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**Japanese Managers' Experiences of Neuro-Linguistic Programming:
A Qualitative Investigation**

Reference:

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Abstract

Purpose: Though several work-related mental health training initiatives have been implemented in Japan, the effectiveness of such approaches remains unclear.

Consequently, some Japanese corporations prefer using interventions such as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) to improve employee mental health and wellbeing. This language-based development methodology has been the subject of debate in terms of the quality of the underlying empirical evidence. However, a perspective missing from this debate is an evidence-based understanding of the first-hand experiences of employees that have undertaken NLP training. This study sought to inform this debate by conducting a rigorous qualitative examination of the experiences of Japanese senior managers who had recently received training in NLP.

Design/methodology/approach: Semi-structured interviews attended by eleven Japanese NLP master practitioners were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings: Four themes emerged from the dataset: i) improving work-related mental health, ii) NLP fosters a better understanding of the mind, iii) NLP helps to reframe perspectives relating to work and mental health, and iv) challenges of NLP training.

Originality/value: While managers found NLP training skills such as reframing and neuro-logical levels useful to their managerial practice and mental health more generally, they raised concerns about NLP's reputation as well as the utility of some of the techniques employed in NLP.

Keywords: neuro-linguistic programming, Japanese management, occupational mental health, Japan, positive psychology

Introduction

There is growing awareness of mental illness in Japan (Kobori, et al., 2014) where the number of individuals diagnosed with depression increased by 136% between 1999 and 2008 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [MHLW], 2015). Japan has one of the highest rates of suicide among developed countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015) and 12% of all suicide cases are deemed to be work-related (National Police Agency, 2016). Furthermore, approximately 60% of the Japanese working population experience intense anxiety and stress (MHLW, 2010), and the number of Japanese workers' compensation claims for mental health problems increased from 200 in 2000 to 1,500 in 2015 (MHLW, 2016). From a financial perspective, if Japan was to eradicate suicide and depression, the yearly financial benefit would be approximately 2.7 trillion Japanese yen (JPY), equivalent to 0.7% of GDP (Kaneko and Sato, 2010).

The Japanese word *Karoshi* means “death from overwork” and it refers to health and psychological problems arising from long working hours that are typical of many Japanese workplaces (Kopp, 2017). Consistent with the traditional Japanese value of a focussed work ethic (Ono, 2016), long working hours have sometimes been a prerequisite for acceptance within the Japanese office setting (Hisamoto, 2003). Indeed, a quarter of Japanese companies have employees working more than 80 hours unpaid overtime each month, and 12% have employees working more than 100 hours (Lane, 2017). The rate of Japanese employees working long hours (over 49 hours per week) is higher than most of the Western developed countries (i.e., 21% in Japan, 17% in US, 13% in UK [The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2016]). In addition to increasing the risk of suicide, excessively long working hours leads to a deterioration of workers' mental health (Kuroda and Yamamoto, 2016).

In order to reduce overtime and overwork-related problems, the Japanese government has established several new policies. The first comprehensive programme launched in 2002 focused on i) reducing overtime to no more than 45 hours per month, ii) introducing medical examinations for all employees, and iii) offering consultation by a medical professional for those working long hours (Iwasaki et al., 2006). However, despite such efforts, overtime has remained constant and a detailed analysis of changes in the prevalence of overwork-related health problems has not been conducted (MHLW, 2016).

In 2014, the Japanese government passed a new act to help prevent *karoshi* and other overwork-related health disorders (MHLW, 2014a). To support implementation of the act, the national budget for preventive measures against overwork-related disorders increased from 5.5 billion JPY in 2015 to 7.4 in 2016 (MHLW, 2016). In the new act, overwork-related disorders were defined as i) death by cerebrovascular/cardiovascular diseases (CCVD), ii) suicide following an onset of mental illness caused by work, and iii) CCVD and mental disorders due to work. The 2014 act also focuses on the transparency of workers' physical and mental health, and on whether workers are maintaining a healthy work-life balance. The Japanese government has also recently initiated the work-style reform which in addition to sustaining the Japanese workforce, includes measures to help reduce overtime working (The Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2016).

