Other Papers

Tomasz Witkowski
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Letters to Editor

Dear Sirs,

In 2011, the number two of "Polish Psychological Bulletin", published my article entitled "Thirty-Five Years of Research on Neuro-Linguistic Programming. NLP Research Data Base. State of the Art or Pseudoscientific Decoration?" Soon after its publication a heated discussions on Internet arose, where one of the proponents of NLP (the name will be disclosed to the editor) threw accusations against me and the Editor-in-Chief - prof. Dariusz Doliński, of failure to disclose a conflict of interest. According to him the fact that the author is the co-owner of a training company which applies a different approach than the NLP should be disclosed when the article was published. The second, more serious according to the author of the accusations, source of conflict of interest is the fact that prof. Dariusz Dolinski worked for the mentioned company performing a job involving the conduction of a few hours of training within a single cycle, entitled: "School of difficult situations for managers."

Since the publication of the article, accusations have been publicly announced by the author a few dozen times both during my lectures and in many places on the Internet (in Poland and abroad). I asked him on a number of occasions to report the perceived conflict of interest to the Editorial Advisory Board of PPB or the Commitee of Ethics of Science. He did not do that till this day.

Since the activity of the author of the allegations is intense in their spreading and maintaining and in my opinion it does not favor neither the image of the Polish Psychological Bulletin, nor its Editor-in-Chief, nor the Editorial Advisory Board nor myself, I would like to make a formal complaint against Dr. Thomas Witkowski, author of the article published in PPB and its Editor-in-Chief - prof. Dariusz Doliński for violating ethical principles in the publication mentioned in the introduction to the paper. I ask for an astute consideration of this matter and, in the case of the recognition of the aforementioned fault, to draw all possible consequences of the violation of ethical principles against them.

Sincerely,
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Neuro-Linguistic Programming: A Technique's Collection or a Convincing Approach to Human Behavior and Health

Neuro-lingusitc programming (NLP) is considered an approach to communication and personal development, applied in business, education, and health care settings (Thosey & Mathison, 2010). However, many leading psychological associations do not recognize NLP as a mode of psychotherapy. The list of professional organizations, which are sceptical about NLP as a model of psychotherapy and thus do not include this approach into their recommended treatment approaches include British Psychological Association, American Psychological Association, and Australian Psychological Association. Without a doubt, these professional organizations are world-leading in advancements for practice, constantly evaluating and developing even better psychotherapy training standards and promoting responsible and safe treatment for psychotherapy clients. On the other hand, NLP is recognized by selected unions of training centers and practitioner organizations, offering education and counseling aiming at personal development, such as UK Council for Psychotherapy.

A lack of the recognition of NLP as a method of treatment may have multiple sources, such as a lack of: (1) the theoretical underpinnings, (2) the existing evidence for the effects of NLP, (3) the use of reflexive, self-critical approach, aiming at disclosure and discourse across the groups of practitioners and clients (4) thorough ethical concerns about the ways NLP may be taught and used in practice. Those issues were addressed in several position papers and reviews of empirical literature (e.g., Tosey & Mathison, 2010; Witkowski, 2010).

The theoretical incoherence of NLP leads behavioural medicine and psychology practitioners and researchers to discount NLP as an "approach to" or a "model of" communication/learning (Sturt et al., 2012). Instead, NLP may be considered "a collection of communication and behaviour change techniques" (Sturt et al., 2012, p. e758). The founders of NLP take an epistemiologic stance assuming that coherence and cognitive understanding may be expendable to effective professional practice (Tosey & Mathison, 2010). In fact, NLP draws from several theory-based psychological models explaining human behaviour such as Chomsky's transformational linguistics or modelling theories (see Bostic St. Clair & Grinder, 2001) but, on the other hand, NLP seems not to use the updates of the advancements of these psychological models (Robbe, 2000)

NLP presents hypotheses which assume a correspondence between internal processing of stimuli and externally observable behaviors. Therefore, it offers testable hypotheses which could be verified in laboratory and in a clinical context of trained professionals. As the evidence base for psychological interventions in both mental and physical health has strengthened in recent decade (for overview see Alam, Sturt, Lall, & Winkley, 2009; Ismail,

