

Recognising power – taking responsibility: For respectful cooperation at the UFZ

Why is this topic relevant?

An appreciative and trusting working environment is the basis for excellent, creative research. Abuse of power can destroy trust, cause psychological stress and hinder scientific progress. It contradicts the ethical principles of science and the guidelines of good scientific practice.

What do we mean by abuse of power?

Abuse of power, i.e. the exploitation of hierarchical or professional positions to control, disadvantage or harm others, can take various forms – often subtle, sometimes overt. It usually occurs in the context of asymmetrical power and dependency relationships, such as in hierarchical structures or care situations. Examples include:

- Unfair workload, unjustified behaviour, or inappropriate instructions
- Discrimination, exclusion, or disparagement
- Appropriation or concealment of others' scientific achievements
- Bullying, bossing (systematic disparagement by superiors), boundary violations, or sexualised violence ¹

Mental health and time pressure

Mental stress and work overload can encourage abuse of power on several levels – both for those affected and for those responsible.

A healthy work organisation that clearly defines responsibilities and roles, ensures realistic expectations and allows for sufficient recovery time and clear boundaries between work and rest periods. This not only protects mental health, but also reduces the risk of conflicts, misconduct and structural abuse of power.

What can we all do? Recommendations for respectful behaviour

Communication and cooperation

- Respectful interaction, fairness and openness within the team
- Mindful communication on an equal footing
- Constructive error and feedback culture

Schutz und Prävention

- Low-barrier access to [internal conflict resolution points](#) and digital reporting options (e.g. [anonymous contact form](#) for the equal opportunities officer)
- Ensuring confidentiality and protection from reprisals for those who report incidents
- Promoting an open and inclusive research environment

Structures and Processes

- Clear, transparent regulations regarding tasks, responsibilities and expectations
- Comprehensible processes for career decisions and assessments
- Multi-perspective support (e.g. tandem models, various committees)

Handling cases of suspected abuse of power

If you feel that boundaries are being crossed, whether with you or others, trust your instincts:

- Document incidents with dates and specific details. Seek out confidential contacts (e.g. managers, internal conflict resolution points, external support organisations).
- Support those affected and promote a culture of responsibility.
- Even if you are unsure, seek advice early on – no one should have to deal with doubts alone.

Contact: Equal Opportunities Officer | www.ufz.de/equality
WAY TO UFZ Project | www.ufz.de/wayto

¹ https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844023067439?utm_source=chatgpt.com

References:

„Leitlinien zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis“ der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Online: <https://zenodo.org/records/14281892>

DFG: „Gute wissenschaftliche Praxis“, online: <https://www.dfg.de/de/grundlagen-themen/grundlagen-und-prinzipien-der-foerderung/gwp>.

Berlin Science Survey 2024 – Wie begünstigen Arbeitskulturen Machtmissbrauch?

Source: Berlin Science Survey (2024), Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Robert K. Merton Center for Science and Technology Studies

URL: <https://www.berlinsciencesurvey.de/en/bua-news-03-25>

Summary: The study shows that 23.6% of the scientists surveyed have experienced abuse of power at least once. Abuse of power correlates strongly with the nature of the work culture. In cooperative work environments with low competitive pressure, abuse of power and discrimination are significantly less common than in highly competitive cultures. Particularly vulnerable groups such as gender-diverse individuals, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and people with physical or mental illnesses report abuse of power more frequently. The results underscore the importance of positive, cooperative work cultures in preventing abuse of power.

Gewin, Virginia (2025): „Can Germany rein in its academic bullying problem?“ – Nature Careers

Source: Virginia Gewin, Nature Careers, 8. Mai 2025

URL: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-01207-8>

Summary: The article highlights structural problems of abuse of power in German universities. It reports how hierarchical power among professors leads to intimidation, exploitation and silence. Only a few victims report cases of sexual harassment for fear of reprisals. The report highlights the role of ombudsman offices and shows the increase in inquiries to integrity offices in recent years as a sign of growing visibility but also stress.

