

# Power abuse and anonymous accusations in academia – Perspectives from early career researchers and recommendations for improvement

Jana Lasser, Lindsey Bultema, Anja Jahn, Michaela Löffler, Vera Minneker, Cornelia van Scherpenberg

---

Die steilen Hierarchien im deutschen akademischen System bergen großes Potenzial für Machtgefälle und Abhängigkeiten. Diese entstehen meist zwischen Personen mit etablierten Karrieren an der Spitze der Hierarchie, wie z. B. Gruppenleiterinnen bzw. -leitern und Professorinnen bzw. Professoren, und Promovierenden, die ihre akademische Laufbahn am unteren Ende der Hierarchie beginnen. In Deutschland wurden in jüngster Zeit einige Fälle öffentlich diskutiert, in denen akademische Führungskräfte wegen des Vorwurfs missbräuchlichen Verhaltens gerügt wurden. Die Tatsache, dass manche der anschuldigenden Personen anonym blieben, wird nun kritisch betrachtet. In diesem Beitrag wollen wir die Perspektive der Promovierenden in die Diskussion einbringen. Mehrere kürzlich durchgeführte Umfragen bestätigen, dass sich Promovierende nach wie vor in einer vulnerablen Position befinden und Anonymität notwendig ist, damit weniger etablierte Wissenschaftlerinnen bzw. Wissenschaftler ihre Bedenken ohne Furcht vor negativen Auswirkungen äußern können. Zudem schlagen wir konkrete Änderungen des akademischen Systems vor, um Machtmissbrauch zu verhindern und vertrauenswürdige und unabhängige Konfliktlösungsverfahren einzuführen.

---

## 1 Insights into power abuse in the German academic system

Power abuse occurs in situations where there is a misuse of hierarchical power and/or mismanagement of leadership (Vredenburg & Brender, 1998). At the top of the academic hierarchy, we usually find people with established careers – professors, research group leaders, or directors of a research institute. The bottom is represented by doctoral researchers (DRs), continuing their education and advancing their careers. Besides universities, non-university research institutions play a key role in training DRs and shaping their academic careers. In addition to being recognised for important and excellent research in all areas of science, the four biggest German non-university research institutions (Fraunhofer Society, FhG; Helmholtz Association, HGF; Leibniz Association, WGL; and the Max Planck Society, MPS) have also attracted media attention for more unfortunate reasons in recent years. In several cases, scientists in

a leading role were shown to participate in scientific misconduct or personal offences (Boytshev, 2020; Müller, 2018; Thiel, 2018). Here, we add the perspective of the DRs represented by N<sup>2</sup> from the HGF, WGL and MPS to the discussion of power abuse and conflict resolution in academia.<sup>1</sup>

In recent reports about abusive behaviour by superiors in German newspapers and magazines, accusers are not publicly known and remain anonymous, often even to the accused. In reports from 2018, accusers are portrayed as victims, worthy of protection (Müller, 2018; Thiel, 2018). Nevertheless, in recent articles (Buchhorn & Freisinger, 2020) the coverage and discussion of cases of power abuse accusations in academia have seen a shift in perspective. The role of the accusers has changed from victims of power abuse to people using their anonymity to conspire or even rebel against their superiors. From the perspective of DRs, we argue that their position has not changed, vulnerability still remains, and that anonymity is pertinent to enable less established scientists to voice their concerns without fear of repercussions and, to some extent, they should be able to offset the existing power differentials to their superiors.

