How I became a pseudophile

From having to hear so often that NLP is a pseudoscience, while as a trainer or coach you experience how powerful and effective NLP works on so many levels, you might become dispirited.
Not so Lucas Derks. For the readers of INZICHT -and especially for everyone working within the broad world of mental health- he painstakingly exposes how fear, and not the so-called lack of evidence-based practice, is the reason for keeping NLP at bay.

As an NLP user, you can try to escape the 'science' theme, but someone always pops up and shouts, "But NLP is pseudoscience, isn't it!" After 45 years of NLP, I still see myself as a scientific researcher and see NLP as the form of practical psychology I fully support. For those who want to make time for it, I have endless arguments as to why rejecting NLP for lack of 'evidence-based practice' or, in other words, 'clinical scientific evidence' is enormously stupid. And I can explain what a tragedy it is for society and mental health that the best methods for helping to solve psychological problems are excluded from mainstream mental health services and university clinical-psychological education. Only because they are associated with three wrong letters: NLP. And then there is also the exasperation that the great breakthrough in psychotherapy that started with NLP fifty years ago goes systematically unmentioned in scientific literature. And that it looks a lot like a researcher referring to NLP is vetoed by the better journals, research sponsors and congress editors. One would almost think of a conspiracy....

First encounter

I discovered NLP in 1977 when this abbreviation did not yet exist, within the framework of my psychology studies. 'The Structure of Magic 1' (1975), the first book by Bandler and Grinder, was optional literature in my second year of study, at the RU Rijksuniversiteit Department of Functional Theory, where Professor Piet Vroon was then in charge. When I joined the clinical psychology department after graduating in 1982, a leaflet from the IEP institute in Nijmegen was hanging on the wall: Introduction Training NLP, the first in the Netherlands. There was also another employee who went there: Jaap Hollander gave me, as an unemployed psychologist at the time, a significant discount. It was a great experience!

Bias

Social psychology has proven that bias arises from lack of self-acquired knowledge and is often handed down from dimwit to dimwit. So is the prejudice that NLP is not scientifically based, manipulative, ineffective, unethical ánd commercial. Moreover, it is an unbelievably persistent prejudice because the necessary information to let go of that idea and give NLP official recognition is systematically filtered out by editors and others. Revolutions in science, paradigm shifts, often come from outside the circle of the initiated who have already made a career within the field. The tendency to shut those newcomers out because they are perceived as a threat is usually very strong. Often the establishment also has the power to do so. This is how it went with NLP in clinical psychology. Irrational situations arose, such as professors teaching and praising EMDR, but never daring to mention its origins in NLP.

Below you see proof of this: a 1985 article in which Francine Shapiro, who developed EMDR while always denying the influence of NLP, is directly linked to NLP before she says she invented EMDR in 1988. This is a singled-out detail of this old copy.

You'd better be proud that in the on-line encyclopaedia Wikipedia, NLP is referred to as pseudoscience by reputable scientists and therapists. It indicates that NLP is apparently so important (read: dangerous) that these scientific authorities are risking their reputations by fighting against it.

They write the following (13/01/2023):

> Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is a pseudoscientific approach to communication, personal development and psychotherapy, which first appeared in Richard Bandler and John Grinder's 1975 book *The Structure of Magic I.* NLP claims that there is a connection between neurological processes (*neuro*-), language (*linguistic*) and acquired behavioural patterns (*programming*), and that these can be changed to achieve specific goals in life. According to Bandler and Grinder, NLP can treat problems such as phobias, depression, tic disorders, psychosomatic illnesses, near-sightedness, allergy, the common cold and learning disorders, often in a single session. They also claim that NLP can 'model' the skills of exceptional people, allowing anyone to acquire them.'
>
> NLP has been adopted by some hypnotherapists, as well as by companies that run seminars marketed as 'leadership training' to businesses and government agencies.
>
> There is no scientific evidence supporting the claims made by NLP advocates, and it has been called a pseudoscience. Scientific reviews have shown that NLP is based on outdated metaphors of the brain's inner workings that are inconsistent with current neurological theory and contain numerous factual errors. Reviews also found that research that favoured NLP contained significant methodological flaws, and that there were three times as many studies of a much higher quality that failed to reproduce the "extraordinary claims' made by Bandler, Grinder and other NLP practitioners.

