

Valid and Reliable: Reflections on NLP and Research

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Recent direct experiences of Practitioner Research in Counselling, Psychotherapy and the Social Sciences prompted me to share my thoughts and encourage NLP and other practitioners to utilise these methods in gaining recognition for their work, and enhancing the reputation of NLP.

"I begin with the assumption that competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit."

Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, (1991)

The debate about whether NLP developers and practitioners should provide traditional, scientifically-based and quantifiable research results to support and validate their work rumbles through the community with regularity. Some maintain that NLP will never be taken seriously by academics or accepted as a serious subject unless it submits to conventional academic rigours. Others assert that such ideas are irrelevant and that since they know NLP works, they don't want or need to know how, and scientific proofs are unnecessary. As a trainer, an NLP Master Practitioner, a counsellor, and with a recent research-based Masters degree in counselling practice, I have had the opportunity to experience first hand the possibilities afforded by changes in the contemporary approach to research. Practitioner research using qualitative methods is now being positively encouraged by universities and professional associations within the coun-

selling and therapy arenas, encouraging those who actually work with clients to examine their practices and benefit from the process. The results of this then filter into the general community and give wider access to interesting discoveries, making them available for further study.

This doesn't mean that qualitative research is without critics, nor lacks shortcomings and pitfalls; and it is definitely not an easy way out for the lazy, opportunistic or non-mathematical researcher to glide effortlessly through a project without some serious hard work and rigorous thinking. I can say from my own experiences, and those described by the 14 peers who were my associates on the course, that whilst it was enjoyable, it was quite possibly the most demanding academic exercise we had ever undertaken, in terms of the personal rigour and professional responsibility which were core to the whole process. There were times when the prospect of a (relatively) simple questionnaire or scale and a (relatively) straightforward means of numerical analysis seemed immensely appealing as I dealt with my data, playing devil's advocate with myself whilst looking for yet more possible alternative interpretations. It was stimulating, exciting, frustrating, exhausting, exhilarating - and an intense learning journey

that led to great insights and awareness on both personal and professional levels. What I intend to illustrate in this article is the way in which research can be experiential, based on real practice with actual clients - and yet retain the validity which satisfies high academic standards, with well-constructed studies bringing valuable insights to the practitioner/researcher, the research subjects and the wider community. There may remain purists who advocate strictly quantitative methods as the only means of obtaining reliable data, but NLP could find that by adopting some of the philosophical stances of new paradigm research, its reputation and status increase and a more fluid interchange with academia is attained.

One of my primary assumptions is that we all share an interest in what works -



nlp at work

whether we are operating in Business, Education, Therapy or any other application of NLP, and regardless of the "style" of NLP we may embrace. If we have a question for research, a puzzle about NLP that we want to solve, can we agree now that an underlying principle might be that what we really want to know is "what is most effective - most often for most people or organisations in as many situations as possible". Or, What, When, With Whom, Why, Where, What if, Who else, What else, Where else - and So What? - just to get us started on the kind of reflective thinking that could produce interesting and useful results. John Grinder and Carmen Bostic St Clair, in *Whispering in the Wind*, describe NLP as not being amenable to statistical verification, and to many NLPers, the idea of gathering that kind of numerical information is simply not relevant or desirable. There are those, though, who consider that "unless NLP specifically does begin to statistically verify its claims it will continue to be regarded as Californian hype by many psychologists, even if it does turn its attention to more modeling projects as the authors of *WITH* suggest it must." (Bruce Grimley, 2004).

Bruce is a Chartered Psychologist, coach and NLP practitioner, who has also experienced the questioning scepticism and occasional disdain of academics and other psychologists when NLP is introduced into the conversation. His intention is to help nudge NLP into a position where it can stand alongside other modalities and be accepted - a quest I strongly support, having recently received this comment from a leading humanistic academic and author that "of course, you know that NLP is anathema to academics". As Bruce points out, his statement is not based on an exclusive attachment to quantitative methods, and there are

effective qualitative means of assessing results statistically, through methods such as "Q-sorts". Q-sorts are a statistical method of assessing the subjective elements of any situation, which are often passed over by quantitative methods, and were used by a Carl Rogers, one of the fathers of humanistic psychotherapy who developed person-centred methodologies for education and therapy. Rogers used a variety of research methods which have since been widely adopted, including Rorschach "blot" tests and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT).



Statistical verification doesn't have to entail any complex analysis - it can be as simple as the process of intersubjective verification. Rogers also mentions "intersubjective verification" (1967: p. 219), where he uses a metaphor of seeing blue fish - or thinking he saw it - and being more certain if another person independently saw it too. This reinforcement from an outside source can help remove the criticism that personal accounts of what works are purely anecdotal with no solid base of evidence.