Here we outline the various power differentials that exist in academia between early career researchers (ECRs) and their superiors while relying on information about the working conditions of DRs in German non-university research organisations from the harmonised surveys conducted by the N<sup>2</sup> member networks: WGL (Beadle et al., 2020), HGF (Peukert et al., 2020), and the MPS (Olsthoorn et al., 2020). Comprehensive results as well as a detailed description of the employed methods can be found in the respective survey reports. These individual publications summarise results from the same survey questionnaire. Out of approximately 16,000 eligible DRs, 4,800 participated in the surveys. The aim was to shed light on the relationship between supervision, working conditions, mental health, and experiences of abusive behaviour. We supplement the findings of these harmonised surveys by reports from other large national (Briedis et al., 2018; Schraudner, Striebing, & Hochfeld, 2019) and international surveys (Wellcome Trust, 2020; Woolston, 2019) to ensure our analysis is applicable to the German academic system as a whole and, to some extent, to the international academic system. We end our contribution by suggesting concrete changes to the academic system to prevent power abuse and to establish reporting and resolution procedures that are trusted by scientists, regardless of career stage and independent of individual research organisations. We argue that anonymity lies at the heart of such procedures, since it is necessary to offset the power imbalance, protect accusers from retaliation by offenders, and help foster trust in the reporting system.

---

<sup>1</sup>N<sup>2</sup> is a network of the elected representation of the doctoral researchers of the HGF, WGL and MPS. The International PhD Programme Mainz (IPP) is an associated member of N<sup>2</sup>. Combined, these four non-university research organisations have approximately 16,000 DRs. N<sup>2</sup> regularly conducts surveys and represents the issues of the DRs from its members both towards the research organisations as well as externally.

## 2 Power differentials in academia

“Power abuse” or “abuse of power” is commonly defined as using one’s position of power (Dahl, 1957) to take advantage of a person in an inferior position for personal gain or to harm said person (UNESCO, 2020). It is strongly connected to the ability to control or punish a person in an inferior position if they do not comply (Hodes & Mennicke, 2019; Vredenburg & Brender, 1998). Harming the victim of power abuse can take the form of bullying (National Centre Against Bullying, 2020).

The bases for the occurrence of power abuse are power differentials between the offender and the victim (Malecki et al., 2015). A crucial characteristic of a power differential is the vulnerability of the victim, who has a lot to lose and may therefore be unable or unwilling to defend themselves.

Power differentials in academia are complex and occur in different, often interconnected areas of academic life. Most prominently, these areas include dependence on the superior for evaluation, future employment, and reputation (Gibson et al., 2014). From our experience as point of contact for DRs in difficult situations, we also recognise the differential in knowledge due to the more extensive experience of the supervisor in the academic system as a relevant power differential. In the following, we will use results from recent surveys among DRs and ECRs to illustrate that experiences of mobbing or bullying among ECRs are frequent, that abusive behaviour is likely to go unnoticed or unpunished, and that these experiences have a detrimental effect on ECRs’ mental health. To make these general findings more tangible, we will continue by illustrating the existing power differentials in the four areas described above in more detail.

### 2.1 Ubiquity of abusive behaviour in academia

While the majority of DRs (around 60–70 %<sup>2</sup> on average) report high overall satisfaction with their PhD, 18–23 % state that they are unsatisfied with their supervision, and 10–13 % report to have been bullied by a superior at least once. Only one third of those who have experienced bullying reported the incident to an official body (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020; Schraudner et al., 2019). The two most important reasons not to report an incident are the conviction that there would be no consequences for the perpetrator (55 %) and fear for one’s career (35 %) (Schraudner et al., 2019). Of the individuals who reported an incident, only about a quarter were satisfied with how the situation was resolved (Beadle et al., 2020;

---

<sup>2</sup>The numbers we report are taken from the individual survey reports by the respective networks that are part of N<sup>2</sup>. We report a percentage range of the minimum and maximum percentage of responses per reported question in the respective survey reports.

Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020), and significant numbers report general negative consequences (35 %) or specific negative consequences for their career (24 %) (Schraudner et al., 2019). This situation has dire consequences for the mental health of ECRs, leading to vastly increased numbers of young academics reporting depression or anxiety disorders and a significant proportion of DRs who consider quitting their PhD: Together with inadequate supervision and high workload, experiences of power abuse are strongly correlated to deteriorating mental health in DRs. The prevalence of depressive symptoms is 15–18 % (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020), which is twice as high as for the same age group in the German general population (Jacobi et al., 2014; Maske et al., 2016). Moreover, between 60 and 70 % of DRs show symptoms of at least moderate anxiety (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020). Similarly, the Wellcome Trust Survey reports that “*just over half of the respondents had sought or had wanted to seek professional help for depression or anxiety*” (Wellcome Trust, 2020). About a third of DRs consider quitting their PhD “*often*” or “*occasionally*” (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020), a tendency that is also correlated with experiences of bullying. These findings universally show that ECRs perceive the strong and multiple dependencies between them and their supervisors as problematic, leading to dissatisfaction, mental health problems, and thoughts about quitting.