Due to the influence of government led work-related health promotion initiatives, more Japanese companies are providing mental health support (23.5% in 2002 and 47.2% in 2012) in the form of specialist training for managers, return-to-work support for employees, and recruitment and training of dedicated in-house mental health support workers (MHLW, 2013). However, there is still reticence amongst many

Japanese employers to provide mental health support services, and the effects of both government-led and in-house mental health support initiatives have been ambiguous. For example, 64% of Japanese companies responded “nearly the same” to the question of how many employees took more than a month of mental health leave or left the company in the year of the survey, compared with the previous year (MHLW, 2013).

Due to uncertainty surrounding certain national and locally-implemented work-related mental health initiatives, some Japanese companies have preferred to utilise a technique called neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) for improving diverse work psychological outcomes including occupational stress and self-esteem (AUTHOR 1 et al., 2018c). NLP originated in Richard Bandler’s observations of specific linguistic structures that Fritz Perls, a Gestalt therapist, used in his sessions to enhance the effects of positive suggestions for patients (Bandler and Grinder, 1979). NLP helps practitioners analyse how outstanding results are delivered and then determine how best to reproduce them (O’Connor and McDermott, 2001). The process of duplicating excellent results is called modelling and can be applied to a wide range of contexts (Ready and Burton, 2016). NLP has been used to improve various psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and stress (Bigley et al., 2010; Gray and Liotta, 2012; Juhnke et al., 2008; Simpson and Dryden, 2011; Stipancic et al., 2010; Wake, 2008; Witt, 2008). Furthermore, it has been used by organisations in Japan to promote goal-setting, self-management, team building and leadership (Yamazaki, 2007). Specific NLP techniques are also believed to have applications for improving wellbeing in diverse types of university student populations, including business students and caring profession students (AUTHOR1 et al., 2018a; AUTHOR1 et al., 2018b). There are various providers offering NLP training in Japan but the NLP Connection, which was one of the first NLP organisations to establish itself in Japan, has certified

1,725 practitioners and 1,321 master practitioners (C. Hall, personal communication, March 15, 2016).

Although NLP appears to be reasonably well-accepted amongst the Japanese management sector, the science of NLP has been criticised for being underdeveloped (Pensieri, 2013; Sturt et al., 2012). For example, Sturt et al. (2012) systematically reviewed NLP interventions on health outcomes and concluded that much of the research was limited by major methodological issues (e.g., not reporting aims, interventions, etc.). Furthermore, other literature reviews have highlighted issues relating to researchers' lack of understanding of NLP (Pensieri, 2013).

However, a perspective missing from the abovementioned critiques and systematic reviews is an evidence-based understanding of the first-hand experiences of management professionals who have received NLP training. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to inform the debate concerning the utility of NLP in Japanese organisations by conducting a rigorous qualitative analysis of the first-hand experiences of Japanese senior management professionals who have received NLP certification training.

Method

Design

An in-depth qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews attended by 11 senior Japanese managers who had received NLP Practitioner and Master Practitioner certification training (NLP-PCT and NLP-MPCT) was conducted. The CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) checklist (Public Health Resource Unit, 2013) was employed to inform and enhance the methodological design of the qualitative investigation.

Participants

Three NLP trainers in Japan approached experienced managers who had completed NLP certification training. Of the 14 managers approached, 11 agreed to attend an hour-long interview via Skype. The lead author, based in the UK, conducted the interviews and introduced themselves as a psychology researcher. The 11 participants consisted of eight senior managers, two directors, and one company president. Nine participants worked in major corporations and two worked in medium-sized organisations.

Seven of the participants were men and four were women, and the age range was 39-68 years ($M=53.4$, $SD=7.4$; Table 1). The average age of participants in this study was in line with the demographic characteristics of senior managers in Japan (i.e., 52 years old; MHLW, 2018). In line with the Japanese government's aim to increase female managers in Japanese companies, both male and female managers were included in the current study (MHLW, 2014b). On average, participants had completed NLP-MPCT 2.8 years prior to data collection, and all participants had completed their NLP training at least one year prior to study commencement. Participants had an average of 16.3 years of managerial experience.