Pseudoscientific

Unfortunately, many students look at Wikipedia: "Oh, pseudoscience, that's the worst you can be, right?" There are those words that put people off, like racism, sexism and Nazism. In Germany today, you have the stigma of the 'Ökos' or 'Ökotussi' ('back-to-nature freaks'). That's like a 'pseudo' in science. Not feeling proud as a pseudo yet? Then check out on YouTube interviews with Graham Hancock, who has for 25 years been tussling as a pseudo-archaeological scientist. However, his status as a 'pseudo' is under threat because he has since been proved right in almost everything he used to claim. Soon, he can be expected to receive an honorary doctorate and will have to go through life as an ordinary science journalist. It will be like that with NLP too. One day, the now hostile clinical psychologists will shout, "Yes NLP, sure, we've always applied that."

Human imagination

When you look at what NLP means in concrete reality after 50 years, you realize that it cannot be tested as a whole, as a single form of therapy. Unlike a mini method like EMDR, you cannot learn it in half a day or have it done by a computer. Because NLP is a package of heterogeneous methods, cobbled together based on one criterium: that they seem to work. But the overall toolbox with all its various 'tools' has no real, cohesive unity. On

top of this, many of NLP's ingredients have been around for a long time, have already been tested under other names and have a lot of overlap with other more accepted methods. Such as Ericksonian hypnotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, classical behavioural therapy, regression therapy, Gestalt therapy, systems therapy, psychodrama and several other forms. But if you really want to, you could easily explore one almost all-embracing feature of NLP. Because the NLP methods almost all use human powers of imagination. So, to prove NLP scientifically, you would have to show that people can imagine things. And that what they imagine and how they imagine things affects their behaviour. Well, that's a very superfluous study, because this is beyond dispute and there are drawers full of supporting research to be found.

Unethically rejected

What modern clinical psychology does is mainly effect-evaluation research. In a world where psychotherapies compete with each other, insurers and governments want to know whether what they spend their money on really works. Logical. So, they came up with the criterion 'evidence-based'. This means that it can be proven by measurements that a certain therapy works. And then we are talking about measuring with standardized questionnaires, or even better, with high-tech brain scans. This often involves proving that a method works better than competing approaches, such as doing nothing, waiting list (placebo), psychopharmaceuticals, electroshock or other forms of therapy. However, insurance managers, and politicians too, only want to know whether therapy X, for example, works 32% better/faster/cheaper than therapy Y. Only when you can prove such a thing about NLP, it is no longer pseudoscience. Now it is apparently the case that such research is likely to be stranded already at the so-called 'ethical review application'. Because if it's called NLP, an ethics review committee won't want to get their fingers burned by it, so it will be rejected outright as unethical. And no appeal is possible against that, but you still have to pay the 3500 euros review fee.

Testing individual tools

But there is also a logical paradox involved. Because you can only test individual techniques from the NLP box and not the whole box, you can never come to a totally positive judgement about NLP. For example, you can say that in 85% of cases Change Personal History works well for certain symptoms. But that does not automatically mean that all NLP works well for all symptoms. From this position, a limited number of NLP researchers have been engaged in testing individual NLP tools. In particular Lisa de Rijk, Richard Gray and Frank Bourke are psychologists who have worked to prove the effectiveness of some NLP tools. This has led to three noteworthy publications that I would like to discuss briefly here.

"Nearly all NLP methods use the human power of imagination."

NLP or not?

First, it was necessary to determine which tools do and don't belong to NLP. To this end, a Delphi survey was conducted in 2018 among the members of the so-called NLP Leadership Summit. This is composed of about 120 NLP luminaries who meet or met regularly to discuss developments within NLP. They all have at least 15 years of experience as trainers and have written piles of NLP books together. So, when asked whether technique X is an NLP tool or not, they should reasonably be able to give a correct answer. Those answers produced a list of NLP techniques on which these experts agreed. Lisa de Rijk published an article about it.

