Transcript

Hello, and welcome to *Doing Science Differently*, a podcast that explores issues in the culture and practice of research. We interview experts working on making the world of science a better place, and learn how their pragmatic approaches can change practice in the lab or clinic.

Today, Eric Danner will be talking to Sabine Oertelt-Prigione about power abuse in academia.

Sabine
Yeah, I'm Sabine Oertelt-Prigione. And I'm now a professor of sex and gender sensitive medicine in the Radboud University in the Netherlands and at Bielefeld University in Germany. And I started out studying medicine, so I'm a physician by training. I trained in internal medicine and in public health. I am also an organizational consultant and, yeah, I work as a researcher, mostly. And on the side, I advise organizations, I coach young researchers, I advise start-ups, so I do some side projects for free.

Eric
Cool. And so today we're going to be speaking about power abuse and harassment. And so, I just thought it would be useful to start by hearing how you define this and how you see this.

Sabine
Well, um, power abuse is really a huge box if you want to, if you want to open it. I mean, how do we do? We define that – and where do we start? I think the whole point with power and abuse, that's really the two elements. So, you, um, if we if we think about workplaces, because I think that's what we're mostly addressing here, um, it has to do on the one hand side with, uh, demonstrations of power, which are usually hierarchies or structures are predefined in organizations. And then, of course, 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 or actually imposes certain conduct and certain actions on them that they wouldn't be otherwise taking, um, and that in a way or the other, they kind of feel they have to do, they have to comply with because otherwise they couldn't advance professionally. So that's the way and this is already a bit catered towards academia. But in trying to frame it in, and the field we're working in, and this is really what it is. It's the system we build and how this system is used improperly by certain people in the system and how others kind of have to follow, um, expectations that they wouldn't normally want to follow.

Eric
And how, do you have any concepts of how widespread power abuses or other forms of harassment in research and academia is? And perhaps it's more anecdotal from just having been in that conversation a lot or maybe there's data that you can point to?

Sabine

Well, I think with power abuse it's extremely difficult to measure, simply because the question is – where do you start? And, you know, when does a hierarchical relationship, based on a certain degree of power imbalance, become abusive? Um, I mean, there are clear examples and those are, if you want, the easier ones to measure. But I would say the concept of hierarchies interwoven in many, many organizations, and academia is just one of them, and defining when this use becomes abuse is extremely difficult. So, it's difficult, I think, to actually quantify that numerically. It's probably a bit easier, although even in other forms of discrimination and harassment you do have grey zones, but it's easier if you pick a single example. And that was also one of the reasons why, among others, we started working on sexual harassment, because in a way we had clearer definitions to start with, and it was somehow one of the many aspects of power abuse, but we could frame it in a way that allowed us to measure it. So, we could actually ask people – did you experience this and this and that? And then, the numbers were rampant and I can talk about a few organizations, but in general I would say that, um, well 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. I mean, some people like to believe that or like to frame it like that, but we know it is really something that is part of power abuse in academia and other organizations.

Eric
And for the part that you were able to get more numbers on, such as sexual harassment, can you speak briefly about some of them?

Sabine
We did a study at Charité in Berlin several years ago, which we also published, so people can read it. It was published in JAMA Internal Medicine two years ago. And we actually asked the physicians at Charité what they had experienced in their professional careers. So it was, the question was really about, uh, within your professional career, so not just at Charité – in general, in all the years you've worked, have you experienced any of these things? And um, instead of asking people – have you experienced sexual harassment? Which is difficult as a question in itself, because a lot of times survivors question if what they experienced was actually sexual harassment, we gave people a list of 10 possibilities starting with, um well, just verbal remarks going into more active advances, still verbal, and then moving into the physical part. And we just ask people – have you experienced any of these things? And then, in a second layer of questioning, we asked them if they experienced this is harassing or as threatening. And when it came to all of these actions, about 70% of women and men working, uh, in the organization had experienced any of these in their professional lifetime.

Eric
Can you note any part of that, of the structures that you see that kind of allow for or possibly even foster the ability to harass and/or abuse?