## 2.2 Employment

It is typical for a hierarchical environment that continued employment of a subordinate depends on the assessment of their work by their superior. This dependency is amplified in the case of DRs since almost all employment contracts are time-limited: 96.6 % of DRs working at universities or non-university research institutions in Germany have fixed-term contracts (Briedis et al., 2018); for postdocs or scientists without tenure under the age of 45, this number still ranges between 84 and 93 % (BuWiN, 2017). Therefore, ECRs, including DRs, regularly depend on their supervisor, professor, or the principal investigator (PI) of their research to extend their contracts and can be more easily dismissed without justification by simply not extending their contract. In Germany, decisions about further employment of ECRs are often taken by a single PI or professor who has power over the research unit, institute or third-party funding on which the ECR is employed.<sup>3</sup> Even though the average length of a PhD in Germany is 3.5 to 4.5 years (BuWiN, 2017; Jaksztat, Preßler, & Briedis, 2012), only around half of all DRs actually receive a contract with a duration of 36 months (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020). For around 15 % of DRs, the duration of their longest employment contract did not exceed 24 months, and only 11 % received a contract lasting up to 48 months. These contract durations are not long enough to

<sup>3</sup>This is an observation based on our experience in advising DRs, which is in need of verification through a structured survey.

ensure completion of a PhD within the first employment contract (Jaksztat, Preßler, & Briedis, 2012). This makes it very likely that DRs will be faced with the necessity to extend at least one contract to complete their degree. The situation is even more precarious for other ECRs such as postdocs and junior group leaders: Here, 50 % of all employment contracts have a duration of less than one year (BuWiN, 2017).

In addition to the time-limited contracts, DRs are often in a financially vulnerable phase of their life, with 23–25 % of DRs relying on external support to finance their doctoral research (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020). Moreover, for international DRs from outside the EU (23–35 %), the residence permit depends on the contract duration (§ 18 Aufenthaltsgesetz). Besides power imbalance due to employment contracts, PIs have a range of administrative powers with the potential for misuse: They can approve or disapprove annual leave and business trips to conferences which are important to build an academic network. Lastly, the process of obtaining a PhD degree involves many formal steps which need to be approved by the supervisor, each being a possible reason for delay of the completion of their research, and of severe inconvenience to the DRs.

These precarious working conditions result in a strong dependence of ECRs on single senior researchers that have administrative power. For example, an international DR pursuing a degree on a working contract with an initial duration of two years might be coerced by their PI to prioritise a project beneficial to the PI over their own dissertation under threat of not extending the contract.

### **2.3 Evaluation**

Traditionally, in German universities and research institutions the main supervisor of a dissertation is also the main project evaluator (Ebisch, 2017). The grading of a thesis which they supervised themselves often results in a conflict of interest: PIs can use the threat of a bad thesis evaluation to compel work from the DRs that exceeds what has been contractually agreed upon. On the other end of the spectrum, the PIs are not incentivised to truthfully assess the work they have supervised: If the work is truly subpar and not deserving of a degree, the PI might fear a negative reflection on their supervision skills and allow the DR to pass with low grades instead of not permitting them to pass at all. Additionally, PIs are often evaluated on the number of DRs they graduate – an additional incentive to permit people to pass. Researchers usually have a high intrinsic motivation to work extensively on their research (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020), and this is exacerbated by the competitive environment in modern academia (Woolston, 2019). However, pressure from supervisors is a main reason for long average working hours, work on weekends, and a tendency to not take annual leave in academia: 30–33 % of DRs report that they

do not feel free to take holidays because of a high workload, and 7–11 % because they are pressured by their superior (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020). The strong dependence on the opinion of their main supervisor and, ultimately, the positive evaluation of their project can cause ECRs to become vulnerable to extortion of work or unable to report abusive behaviour for fear of failing or a bad dissertation grade.