Winkley, & Rabe-Hesketh, 2004; National Institute of Clinical Excellence, 2009) parallel evidence for NLP seems much less unequivocal (for overview see Stuart et al., 2012). First, experimental laboratory tests examining main hypotheses were conducted relatively rarely. Studies which were carefully peer-reviewed often failed to support the claims of NLP. For example Wieseman, Watt, ten Brinke, Porter, Couper, and Rankin (2012) conducted a series of experiment testing the eye movement hypothesis in three different contexts and showed that a pattern of eye-movements does not aid the detection of thoughts of observed speaker. Systematic reviews, analysing the overarching evidence for NLP working hypotheses in the context of various psychosocial outcomes indicate a lack of convincing evidence for NLP hypotheses. Further, a recent systematic review, applying the state-of-the-art methodology standards, offered similar conclusions about a lack of proof of NLP effectiveness in the area of health-related outcomes (Sturt et al., 2012). Sturt and her colleagues (2012) investigated findings obtained in controlled trials, observational, and longitudinal studies. Research was conducted in four continents, targeting a change in symptoms of anxiety disorders, substance misuse, body weight management, and morning sickness. The results suggest a limited quantity of NLP research, a low level of quality of existing research in health context. In conclusion the results of the review suggested that the existing evidence would suggest no clear indication that NLP techniques may improve health-related outcomes (Sturt et al., 2012). In particular, only one in five randomized controlled trials showed some support for NLP-based hypotheses (Sturt et al., 2012). In sum, there is insufficient evidence to recommend the use of NLP for physical or mental-health outcomes.

In contrast to conclusions which may be drawn from systematic reviews (Sturt et al., 2012; Witkowski, 2010), some NLP researchers and practitioners present a belief that there is an evidence supporting NLP. This evidence is assumed to be accumulated in unpublished data or data presented in such sources as dissertations, which are rarely reviewed by independent, internationally recognized practitioners and researchers. Importantly, the content analysis of those sources points to the fact that a possible support for NLP presented in those sources may result from an overlap between NLP techniques and well-established, effective, theory- and evidence-based cognitive behavioural techniques using rules of goal setting or classical conditioning (Sturt et al., 2012).

NLP highlights the notion of reaching the excellence, emphasis on innovation, and the development of full potentials of an individual. However, NLP scholars indicate that the NLP community should aim at greater reflexive awareness and engage with a discussion with other researchers and the critics (Tosey & Mathison, 2010). For example, analysis of the social dimensions of NLP training and the confounding effects of social factors in training and practice, such as peer pressure (Tosey & Mathison, 2010), need further attention.

Last but not least, some ethical issues, particularly relevant in open communication with potential clients, may

be raised. One of the key issues refers to acquiring a licence (or a title) of "certified practitioner" after a very brief training, lasting approximately 12 days (Tosey & Mathison, 2010). The notion of this title may suggest a link to health-care professions. However, there are no inclusion criteria based on skills or education (e.g., education background in human services). This recruiting and training approach may increase a risk of misuse of NLP techniques and harm the clients, as the training does not address the complexities of human health and social influence.

It should be noted that although the majority of experimental research and reviews do not support NLP hypotheses, the NLP founders and key practitioners fail to publish peer-reviewed commentaries to these critical research. Any solid critical arguments addressing existing research evidence should meet the high standards of scientific journals, including the methods of analysis, synthesis and the ways in which the arguments are presented and supported. Unfortunately, commentaries submitted to scientific journals such as Polish Psychological Bulletin rarely meet these standards. In the same time, social media are flooded with statements and accusations suggesting that criticism results from local and/or international plots against NLP, personal connections between editors and critical authors, or undisclosed conflicts of interests. As social media do not have strict peer-review standards, accusations published in these media may not meet any standards of analytical argumentation. Key arguments about personal connections between editors and authors publishing in respective journals should be dismissed. Editors and researchers publishing in one country or international researchers from one branch of a discipline function in a research network and obviously know each other. Scientific journals reject a majority of submitted papers (often triaging manuscripts and rejecting them directly after the submission), and a vast majority of rejected papers are written by researchers who know editor personally or by editors' co-workers. Editor's mission is advancing the field and secure better understanding of key problems within the discipline and it is always obtained by publishing critical arguments, meeting the standards of methodology of science.

In sum, based on existing position papers and research and it may be argued that allocation of financial and time resources of individuals and institutions should be confined to NLP research which could feed theory- and evidence-based practice (see Sturt et al., 2012). The accumulating evidence, reviewed by Sturt et al. (2012) and Witkowski (2010) as well as an analysis of the applications and developments of NLP (Tosey & Mathison, 2010) provide major criticism for NLP. As the research examining effects of the use of NLP is relatively scarce and preliminary research conclusions are unsupportive for NLP assumptions, therefore the use of NLP in the context of human services and health has no clear rationale.

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