Sabine

Well, I would say the entire academic environment up to tenure is built on mutual dependency, and that, of course, is a tricky position to be in. So there's several structural aspects to it. So the one thing is how the learning process works. So you know, you work with more experienced people, which *per se* is not a problem. Um, but of course, that means you come in and there's knowledge differences and a certain knowledge hierarchy. And a lot of times, um, the focus is just on the content of the research you're doing, and not so much on the fact that people might not be knowledgeable in that field, but they bring in other experiences who could actually be valued. So, this whole concept that, um, students especially, or you know young PhDs or postdocs, come in with the breadth of experience that might not be related to the topic they are starting to work on but can bring additional, uh, knowledge and experience, which could be valuable, is really not a point here. So, there is this knowledge asymmetry connected to the fact that we're just focusing many times on the one subject that's being investigated in this lab or in this group. So that's one point. So, you have the knowledge asymmetry, then in most cases, you have fixed-term contracts, so people know that they're paid for, if they're lucky, three or four years, if they're unlucky, six months. Um, which of course, puts adults in a situation where you might not know what's gonna happen in six months or a year or two years and it makes planning of your life of course difficult. Um, simply because you don't really know what's going to happen. And you are, of course, at the mercy of the benevolence of whoever is going to extend your contract.

Um, and a lot of times there is a lack of transparency of which kind of decisions lead to that. So, it might well be that the money is finished, but if you know, if the leadership discusses that with you and you try to find solution and there's transparency, it's a completely different degree of agency, than if there is no clarity on whether there is funds, whether these are available, whether you will be the beneficiary of these funds and so forth. So, there is this dependency in the system, baked into the fact that there are a lot of fixed-term contracts. So that is the other thing. And then, of course, the question is, what kind of rewards are set in the system? So, what makes you *'successful'*, um, in the research environment? And, of course, the rewards we're setting, and the things we're prized for, um, of course, people try in one way or another to comply to a mechanism that will lead to those rewards. And so, depending on what is valued in organizations and depending on how conservative they are, for example, in the use of metrics, people will potentially, uh, make use of everything they can in order to protect themselves. So, there's also a certain degree of vulnerability, if you want, in the leadership and you know up to a certain moment of their career, then it becomes less. But there's also a certain degree of vulnerability, which means that, um, even a leader of a group or, you know, a lab or so forth might be in a relatively vulnerable position because their future is also not completely clear. Especially in organizations with high turnover, where people, you know, get contracts for five to seven or nine years, and it's not clear if they will be tenured, even if they're successful.

So, you also have these incentives on the leaders themselves to potentially exert certain type of pressure to kind of save themselves. Uh, and so I think 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. We can work on all the structural aspects, but it's also true that within a certain system, with certain incentives, you will see certain personalities thrive more than others, and certain behaviors be rewarded more than others.

Eric

One thing that I have noticed during my research world was that if you have an issue during your PhD, you pretty much are trapped for 4 to 6 years with a single person. And if you decide that they are treating, mistreating you or there's some sort of unethical treatment, the question is either – do you bear it, deal with it or do you just quit your entire career? *W*hich is usually, if you're going to leave your PhD, that's often the end of the game and this is, it feels like to me one very tangible example that I've seen with people, where I'm like the system is really set up to force you into situations, to deal in situations that just feel really disturbing. Or maybe *'*outside people*'* would consider very unethical.

Sabine

Well, because also, there's this ownership of ideas, right? So that's the other thing that does not allow PhD students, in a way, to transition, for example, into another lab or so forth, 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. If you want to put it like that. And so you're working with that person. Uh, and you know, you probably love the work you're doing, and it becomes really a conundrum of – do I give up the work I love or do I just kind of, you know, shut down and pull through? *A*nd that's what it becomes. It becomes kind of a breaking point in that way, because there's not a lot of alternatives and that's also part of the system if you want. If you have a research system that builds much more on networks, where you actually have several people working on topics that integrate, built upon each other, and you know where you have an environment where there are several people doing this, also for the junior staff to potentially move from one place to the other, uh, is easier, although then you have to see okay, who's willing to work in these networks, which already tells you something about the people you're probably working with. So actually, if you work with somebody who likes to work in these kind of networks, you might actually enjoy working there much more because the whole attitude of how work should be done is different. But yeah, it has a lot to do with the ownership of ideas and how important that is for us in academia. I mean, the idea that you know you're doing your big paper and somebody scoops you is drama. And the fact alone that so much is connected to that, also tells you how fragile the position sometimes is. And if you're working for somebody who wants to publish that, of course they will not let you go somewhere else and share your ideas. So it is, it is really a tricky situation which is also built on this intellectual ownership concept, which is inbred in science, if you want.

Eric

I've been consistently shocked by how many people end up in therapy. How many people end up depressed. How many people end up with physical ailments, uh, and are just completely, are completely wrecked. But at the same time, they then go to work and even people that are their colleagues or people that are one lab over, have no idea. And it's only in these very private moments do you see this poor person being tortured. Uh, and I guess we've also spoken about, uh, some of the structures that allow for it, but I'm also sometimes surprised. Is it just that we need the #MeToo movement in this or why? What are the barriers that you see for this open discussion? And maybe it's and we just kind of discuss them? Or do you have any other ideas on why we don't at least have a bit more of a direct acknowledgement to others in a lab over?