It's also important to say that qualitative research doesn't necessarily exclude the use of statistical techniques. It's equally true that quantitative and qualitative methods used together can be powerful, and that using proper guidelines and instruction in research techniques, coupled with outside supervision are important factors in ensuring research is valid and

valued by sceptics who regard quantifiable data as the only possible source of reliable information. Qualitative research is considered in some disciplines to be useful only as a forerunner to further quantitative work, valid as an exploratory tool but not as a stand-alone methodology. In counselling and psychotherapy, qualitative research is welcomed as a major contribution to the growth of individuals, to the development of models for other practitioners to use, and to understanding what works for the client.

My research approach was not initially based on statistical verification. Although I have past experience of designing and conducting research projects based on statistical probabilities and using elaborate (to my mind, anyway) programmes and methods to analyse results, I was delighted in my recent project by the flexible and refreshing nature of the research methods available, and even more thrilled to discover that

the expected form was to put oneself into the research. Well, yes, you might say that's obvious, because if you want to know more about your practice, then it makes sense to make yourself part of the investigation.

However, formerly the common academic and business research practice was always to keep the "I" out of data collection, analysis and reports and certainly not to be part of the subject - so for me to be positively encouraged to put more of myself into my work was a profoundly freeing experience. My first draft was well-received by my supervisors, as a technically very competent piece of work, but - there wasn't enough of me in it. I found it a challenge initially to let go of the years of training requiring me to write in the third person, and to allow my own voice to be heard. Finding and using an authentic voice has been a development

tal motif for me over the past few years, which started with planning my dissertation - and that has triggered in me a willingness to express myself more freely and fluently.

From the array of possibilities on offer, I chose a case study method, an "intensive single case" at that, which left me open to possible criticisms in terms of how "generalisable" my results could be. That's a standard response to case studies, so I took great care to follow guidelines and put in all the safety measures I could to avoid the pitfalls. Using qualitative methods can allow a practitioner to have access to information about the way they actually practice which is not normally available, because it has become part of the "tacit" area of our experience. Robin Higgins has a useful handbook on research which talks about case studies: "The advantage of single case research is its closeness to clinical practice. The primary purpose of the research is to measure the treatment benefit for the individual along lines that can be tailor-made for this particular person. The research encourages the co-operation between therapist and patient, who can become a co-worker in the research and assist in decisions over flexibility of approach, and variation in levels of rigour. (c.f. the patient who is prepared to keep a diary of the series of events in the treatment and to share this diary with the researcher)" (Higgins, 1996: p.60).

In the end, for my own research, it was about what I wanted to know, about my burning questions, the essence of what I wanted to uncover about the way my practice and my client relationships work. I wasn't answerable to a funding body, so my research outcomes were initially only relevant and important for me, and my tutors and peers were primarily concerned with the individual processing and integration of the results, and their effects on personal and professional development. It was reassuring to find that Carl Rogers, in speaking of his significant learning, said: "evaluation by others is not a guide for me" continuing, "I have come to feel that only one person.....can

know whether what I am doing is honest, thorough, open, and sound, or false and defensive and unsound, and I am that person." (Rogers, 1967; p. 23)

The case I chose was almost like a gift, in that the particular client appeared just at the time I was deciding on my topic, and fascinated me from the outset; I had dreams and images coming to me and was completely absorbed by the case. It initially surprised me that such reflections and activities were encouraged by the tutors on the course - if I'd told my boss when I worked as a researcher that I'd been having dreams and intuitions about my projects he would have thought I was mad! (And highly unprofessional, too.) So I relished the chance to embrace a piece of work that had such resonance and passion about it - in fact, at times it ceased to feel like work and became a pleasurable pursuit, notwithstanding the time, effort and application it demanded. It's a given that the research was set up according to strict ethical guidelines, and that supervision and full informed consent were in place. Anyone wanting further details on such issues can request information, which I will share. There is, of course, the question of bias and impartiality, and here I adopt the stance of the constructivist. I believe, along with many contemporary qualitative researchers, (see Stake, 1995, for example), that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered, and that no aspects of knowledge are purely external and devoid of human construction.

Whatever we touch or do, once we have effected any kind of contact, we have changed it irrevocably, so even research designated as scientifically sound has the inevitable challenge of being influenced by the choices made by its originators. Because I wanted to be as rigorous as possible with my research, I set up a "multiple voices" feedback model, and included significant others such as family members, teachers and observers so that I could include their comments and impressions to give added validity to the project. As Gordon Lynch says:

"If ... there was a convergence of opinion between the counsellor, client and another observer that the counselling process had helped the client to resolve their key concern, then the conclusion that the counselling had been effective would seem to possess a reasonable degree of truthfulness. This study would therefore seek to build conclusions about the counselling relationship on the basis of points of convergence between different perspectives on it (a process referred to by researchers as 'triangulation')". (Lynch: 1996)

A case study is essentially a story of what has happened, and avoiding accusations of being purely anecdotal is critical to keep a study valid. Adding in the voices and perspectives of others is one way of safeguarding, which I used, and I also had the benefit of working with Action Learning Methods. An Action Learning Set is a group who undertake to monitor and support each other's work progress - we met regularly with a specific agenda, and as a control and a source of suggestions and alternative perspectives it was a powerful learning experience. Where in NLP we have practice groups, maybe we can also think of setting up support groups of like-minded individuals who support each other's research interests, or pursue a mutually agreed theme together. With the availability of online community, geographical proximity is no longer a necessity, and we could have worldwide networks using the power of focussed intention for research.

