

OR-36

Abuse of Power as Breach of Good Research Practice – Towards an Integration of Power Abusive Behaviors in Research Integrity Guidelines

Katharina Beier¹, Sophia May², Britta Anstötz³, Valerie Boda⁴, Maria Melms⁵, Carmen Schüler⁶

¹Ombuds Office for Good Research Practice, University of Göttingen, Germany

²Ombuds Committee for Research Integrity in Germany, Germany

³Coordination Office for Research Integrity, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

⁴Office for Good Scientific Practice and Ethical Principles, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany

⁵Office of Ombudspersons, Leipzig University, Germany

⁶Ombuds Office, University of Hamburg, Germany

In recent years, awareness of power abuse in academia has been rising in Germany — largely driven by high-profile cases that received extensive media attention, but also by reports. In this context, universities and other research institutions are criticised: institutional structures are seen as enabling or encouraging abusive behavior, while the investigation and sanctioning of power abuse is often perceived as insufficient, slow and lacking transparency. In addition, it is not clear which bodies are — or should be — responsible for investigating potential cases of abuse of power in the academic sphere.

Germany's national Code of Conduct "Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice" (German Research Foundation (DFG) 2019) to which virtually all research institutions are committed, emphasises the need to prevent abuse of power and the exploitation of dependency relationships through appropriate organizational measures. This suggests that abuse of power can also constitute a breach of the rules of Good Research Practice (GRP).

However, the DFG's Code of Conduct does not specify which power-abusive behaviors qualify as research misconduct. Given our capacity as advisors on GRP, we are regularly confronted with allegations of power abusive behaviors and therefore argue for the development of a GRP-specific definition. This would help objectify and assess research-related power abuse and provide ombudspersons in academia with a clearer basis for addressing potential cases — while also delineating the boundaries of their responsibilities.

To this end, we first propose a working definition of power abuse tailored to the academic context. Second, we outline systematic considerations — derived from existing GRP regulations — on how abuse of power might be conceptualized as a violation of the rules of GRP.

While our focus is on the German context, we seek to engage with stakeholders across Europe to explore whether and, if so, how power abuse might be addressed and (where appropriate) sanctioned as a form of research misconduct within other national GRP frameworks.

Acknowledgement: These considerations were developed as part of a working group of the Network of Research Integrity Offices in Germany.