Sabine

Well, I think what we were discussing are probably more of the meta level structural aspects. And what, of course, comes in is the personal aspect and the personal experience you're having, and also kind of the expectations that you set on yourself or maybe that you're surrounding set on you. So, you know, working in academia is still seen as a kind of privileged job, you know, and then that you kind of made it into academia and you're pursuing a PhD or you're working as a professor or whatever. There is still a lot of, you know, societal, uh, you know, position attached to this. And then, there's a lot of respect for this job and also a lot of, I would say, idealization of what it actually means to work in academia. So, I think that comes in, in one way or another thinking that, okay, I kind of made it until here and now I have to keep going and prove myself. That's one point. And, um, the other aspect is – what do you see around yourself? So I think that also makes it tricky, because 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. Um, and if you don't have the strongest personality, what you will think is that it's your fault, or you know that's the way it is, and I need to adapt to this. And then that's where a lot of this questioning comes from. Also, am I being too sensitive? You know – why am I not doing it? Everybody else is making it. And actually to step out and, um, to reflect on this critically and find it, you know, and see that it is not acceptable and to also see which structures are at play here, it costs enormous amounts of energy. It actually is, it will take up a lot of your time to self-reflect on the situation where you're in, to kind of take yourself out of that, to come to the point where you realize what's structurally at play while still seeing that you, in your position, might not be able to change that and still have to pull through. So, I think it requires an enormous amount of personal work to actually go through this and kind of have the opportunity to reflect on this and process it for yourself. And I think there's two things here. So, on the one hand side, it's not that it didn't happen before, it's just that mental health overall was kind of a 'taboo topic', even in academia, even in the biomedical field. That and if you work with clinicians, my impression is that it is even stronger as a taboo than it is for researchers at that moment in time. Also, because if you work as a clinician, you always have the feeling like if I don't work – what happens to my team, who's gonna jump in for me? And there's patients' lives depending on my activity. So, there is an additional burden that comes on top of that. But overall, there is definitely this aspect of pressure you put on yourself. Um, and as I said, it's now, it's actually possible to at least address it partially, because it's become a societal discussion that we're having about this. So, we're seeing more numbers, and we're seeing more people speaking up, but it is still, it is still difficult.

Eric

That's really interesting, because I think, I had always imagined that, what I have sometimes seen people try and discuss these things. And then there's sometimes, because there's not a lot of solutions, what they end up having is a boss who has been harassing them, who is now angry that they are damaging the boss's reputation by letting other people know about it. And so, then there's retribution. And so, I had always thought that it's because of the structural possibility of retribution. But it's also a very interesting point to me that it's also that if there is structurally almost nothing to be done, really processing it, thinking about it, speaking about it, and then feeling completely trapped, maybe just heightens the suffering. Then if you kind of shove it down and kind of buy into the lie that there's nothing really happening. I actually hadn't considered that before.

Sabine

Um well, I, if you look at my CV you see that I worked in several different countries and so I worked in several different systems and experienced different ways of you know, of how academia works or can be working. And for me personally, it was quite interesting and very surprising when I moved to Berlin, and I was with my early thirties. So, I worked in Italy and the US before, and then, while I was in Berlin, I was studying a bit in London and so, seeing this system, I experienced it as extremely hierarchical, uh, and quite surprising. So, one of the points when I first came there, I introduced myself by my first name and people were just looking at me like, you know – who are you? Why are you not pointing out your title? *So* that, it was a funny anecdote. So not everything is like that, but it just kind of visualized a different culture and a different type of interaction. And the way I see the German research system, uh, in my opinion is very conservative compared to a lot of other European research systems. And what it has, I think, and that's what exacerbates some of these aspects, you have a quite insular historical structure with, as I said, people who are the bearer of all knowledge, which brings enormous power to it and of course, these people also spend their lives fending off adversaries.

And the other thing is, well the German research system has a lot of money compared to a lot of other European countries. So, you have certain power structures, and you have money attached to it, which is a huge incentive, of course. Um, and so I think that makes for a system which is, well, we can say it's very resilient. But what resilient means is also a lot of times adverse to change. So, you know, we've done this for 300 years, we're very successful. Why should we be changing anything just because a few people tell us that we shouldn't be doing this? And so, in a way, my experience was that this system also breeds, uh, in the generations that are being trained a certain type of attitude, and I'm fortunately, I think there's change happening. And in my generation, I do see a lot of, you know, younger researchers who are trying to change the way these practices are, especially because maybe they don't like them themselves.

