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Improving the publication rate of Spanish researchers in good journals

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Five obstacles are described that currently prevent Spanish researchers in the psychological sciences from publishing more frequently in journals of high impact factor. These are: *a)* a general lack of confidence in your ability; *b)* a tendency for your papers to be driven more by speculation rather than data; *c)* excessive length of submitted manuscripts; *d)* higher than expected rates of drop-out and non-participation in studies, y *e)* lack of independence from pharmaceutical companies. Although many of these problems will require long-term structural changes, others can be addressed immediately and yield improvement rapidly.

Key words:
Impact factor. Journals. Publishing.

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Incremento de las tasas de publicación de los investigadores españoles en revistas internacionales con nivel de impacto elevado

Se describen en este artículo cinco obstáculos que dificultan en la actualidad la posibilidad de que los investigadores españoles dedicados a las ciencias psicológicas publiquen con una frecuencia mayor en las revistas con un factor de impacto elevado. Estos obstáculos son: *a)* la falta general de confianza en su capacidad; *b)* la tendencia a que los artículos redactados recojan conjeturas más que datos; *c)* la longitud excesiva de los originales remitidos para publicación; *d)* las tasas de abandono y de falta de seguimiento de los participantes en los estudios, superiores a las esperadas, y *e)* la falta de independencia de los investigadores respecto a las compañías

farmacéuticas. A pesar de que muchos de estos problemas van a requerir la aplicación de modificaciones estructurales a largo plazo, algunos de ellos pueden ser abordados de manera inmediata con una mejora rápida de los mismos.

Palabras clave:
Factor de impacto. Revistas. Publicación.

INTRODUCTION

In the scientific literature of the psychological sciences Spain is not quite pulling its weight. Bibliometric analyses of the output of countries shows that Spain is languishing at number 18 in the list of European nations and is somewhat lower when allowance is made for your population (table 1). Although this is partly to be expected as Spain was one of the less affluent countries in Europe until recently, and it is well established that the best resourced countries contribute disproportionately to the scientific literature by a factor of 9¹, it is not a state of affairs that should be allowed to continue. This becomes more important as Spain becomes more prosperous and integrated into European science. Clearly there could be many ways of changing things for the better and the following account necessarily has to be a personal one. However, it is based on my experience in reviewing Spanish papers for the *British Journal of Psychiatry* and so incorporates the views of the many reviewers who have seen the papers submitted, and a significant proportion of these have been from Spain itself.

I have identified five separate problems that deserve discussion. All of them are to some extent subjective, but I try to back them up with evidence.

LACK OF CONFIDENCE

With a few notable exceptions, Spanish researchers in the psychological sciences lack confidence in their undoubted ability. This is illustrated by a tendency to imitate, or replicate, the work of researchers elsewhere, particu-

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Table 1		Research publications in psychiatry in European member states (new entrant countries in bold type) ¹⁵	
Country	Population ¹	Number of publications ²	Rate n/10 ⁶ inhabitants
Ireland	3,786,900	84	22.18
Finland	5,176,220	53	10.24
Denmark	5,293,000	38	7.18
Sweden	8,872,294	54	6.09
Luxembourg	438,500	2	4.56
Austria	8,110,200	31	3.82
Malta	385,809	1	2.59
Estonia	1,369,515	3	2.19
Germany	82,187,616	179	2.18
Netherlands	15,925,513	32	2.01
France	59,079,000	92	1.56
UK	59,755,660	80	1.34
Lithuania	3,499,536	4	1.14
Greece	10,645,000	12	1.13
Slovenia	1,977,229	2	1.01
Belgium	10,161,000	10	0.98
Czech Republic	10,272,503	9	0.88
Spain	40,173,504	35	0.87
Latvia	2,372,984	2	0.84
Hungary	10,210,971	8	0.78
Italy	57,761,956	39	0.68
Poland	38,646,200	14	0.36
Portugal	10,210,553	3	0.29
Slovakia	5,400,679	1	0.19
Cyprus	693,789	0	0.00

¹ Population in July 2000. ² Publications found using «name of country» and «psychiatry» in the Science Citation Index and the Social Sciences Citation Index for the years 1994–2004.

