoint and NLP-world, and more recently through Rappoport and the *NLP Research Journal*, people are becoming more informed about new developments. This possibly leads to greater adoption of the newer techniques but less agreement of what is core NLP in the elder network.

Limitations

The use of a Delphi Poll is a recognised approach to gain consensus across a community. It could be argued that by staying internally referenced, i.e. within the NLP community, the findings of the Delphi Poll are invalid. This is countered by considering the adoption principles of any given approach. It is only by gaining agreement amongst experts who use the tools daily of precisely what constitutes a methodology that these tools and techniques can then be tested in an empirical manner.

The authors of this study were only able to further the use of the data into a Delphi Poll after the initial data was returned, there-

fore the set-up of the study was biased from the beginning with inclusion of data only from those who responded. It is likely that these respondents had a vested interest in the outcome. Equally it is recognised and stated that each of the authors of this paper have a vested interest in the outcome, as each is a recognised expert in the field of NLP and is a member of the NLP Leadership Summit. This inevitably provides a strong bias in this study. By presenting the data that emerged from the study we are offering transparency of process. We also recognise that many tools and techniques that are deemed to be NLP will have commonalities with other psychological approaches. This is inevitable as NLP was developed out of modelling other therapies. This does not discount them as NLP rather that they are models of processes that have been identified from these other therapies.

Conclusions

Here we need to emphasise that NLP was never designed as a closed system or a structured research program. NLP is a modelling methodology therefore there will inevitably include components from other widely recognised approaches within the skill set of NLP. The variety of conceptual roots and the development of technical complexity that emerged out of the modelling work for each of the NLP elements is considerable. Although in the 1970s the NLP elements were initially developed by the three originators assisted by three successive groups of students from the University of California, from the beginning of the eighties the group of contributors grew beyond what could be overseen and registered. Even

today new NLP elements are being created through the process of systematic modelling that is core to NLP. By clearly stating what is and what is not NLP it then becomes possible to begin to measure and evidence NLP as a potentially effective coaching tool.

The goal of the Delphi Poll was to enable researchers to show that what they evaluate belongs to the applied psychology of NLP, albeit having historical roots in other therapies or psychologies. This has largely been achieved. In the future the results can be used as a reference for measuring the effectiveness of coaching using specific techniques and concepts from NLP.

Lisa de Rijk

Awaken Consulting & Training Services Ltd;
Awaken School of Outcome Oriented
Psychotherapies Ltd.
lisa@awakenconsulting.co.uk
@lisa_derijk

Lucas A.C. Derks

Psychotherapist, Social Panorama

Bruce Grimley, AFBPsS,

M.D. Achieving-Lives Ltd

NLP Master trainer,

(International Association of NLP Institutes)

Jaap Hollander

Coach, Institute for Eclectic Psychology

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Appendix 1

Axiom		Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Premises about experience	The map is not the territory	100%	3.00	0
	Structure is more important than content	92%	2.86	.47
	Life and mind are systemic processes	90%	2.85	.48
	Experience can be reduced to sensory elements (VAKOG)	88%	2.83	.53
	The mind is a feed forward system that predicts the future	66%	2.46	.84
Premises about Communication and Change	The meaning of communication is the response elicited	98%	2.98	.13
	There is no failure only feedback	98%	2.97	.26
	People make the best choices available to them	98%	2.98	.13
	People have the resources they need for the changes they desire	97%	2.95	.29
	If what you are doing does not work, it is useful to do something else	97%	2.95	.29
	All behaviour has a positive intention	97%	2.95	.29
	If one can do it, others can learn to do it	97%	2.95	.29
	Submodalities determine the effect of an experience	97%	2.95	.29
	The system with the greatest flexibility survives	88%	2.80	.61
	Resistance is a signal of insufficient rapport	86%	2.86	.39

