

Wednesday late afternoon session Track A, Wednesday, Sep 24 2025, 14:00-15:30

Location: Main Hall

Session: Power Dynamics

Chair: Dejan Jontes

OR-33

Authorship conflicts between supervisors and PhD students – Findings from a recent survey in Germany

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National codes of conduct to foster good research practice not only include criteria for authorship, but also clarify that so-called honorary authorship (being listed as author without fulfilling the respective criteria) constitutes a breach of research integrity. In Germany, this holds true for the "Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice" of the German Research Foundation [1] which have to be implemented by German research performing institutions as a requirement for receiving funding. Notably, these guidelines emphasize that merely holding a leadership or supervisory position does not constitute a sufficient criterion per se for claiming authorship on emerging publications.

Nevertheless honorary authorships are routinely the subject of enquiries handed in at ombuds offices in Germany as our recent survey amongst local ombudspersons conducted by the discussion hub project at the Ombuds Committee for Research Integrity in Germany shows [2]. More specifically, the survey underlines that frequently PhD students indicate that their supervisors seem to violate authorship guidelines and to use their position of power to claim unjustified authorship. Furthermore, conflicts between supervisors and PhD students are not limited to the question of honorary authorship, but also concern other contentious topics such as allocating the appropriate authorship position or handling changes of the byline in a fair manner. Moreover, as our survey reveals, many PhD students refrain from mediation, only asking for counselling, when they reach out to ombudspersons.

In my talk, I will present these results of our survey in more detail discussing also other factors making mediation in conflicts between PhD students and their supervisors for ombudspersons more challenging. In this context, I will address different dependencies PhD students are potentially subject to and which might facilitate power abuse by supervisors, in turn affecting the work of ombudspersons addressing such cases. By doing so, I not only intend to point out frequent problems and characteristics in such conflicts, but also aim at moving the debate forward on how to handle and prevent those in order to foster research integrity.

[1] German Research Foundation (2019)

[2] Katrin Frisch and Nele Reeg, Zenodo (2024)