Table 1. Participant list

	Age	Gender	Position	Company size	Industry	Mgt Exp (yr)*
Participant 1	54	M	Quality Manager	5,000+	Automobile	14
Participant 2	68	M	HR Manager	5,000+	Insurance	30
Participant 3	50	F	Director	5,000+	Technology	11
Participant 4	49	M	Sales Manager	5,000+	Publication	13
Participant 5	60	M	Sales Manager	5,000+	Communication	20
Participant 6	39	M	President	25-99	Insurance	9
Participant 7	48	F	Sales Manager	5,000+	Electronics	18
Participant 8	53	F	HR Manager	5,000+	Electronics	10
Participant 9	52	F	Consulting Manager	25-99	Consultancy	9
Participant 10	57	M	HR Manager	5,000+	Medicine	25
Participant 11	57	M	Director	5,000+	Sports	20

*'Mgt exp (yr)' = Management experience (year)

NLP Training

Generally, both the NLP-PCT and NLP-MPCT are delivered for ten days over three months. NLP-PCT focuses primarily on personal changes, teaching the basic concepts and skills of NLP to enable participants to make changes within themselves (Hall, 1983). The following eight NLP components are covered as part of the training: representational systems, rapport-building, anchoring, language patterns, outcome framing, sub-modalities, strategies, and trance. Completion of the NLP-PCT allows participants to move onto NLP-MPCT, which focuses primarily on fostering change in others. NLP-MPCT also develops participants' understanding and NLP practice abilities (Hall, 1983). All the skills taught in the training entail theoretical understanding, demonstrations by the trainer, and self-practice. During the course of the training, participants are required to produce five self-reflection reports (Yamazaki, 2004, 2005).

Procedure

The questions included in the interview schedule (e.g., ‘Which NLP skill(s) did you find most helpful to your managerial practice?’) were based on the Helpful Aspects of Therapy Questionnaire (HAT: Llewelyn, 1988), which has been employed in research contexts to examine the efficacy of professional training (e.g. Smith, 2011). The questions in the HAT were suitable for the present study because they i) were straightforward, ii) not intrusive to the interviewees, and iii) helped the interviewees to focus on the helpful events in the change process (Elliott, 2012).

The interviews were conducted via Skype, recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English. Each interview explored topics such as the reasons why participants decided to undertake NLP training, what NLP skills and concepts were particularly useful in their work (and how they applied them), and whether there were any challenges in applying NLP in a management context.

Ethical approval was provided by the authors’ university research ethics committee.

Data Analysis

A point of data saturation was reached after the aforementioned 11 interviews were undertaken (i.e., it was deemed that interviewing more participants would not add to the overall story; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Thematic analysis – which does not limit the analysis to any existing theoretical framework – was employed because it was considered to be appropriate for investigating the under-researched topic of Japanese managers’ experiences of NLP (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis identifies the essential concepts and patterns of experience within the data by means of segmentation, categorisation, summarisation, and reconstruction of the data. The

technique illustrates patterns in experience and identifies the common themes within these patterns (Givens, 2008).

To maintain transparency and coherency, an investigator triangle (Hales, 2010) was formed that comprised (i) the lead author, (ii) a psychology researcher who was familiar with NLP training, and (iii) a non-NLP-trained researcher. The second and third member of the investigator triangle reviewed the data extracts relating to each of the themes identified during the lead author's analysis, and an agreement was reached in all cases. The three individuals involved in the investigator triangle were all native Japanese speakers and they likewise examined the quality of the translation from Japanese to English.

The following steps were taken as part of the thematic analysis:

1. Familiarisation

After transcribing, all the scripts were read and re-read in order to search for patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

2. Generating initial codes

Coding was then conducted to help formulate the data into purposeful groups (Tuckett, 2005), yielding as many codes as possible (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Twenty-four initial codes were formulated: NLP eight-frame outcome, reframe, neuro-logical levels, association/dissociation, position change, understanding the human mind, communication, goal setting, meta-model, flexibility, applicability, motivation, coaching, identity, presentation, misunderstanding, perspective change, power of questions, principles, swish pattern, self-control, trust, psychological safety, and awareness.