Appendix 2

Method		Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Distinctions	Sensory modalities	100%	3.00	0
	Submodalities	100%	3.00	0
	Association vs Dissociation	100%	3.00	0
	Elements of the structure of subjective experience	97%	2.95	.29
	Focus outside versus focus inside	95%	2.92	.38
	Analogue versus digital	93%	2.92	.34
	Meta programs	92%	2.90	.36
	Sensory experience versus categorisation (complex equivalence)	90%	2.85	.48
	Neuro-Logical levels	85%	2.75	.63
	Presupposition versus explicit statement versus implication	78%	2.68	.65
	Meta states	69%	2.56	.73
	Core states	68%	2.47	.82
	Separating versus joining	46%	2.20	.85
	Graves drives	3%	1.22	0.49
Attitude	Modelling orientation	97%	2.93	.37
	Sponsoring attitude	61%	2.29	.82
	Coach state	44%	2.05	.97
Model of change	Well-formed outcomes	100%	3.00	0
	TOTE model for goal directed change	98%	2.97	0.26
	Utilisation	97%	2.97	0.18
	SCORE model for choosing or designing interventions	83%	2.68	0.86

Appendix 3

Tools/ techniques		Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Skills	As-if frame	100%	3.00	0
	Calibrating internal states and processes	100%	3.00	0
	Eye accessing cues, detecting and working with	100%	3.00	0
	Meta model questions	100%	3.00	0
	Milton model language patterns	100%	3.00	0
	Modelling	100%	3.00	0
	Rapport (mirroring/pacing)	100%	3.00	0
	Strategies	100%	3.00	0
	Verbal reframing	100%	3.00	0
	Anchoring	98%	2.97	.26
	Ecological check	98%	2.97	.26
	Time lines, working with	98%	2.93	.37
	Leading, verbal and non-verbal	95%	2.93	.31
	Stacking realities	83%	2.78	.53
	LAB profile	63%	2.39	.85
	Double induction	59%	2.32	.88
	Clean language	32%	1.68	.82
	Mindsong metaprofile analysis	24%	1.81	.8
Techniques	Future pacing – adapting a change to future contexts	100%	3.00	0
	Six step reframing	100%	3.00	0
	Change personal history	98%	2.97	.26
	Changing a strategy	98%	2.97	.26
	Collapsing anchors	98%	2.97	.26
	Negotiating between parts	98%	2.97	.26
	Swish pattern	98%	2.97	.26
	Trauma process using VK dissociation	98%	2.97	.26
	Communicating with a part	97%	2.95	.29

Continued

Appendix 3 *continued*

Tools/ techniques		Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Techniques	Circle of excellence	97%	2.93	.37
	Eliciting a resource, using a reference experience	97%	2.95	.29
	Eliciting a resource, using a role model	97%	2.95	.29
	New behaviour generator	97%	2.97	.37
	Reimprinting format	97%	2.95	.29
	VK squash	95%	2.93	.31
	Eliciting a resource, using communicating with the future self	93%	2.90	.40
	Eliciting a resource, using physiology	93%	2.88	.49
	Aligning perceptual positions	92%	2.88	.43
	Metaphor for inducing change	92%	2.78	.59
	Compulsion blow out	86%	2.81	.51
	Shifting the importance of criteria	86%	2.83	.46
	Aligning neuro-logical levels format	85%	2.73	.67
	Disney strategy	85%	2.76	.60
	Allergy Model	83%	2.69	.65
	Auditory tempo shift to change string feelings	80%	2.75	.54
	Timeline reframing format	80%	2.73	.58
	Integrating conflicting beliefs format	78%	2.75	.51
	Criteria for NLP techniques	76%	2.58	.91
	Core transformation	76%	2.46	1.02
	Belief audit for identifying limiting beliefs	75%	2.68	.60
	Belief outframing	73%	2.66	.60
	Grief resolution, shame resolution, guilt resolution, anger/forgiveness process	73%	2.47	1.09
	Operating metaphor	73%	2.61	.70
	Meta mirror format	68%	2.61	.62
Transforming negative self talk	64%	2.56	.65	
Remodelling	64%	2.61	.56c	