Lisa de Rijk

The panel agreed that standard skills like the following could be classified as NLP: Meta Model questions, Milton Model language patterns, Modelling, Report (mirroring/pacing), Strategies, Verbal reframing, Anchoring, Ecological check, working with Timelines, Verbal and Non-verbal Leading.

The same went for techniques like Future pacing, Six-step reframing, Change Personal History, Changing a Strategy, Collapsing Anchors, Negotiating Between Parts, the Swish Pattern, the Trauma Process using VK Dissociation and Communicating with a Part.

Of course, there were also techniques of which only few Leadership Summit members thought that they belong to NLP. It should be kept in mind here that not all members are always aware of all techniques. So, the results show what they recognize as NLP techniques, but don't pass judgment on the techniques themselves

Effective methods

These bold, now official NLP techniques, could be tested for their clinical efficacy. But the results of the studies done would still say nothing about NLP as a whole. Unless, of course, they all came out very good. But those studies on individual techniques, when they score as very effective, say that there are effective methods within NLP. And that is where we stand with the content of the other two publications. And that is where we end up with the studies in the two books mentioned under this article (numbers 2 and 3). For the scientific status of NLP, of course, it changes but little because the skeptical critics will never read this study and the follow-up studies. Mainly because they cannot be published in highly regarded scientific journals because of NLP's poor reputation as a pseudo... Or the lack of ethical approval of the research.

Besides, you shouldn't expect much sportsmanship in science either. If an efficacy study has been painstakingly produced by NLP practitioners, the skeptics will not immediately say, "Gee how nice that you went to all that trouble, in your spare time and with your own money!" No, they will immediately look for research-technical shortcomings to undermine any positive results. The rigorous and thorough research from the hands of academic researchers whose main occupation is the testing of therapies is very hard to match.

Literature:

1) *Special Issue - NLP Coaching. The evidence for NLP. Lisa de Rijk, Lucas A.C. Derks, Bruce Grimley & Jaap Hollander. International Coaching Psychology Review l Vol. 14 No. 1 Spring 2019.*

2) *Neurolinguistic Programming in Clinical Settings: Theory and evidence-based practice. Edited by Lisa de Rijh, Richard Gray and Frank Bourke, (2022). Routledge, Arbinton, Oxon and Rout- ledge, New York. ISBN 9781032057200*

3) *The Clinical Effectiveness Of Neurolinguistic Programming, A Critical Appraisal. Edited By Lisa Wake, Richard Gray & Frank Bourke (2013), ISBN 9781138808539*

6-step technique

If you find yourself in a discussion about the pseudoscientific status of NLP with someone, the key is not to make it all worse than it already is. For that now here is a six-step technique:

1) Purchase the three books shown below. They are published by academic publishers in England. They are serious and everything in them is accounted for. However, they cost up to a hundred euros each, because of the well-crafted but limited edition. They are mostly bought by university libraries. But anyway, within this framework, they are well worth their money.

2) Always keep these books handy in your work environment, just in case the discussion about NLP as a pseudo-science breaks out.

3) As soon as someone confronts you with the statement "NLP is pseudoscience", you say, "Indeed, there has not been that much clinical evaluation research on NLP (pacing), because it is not that easy. And many NLP practitioners don't put the effort and money into it because they know NLP works well anyway (leading)."

4) If the critic is still not satisfied, then you put these three books in front of him and say, "This is the little we have. Maybe there is more, but I don't know. Because NLP is in use all over the world. Maybe Japan, Finland or Chile have also done some good research? If you want, you can borrow them." But that's risky, because you'd probably like to have these expensive books back for the next pseudo-customer.

5) If the critic persists, you say, "You know... what is pseudo now may be mainstream the day after tomorrow. But I'm not going to sit and wait for that now."

6) Be proud of being pseudo, and also become pseudophile. Because if you look in the history of science, you will see that a lot of very good developments were first condemned by church or science authorities. You could almost go so far as to say that if you engage in pseudoscience, you are, with high probability, moving humanity forward. Bear in mind that it is as unscientific to believe that everything about NLP is nonsense as it is to think it is all true.