3. Searching for themes

The codes were organised into potential themes. In order to view all the codes at the same time, while moving and connecting them flexibly, the mind-map method was employed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The twenty-four codes were grouped into four themes: (i) improving mental health, (ii) understanding the human mind, (iii) frame change, and (iv) challenges of NLP.

4. Reviewing themes

All the coded data extracts were reviewed for coherency and accuracy (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Four types of data were identified: (i) NLP management applications, (ii) what NLP teaches, (iii) what NLP does, and (iv) limitations relating to using NLP in an organisational setting. The aforementioned theme of ‘improving mental health’ related to (i) NLP management applications; the theme of ‘understanding the human mind’ related to (ii) what NLP teaches; the theme of ‘frame change’ related to (iii) what NLP does; and the theme of ‘challenges of NLP’ related to (iv) limitations concerning using NLP in an organisational setting.

5. Defining and naming themes

Lastly, the central meaning and the scope of data captured by each theme were defined (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, reviewing the data extracts for ‘improving mental health’ revealed that the NLP skills of neurological-levels and meta-model improved managers ability to augment employee levels of motivation, trust, and psychological security.

Results

Four themes emerged from the analysis: i) improving work-related mental health, ii) NLP fosters an understanding of the mind, iii) NLP helps to reframe perspectives, and iv) challenges of NLP in organisational settings.

Table 2. Master themes and example participant excerpt

	Themes	Example Participant Excerpt
1	Improving Work-Related Mental Health	<i>NLP skills, for example the eight-frame outcome, help us to think about how we want to be. Each member of staff can think about how they want to be, and what actualising this would mean to their life. (Participant 1).</i>
2	NLP Fosters an Understanding of the Mind	<i>NLP systematically analyses our psychology, so based on that, you can think about how to change your own behaviours (Participant 3).</i>
3	NLP Helps to Reframe Perspectives	<i>My primary frame has changed from 'Why do I (or my team) have to do this?' to 'How can I (or my team) use this for the better?' ... Now I ask myself 'What can I learn from this?' or 'What positive consequences would I face if I did this?' This helps me to stay focused on what I need to do (Participant 8).</i>
4	Challenges of NLP in Organisational Setting	<i>If I advertise 'NLP' training to my team, they wouldn't be interested.... The word 'NLP' does not have a citizenship in my office, while 'coaching' or 'mental training' does (Participant 7).</i>

Theme 1: Improving Work-Related Mental Health

All of the senior managers reported that by using NLP in their management practice, they were able to augment occupational mental health competencies (e.g., autonomous motivation, trust, psychological safety) in both their staff and themselves:

Participant 1: NLP skills, for example the eight-frame outcome, help us to think about how we want to be. Each member of staff can think about how they want to be, and what actualising this would mean to their life. Helping them identify their personal meaning to their work creates a different quality of motivation in them.

Participant 6: To increase our productivity, trustful relationships are very important. When I tell my staff the company vision and future plans, it would be meaningless if my staff didn't trust the company. Neuro-logical levels help me to gain congruence among my vision, how I need to be and behave, and this creates trustful relationships with them.

Participant 2: I believe sponsorship is love. We feel psychologically safe when given sponsorship, an acknowledgement at an identity level. Many managers

more often attack their staff's identity than acknowledge it. Attacking one's identity really damages one's safety.

These data extracts appear to support the view that NLP improved work-related mental health, especially by augmenting positive psychological effects (AUTHOR1, 2018). In NLP, the eight-frame outcome, also known as the well-formed outcome (Yamazaki, 2007), consists of eight frames or questions to help an individual achieve a goal: outcome, evidence, context, ecological, resource, limitation, meta-outcome, and action frames. Participants found this goal-setting method useful as it appeared to enhance autonomous motivation as well as positive emotions towards both their own and their employees' work. Furthermore, the above data extracts indicate that participants were making use of an NLP skill known as neuro-logical levels (Dilts, 1996). This NLP skill is inspired by the fundamental levels of learning and change (Bateson, 1972) and helps NLP practitioners describe and use these levels accordingly: environment, behaviours, capabilities, beliefs/values, identify, and spiritual levels. For example, NLP practitioners can use this skill to clarify, shape and develop adaptive working strategies that are conducive to cultivating mental health and wellness within themselves and their team (AUTHOR1, 2018).