But you do see how this kind of structure breeds a certain type of behavior. And especially if you then look at women and minorities, who have to come up in the system, which is very patriarchal, let's just put it like this. Um, they adapt to this kind of system and potentially become even more than the, you know, 'established players' in the system. Just to be recognized. Just to be accepted, and in order to even be allowed to have a career in this kind of system. So, um, a lot of times we have this talk about the 'Queen Bee phenomenon'. You know, women coming to power and then mistreating other women, which, *per se*, is definitely something. But the question is – why does this happen overall? And it is a structural aspect that's behind it. So, if you work in a misogynist organization, in order to be accepted to even have an opportunity to have a career, you might end up being more misogynist than your male colleagues going like – look I'm just like you, I can actually do it more, now give me a position, now recognize my work. So that's kind of the mechanism that happens here is. I show you that I can do it a bit more, and could you now please finally acknowledge my abilities? And this is the mechanism that's at play.

Eric

It's interesting to hear you say that, because everything you're saying is so abstract. But at the same time, it completely matches things that I have seen, especially moving from, I did many

years of research in California, well many years, and I'm only 33, 34. But I did about six years of research in California, and I was completely shocked, when I got here, to two or three things. One was that there was a feeling I always got, that even the undergrads and the professor, on some level, were all at the same, they're all on the same team. And there's different knowledge, but it was a lot energetically, more even, uh, to some degree, we're all people and we're all on the same team and we all bring different things. And then, I got to Germany, definitely without realizing it, pissed off some people by treating the postdocs and me as a new PhD student that we were somehow, somehow equals as people. And that was a thing that took me years to learn. And then also being shocked by the immense amount of resources here, that these, there is not an awareness or a discussion in the US by how much money is at these institutes. It is just. And once this secret gets out, there's going to be so many more people from the US trying to get here because it's wild. Um, and then, uh yeah, so anyway, it's really amazing to hear you say that.

Sabine

Also, I try to put it at a level where people, I mean a lot of this is built on my own experiences in these different system and, you know, and in my own personal experience with these systems and then, of course, what all the work I was talking about before the enormous amount of energy you have to put into the work on yourself to take that to an abstract level. I didn't get to this point overnight, but the way I'm trying to tell you all of this, is that people can recognize themselves in the mechanisms and possibly get a bit of insight into what's actually going on when you are, because the most difficult part is when you are in the situation, you don't see the end of it and you have a really difficult time in taking yourself out of it and kind of looking at yourself from outside. I think that's the most, most difficult point because, it's, you're so emotionally involved on so many levels, that the most difficult thing, that most people cannot simply not do in that situation, is take yourself out and kind of look at it from outside, and which will show you a lot of the dynamics that are going on. And so, in describing it in somewhat more abstract terms, I hope that people will see some of the dynamics that are playing out, that they are exposed to, and that there's actually a bigger system to this. So, it's not you imagining something, or you experience something strange. It is really much bigger forces at play in a system that's built in a certain way. And so, I think a lot of people can relate to this in many different ways, in many different experiences. Because if I tell you single experiences, people might actually think – well that doesn't apply to me, I don't find myself in that. But if you see that it is really a structural question, I hope that people can see how they fit into this and what's actually going on in their experience.

Eric

Thank you. I would like to now shift from kind of this framework of the system to more about your work, and because you've been part of a number of institutional level reforms trying to address sexual harassment and also power abuse. And I wanted to just start, more personally, of all the people, as we just noted, there is quite some people that either have experienced this or are interested in this. But most people don't end up leading large scale reforms. So what is it that got you involved in this?

Sabine

Frustration. So, I would say I worked in an extremely dysfunctional institution for a while. And to see what I was saying before about the work you need to do on yourself to not become like the dysfunctional leadership you're experiencing and where you see all the consequences of requires a lot of energy. And so I was, I was just thinking that I, how much energy I had to spend into, you know, dissecting what was going on and why that happened. And I mean, I was very fortunate to do training as an organizational consultant, because in doing that, you first of all understand organization. But you also have to work a lot on yourself, kind of reflect on what it means to be a team member or leader, or what kind of leader you want to be. And how do you deal with conflicts and all of these kind of things, which I think are essential to becoming at least a sort of insightful leader yourself. You'll still make mistakes, but at least you can try to understand that. And it helped me enormously in understanding all the dynamics that were ongoing, while still being in a situation where I was not in a position to be able to change them. So that I found extremely frustrating. And, um, I'd say, you know, injustices, probably injustice is what drives me. So, it made me mad as a kid, and it still makes me mad. Uh, and so being trapped in such a situation for a while in order to get my academic credentials, uh, it just, I found it incredibly frustrating. And so, I realized, I said, well, that I'm not one of the people who will necessarily write about it. I want to change things and I want to make sure you know, there's several pledges you can make. One are that, if I'm in that situation, I definitely will make sure that the people that work with me will never feel like that. And if I have to make any decisions, I'll probably think about what I have seen and do exactly the opposite, which might not always be the best solution, but I'll definitely do that. And then the other things is, I can try to model certain behaviors and certain activities within my work group but that's like a small insular thing and people would have to know about that, and I don't have time to kind of show case that. And the other thing is working at the structural level. 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. So that's kind of what motivated me. It's really the activistic aspect of it. And of course, being sort of an activist in academia is different than being an activist for Greenpeace, for example. So of course, the way you're working is still…

