

Proof that it works

Searching for the scientific support for NLP

by Lucas Derks

Can you scientifically prove that you can fix cars, bikes and washing machines with a complete toolbox? Yes, of course. However, everyone has known that for a long time. So why bother? In the previous edition of INZICHT, Lucas Derks wrote about how difficult it is to prove the effectiveness of the total NLP toolkit. At least, by today's scientific standards. But he also wrote that the various individual NLP methods, each and every one of them, lend themselves perfectly well to this.

At the end of June 2023, I entered the lion's den: I attended the 54th annual conference of the Society for Psychotherapy Research in Dublin. The 1003 participants included the world's most prominent psychotherapy researchers. As a practicing NLP practitioner, I felt like an odd man out, until I bumped into an NLP trainer from Romania who was an old acquaintance. We had a very pleasant evening in an Irish pub.

At this conference, I gave a 20-minute Power-Point talk (it was one of 180 similar presentations in four days). My topic: the effectiveness of treating depression of unknown cause in a single NLP session, via the client's perceived dark clouds in their mental space. The research on this, conducted by the Society for Mental Space Psychology between 2017 and 2020, was sponsored by NVNLP. See the research report in newsletter 19 of winter 2021 at www.somsp.com.

Similarities with NLP

In my lecture, in which I also showed all the (NLP) steps of the procedure used, to indicate that therapists who participated in the research did not have an easy task, I also presented the research results. Thanks to the help of American NLP researcher Richard Gray, the statistics turned out to be up-to-date, so no awkward questions were asked about that. Nor did I get any about the questionnaire used to measure depression (the Beck Depression Inventory 2, Dutch).

In the hour in which I was the first of three speakers to give my presentation I was followed by a German researcher who had conducted a meta-analysis of research on walking as a therapy for depression, entitled: *Walking with the black dog*. For that, she had scoured all printed and online journals for such research, resulting in the overarching conclusion that regular walking seems to be a good option for depression. But she did not talk about possible interventions that a walking coach, while walking with a depressed person, can do.

Then two Spanish therapy researchers talked about the application of an empty chair in processing complex grief. When the client visualizes the deceased person in that chair and has imaginary conversations with him or her, is an approach that

works effectively. Of course, this is not a strange method for NLP practitioners. And like this there were more researched interventions that were very similar to NLP methods but were presented under different names.

Synchronisation

For instance, 'Synchronisation' in therapeutic conversations seemed to be a hot topic at this congress. NLP practitioners call this the 'matching' of 'rapport variables'. There was also interesting research on therapeutic processes where the concept of 'voices' and their 'integration' was at the core. Traumatized clients often had multiple contradictory inner voices active, which gradually aligned during

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therapy. Yes, that was clearly about the process by which conflicting parts come to integration. Likewise, there was much more research about which I and my Romanian colleague concluded that we as NLP practitioners have for almost 50 years been using methods supported by current research. Slowly more and more evidence materializes for the effectiveness of the tools in the NLP box. However, it appears those tools are often called something else: What's in a name? Even so, in Dublin there was no research into anything factually similar to Core Transformation.

Core Transformation tested

In 1994, Connirae Andreas and her sister Tamara published a book on a then-new NLP method called Core Transformation. This approach became a popular part of many practitioners, but especially master practitioner programmes. Chances are that readers of INZICHT will know Core Transformation and use it regularly. In core transformation, the Andreas sisters combined several existing NLP concepts, such as personality parts, positive intentions, up-chunking and the TOTE model, into one tool. A tool that allows you to evoke resources on the spiritual logical level, such as harmony, joy, being, love, oneness or connectedness, which you then let have their healing effect. What is special about core transformation is that there is no clear indication of its application: in principle, you can use it to treat any problem that can be defined by the NLP 'er as the doing of a part of the client. In other words, a jack-of-all-trades approach. Although there is plenty of anecdotal information about the positive effects of this method and its users have few doubts about it, no scientific evidence was available.

Proven positive effect

It seems that university lecturers in clinical psychology and psychiatry follow an unwritten law: what has not been proven through research does not exist. But after 30 years, core transformation now also exists for science! Only, the official publication is

still pending, due to bureaucratic hurdles. Nevertheless, thanks to the study *Examining the Clinical Efficacy of Core Transformation: A Randomised Clinical Trial* *1 thanks to the kind help of Mark Andreas (son of Steve and Connirae Andreas) who sent me the manuscript, we can already get a glimpse of it. This research focused on four questions: 1) How much change does core transformation trigger in clients? 2) Is this therapeutic effect reproducible? 3) How does the effect of core transformation compare with similar therapies such as ISTDP, CBT, MBST? 4) Is the clinical effect of core transformation lasting?

Meaningful result

The survey was conducted in India with 16 men and 113 women. Many of the men also asked for this said they had 'no problems' and therefore preferred to send their wives. 74% of these trial clients were (to my surprise) Roman Catholics. These total 129 participants were randomly divided into two equal groups. One half were treated with core transformation immediately, while the other half had to wait a month, after they did also fill in the standard pre-measurement questionnaires to determine the extent of their problems prior to treatment. This last half of participants constituted the waiting list control group. All 129 participants thus received a single session of Core Transformation and it was always conducted by the same therapist. Four and eight weeks later, follow-up measurements were taken using the same series of standard tests to determine how Core Transformation had affected symptoms and psychological development. The tests used were thus completed three times by each participant.