Pinto, Ana et al. (2023): „Ethics and Power Abuse in Academia: A Systematic Review“ – Journal of Business Ethics

Source: Pinto, A., et al. (2023). Ethics and Power Abuse in Academia: A Systematic Review. Journal of Business Ethics.

PDF: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10551-023-05405-0.pdf>

Summary: The systematic literature review analyses abuse of power in academic institutions from an ethical perspective. It identifies causes such as hierarchies, unequal power relations and a lack of control mechanisms. Recommendations are also formulated for institute management on prevention and intervention, e.g. through transparent processes, ombudsman offices and training on ethical behaviour.

Hagemann, Christine & Schlüter, Markus (2024): „Preventing Power Abuse in Research Cultures“ – ScienceDirect

Source: Hagemann, C., Schlüter, M. (2024). Preventing Power Abuse in Research Cultures. Journal of Research Integrity, Elsevier.

URL: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844023067439>

Summary: This article examines factors influencing and preventive measures against abuse of power in research environments. It emphasises the importance of clear work structures, supervision concepts and an open error culture. The research highlights that institutional measures and awareness training play a central role in raising awareness and providing protection.

Schmidt, Lara & Weber, Timo (2025): „Diversity, Equity and Inclusion as Shields Against Power Abuse“ – Governance Journal, MDPI

Source: Schmidt, L., Weber, T. (2025). Diversity, Equity and Inclusion as Shields Against Power Abuse. Governance, MDPI, 14(9), 233.

URL: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-3387/14/9/233>

Summary: The study argues that a strong commitment to DEI makes institutions more resistant to abuse of power. Inclusivity and equal opportunities reduce systemic inequalities and create safe spaces. Practical examples show how diversity-oriented guidelines and programmes in research organisations effectively counteract abuse of power.

Study „Normative Acceptance of Power Abuse“, Universität Mannheim et al. (2025)

Hoeft, L., Mill, W., Vostroknutov, A. (2025): *Normative Acceptance of Power Abuse*. Kyklos, Online First. DOI: 10.1111/kykl.12474

Summary: The study uses experimental methods to show that abuse of power is not only justified by those in power, but that those affected also begin to perceive this behaviour as socially acceptable over time. This explains why corrupt or abusive institutions can often exist for a long time, as victims 'adapt' to such conditions and accept them as the norm.

Umfrageergebnisse Machtmissbrauch VHD (2025)

Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands (VHD) (2025): *Leitbild „Machtmissbrauch in der Geschichtswissenschaft verhindern“*, inklusive anonymer Umfrage mit über 570 Teilnehmenden.

Summary: The survey documents various forms of abuse of power (such as discrimination, sexual violence, excessive workloads and appropriation of scientific achievements) in the academic environment and serves as a basis for concrete recommendations for action to prevent such abuse and promote a respectful scientific culture. Official website of the VHD; e.g.

<https://www.historikerverband.de>

Netzwerk gegen Machtmissbrauch in der Wissenschaft e.V. (2025)

Network Against Abuse of Power in Science e.V. (2025): Counselling and prevention organisation.

Summary: The network offers independent counselling for those affected and campaigns for greater awareness and prevention of abuse of power. It describes abuse of power as a common but still taboo problem that is closely linked to relationships of dependency and a culture of fear.

Empfehlungen gegen Machtmissbrauch an Hochschulen (2025)

Various publications by university associations and institutions (2025): Guidelines based on good scientific practice.

Summary: These guidelines recommend binding rules of conduct, transparent supervision and decision-making processes, and straightforward and secure complaint procedures to effectively prevent abuse of power in academic supervision and career

advancement. <https://www.hrk.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/pressemitteilung/meldung/hrk-massnahmen-gegen-machtmissbrauch-an-hochschulen-weiterentwickeln-5017/>