## 2.4 Reputation

Moving through the bottleneck of academic careers is highly dependent on reputation and one's ability to form a strong network (Scaffidi & Berman, 2011; Wolff & Moser, 2009). At the beginning of an academic career, researchers profit highly from their supervisors sharing their networks and introducing them in the relevant academic circles. This puts supervisors in a unique position of power to foster or damage the reputation of the ECRs. A substantial number of ECRs, 58 %, report not getting the support they need from their supervisors to further their career (Briedis et al., 2018). Supervisors guard the entry to academic circles by allowing or preventing ECRs' attendance at conferences and have countless possibilities to mention the merits or deficiencies of their graduates to their peers. Here the power differential is formalised in the letter of recommendation that is required for almost all applications to academic and non-academic positions. PIs have no obligation to provide such a letter and, if they do, they have no obligation to justify a bad assessment of the ECR<sup>4</sup>. Lastly, in most academic fields, PIs have the power to decide on authorship contributions in academic publications. In many cases, at least one first or corresponding author publication is required to receive a doctorate and is necessary to successfully apply for a research position or grant. The pressure to "publish or perish" leaves ECRs dependent on their supervisor to grant them this (first) authorship (Wu et al., 2019). This dependence on the supervisor to build an academic reputation crucial for pursuing a career in academia leaves ECRs with little incentive to take any action that their supervisor might not endorse.

## 2.5 Knowledge

Often overlooked amongst the many power differentials existing in academia is the difference in knowledge about the system. In today's academic system, ECRs are expected to frequently move institutions and countries for an extended period of time until they find a permanent position (Balaban, 2018; Laudel & Bielick, 2019). This means that people in hierarchically more vulnerable positions are also more likely to have been at an institution for a shorter period of time and to leave again in the near future. In

<sup>4</sup>Other than in the German "Arbeitszeugnis", where a bad assessment needs to be justified (BAG, Urteil vom 14.10.2003 – 9 AZR 12/03, 2003).

our experience, this often incentivises conflict resolution structures to delay resolution until the victim has left the institution. Moreover, short-term contracts make it harder for ECRs to sufficiently familiarise themselves with bureaucratic structures, workplace regulations, and employment rights. As a consequence, ECRs' participation in organised workers representations such as works councils is hampered (Smith, 1998), which impacts ECRs' abilities to stand up for their rights and speak up if they fall victim to abusive behaviour.

The knowledge differential between PIs and ECRs also manifests itself in the academic sphere: PIs tend to know their field and their peers well, they have extensive knowledge about appropriate funding agencies, appropriate venues for publication and conferences. ECRs are dependent on their PIs to share such knowledge with them to be successful in academia. The fear of being scooped is a common phenomenon in science (Laine, 2017). From our experience we know that this can result in a tendency towards secrecy in projects their group is currently working on, urging their ECRs not to speak about their work to their peers or at conferences for fear of being scooped. If this is a typical case, it systematically hampers the ability of ECRs to form their own network and to get the scientific opinion of other senior researchers, obstructing the scientific process.

### **3 Breaking the vicious cycle of abusive behaviour in academia**

#### **3.1 Importance of anonymity for reporters of incidents**

In practice, the path from first report to consequences for the offender is long and has many stages. Along this path, there are varying degrees of anonymity, and in this context anonymity should not be discussed in a binary fashion. We recognise that allegations of power abuse can have a very damaging impact on the reputation and career of senior researchers. Therefore, besides treating a complaint confidentially until it is settled, an investigations committee should have the possibility to know the identity of and speak to the person filing a complaint to assess the situation before reaching a verdict, therefore balancing the need for anonymity and the necessity to substantiate accusations before corrective action is taken. Said committee needs to be held accountable to safeguard the anonymity of the victim since accidental disclosure of information about the victim makes it easy to identify them in the often very small institutions and can lead to dire consequences for the accuser (Boychev, 2020).

