

Show notes

Doing Science Differently

#1 – power abuse in institutions [57:25]

Guest: Prof. Dr. med. Sabine Oertelt-Prigione

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In this episode of *Doing Science Differently*, we will dive into the complex topic of power abuse and sexual harassment in Academia. Today, there is an increasing amount of evidence that workplace bullying and harassment are more widespread and systemic than usually officially acknowledged or discussed. This very often leads to poor mental health and lower work motivation. Fortunately, ‘taboo topics’ such as the abuse of power are being more and more called out and actively tackled. In the first episode of our podcast, you will also learn more about initiatives which are put in place to address these issues in Berlin-based research institutions and get to know Sabine, our guest and inspiring activist behind these reforms.

In this episode, you will hear more about:

[01:29] Sabine’s ‘definition’ of power abuse

“[...] the abuse is kind of the misuse of these established structures in a way that limits the freedom of action of people who are at the lower end of the hierarchy [...].”

[03:15] how harassment and power abuse are widespread issues but still hard to measure

“[...] harassment is not so much of a surprise anymore. It was a ‘taboo topic’ years ago. I would say with the #MeToo movement and everything we’ve heard about academia in the last few years, nobody really believes that it is single cases happening anymore.”

[06:39] structures that allow or even foster harassment and abuse

“[...] there’s all these different mechanisms. So, the structural ones on the contracts we provide, the incentives that the system of academia as a whole, uh, provides, and kind of wants people to abide and live by. And then, of course, there’s personality, and that’s the other aspect that we cannot change.”

[11:52] the intellectual ownership concept

“[...] because you also have a system, especially in Germany, which is very much catered towards individuals who are kind of the owner of all knowledge in that field.”

[15:06] how structural power abuse can lead to poor mental health

“(...) if you work in unhealthy organizations and teams, and you see a certain behavior overall being normalized, it’s also a lot of this leads to personal questioning.”

[27:23] the motivation behind leading large-scale reform efforts

“So, I’m trying to empower enough people to pick this up in order to make this transparent, and in order to build really a critical mass of people who can start talking about this, who have the words to describe what’s going on, who learn to think in a different way, to work together in order to change that.”

[32:24] examples of reform efforts at Berlin-based research institutions

“Then the numbers came out. Um, the leadership was not very pleased, but at the same time, we had developed all these potential intervention measures that could be implemented right away.”

[40:51] how to deal with frustrations when activists or bottom-up approaches don’t go as far as they could

“And I think what you learn being an activist in all of these fields is, you know, you come in with your 150% that you want, and if you get 70%, you’re actually happy and that’s the way it works. It’s just the way incremental change works [...].”

[47:00] how to get involved

“And the simple fact of talking about it and actually reflecting, giving people mirroring experiences in that they’re not alone, and that there are others in that situation. And there is the opportunity to organize. I think that’s essential in building more of this critical mass because the organizations themselves don’t change [...].”

Guest biography

This episode’s invited guest is Prof. Dr. med **Sabine Oertelt-Prigione**. After successfully finishing her medical studies in Milan (Italy), Sabine worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of California in Davis (USA) investigating the biological basis of sex differences in autoimmunity. She then obtained her doctorate and habilitation at Charité-Universitätsmedizin Berlin (Germany), while training as an organizational consultant and developing an interest in the prevention of power abuse and sexual harassment. Sabine is working as a professor of sex and gender sensitive medicine at the Radboud University in Nijmegen (Netherlands) since 2017 and at the University of Bielefeld (Germany) since 2021. On top of this, she is coaching researchers, and advising start-ups as well as organizations, such as the Charité or the Max Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine in Berlin.

List of resources

[05:13] Jenner et al., Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Academic Medicine. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2019 Jan 1;179(1):108-111. doi: 10.1001/jamainternmed.2018.4859

[22:26] The queen bee phenomenon is used to describe the behavior of women in leadership positions who distance themselves from other women in their work environment. These work environments are mostly dominated by men. You can learn more about the phenomenon here:

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30597-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30597-3/fulltext)

[33:54] The Hans-Böckler-Stiftung (Hans Böckler Foundation) “deals with Co-determination, research linked to the world of work and the support of students on behalf of the DGB, the Confederation of German Trade Unions”. If you want to find out more about the foundation, please visit: <https://www.boeckler.de/en/index.htm>

[~37:57] Sabine is referring to a large-scale reform effort that happened in 2019 at the Max Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine (referred to as MDC), a research institute in Berlin. After a sexual harassment scandal, the directors were asked to react and set up an anti-harassment task force formed by employees to shape their institute’s policies and culture. Many volunteered to participate, from scientists to administrators, Germans and Internationals. The diverse and bottom-up approach was remarkable. Together with Sabine, who moderated this reform effort, the volunteers developed a Code of Conduct, defined de-escalation measures in case of harassment, and composed a list of policies including training of all leaders at the MDC. The Board of Directors is slowly adopting the measures. To learn more about the task force, Sabine’s role in this reform effort at MDC, and about its Code of Conduct, go to:

<https://www.mdc-berlin.de/news/press/there-no-place-sexual-harassment-mdc>

<https://www.mdc-berlin.de/news/news/haressment-doesnt-happen-vacuum>

<https://www.mdc-berlin.de/news/news/abuse-power-and-harassment-are-no-longer-taboo-topics>

<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/63129867/guideline-against-discrimination-bullying-and-harassment> (Code of conduct)

[44:23] Sabine briefly mentions Frank Miedema, who is vice-rector of research and chair of the Utrecht University Open Science Program since 2019. He is also one of the initiators of Science in Transition (<https://scienceintransition.nl/en>), who believe that science is in need of reform.


[45:00] Sabine talks about a process called ‘recognition and reward’. If you want to find out more about the program, visit: <https://recognitionrewards.nl/>

[48:14] Athena SWAN (Scientific Women’s Academic Network) or the Athena SWAN Charter was established in 2005 and is a framework which supports gender equality in higher education and research globally. Please visit <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter> for more information.

You can find out more about the 'Doing Science Differently' Podcast-team under <https://www.bihealth.org/en/quest/projects/spokes/think-tank-members>.

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