Continued

Appendix 3 *continued*

Tools/ techniques		Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Techniques	LAB profile	63%	2.39	.85
	Sponsoring attitude	61%	2.29	.87
	Double induction	59%	2.32	.88
	Godiva chocolate pattern	59%	2.47	1.09
	Spinning feelings to change strong feelings	54%	2.29	.91
	Last straw threshold pattern	52%	2.36	.74
	Generative change format	51%	2.29	1.03
	Forgiveness model	47%	2.22	.81
	Building belief bridges	46%	2.37	.64
	Separating versus joining	46%	2.20	.85
	COACH state	44%	2.05	.97
	Symbolic modelling	42%	2.17	.81
	Bateson strategy	41%	2.29	.74
	I wonder how technique for generating practical new ideas	39%	1.97	1.25
	Identity matrix	39%	1.92	1.25
	Wholeness process	37%	2.07	.83
	Engaging the body's natural process of healing format	37%	2.05	.80
	Provocative change techniques modelled from Frank Farrelly	36%	1.90	.90
	Social panorama technique	36%	2.02	.80
	Resonance pattern	34%	2.17	.67
	Generative collaboration	32%	1.85	1.27
	Clean language	32%	1.68	.82
	Imperative self-format	32%	1.98	1.09
Core finding engine for identifying limiting beliefs	31%	2.12	.67	
Criteria spin	30%	2.07	.78	
Hero's journey format	29%	1.37	1.54	
Collective intelligence techniques	25%	2.00	.72	

Continued

Appendix 3 *continued*

Tools/ techniques		Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Techniques	Dynamic spin release	25%	2.00	.72
	Co-dependence format	24%	2.07	.67
	MindSonar meta profile analysis	24%	1.81	.80
	Inner child work	22%	1.10	1.58
	Integrating archetypal energies	19%	1.58	.79
	Gift of nature	8%	1.64	.61
	Family constellations	5%	1.22	.53
	mBit multiple brain integration techniques	5%	1.51	.60
	Graves drives	3%	1.22	.49
	Deep tissue massage	2%	1.15	.45

Appendix 4

Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD	Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD	Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Future pacing – adapting a change to future contexts	100%	3.00	0	Sponsoring attitude	61%	2.29	.87
Six step reframing	100%	3.00	0	Double induction	59%	2.32	.88
Change personal history	98%	2.97	.26	Godiva chocolate pattern	59%	2.47	1.09
Changing a strategy	98%	2.97	.26	Spinning feelings to change strong feelings	54%	2.29	.91
Collapsing anchors	98%	2.97	.26	Last straw threshold pattern	52%	2.36	.74
Negotiating between parts	98%	2.97	.26	Generative change format	51%	2.29	1.03
Swish pattern	98%	2.97	.26	Forgiveness model	47%	2.22	.81
Trauma process using VK dissociation	98%	2.97	.26	Building belief bridges	46%	2.37	.64
Communicating with a part	97%	2.95	.29	Separating versus joining	46%	2.20	.85
Circle of excellence	97%	2.93	.37	COACH state	44%	2.05	.97
Eliciting a resource, using a reference experience	97%	2.95	.29	Symbolic modelling	42%	2.17	.81
Eliciting a resource, using a role model	97%	2.95	.29	Bateson strategy	41%	2.29	.74

Continued

Appendix 4 *continued*

Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD	Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
New behaviour generator	97%	2.97	.37	I wonder how technique for generating practical new ideas	39%	1.97	1.25
Reimprinting format	97%	2.95	.29	Identity matrix	39%	1.92	1.25
VK squash	95%	2.93	.31	Wholeness process	37%	2.07	.83
Eliciting a resource, using communicating with the future self	93%	2.90	.40	Engaging the body's natural process of healing format	37%	2.05	.80
Eliciting a resource, using physiology	93%	2.88	.49	Provocative change techniques modelled from Frank Farrelly	36%	1.90	.90
Aligning perceptual positions	92%	2.88	.43	Social panorama technique	36%	2.02	.80
Metaphor for inducing change	92%	2.78	.59	Resonance pattern	34%	2.17	.67
Compulsion blow out	86%	2.81	.51	Generative collaboration	32%	1.85	1.27
Shifting the importance of criteria	86%	2.83	.46	Clean language	32%	1.68	.82
Aligning neuro-logical levels format	85%	2.73	.67	Imperative self-format	32%	1.98	1.09
Disney strategy	85%	2.76	.60	Core finding engine for identifying limiting beliefs	31%	2.12	.67
Allergy model	83%	2.69	.65	Criteria spin	30%	2.07	.78