As described above, power differentials are ubiquitous in academia and incidents of abusive behaviour are rarely reported. This deprives the academic system of much-needed feedback from a majority of its members and hinders improvement. A strong motivator for ECRs not to report incidents of abusive behaviour is their fear of repercussions. Hence, anonymity is necessary to encourage reporting of incidents: The

opportunity to anonymously report abusive behaviour, for example to an ombudsperson<sup>5</sup> or the gender equality officer, allows victims of power abuse to receive support without fear of direct repercussions from their supervisor. Furthermore, it opens a path to improve the situation by enabling supervisors to learn from their mistakes and institutions to discharge senior scientists that are not fit to supervise ECRs after a verdict by an independent committee. Finally, given the vulnerability of ECRs' reputations and career perspectives in their (often small) academic field, anonymity to the offender needs to remain intact even after the conclusion of the investigation.

A frequent argument against anonymity is its potential to encourage "smear campaigns" to discredit people, with no threat of repercussions for the accuser. Nevertheless, there are many reasons to doubt the validity of this argument: Firstly, following a recent report by the German "Ombudsman für die Wissenschaft" (Czesnick & Rixen, this volume), only about 10 % of all accusations occur anonymously. Secondly, independent of anonymity, accusations need to be substantiated, and the substance of evidence submitted to the committee tasked with resolving the incidence can be assessed without knowing the identity of the accuser. Lastly, since the identity of the potential offender also remains confidential during the resolution process, the opportunity to defend themselves and resolve the incident without damage to their reputation remains intact and is independent from potential anonymity of the accuser.

### 3.2 Recommendations for prevention, reporting, and resolution

Taking an advisory role in difficult situations between ECRs and supervisors has shown us that ECRs do not trust the current reporting mechanisms and are in fact too scared to give valuable feedback about their experiences in the academic system. This is because both the feedback culture and ways to gracefully deal with incidents of power abuse are currently insufficient in academia (e.g., Else, 2018). At worst, ECRs might pass on their own experiences of bad and abusive supervision when it is their turn to supervise and lead a research group – the vicious cycle of bad scientific leadership and dependencies. This situation is damaging for the academic system as a whole, because productivity and scientific progress suffer, and bright young minds are alienated from research.

Therefore, we propose a variety of measures that have shown to not only resolve, but prevent power abuse and break the vicious cycle. The recommendations are based on a position paper on Power Abuse and Conflict Resolution published by N<sup>2</sup> (N<sup>2</sup>, 2019). We also note cases in which these recommendations have already been addressed or implemented by German research institutions.

<sup>5</sup>An ombudsperson in this context is a person appointed by an individual research organisation or research funding body, as defined by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2019).



First of all, power differentials can be navigated and power abuse prevented if DRs and their supervisors sign a supervision agreement which clearly outlines roles, expectations, and procedures from both sides. Such an agreement is already in place in many institutes and universities, often formulated in collaboration with PhD representatives<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, PhD supervision should be shared with more than one person, ideally in the form of a Thesis Advisory Committee, which includes external, independent advisers who consult on the progress of the dissertation project. In 2019, between 55 and 70 % of German non-university research organisations already had a supervision agreement and/or a Thesis Advisory Committee<sup>7</sup> (Beadle et al., 2020; Olsthoorn et al., 2020; Peukert et al., 2020). At the same time, regarding thesis assessment, there should be a clear division between main supervisor and main referee, at the very least including a majority of external reviewers in the thesis evaluation and marking process (also see HRK, 2012).

An additional measure, which is promising to mitigate the instances of power differentials outlined above, is to introduce leadership training for any senior researcher taking on supervision and/or leadership responsibility. Recent incidents of power abuse (Boychev, 2020; Müller, 2018; Thiel, 2018) have shown that scientific excellence does not equal good leadership skills. Therefore, any researcher who is responsible for the supervision of DRs should take part in mandatory and regular leadership training in order to learn how best to guide the DRs through the existing power differentials in reputation, knowledge and employment status. The Human Resources Department of the MPS has started offering such training courses, some of which are mandatory. The Leibniz leadership lecture programme and the Helmholtz Leadership Academy pursue similar goals.