A perspective on the historical importance and use of case studies is given by Wilkinson & McNeil, (1996):

"The case study in research connotes a more in-depth, intensive study of a particular unit, such as an in-depth description of history, symptoms, or treatments. For instance, Sigmund Freud (1920, 1963) reported numerous, detailed case studies in his pioneering work on psychoanalysis. Similarly, Jean Piaget (1952) conducted intensive case studies on his children in order to describe the development of human intelligence and cognition." (Wilkinson & McNeil, 1996: p.212)

It seems that whilst traditional scientific researchers might object to the non-generalisability of case studies, practitioners in the forefront of groundbreaking therapy and theory building have regularly used them in the development of their disciplines. According to Gilgun (1994):

"in addition to psychotherapy, (Kazdin, 1981), case studies have provided the basis for the development of human behaviour (Garmezy, 1982), family therapy and family sociology (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992; Handel, 1991)" (Gilgun, 1994: p. 1).

Simon du Plock is an author, an existentialist psychotherapist and a lecturer at Regent's College in London, who also sits as an external examiner on a number of university boards for doctoral and masters programmes. His book "Case Studies in Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy" was one of a number which inspired me with its open and accessible style, and I was particularly taken with these words:

"If the reader will not discover here the wise words of experts, they will, I hope find themselves witness to the struggles of a range of therapists to arrive at a way of working which takes fully into account the experiences of their individual clients.... They will certainly not read as scientific experiments... Inevitably they will feel frustrated that they have only a snapshot, or impression, of a larger piece of work." du Plock, (1997: p.6)

You can also find inspiring and beautifully written case studies in Yalom's "Love's Executioner", and Spinelli's "Tales of Unknowing". I can envisage similar volumes for NLP - a practical collaboration which offers the carefully reflective experiences of practitioners and their clients as an honest and open account of how therapeutic or catalytic change relationships develop. Think of all the modelling projects undertaken by students in Master Practitioner programmes, consider the possibilities of practice groups learning and sharing case histories, of authors and developers combining to present perspectives

of their modus operandi - it would not take too much to set up a programme to promote these and the benefits would be enormous. Who would like to join in such a venture?

So what about NLP and research? NLP has at its disposal an exquisite range of tools and techniques which give it a superb opportunity to ask the penetrating questions which might demonstrate just how valid, reliable and generalisable it is - in other words, to satisfy its critics and provide a platform to which we can all step up proudly knowing that criticism of our evidence - formerly described as anecdotal and insignificant - is unfounded. I think it may just be possible to create a path through the combat zone, and establish a neutral territory where both sides can be satisfied, where NLP can grow and the many excellent practitioners can confer, share and develop with a sense of safety and support.

Clients and practitioners in any professional relationship share what can be an intense and personal experience, that "fierce conversation", discovering deeper meanings so that change is elegantly and effectively achieved. On this note of acknowledging the importance of experience, and allowing "therapist" a broader meaning which includes anyone who adopts a helping role in a wider context, I'd like to give the last word to Carl Rogers, who says:

"It is for this reason that therapists recognise - usually intuitively - that any advance in therapy, any fresh knowledge of it, any significant new hypotheses in regard to it - must come from the experience of the therapists and clients, and can never come from science." (Rogers, 1967: p. 212)

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The topics of practitioner research explored in this article will be the subject of a workshop I am giving at the Integral NLP Conference in July 2005 in Glastonbury, with the aim of developing a framework for effective research and development within NLP, which will be valued by academic communities and help build the reputation of NLP worldwide

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Christine Miller has a first degree in Linguistics and is an author, trainer and NLP Master Practitioner, with an MA in Counselling Practice. She works as a corporate consultant and in private practice with a varied clientele from school age children to adults. She is the author of a forthcoming book called "Resourceful Intelligence", to be published by Crown House. She has a background in research, marketing and training, having held senior management posts with UK public companies, where she discovered that her skills and passion lay in helping people uncover their potential to perform at their best, to experience true "resourceful intelligence". A firm believer in brain-friendly learning, Christine also offers seminars and workshops in personal and business growth and development, and trainings for other professionals in the techniques she has developed.
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