Continued

Appendix 4 *continued*

Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD	Tool/Technique	Total (N=59)	Mean	SD
Auditory tempo shift to change string feelings	80%	2.75	.54	Hero's journey format	29%	1.37	1.54
Timeline reframing format	80%	2.73	.58	Collective intelligence techniques	25%	2.00	.72
Integrating conflicting beliefs format	78%	2.75	.51	Dynamic spin release	25%	2.00	.72
Criteria for NLP techniques	76%	2.58	.91	Co-dependence format	24%	2.07	.67
Core transformation	76%	2.46	1.02	MindSonar meta profile analysis	24%	1.81	.80
Belief audit for identifying limiting beliefs	75%	2.68	.60	Inner child work	22%	1.10	1.58
Belief outframing	73%	2.66	.60	Integrating archetypal energies	19%	1.58	.79
Grief resolution, shame resolution, guilt resolution, anger/forgiveness process	73%	2.47	1.09	Gift of nature	8%	1.64	.61
Operating metaphor	73%	2.61	.70	Family constellations	5%	1.22	.53
Meta mirror format	68%	2.61	.62	mBit multiple brain integration techniques	5%	1.51	.60
Transforming negative self talk	64%	2.56	.65	Graves drives	3%	1.22	.49
Remodeling	64%	2.61	.56c	Deep tissue massage	2%	1.15	.45
LAB profile	63%	2.39	.85				

Appendix 5

Axiom		Mean	SD
Premises about experience	The map is not the territory	3.00	0
	Structure is more important than content	2.86	.47
	Life & mind are systemic processes	2.85	.48
	Experience can be reduced to sensory elements (VAKOG)	2.83	.53
	The mind is a feed forward system that predicts the future	2.46	.84
Premises about Communication and Change	The meaning of communication is the response elicited	2.98	.13
	People make the best choices available to them	2.98	.13
	There is no failure only feedback	2.97	.26
	People have the resources they need for the changes they desire	2.95	.29
	If what you are doing does not work, it is useful to do something else	2.95	.29
	All behaviour has a positive intention	2.95	.29
	If one can do it, others can learn to do it	2.95	.29
	Submodalities determine the effect of an experience	2.95	.29
	Resistance is a signal of insufficient rapport	2.86	.39
	The system with the greatest flexibility survives	2.80	.61

Appendix 6

Method		Mean	SD
Distinctions	Sensory modalities	3.00	0
	Submodalities	3.00	0
	Association versus Dissociation	3.00	0
	Elements of the structure of subjective experience	2.95	.29
	Focus outside versus focus inside	2.92	.38
	Analogue versus digital	2.92	.34
	Meta programmes	2.90	.36
	Sensory experience versus categorisation (complex equivalence)	2.85	.48
	Neuro-Logical levels	2.75	.63
	Presupposition versus explicit statement versus implication	2.68	.65
	Meta states	2.56	.73
	Core states	2.47	.82
	Separating versus joining	2.20	.85
	Graves drives	1.22	0.49
Attitude	Modelling orientation	2.93	.37
	Sponsoring attitude	2.29	.82
	Coach state	2.05	.97
Model of change	Well-formed outcomes	3.00	0
	TOTE model for goal directed change	2.97	0.26
	Utilisation	2.97	0.18
	SCORE model for choosing or designing interventions	2.68	0.86

Appendix 7 continued

Skills/Tools/techniques	Mean	SD	Previous ranking	Current ranking	Skills/Tools/techniques	Mean	SD	Previous ranking	Current ranking
As-if frame	3.00	0	1	1	Belief outframing	2.66	.60	31	29
Calibrating internal states and processes	3.00	0	2	2	Operating metaphor	2.61	.70	33	30
Eye accessing cues, detecting and working with	3.00	0	3	3	Meta mirror format	2.61	.62	34	31
Meta model questions	3.00	0	4	4	Remodeling	2.61	.56	36	32
Milton model language patterns	3.00	0	5	5	Criteria for NLP techniques	2.58	.91	28	33
Modelling	3.00	0	6	6	Transforming negative self talk	2.56	.65	35	34
Rapport (mirroring/pacing)	3.00	0	7	7	Grief resolution, shame resolution, guilt resolution, anger/forgiveness process	2.47	1.09	32	35
Strategies	3.00	0	8	8	Godiva chocolate pattern	2.47	1.09	40	36
Verbal reframing	3.00	0	9	9	Core transformation	2.46	1.02	29	37
Anchoring	2.97	.26	10	10	LAB profile	2.39	.85	37	38
Ecological check	2.97	.26	11	11	Building belief bridges	2.37	.64	45	39
Time lines, working with	2.93	.37	12	12	Last straw threshold pattern	2.36	.74	42	40
Leading, verbal and non-verbal	2.93	.31	13	13	Double induction	2.32	.88	39	41
Stacking realities	2.78	.53	14	14	Sponsoring attitude	2.29	.87	38	42
LAB profile	2.39	.85	15	15	Spinning feelings to change strong feelings	2.29	.91	41	43
Double induction	2.32	.88	16	16	Generative change format	2.29	1.03	42	44