Theme 2: NLP Fosters an Understanding of the Mind

The senior managers reported that NLP improved their understanding of the human mind which enabled them to apply NLP skills flexibly within the context of their work. In particular, participants appeared to deepen their understanding of some of the basic functions of the human mind, including its desire for understanding (Yamazaki, 2007), inclination toward meaning making (Bandler and Grinder, 1975), and a preference of pleasure over pain (Ready and Burton, 2016):

Participant 3: NLP systematically analyses our psychology, so based on that, you can think about how to change your own behaviours. ... In counselling and coaching, you are advised to have more experience to learn the applications, however, NLP teaches the principles and essence of our mind, so that you can apply each skill to your work contexts.

Participant 4: Knowing skills alone is not enough; you need to understand the mechanism behind them, in order to create managers' training that makes a difference.

Insight into these core psychological principles appeared to help the senior managers understand how and why each NLP skill works, and to be able to evaluate and compare NLP with other interventions accordingly. For example:

Participants 4: There are so many self-help books suggesting different ways to succeed in management. But they tend to only tell you what to do, based on what the author did that worked in their contexts. The principles that I learned in the NLP training help me analyse why those methods work, and what part of them could be applicable to my context.

Participants 11: In my earlier coaching training, I didn't really learn the logic of how each skill works, and how to apply them to different situations. I had to rely on my experience to learn applications. NLP taught me what coaching was missing: how each skill works.

The above participant extracts appear to be related to a key training goal of NLP which is fostering the ability to analyse excellence (Ready and Burton, 2016). For example, if

a client is feeling confident, an NLP practitioner might ask questions such as ‘Where do you feel confidence in your body?’, ‘What colour is the feeling?’ etc. Assigning qualities to feelings and linking these qualities to the five sense domains (i.e., visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory) is an NLP process known as assigning ‘sub-modalities’ (O’Connor and McDermott, 2001). Sub-modalities help practitioners understand their client’s internal map of the world and to subsequently model excellent results that other individuals and teams have demonstrated.

Theme 3: NLP Helps to Reframe Perspectives

The word ‘frame’ is often used in NLP (including various subsets of the term such as reframe, pre-frame, and ecological frame) to refer to an individual’s perspectives towards a specific situation or object. For example, ‘reframing’ is commonly used to modify perspective, including how an individual interprets objects and people around them (O’Connor and McDermott, 2001). All participants reported that NLP helped both them and their employees to cultivate more effective frames:

Participant 9: It is a drastic change in my team that we now often set up a positive outcome first in each project for the team and individuals. For example, one member of my staff was in charge of a difficult case. She was very anxious about it, and hesitant to take any actions. We went through the eight frames to create a positive outcome, which helped her to have a clear vision of how she wanted this case to be at the end, instead of what she was nervous about.

Participant 8: My primary frame has changed from ‘Why do I (or my team) have to do this?’ to ‘How can I (or my team) use this for the better?’ There are so many stressful things, and I used to be drowning in the negative emotions. Now I

ask myself ‘What can I learn from this?’ or ‘What positive consequences would I face if I did this?’ This helps me to stay focused on what I need to do.

Theme 4: Challenges of NLP in Organisational Settings

Although all participants were satisfied with their experience of receiving NLP training, they also reported some challenges in using NLP in the workplace. One notable challenge related to the use of the term ‘NLP’ in the organisation:

Participant 7: If I advertise ‘NLP’ training to my team, they wouldn’t be interested. So, instead I say it’s coaching, training, or we will do some ‘mental training’, then they would listen to me. The word ‘NLP’ does not have a citizenship in my office, while ‘coaching’ or ‘mental training’ does.

