

Title: Spinning wider

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The recent article by Jellison et al. shows how abstracts reporting randomized controlled trials of therapeutic interventions in psychiatry tend to be “spinned” to suggest positive effects of treatments, even when the actual results do not.[1] Although the authors do not explicitly address the reasons for such spinning, they suggest that unethical researchers “beautify” their results to increase chances of publication. However, they mention a study by Lazarus et al. who found reviewers recommending positive spin in their comments,[2] hinting that spinning of scientific results might be a broader issue than unethical researchers “crossing the line” to get published.

Indeed, results of large studies can be spinned not only by researchers, but by editors and commentators as well. For example, CATIE, STAR-D and STEP-BD were arguably the most ambitious clinical trials of the past decade in psychiatry, aiming to determine the most effective “real-world” pharmacologic strategies for major psychiatric conditions. They did not reach their goal, but found that all strategies were equally and shockingly mediocre. They nevertheless received enthusiastic comments in major journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, minimizing the poor outcomes and celebrating how such important clinical trials were advancing the field.[3] In dominant narratives, revolutionary progress is presented as imminent. A more recent example is the announced advent of “precision psychiatry,” hailed as a “paradigm shift” promising a “complete redesign of the landscape of mental illness.”[4]

In medical research, competition for resources and visibility is certainly fierce. Such an environment can abet deliberate, dishonest, and unacceptable behaviors. However, we believe that positive spinning in psychiatry is the expression of a wider issue. In 1990, President George W. Bush announced the “decade of the brain” with much optimism and fanfare. 30 years later, the promises then made of a neurobiological revolution in psychiatry are still waiting to be fulfilled. This is a painful truth – it is therefore tempting to hang on to the faith that a major breakthrough is “just around the corner.”[5]

1. Jellison S, Roberts W, Bowers A, et al. Evaluation of spin in abstracts of papers in psychiatry and psychology journals. *BMJ Evid Based Med* 2019 [published Online First: 7 August 2019] doi: 10.1136/bmjebm-2019-111176.

2. Lazarus C, Haneef R, Ravaud P, et al. Peer reviewers identified spin in manuscripts of nonrandomized studies assessing therapeutic interventions, but their impact on spin in abstract conclusions was limited. *J Clin Epidemiol* 2016;77:44-51 doi: 10.1016/j.jclinepi.2016.04.012.

3. Saraga M, Stiefel F. Psychiatry and the scientific fallacy. *Acta Psychiatr Scand* 2011;124:70-2 doi: 10.1111/j.1600-0447.2011.01708.x

4. Stiefel F, Conus P, Bourquin C. Precision psychiatry: Promises made-Promises to be kept? *Aust N Z J Psychiatry* 2019 [published Online First: 17 May 2019] doi: 10.1177/0004867419849482.

5. Evans R, Kotchetkova I, Langer S. Just around the corner: Rhetorics of progress and promise in genetic research. *Public Underst Sci* 2009;18:43-59 doi: 10.1177/0963662507078016.