Continued

Appendix 7 continued

Skills/Tools/techniques	Mean	SD	Previous ranking	Current ranking	Skills/Tools/techniques	Mean	SD	Previous ranking	Current ranking
Clean language	1.68	.82	17	17	Bateson strategy	2.29	.74	49	45
Mindsonar metaprofile analysis	1.81	.8	18	18	Forgiveness model	2.22	.81	44	46
Future pacing – adapting a change to future contexts	3.00	0	1	1	Separating versus joining	2.20	.85	46	47
Six step reframing	3.00	0	2	2	Symbolic modelling	2.17	.81	48	48
Change personal history	2.97	.26	3	3	Resonance pattern	2.17	.67	56	49
Changing a strategy	2.97	.26	4	4	Core finding engine for identifying limiting beliefs	2.12	.67	60	50
Collapsing anchors	2.97	.26	5	5	Wholeness process	2.07	.83	52	51
Negotiating between parts	2.97	.26	6	6	Criteria spin	2.07	.78	61	52
Swish pattern	2.97	.26	7	7	Co-dependence format	2.07	.67	65	53
Trauma process using VK dissociation	2.97	.26	8	8	COACH state	2.05	.97	47	54
New behaviour generator	2.97	.37	13	9	Engaging the body's natural process of healing format	2.05	.80	53	55
Communicating with a part	2.95	.29	9	10	Social panorama technique	2.02	.80	55	56
Eliciting a resource, using a reference experience	2.95	.29	11	11	Collective intelligence techniques	2.00	.72	63	57
Eliciting a resource, using a role model	2.95	.29	12	12	Dynamic spin release	2.00	.72	64	58
Reimprinting format	2.95	.29	14	13	Imperative self-format	1.98	1.09	59	59
Circle of excellence	2.93	.37	10	14	I wonder how technique for generating practical new ideas	1.97	1.25	50	60

Appendix 7 continued

Skills/Tools/techniques	Mean	SD	Previous ranking	Current ranking	Skills/Tools/techniques	Mean	SD	Previous ranking	Current ranking
VK squash	2.93	.31	15	15	Identity matrix	1.92	1.25	51	61
Eliciting a resource, using communicating with the future self	2.90	.40	16	16	Provocative change techniques modelled from Frank Farrelly	1.90	.90	54	62
Eliciting a resource, using physiology	2.88	.49	17	17	Generative collaboration	1.85	1.27	57	63
Aligning perceptual positions	2.88	.43	18	18	MindSonar meta profile analysis	1.81	.80	66	64
Shifting the importance of criteria	2.83	.46	21	19	Clean language	1.68	.82	58	65
Compulsion blow out	2.81	.51	20	20	Gift of nature	1.64	.61	69	66
Metaphor for inducing change	2.78	.59	19	21	Integrating archetypal energies	1.58	.79	68	67
Disney strategy	2.76	.60	23	22	mBit multiple brain integration techniques	1.51	.60	71	68
Auditory tempo shift to change strong feelings	2.75	.54	25	23	Hero's journey format	1.37	1.54	62	69
Integrating conflicting beliefs format	2.75	.51	27	24	Family constellations	1.22	.53	70	70
Aligning neuro-logical levels format	2.73	.67	22	25	Graves drives	1.22	.49	72	71
Timeline reframing format	2.73	.58	26	26	Deep tissue massage	1.15	.45	73	72
Allergy model	2.69	.65	24	27	Inner child work	1.10	1.58	67	73
Belief audit for identifying limiting beliefs	2.68	.60	30	28					