Eric
How so?

Sabine
Um, while you're working in a very structured system and you have to, I think what you have to balance is, um, well, let's put it like this: Your authority comes somehow from your academic position and your academic credentials, which you need. On the other hand, to have the power to actually influence the processes, so in a way, um, me being visible and me doing the work is also necessary. So that I can help others to actually get to the point, to get these processes going. Because if I were, first of all, if I were outside of academia, my influence, because my credibility would be so much less, because what a lot of times what happens when it comes to trainings against discrimination, harassment, somebody from outside is kind of hired in, and everybody, who was sitting in the room thinks like – yeah, but they have no clue what's really happening. And the ability to actually have gone through an academic career and know all of the things that are going on, I don't need to say much, and you know what I'm talking about. What you were saying before, I'm talking in very abstract terms, but everybody knows what I

mean. And kind of this feeling is essential also to connect with the people in the room and kind of try to get them to have these 'aha experiences'. On the one hand side, aha, I can do something. And on the other hand, aha, maybe that's not the ideal way that I'm doing things. Right, you want to have different kind of epiphanies with different people.

Eric
So, it's not just the fact that people are sitting in their ivory tower and not listening. It's more that if you are part of the system, you actually deeply understand this system and you understand what the actual problems are. And then you can speak to people in a way that they can actually see the problems more versus because the system in some ways this is quite different than the rest of society's structures. And it doesn't always translate easily. Can you speak a bit more about, after you got a bit motivated, the actual work that you did and the reforms and the work at these institutions?

Sabine
So, we, with the sexual harassment, where we actually started out at Charité in 2013. So then we got some money, some seed money in 2014, and what we did was, um, it was a moment at the time where we really didn't have data. And that's the most tricky part is – how do you make clear to your board that you need an intervention, if you have no numbers? So, there's, also let's put it like this, there's also strategy in not having numbers. Um, so what we set out to do, and what I said from the beginning was, we need to, you know, get the data. But I am not satisfied with having data because this project needs to focus on change from the start. Because if we only have data than people, you know data lands somewhere, in somebody's desk or, you know, somebody's drawer and that's it. So, we designed a very far- reaching project. We didn't tell them at the time. So, when we got to see money, it was actually written in very small terms. So, it was much less scary than it turned out to be. Um, but we designed a very broad project, in which we collected data on prevalence, which is the quantitative part that we needed. And at the same time, we did interviews, um, with a lot of employees and trying to find out what could work in terms of prevention, what they want for, in order to develop actually an informed, um, list really of interventions that are needed in the organization. And we worked together with the Hans Böckler Stiftung, which has an archive of organizational policies against all kind of things, for all kinds of things. And they also have a collection of policies against sexual harassment and discrimination. So, what we did is, we also evaluated those that they had, there were about 120, and try to come up with a, let's say, a best practice example. And we also developed, like, a legal framework, if you want. I mean, it's still, uh, it's a company pledge because it is not a legal document itself, but it is a step in a way, and the process in itself is important.

And so we did all of these things together. And so what happened? 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. So, you can basically go to your board and go like – these are the numbers, they look really bad, but this is what we can do. And that's kind of the way you want to get in, because if you get in and say these are the numbers, we need to do something, they will do it their way, or which might mean not doing anything, or which might mean somebody they think knows everything will design a policy. And a lot of times that's completely disconnected to what people are actually

experiencing in real life. So, what we did there, we came in with what we needed, um, and that was helpful. And we actually managed, we were lucky in that respect, to have the board on our side. So even when we did the questionnaires, um, we actually had the leadership. And I must really credit them to that because it was a risky situation at the time when we started, they told me and saying like – well, we're going to be the only hospital in Germany bringing up these numbers, so people will look at us and go like 'this is so bad'. And I told them, well, yeah, but you want to be the most, you know, the biggest and the best hospital in Germany. Then you have this responsibility, and they actually agree on that. So, I must say that there we really had to support in order to do that, and they even supported us to a degree that the medical director actually wrote a letter to all the directors of the different Center asking them to please encourage people working there to participate. So, there was really this kind of support, and I think, that was essential in showing that it was safe. It was all anonymous. But still, you know, people might not be answering anyway because they feel scared or threatened. So, there was actually this feeling of it is accepted in the organization and we had a very good return. Um, and so that helped us. And then, since they were kind of on board, some of the measures were adopted right away. Um, and then what we did was some other measures seem too far out, and in big organizations a lot of times you just have to wait because there will be new incidents. And when new incidents happen, the organization needs to do something for PR.