Those tests were:

- *Big Five IPIP 50. The Purpose in Life Test (PILT).*
- *Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (ABS).*
- *General Health Questionnaire - 12 (GHQ).*
- *Rating Checklist. (A five-item Rating Checklist was developed by the first author as a measure of global wellbeing).*
- *Outcome Checklist (OC).*

The result showed that this single core transformation session had a meaningful (=significant) above chance positive (moderate) effect on symptom experience, emotional stability, balance, overall wellbeing and seeing the meaning of life.

Advantages and disadvantages

The fact that you can apply core transformation to almost all problems has a number of advantages and disadvantages for researchers. It is nice that you can use a single well-defined procedure on all subjects. And the fact that the same therapist treated all participants made the so-called 'independent variable' strong. Unfortunately, critics may still call out that the effect of the technical steps per se, may have been overshadowed by the impact of the personality of that one therapist.

Another disadvantage is that you do not know in which symptoms the method works best, because the problems were very varied. In order to still measure the effect within the variation of problems treated, a very broad spectrum of tests had to be administered. The latter does seem to have worked well in this study. But because of the variation in the problems treated, the effect cannot be measured so precisely and the effect score may come out relatively low. For guidance, the mean effect size of a (meta-)analysis of many different studies on several forms of therapy in which multiple sessions were used ranges from Cohen's $d = .26$ to 1.51 . For the effect size measure the Cohen's d , $.2 =$ small, $.5 =$ moderate and more than $.8 =$ large. The effect of core transformation was $d = .63$ in the immediately treated group and $d = .52$ in the wait-list control group. In short, this proved that it is more than moderately helpful for all kinds of problems.

'Lightning Process' under the microscope

In the 1980s and 1990s, medical psychologists discovered that the human immune system is sensitive to suggestion. And as a result, the new field of 'Psycho-Neuro-Immunology' (PNI) developed in parallel with NLP. With the concomitant NLP assumption that body and mind form one cybernetic unit. With that, pragmatic NLP had incorporated the discoveries in PNI. The endless discussions about whether a given problem is physical or psychological had thus been sidelined. Phil Parker, an English NLP practitioner and guitarist, used NLP to help heal his shattered and doctors' written-off hand until he could strum his guitar with it again. That success stimulated him to investigate which NLP principles and techniques could be used to support people with physical complaints in their healing. And which suggestions from social workers could actually get in the way of healing. The result he called 'Lightning Process', which on the one hand helps participants understand the principles of Psycho-Neuro-Immunology, and on the other hand uses a series of NLP exercises to translate these insights into their experience. Phil then began systematically applying this process to clients with a variety of physical complaints. The Lightning Process seemed to effectively promote their healing. Next, Phil began training people to apply the Lightning Process in healthcare settings.

Effectiveness and usability

Since 2010, a whole series of studies have been conducted by Phil Parker and some independent researchers on the effectiveness and usability of the Lightning Process. The book 'Neurolinguistic Programming in Clinical Settings' contains an overview of all the studies. In doing so, there are several studies that definitely meet the quality standards of science. In particular, the collaboration with the English and Norwegian Association of

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Patients with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome yielded large amounts of data pointing to positive effects on the participants studied.*2 For the scientific status of NLP, the research on the Lightning Process represents a small but solid step up. And it is good for NLP practitioners to know that there is an extensive and well-documented application of NLP in the field of healing processes.

Final conclusion

Because the Lightning Process, like NLP as a whole, consists of a series of different interventions, it is difficult to isolate the exact active components for further scientific study. But the 'package of NLP and education in NPI' that makes it up is more researchable than NLP as a whole, because everyone treated with the Lightning Process is always offered all the components. And so not like NLP, that it is a choice from a wide variety of interventions tailored to the individual. But with some Lightning Process studies, the difficulty is that the symptoms people wanted to cure in some studies could be very diverse. Therefore, researchers often limited themselves to a five-level scale post-measurement: ranging from 'completely cured' through 'slightly better' to 'much worse'. My final conclusion from the article on the Lightning Process research, is that the techniques that have become prevalent in Psycho-Neuro-Immunology - mostly imagination techniques - can become more effective with the help of the NLP toolkit.

Winding up

The scientific underpinnings of NLP will consist of a whole series of studies on individual components. It is useful for NLP practitioners to have this very clearly in mind once they debate the evidence for NLP's effectiveness. The fact is that NLP is a toolkit of which a number of tools have been shown to be effective in solid studies. ■

***1 Examining the Clinical Efficacy of Core Transformation: A Randomised Clinical Trial**

Authors: Dinesh J. Braganza, Ralph

L. Piedmont, Jesse Fox, Geraldine M. Fialkowski.

Loyola University Maryland Supporting researcher: Richard M. Gray, Ph.D.

Fairleigh Dickinson University

Summary:

This randomised clinical trial with a sample of adults (N = 129) from India explored the effects of a single Core Transformation session on symptom experience and psychological growth. The results over the total eight-week study period indicated significant, moderate overall effect sizes ($d_s = .63$ & $.53$) for Symptom Experience, Emotional Stability, Affect Balance, Global wellbeing, and Purpose in Life. Implications for research and clinical practice were discussed. Key words: Core Transformation, Symptom Experience, Emotional Stability, Positive Affect, Purpose in Life, personality, incremental validity

***2 Title of the survey article:**

Psychoneuroimmunology - research on Lightning Process

Author: *Dr Phil Parker*

In: *de Rijk, L., Gray, R., & Bourke, F.: (2022 Neurolonguistic Programming in Clinical Settings, Routledge, London and New York.*

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