Participants 10: While working, I earned a master’s degree in psychology, studying part-time. During my master’s, I told some of the university faculties that my research focus was on NLP, and they replied, ‘oh that commercialised one’. It is very strange because coaching is more commercialised; more frequent renewal fees and expensive training.

The above data extracts suggest a degree of frustration amongst participants in the sense that they were convinced of the utility of NLP, but could not understand why the technique was not more popular. In this context, some participants referred to how the seemingly more acceptable practice of coaching – a collaborative development to foster a client's ability to grow autonomously (Stober and Parry, 2005) – utilises numerous practical assumptions that are based on NLP (AUTHOR1, 2018; McDermott and Jago, 2006).

Another challenge identified by participants relates to the fact that NLP originated in clinical practice. For example, some NLP skills require a long period of time, a relatively large space, and/or body movements to be conducted, which can be difficult to implement in a workplace setting. Furthermore, describing feelings and the internal world is not natural for some business professionals, who sometimes prefer to deal with objective (i.e., rather than subjective) facts:

Participant 9: What was hard to use for me was letting them move their body or describe their feelings. ... Especially male staff or staff who rely on logical thinking found difficult to engage in those exercises.

Participant 7: Especially elder staff showed difficulty describing their feelings, because they were a generation who has endured severe criticism from their boss and clients – and developed their mental resilience. They believe talking about feelings is a sign of weakness, and a failure to maintain professionalism.

Participant 3: Some of the skills take a long time to conduct. For example, though it is useful, the eight-frame outcome has eight questions to cover. In a busy workplace, it is unrealistic to go through all of them. Five may be doable, and three would be ideal.

Discussion

The current study conducted a rigorous qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews attended by 11 senior Japanese managers who had completed NLP-PCT and NLP-MPCT. Four themes emerged from the dataset: Improving work-related mental health (theme 1), NLP fosters an understanding of the mind (theme 2), NLP helps to reframe perspectives (theme 3), and the challenges of NLP (theme 4).

In organisational settings, NLP is often used to improve work mental health, especially by augmenting positive psychological constructs (theme 1) rather than for reducing negative constructs per its use in clinical contexts. This is consistent with findings from the current study, where participants reported that NLP benefits psychological wellbeing in different ways. In particular, managers reported that the NLP skills of neuro-logical levels and well-formed outcomes played an important role in supporting employee mental health. Neuro-logical levels appeared to help participants identify the benefits of their work to the immediate and wider community, and well-formed outcomes appeared to help them to formulate a detailed and realistic plan in order to achieve a goal. These NLP skills are related to positive psychological constructs such as mission and meaning, and other NLP studies have linked them to improvements in work-related mental health (AUTHOR1 and Sheffield, 2017).

Throughout NLP certification training, participants learn several principles relating to the functioning of the mind (theme 2). In NLP, this understanding is arguably most directly cultivated via the process of modelling (i.e., modelling excellent communication and results). Modelling strategies are a fundamental part of NLP and have been used to help inspiring leaders such as Steve Jobs and Walt Disney (Dilts, 1996). A key factor that contributes to the modelling process in NLP is sub-modalities, which constitute the detailed internal map of our inner experience. Sub-modalities are similar to a philosophical concept known as *qualia* (Stanford University, 2015) as well as a Buddhist concept known as *rokkyou* (‘六境’; Soothill and Hodous, 2014). Qualia refer to the properties of sense data as well as how these properties are represented internally (e.g., experiencing anxiety as a red large ball rising from the stomach; Stanford University, 2015), and *rokkyou* refers to our internal experience of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, kinaesthetic, and ideological fields (Soothill and Hodous,

2014). Findings demonstrated that the senior managers believed that sub-modalities helped both them and their employees understand that there is an idiosyncratic sensual interpretation of the external world, and that becoming aware of this is an adaptive means of relating to both feelings and sensory information.