And as bad as that sounds, you need to be extremely opportunistic in that moment. And you know, every time something happens, you just come and say – oh, but we still have measure C, D, E, G. Don't you want to do one of those? And so over time, with our catalogue of measures, we actually managed to implement more and more of them. Um, which, of course, doesn't change the cultural law. I'm not even at the organization anymore, and the culture is another big question, but it allowed us over time to do that. So that was, that was the steppingstone. And that was, yeah, almost 10 years ago now. And then from that other people heard about it because we ended up publishing it. Um, and so people started reaching out to me, and from that on people actually called me in. And I do all kinds of different advisory role. So, some people will just call me to give a talk and maybe talk to a few influential people in the organization to get their own process going. So that's what happens sometimes. So, I just come in once and, you know, kind of tell them what the situation of the data is like, what the phenomenon is, try to help them and get started, and don't ever see them again.

Um, and in other organizations, I actually accompanied them through the whole process, which is what we did at the MDC. Um, where they reached out and they were very open in setting out this call on the Internet. You know – we want to do a task force to come up with some kind of new process and a code of conduct. Who wants to participate? And then they got 50 answers and didn't know what to do. And then they reached out to me and asked me if I wanted to actually help with the process. And I was super enthusiastic because what the opportunity was here, was to defy the notion that you need a group of a few people in some chamber next to the board of directors who will draft a policy, and that you can do that across the organization with representation of all professional groups in a big group and still be extremely successful. So that, I think, was really the merit of this process, because it is unique, I think, in the participatory level we achieved, and which has to do with a lot of different factors. I mean the enthusiasm of everybody involved, but also the support structure that was there. The fact that the organizational board was on board. The fact that, you know, the topic just became something that could bring people together. So, I think it was a peculiar, uh, situation.

And I really hope that this can be an example. But it's also, I would say, kind of peculiar for the German system to be able to do it this way.

Eric
Yeah, so I have a follow up to that, which is, I wasn't really involved in this, but I was at the MDC at this time. And one of the things that I heard was that the people involved were actually quite impressed and satisfied with the process. But then when it actually came to the legal department, when everything was done and there were reforms and ideas to be done, part of it got, uh, halted at the legal department. Not because they were against it but because they said actually punishing people for these sorts of things doesn't have a legal basis and then would be considered somehow illegal discrimination. And so, this kind of transitions to a question I have, which is, uh, sometimes reform at the institute level can just be slower, painful because not all institutes are particularly interested in this. And also most major policy and funding is done at the EU or federal level. So what, do you have any ideas or thoughts about what should or could be done at a more federal level, both, either to enforce large scale reform or to provide a legal framework to allow for large scale reform?

Sabine
Well, I would say there's several layers to it. So, I think that, if we start with the organization's first, before going to the other levels, I think for organizations, um, it is, if you do it properly, it can be a PR boost if you want. So, you shouldn't do it because of that but if you have done something like this in a very constructive process and of course what you were mentioning the legal aspect to it, you possibly will not get 100%. 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 and, um, it's very difficult to get absolute revolution and sometimes the question is – is that actually what you want, or do you want to build on the structures that exist and change them from within? So, what that means is also a bit of frustration sometimes because you will not get 150% and that's well, you kind of know from the start. But if you start from zero and you end up at 70% it's already a huge, huge step and then you will just keep going because that's the process. Next time you work on this, you will start at those 70% and again make a leap forward and again, not everything will be accepted. But you start at a much higher level. So, I think that's just the way change in organizations works. It's not an 'on switch' from one day to the next. So, I think that's an important thing to keep in mind.