Whenever abusive behaviour does occur, the victim should have the option to report the incident confidentially with the expectation of a timely investigation. Therefore, it is important that reporting structures are clearly outlined by the institution and regularly communicated to its members. A multi-staged investigation should be led by an independent committee, must be clearly documented, and well communicated to all parties involved. For example, in 2018, the MPS assigned a law firm as an external, anonymous reporting office and established an Internal Investigations Committee in 2019. In 2020, the WGL implemented an External Advice Centre for Conflict Guidance and Prevention and the HGF established a central ombudsperson. In all instances, when the victim deems it necessary, their anonymity must be protected. The trust in

---

<sup>6</sup>For example, the Leibniz PhD Network recently formulated a supervision agreement and proposed it to the WGL institutes, some of which have implemented it already.

<sup>7</sup>Similarly, in the NACAPS survey, 75 % of participants reported having a supervision agreement (Briedis et al., 2018).

these mechanisms is key to establishing them as a feedback structure for researchers from all levels.

In addition to such institutional formal changes, PhD representatives at institutes and universities or larger networks such as N<sup>2</sup> are important low-threshold contact points for DRs and should continue to be supported throughout.

In this work, we argued that abuse of power is systematically embedded in the power differentials that exist in academia, in Germany and beyond. These can have devastating effects on the DR's productivity, their scientific ambition, and their mental health. We have described that the main reason for not reporting abusive behaviour is lack of trust in the system and fear of repercussions. We have outlined suitable measures to reduce power differentials and handle incidents of power abuse and argue that anonymity from the presumed offender lies at the heart of such measures. While the complex academic system is hard to change, we believe that implementation of these measures is a step towards dealing with conflicts in a more satisfactory manner. We hope that all academic stakeholders recognise the importance of and the need to change the organisational culture surrounding abusive behaviour in academia. Only through collaboration on all levels of the academic hierarchy can we create a system that maintains a feedback culture, offers a healthy and sustainable working environment for its members, and fosters excellent research.

## References

- Balaban, C. (2018). Mobility as homelessness: The uprooted lives of early career researchers. *Learning and Teaching, 11*, 30–50.
- Beadle, B., Do, S., El Youssoufi, D., Felder, D., Gorenflos López, J., Jahn, A., ... Welten, M. (2020). *Being a Doctoral Researcher in the Leibniz Association: 2019 Leibniz PhD Network Survey Report*. Leibniz PhD Network.
- Boytchev, H. (2020). Neue Vorwürfe von Mobbing und Willkür in der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft. *BuzzFeed*. <https://www.buzzfeed.de/recherchen/neue-vorwuerfe-von-mobbing-und-willkuer-in-der-max-planck-gesellschaft-90138071.html>; [last accessed on 09/03/2021]
- Briedis, K., Lietz, A., Ruß, U., Schwabe, U., Weber, A., Birkelbach, R., & Hoffstätter, U. (2018). *NACAPS 2018*. Daten- und Methodenbericht zur National Academics Panel Study 2018 (1. Befragungswelle – Promovierende). DZHW.
- Buchhorn, E., & Freisinger, G. M. (2020). Mission Rufmord: Mobbing gegen Führungskräfte. *manager magazin*. <https://www.manager-magazin.de/politik/mission-rufmord-mobbing-gegen-fuehrungskraefte-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000169070116> [last accessed on 09/03/2021]

Czesnick, H., & Rixen, S. (2021). Sind anonyme Hinweise auf wissenschaftliches Fehlverhalten ein Problem? Eine Einschätzung aus Sicht des "Ombudsman für die Wissenschaft." *Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung* 42, 1/2021, 140–150.

Dahl, R. A. (1957). The concept of power. *Behavioral Science*, 2, 201–215.

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. (2019). *Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice. Code of Conduct*. DFG.

Ebitsch, S. (2017). Der lange Weg zum Dr.: Wie läuft eine Promotion ab? *Süddeutsche.de*. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bildung/von-der-anmeldung-bis-zum-dr-wie-laeuft-eine-promotion-ab-1.1374764> [last accessed on 09/03/2021]

Else, H. (2018). Does science have a bullying problem? *Nature*, 563, 616–618.