Theme 3 indicated that NLP helped the senior managers and their employees to formulate new, more adaptive, perspectives. NLP makes frequent use of presuppositions such as ‘There is no failure, only feedback’ or ‘Behind every behaviour there is a positive intention (O’Connor and McDermott, 2001).’ These presuppositions, modelled from excellent communicators, are pedagogical devices intended to help practitioners impart internal changes as a result of clients or employees reevaluating assumptions, thoughts and behaviours (Grimley, 2013). More specifically, theme 3 appears to highlight a central function of NLP which is to challenge or change mental frames (Rosen, 1991). Indeed, consistent with NLP studies of leaders working in clinical settings (Dilts, 1996), the senior managers reported that in addition to changing their way of thinking and how they relate to employees, NLP presuppositions and reframing techniques enabled them to offer more supportive and motivational leadership.

Theme 4 highlighted some of the challenges of using NLP in Japanese organisations. Indeed, as opposed to using the term NLP, the current sample of senior managers preferred referring to the practice as ‘coaching’. This is consistent with wider perceptions of NLP amongst professional bodies in both Japan and overseas, and it indicates that ‘coaching’ is a more accepted term than ‘NLP’. For example, coaching psychology was acknowledged by the British Psychological Society (BPS) in 2004 (BPS, 2005), while NLP has not been officially recognised to date. This is despite the fact that there are significant overlaps between NLP and coaching in terms of both their theoretical underpinnings and the techniques they employ (McDermott and Jago, 2006).

A plausible explanation for the difference in credibility between the two approaches is that NLP is more commercialised (Grimley, 2016). Furthermore, coaching is regulated by the International Coaching Federation yet there is currently not an established regulatory body for NLP (Grimley, 2016). However, as reported by one of the participants in the present study – who holds both NLP and coaching certifications – coaching could also be considered ‘commercialised’ as it involves more frequent licence renewals than NLP.

In addition to the credibility issue, there is also the question of whether NLP is culturally syntonic for Japanese workers (AUTHOR1 et al., 2018). For example, participants reported that a further challenge of using NLP related to a reticence amongst some Japanese employees to discuss emotions at work. This may be due to Japan’s masculine culture (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010) and the fact that some Japanese workers feel considerable shame when discussing mental health issues (Tanaka et al., 2003).

Given the logistical and psychological demands of using NLP in organisational settings (e.g., duration of intervention, space availability, use of body movement exercises, and voicing of feelings, etc.), there is a need for a greater understanding of which specific NLP skills are most suitable for the Japanese workplace (i.e., exploring the research question of whether there should be a subtype of NLP specifically tailored for use in Japanese occupational contexts). The development of such a subtype has been implemented to some degree (e.g., Knight, 1995), but a more focussed and centralised approach is recommended.

Findings from this study are subject to a number of limitations. Indeed, as with all qualitative studies, findings are specific to the current sample of study participants and may not generalise to other Japanese senior managers. Furthermore, bias may be

present given that all participants were trained NLP practitioners that regularly use NLP as part of their work. The lead author's involvement with NLP also might have caused bias, however this was countered by the investigator triangulation, and the second author i) assessing the interview questions, ii) reviewing the data analysis, and iii) co-creating the reporting. Qualitatively exploring the experiences of managers' employees would also likely deepen understanding of the utility of NLP in Japanese corporations.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrated that Japanese senior managers experience NLP as an effective means of augmenting work-related mental health and performance in both themselves and their employees. In particular, although the Japanese senior managers that participated in this study made reference to the challenges of using NLP, they emphasised the value of NLP skills in terms of helping individuals understand their mental processes and relate to work problems in a manner that fosters mental wellbeing and performance.

The current findings, that explore participants' first-hand experiences of using NLP, also help to inform the wider debate concerning the utility of NLP. More specifically, while previous NLP organisational studies have tended not to focus on evaluating the dynamics of how NLP works from a manager's perspective, this study identified that there are a number of key NLP skills (e.g., reframing, well-formed outcome, and neuro-logical levels) that are experienced as being beneficial by senior Japanese business leaders. A further investigation of these skills may contribute to the development of novel solutions in terms of addressing mental health and managerial problems faced by Japanese organisations.

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