I think for organizations, it needs to become more of, you know, kind of a badge of honor to actually do that kind of. I think, as an employer, it's an important thing to show and the problem again, this is in the direction of incentives that we give – uh, why do people come to the MDC? Probably because the PI has very high impact factors and PhD students hope to publish in *Science*. So that might be the incentive. The incentive for a lot of PhD students applying might not necessarily be – oh, this is a great work culture where we have relatively flat hierarchies and there's a great support system, if anything goes wrong and we have measures in place. This is probably not what attracts people. And that's also a question of, you know, what are the incentives and how do we deal with these overall in the long run. And which, of course, means that you need to think about hire structure. So, um, if your organization is part of a bigger network, so, for example, Helmholtz or Fraunhofer or whatever, Leibniz, so of course

you would have to work at the societal level in order to kind of set these incentives. And in the end, it's really a question about changing the discourse in academia, which in one way or another is happening a little bit. I mean, the whole, all the discussions were having in academia at the moment, um, they all go in the direction of need of reform. And a lot of people have embraced, you know, we need open access and then we need transparency and all that, which is great, but it's safe. So, I, you know, and also the personalities you see in the field sometimes, you know, I was successful in something, I played by the rules before, and now I just see myself as this big spokesperson. Um, but I played by the rules myself as well. And do you make that transparent? I mean, there's people who make that transparent. So, Frank Miedema here in the Netherlands will say it played by the rules before, and then I realized it didn't work, and I try to change. Not everybody does it. But anyway, so one point is, you know, do we need to change the data structure and all of that. And the other thing is, do we actually change our practices in everyday life. So, do we change the way we work, uh, on the work floor every day? And how do we include that and how? Which kind of rewards and incentives do we need for that? I must say that here in the Netherlands, we're actually in a very interesting process here because we have an entire process called 'recognize and reward', so 'erkennen – waarderen', and the whole discussion is about – how do we diversify profiles and science and what we recognize as ability and talent? And how do we make sure that we have systems that actually, um, show the whole idea is, show the complexity, and entirety of talent within individuals? It's going to be a huge process. It's not going to be perfect from the start. But the fact that there is even a discussion about recognizing, for example, leadership abilities as one of the most important characteristics when you are being a PI. So, there's your professional competence and your knowledge and you know, being a good teacher and so forth. But being a good leader, and what does that mean is also part of that. And that's really where we need to shift this discussion because there's so much power attached to leadership at a certain point, that so much can go wrong, as we said initially, because there's these huge dependencies, and so it really needs to be a much broader discourse overall.

Eric
Um, it's so that we're close to time. Uh, I have one, well, I had a couple more questions, so if we ever get you back on or if we have a follow up, I just love this conversation, and I would love to chat about many things, but I think to kind of close this out. I feel like the awareness, while you say it's growing, is in general, underdeveloped and still requires more work. And I was wondering if there are any networks or groups that you find to be doing really great work. Or specifically if people are listening to this and they are curious about structures or organizations that are kind of affecting change, that they can either reach out to or look to as a model, or if people are trying to get involved, any structures you think.

Sabine
Well I, what I would say is organize locally, even if you, if you don't have structures in place already, but find your peers and your allies, wherever you're working. I would say the one thing that will get you through, is finding allies where you're working. And they don't have to be in your lab, they don't even have to be in your department, but they have to be somewhere in your organization. And you will always find like-minded people, but I think that's essential. It was essential for me, over the years to kind of have different perspectives of people working there and just, you know, have that kind of support that also tells you – no, it's not you, it's

them – and kind of have this reflection from outside. So that would be my first and foremost, you know, advice to everybody.

And I am actually seeing a lot of local groups building, and I see a lot of organization going on in many universities, really from the bottom, from the student situation, up. So that I think is great. And when we look at systems that that are interesting to look at, I think the whole process in the Netherlands, as I said there again, 'erkennen – waarderen', is interesting on a large structural level. I think Athena SWAN as a system in place in the UK is very interesting. So, Athena SWAN was developed for gender equity. But in reality, it addresses all kinds, I mean, that the actions that the universities proposed address all kinds of discrimination, and actually are now a lot of times targeted towards diversity in general. So, it's not just about gender anymore.

And I think that having a system in place which forces you to continually progress, based on, as I was saying before, you start out at zero and you get to 70, and then from 70, you start again, because if you stay at 70, you don't get your award anymore, really forces organizations to also, in a way, compete in a positive way with each other. So, I think in that respect, Athena SWAN has done really, really great work. And they are really exemplary in how this can be done at the structural level.

I would say then, you know, social media gives us opportunities we didn't have in the past. And a lot of, especially when it comes to hearing stories or sharing stories, a lot of times social media is quite powerful in that, and also in organizing campaigns, and also finding like-minded people that might be hidden somewhere in the cyberspace. So, I think those are also ways to reach out. And there are several initiatives. They also have their problems sometimes. I mean, we've seen the implosion of #MeToo STEM, we've seen the implosion of a few other organizations, because there were single people were just being people and some people simply misbehave. That's all I mean. I'm talking a lot about systemic aspects. But there's also single people who might, you know, just not be correct towards a certain organization. But overall, I think that shouldn't deter the fact that are a few examples that didn't go so well, shouldn't deter from the fact that it there is more organization going on. 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, you cannot expect an organization that is not challenged, will not see the problem and will not change because change is work and change is energy put into this that doesn't go elsewhere and is money potentially put into that. And we'll question practices and nobody likes to be questioned. Not people, not organizations, because organizations are made out of people. So there needs to be a certain degree on pressure in order to show where the trigger points are. And in order to actually get things going.