Gibson, C., Medeiros, K. E., Giorgini, V., Mecca, J. T., Devenport, L. D., Connelly, S., & Mumford, M. D. (2014). A Qualitative Analysis of Power Differentials in Ethical Situations in Academia. *Ethics & Behavior*, 24, 311–325.

Hochschulrektorenkonferenz (HRK). (2012). *Zur Qualitätssicherung in Promotionsverfahren. Empfehlung des Präsidiums der HRK an die promotionsberechtigten Hochschulen*. HRK.

Hodes, C., & Mennicke, A. (2019). Is It Conflict or Abuse? A Practice Note for Furthering Differential Assessment and Response. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47, 176–184.

Jacobi, F., Höfler, M., Strehle, J., Mack, S., Gerschler, A., Scholl, L., ... Wittchen, H.-U. (2014). Psychische Störungen in der Allgemeinbevölkerung: Studie zur Gesundheit Erwachsener in Deutschland und ihr Zusatzmodul Psychische Gesundheit (DEGS1-MH). *Der Nervenarzt*, 85, 77–87.

Jaksztat, S., Preßler, N., & Briedis, K. (2012). *Promotions- und Arbeitsbedingungen Promovierender im Vergleich*. HIS: Forum Hochschule.

Konsortium Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs. (2017). *Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs (BuWiN) 2017: Statistische Daten und Forschungsbefunde zu Promovierenden und Promovierten in Deutschland*. W. Bertelsmann Verlag.

Laine, H. (2017). Afraid of Scooping – Case Study on Researcher Strategies against Fear of Scooping in the Context of Open Science. *Data Science Journal*, 16, 29.

Laudel, G., & Bielick, J. (2019). How do field-specific research practices affect mobility decisions of early career researchers? *Research Policy*, 48, 103800.

Malecki, C. K., Demaray, M. K., Coyle, S., Geosling, R., Rueger, S. Y., & Becker, L. D. (2015). Frequency, Power Differential, and Intentionality and the Relationship to Anxiety, Depression, and Self-Esteem for Victims of Bullying. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 44, 115–131.

Maske, U. E., BATTERY, A. K., Beesdo-Baum, K., Riedel-Heller, S., Hapke, U., & Busch, M. A. (2016). Prevalence and correlates of DSM-IV-TR major depressive disorder, self-reported diagnosed depression and current depressive symptoms among adults in Germany. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 190, 167–177.

Müller, P. (2018). Sie ist die bekannteste Empathie-Forscherin der Welt – Und soll jahrelang Mitarbeiter gemobbt haben. *BuzzFeed*. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/de/pascalemueller/mobbing-max-planck-leipzig> [last accessed on 09/03/2021]

N<sup>2</sup>. (2019). *Power abuse and conflict resolution*. N<sup>2</sup> Position Paper. [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/n2/publications-and-press/N2\\_PowerAbuseStatement\\_English](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/n2/publications-and-press/N2_PowerAbuseStatement_English) [last accessed on 25/03/2021]

National Centre Against Bullying. (2020). *Definition Of Bullying*. <https://www.ncab.org.au/bullying-advice/bullying-for-parents/definition-of-bullying/> [last accessed on 09/03/2021]

Olsthoorn, L. H. M., Heckmann, L. A., Filippi, A., Vieira, R. M., Varanasi, R. S., Lasser, J., ... Schulte-Sasse, R. (2020). *Max Planck Phdnet Survey 2019 Report*. Max Planck PhdNet.

Peukert, K., Jacobi, L., Geuer, J., Paredes Cisneros, I., Löffler, M., Lienig, T., ... Nagel, M. (2020). *Survey report 2019*. Helmholtz Juniors.

Scaffidi, A. K., & Berman, J. E. (2011). A positive postdoctoral experience is related to quality supervision and career mentoring, collaborations, networking and a nurturing research environment. *Higher Education*, *62*, 685.

Schraudner, M., Striebing, C., & Hochfeld, K. (2019). *Work culture and work atmosphere in the Max Planck Society*. Fraunhofer Center for Responsible Research and Innovation.