larly from the United States, instead of forging your own research pathways as Ramon y Cajal did so many years ago. This is illustrated by a general reluctance to submit papers to journals of high impact factor even though these papers may be suitable for publication in such journals. In the last three years the success rate for Spanish papers submitted to the *British Journal of Psychiatry* has been 28%, a higher rate than for submissions generally. Part of this is clearly related to the need to write papers in English. This is almost a mandatory requirement in the science of today, and although it may be unfair, it is a fact of life that a paper published in another language is very unlikely to be cited as often as when it is published in English. Because English is such a difficult language to write well it is desirable, if not essential, for a native English speaker to see the final manuscript and approve it before it is submitted for publication. When papers are published

there is a tendency to go for the relatively easy option of replicating work that was initiated in another country, most commonly the United States. Whilst there is still value in replication, and it can lead to good impact journal publication² it is not the best way of building a solid research reputation. Breaking out on your own, by defining new territories of research, requires courage, but it has been successful for some notable researchers in Spain, as for example, with Cuesta and Peralta in Pamplona, and Garcia-Campayo in Zaragoza, where replication studies are a natural part of the profile of a unit that is founded on good original research^{3,4}. In finding the right journals, it is important to be reminded that what people read is often only distantly related to the impact factor⁵ and to be widely known about is the first need of good research.

One does not need to go too far to see evidence that Spanish researchers can indeed overcome these barriers, often through close international collaboration. Studies by the Salamanca and Barcelona groups illustrate that a team confident in its own ability and significance of its findings can achieve publications in the very best of journals⁶⁻⁷ so others should be able to follow.

TOO MUCH SPECULATION

There is a tendency for Spanish researchers to be more interested in what might follow from their findings rather than what actually does follow. This is because they speculate too much and go beyond the data that are being presented. Good data speak volumes without explanation; poor data cannot be rescued by any amount of creative writing. Spanish authors often are imbued with what I could call the *Don Quixote syndrome*, the luxury of theory without observation or experience, and this can detract rather than add to the content of the paper if it is deemed to be irrelevant by the editor or reviewers. This problem is best expressed by the old Spanish saying «mucha paja y poco grano»*. What may be appropriate for teaching students is quite unsuited for the scientific community desperate to establish an evidence base for current practice.

EXCESSIVE LENGTH

Today there are too many scientific papers competing for too little publication space, and it helps the chances of publication greatly if a paper is kept short and succinct. Spanish papers tend to be too long, and again this may be borne out of a general lack of confidence that the presented data are not considered strong enough to speak for themselves. The length of a good paper for the *British Journal of Psychiatry* is 3,500 words, and when I get a paper of over

* N. of T.: In Spanish in the original.

8,000 words I am immediately put off and inclined to rejection.

HIGHER RATES OF NON-PARTICIPATION

Increasingly it is becoming recognised that missing data are significant handicaps to the interpretation of data, and this is particularly so when there is no attempt to correct for the missing values in published studies⁸. Although it would be wrong to generalise too much, there is a tendency for Spanish researchers to yield lower follow-up rates in longitudinal studies and lower participation rates in cross-sectional ones. This shows itself most clearly in multi-site studies from several countries in which the Spanish centre frequently has a lower level of participation than the other countries⁹. In tackling this problem it is likely that many of the difficulties can be placed at the door of other agencies. Countries such as Denmark have enviable computerised databases that allow easy tracing of subjects and much lower rates of missing data¹⁰, and Spain may not currently be able to compete here. However, there are other ways in which the researchers can improve the contact rate and it would help if greater efforts were devoted to these.

LACK OF INDEPENDENCE FROM PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES

This problem is not confined to Spain, and applies to all countries in which there is little external funding for research. In these circumstances the pharma companies fill the gap, and whilst this is perfectly appropriate for many drug trials of new agents it is less appropriate for other studies in which the appropriate declaration of interest may count against the paper. There is increasing concern about the influence of ghost writers and selective reporting in published papers¹¹⁻¹² and studies that obtain their funding from independent funding bodies have a definite advantage. Clearly this is not a major problem in psychopharmacology, and the work of the Barcelona group, who have combined their interest in bipolar disorder with related drug studies¹³⁻¹⁴ are good examples of this, but when a drug company has sponsored a study on, for example, quality of life in schizophrenia and examined the effect of antipsychotic drugs, the bias is easy to detect.

CONCLUSIONS

In making suggestions to improve publication rates I recognise that the points I make may seem to be unduly negative but things you do well are not relevant to this review. The points I make bear some resemblance to similar criticisms about the Spanish football team; lots of pretty passing in the middle of the field (over-long flow-

ery speculation), excessive commercialism (pharmaceutical industry influence); non-participation (fickle performance and frequent substitutions), and lack of confidence (a chronic shortage of goals). However, I judge that although many of the problems cannot be corrected easily in the short-term, the long-term prospects are good and it is in the spirit of constructive criticism that I have highlighted some simple ways in which attention may yield results.

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