Eric
Okay, that's I, yes, that's quite actually inspiring, and also really reflects the little pieces that I've seen, that have been successful, also from what I understand at the MDC it was not a the leadership inspired to just uproot everything.

Sabine

It usually isn't. No, you cannot really expect that because either you have a visionary leader that is hired in, which rarely happens because the visionary leader needs change, and most organizations don't want to change. So usually the leadership, you know, the authority is built on the *status quo,* so of course, they're not gonna change. I mean, that's, that's just logic, that's just self-preservation. So, in a way, the leadership is there, because they grew in this organization, and they reflect what the organization wants to be. So, there's only two ways, either you hire in people from outside, which will have a really hard time, because first of all, they need to understand the organization, and then see if they can change it. Or you need pressure from inside the organization, which usually doesn't come from those holding the power. So of course, that you know, it's, it is, you know, frustrating if you want, but it is self-preservation, if you look at it, if you were in that position. It makes sense, it's, from a logical perspective, it makes sense. That doesn't mean that it shouldn't be challenged, and that that's not our job to challenge it. But that's just a reality.

Eric

It's a really nice framework, because I think at the MDC, my experience and through that process was that the people at the top are actually really great people. And I assume that there's a lot of, instead of like demonizing all these people at the top for not changing it, that's a much nicer framework to realize, okay, they are probably not evil or bad, but possibly even really great people. They just for XY and Z reasons, they're not the ones that are in the right position, to some degree, to exert that change. And that, possibly they can allow for it or support it, but it almost needs to, by your logic, needs to come from somewhere underneath.

Sabine

And I think there's, there's one last point to this, because a lot of times people say it's lonely at the top right, and then you wonder what that means. And you assume that, okay, you rise to the top, there's not a lot of people like you. But what it really means also, at least from what I see in consulting with leadership, and you know, the more you grow and the more you become senior yourself, if you lose touch with the organization, with the people who work at, in a hierarchy, at lower levels in the hierarchy, it's simply lonely, because you have no clue what's going on. So, the most power and people don't realize that, and I think it's a really important thing to know, the most power within these organizations lies in the flux of information. And if you want to actually, really, you know, kind of cut out a certain type of leadership, if you stop providing them with information, there is that disconnect, which eventually will lead to some kind of 'rocking of the boat'. So, in a way, these fluxes of information and the fact that you need to be connected in order to be a good leader, and not to be that lonely at the top, you need to be connected to what's going on, you need to put yourself at the table with people. There's a lot of stories of successful organizations, where the CEO just goes on the work floor once a week and goes into their, you know, manufacturing belt and has a look at what they're doing. That's what you need to do. And that's the same thing in academia, you need to sit there with people and not just at a meeting where you're the boss, and everybody tells you what they have been doing with their mice or cells. But it is really where you, you're still immersed in what's going on. And people who work with you feel safe enough to actually tell you where the problems are. And they don't feel, you know, somewhat that they could be punished for bringing up problems, but they have the ability to

talk to you, that's when it doesn't get lonely at the top, which is an incentive for leadership. And it's also what empowers people who are not at the top to actually participate actively. Because otherwise what you do is, you just lose people along the way, because as I said, they shut down and just try to get through and possibly leave the organization as soon as they can. Which also doesn't make much sense for an organization because you lose all your talent.

Eric
Okay, well, we'll leave it there. And I want to thank you for the, all of this. And I hope at some point we can continue this conversation because I think there's still quite a lot of interesting things in your head that we didn't get a chance to hear.

Sabine
Thank you very much for the conversation, for the invitation. I hope this will grow the podcast, I wish you a lot of luck and success, and, you know, a lot of listeners, and I'm more than happy to continue the conversation at a later time.

Doing Science Differently was produced by the SPOKES Think Tank, a group of early career researchers funded by a subproject of the Wellcome Trust Translational Partnership at the QUEST Center at Berlin Institute of Health.

This episode was hosted by Eric Danner and produced by Marta Oliveira. Credits by me, Christine Knoll. We would also like to thank Constance Holman, Friederike Kohrs, and Tracey Weissgerber for their help running the SPOKES program.

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