Smith, V. (1998). The Fractured World of the Temporary Worker: Power, Participation, and Fragmentation in the Contemporary Workplace\*. *Social Problems*, *45*, 411–430.

Thiel, T. (2018). Belästigung am Arbeitsplatz: Willkür, Angst, zerstörte Träume. *FAZ.NET*. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/belaestigung-am-arbeitsplatz-willkuer-angst-zerstoerte-traeume-15683036.html> [last accessed on 09/03/2021]

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2017). *Abuse of power or authority*. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/ethics-office/ethics-guidance/abuse-of-power-or-authority/> [last accessed on 09/03/2021]

Vredenburg, D., & Brender, Y. (1998). The Hierarchical Abuse of Power in Work Organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *17*, 1337–1347.

Wellcome Trust. (2020). *What Researchers Think About the Culture They Work In*. Wellcome Trust.

Wolff, H.-G., & Moser, K. (2009). Effects of networking on career success: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *94*, 196–206.

Woolston, C. (2019). PhDs: The tortuous truth. *Nature*, *575*, 403–406.

Wu, C. M., Regler, B., Bäuerle, F. K., Vögele, M., Einhorn, L., Elizarova, S., ... Lasser, J. (2019). Perceptions of publication pressure in the Max Planck Society. *Nature Human Behavior*, *3*, 1029–1030.

**Information about the authors:**

Dr Jana Lasser  
Complexity Science Hub Vienna  
Josefstädter Straße 39  
1080 Vienna, Austria  
Medical University of Vienna  
Center for Medical Statistics, Informatics and Intelligent Systems  
Spittelgasse 23  
1090 Vienna, Austria

Lindsey Bultema  
Max Planck Institute for the Structure and Dynamics of Matter  
Luruper Chaussee 149  
22761 Hamburg, Germany

Anja Jahn  
Leibniz Institut für Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Europa  
Reichsstraße 4–6  
04109 Leipzig, Germany

Michaela Löffler  
Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ  
Permoserstr. 15  
04318 Leipzig, Germany

Vera Minneker  
Institut für Molekulare Biologie gGmbH  
Ackermannweg 4  
55128 Mainz, Germany

Cornelia van Scherpenberg  
Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences  
Stephanstr. 1a  
04103 Leipzig, Germany

Dr Jana Lasser is a PostDoc at the Complexity Science Hub Vienna and the Medical University Vienna. She works on modelling complex social systems with a focus on the connection between social & societal dynamics and mental & physical health. She is member of the N<sup>2</sup> advisory board and was spokesperson of the Max Planck PhDnet in 2018.

Lindsey Bultema is a doctoral researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Structure and Dynamics of Matter, Hamburg. She is focusing on in-liquid electron imaging techniques. She is the 2020 spokesperson of the Max Planck PhDnet and current advisory board member of N<sup>2</sup>.

Anja Jahn is a doctoral researcher at the Leibniz Institute for History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig. In research she focuses on multilingualism in the literatures of East Central Europe. She is member of the N<sup>2</sup> Advisory board and was spokesperson of the Leibniz PhD Network and N<sup>2</sup> Board member from September 2019 to October 2020.

Michaela Löffler is researching hydrogen isotope effects at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research UFZ in Leipzig. She was spokesperson for the doctoral representation Helmholtz Juniors and thus N<sup>2</sup> Board member in 2020.

Vera Minneker is a doctoral researcher and coordinator of the “International PhD Programme on Gene Regulation, Epigenetics and Genome Stability” (IPP) at the Institute for Molecular Biology gGmbH Mainz. She was an elected doctoral researcher representative of the IPP and board member of N<sup>2</sup> from April 2019 to August 2020. She studies the formation of oncogenic chromosome translocations using high-throughput imaging and automated image analysis.

Cornelia van Scherpenberg is a doctoral researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Science where she researches the neural basis of language production processes. She is a member of the N<sup>2</sup> advisory board and was deputy spokesperson of the Max Planck PhDnet and N<sup>2</sup> board member in 2020.