

Tuesday late afternoon session Track B, Tuesday, Sep 23 2025, 16:00-17:45

Location: Seminar 1

Session: Power Dynamics

Chair: Jasna Podreka

OR-30

Power Abuse Trips in Research: What Fuels Them and How to Prevent Them

Irena Ograjenšek

University of Ljubljana, School of Economics and Business, and Faculty of Computer and Information Science, Slovenia

Given the empirical evidence presented and discussed in recent years, academia (in particular its research branch) can be, without any doubt, pronounced a fertile ground for different types of power abuse. Most of it seems to be carried out consciously and intentionally, with very different yet clearly identifiable goals. These are typically personal and range from achievement of direct personal gain to sheer spite or even harm brought upon disliked or disfavored individuals.

Although typically personal, most of these power abuse trips seem to be well hidden behind the veil of institutional agendas. In other words: individuals in a position of formal or informal power manage to find ways to embed their personal goals into institutional agendas with a complete disregard for any form of institutional loss (financial and non-financial). This is possible because many academic governance procedures seem to exist primarily in order to disperse personal responsibility and obscure personal liability.

In this paper we take a closer look at different types of power that fuel the power abuse trips. Three of them deserve special attention: reward power, coercive power, and gossip power. Reward power is demonstrated by an individual's capacity for provision of favorable assignments, financial compensations, promotions, media appearances, and similar to achieve individuals' compliance. Coercive power is defined as the use of confrontations, verbal threats, and punitive actions to force individuals' compliance. Finally, gossip power (universally recognized as one of the most destructive forces in any organization) is wielded by spreading toxic rumors with the goal of ruthlessly killing individuals' reputation; the social death of the target individuals being an anticipated and wished-for consequence.

After reviewing different types of power that fuel the power abuse trips, we turn our attention to ways and means of power abuse trips prevention. We identify several platforms (e.g. legislative, social, health, or media) and numerous hierarchical levels (ranging from supranational, national, industrial, institutional, departmental, to individual) which could be and have been used in the power abuse prevention processes with varying rates of success. We also point out ways and means in which these very platforms and hierarchical levels could and have been misused as tools for further victimization of victims.

Throughout the paper we build on a set of research vignettes based on real-life first-hand experiences of researchers with the goal of facilitating an open discussion of this difficult and very sensitive topic.