Prejudices and procedures for dealing with anonymous allegations: What research organisations can do right and what they can do wrong

Reimer, Maike; Welpe, Isabell M.

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IHF Bayerisches Staatsinstitut für
Hochschulforschung und Hochschulplanung

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Maike Reimer & Isabell M. Welpe

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Maike Reimer[1], Isabell M. Welpe[2]

Abstract

In recent years, female senior scientists at universities and research institutions have repeatedly been accused, completely anonymously, of "leadership misconduct" or "abuse of power". In leadership positions, women are in the minority, in general as well as academic contexts. Their behaviour has been shown to be evaluated differently by superiors, colleagues, employees, and students than that of men in similar positions due to unconscious bias. In this paper, we argue that as a result of unconscious bias, female senior scientists are at increased risk of becoming involved in conflictual processes as a result of complaints because there is a mismatch between gender expectations and professional roles.[1] This is especially true for organisations that have inadequate structures, processes, and procedures for dealing with complaints and conflict. Based on this, we provide recommendations for the development of procedures for dealing with conflicts at universities and research organisations that constitute viable and better alternatives to anonymous complaints.

Keywords: leadership, unconscious bias, research organizations, governance, female scientists

[1] *Bavarian State Institute for Higher Education Research and Planning, Munich, Germany*
[2] *Technical University Munich, Germany; Bavarian State Institute for Higher Education Research and Planning, Munich, Germany*

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[1] Inadequate structures, processes and procedures increase the likelihood for all members of an organisation to be exposed to the effects of unconscious bias in conflicts, although the areas and issues in which perceptions and judgements are biased towards members of particular social and demographic groups vary. In organisations where similar behaviour is perceived and judged unequally, stereotypical judgements and condemnations are practically the "symptom" and bad processes and procedures the underlying "disease".

1. Introduction

In recent years, media reports repeatedly covered incidents of high-ranking scientists at universities and research institutions that were accused of "leadership misconduct"[2] or "abuse of power" (e.g. Aeschlimann et al., 2019b; Köppel, 2019). Allegations were often made by whistle-blowers who were consistently permitted to remain completely anonymous. The management responsible for such procedures initiated investigations based on these allegations and in some cases imposed sanctions under civil service law. These processes were then "scandalised" by the media and only came to a (temporary) end after negative consequences for the accused (ranging from loss of reputation and research resources to dismissal). In many cases, this resulted in great economical and scientific damage, as well as harm to the well-being of those involved (Egner & Uhlenwinkel 2021). There is increasing evidence that these procedures have not always adhered to the basic principles of objectivity, legal hearing, legal counsel, the naming of place and time of the alleged "misconduct", transparency, and fairness (Rixen, 2018; Schauer, 2019). Consequently, many of the affected institutions and academic organisations are now seeking to improve their internal procedures and processes for reporting and handling misconduct and conflicts of all kind (e.g. Baldi-Unser et al, 2019; Max Planck PhDnet, 2018) and change them according to the requirements of rule-of-law and legal security.

Observers and commentators point out that several of the high-profile cases involved *female* professors, directors or research group leaders, even though women are a minority in both academia and the institutions in question (e.g. Aeschlimann et al., 2019a; Buchhorn & Freisinger, 2020; Nock, 2019; Rubner, 2020). Unfortunately, there is no reliable data on how often "leadership misconduct" occurs or is reported overall, nor on the gender of the accused. The lack of data can be attributed to there being no conclusive definition of what constitutes "leadership misconduct" as well as the subsequent proceedings often taking place in secret and are usually neither anonymously nor openly recorded. Only spectacular cases that receive intensive media coverage reach the public, and in order to be suitable for broad public resonance, the cases must have certain characteristics (Czesnick & Rixen, 2021). It can be assumed that there is a high number of unreported cases of actual management misconduct, and of (anonymous) reports that go unnoticed by everyone except the few persons involved. But while a sound empirical foundation cannot yet be established, there is strong evidence from economic and psychological research that women, especially at higher hierarchical levels, face particular challenges because of stereotypical perceptions and judgments of their behaviour that are also relevant in this context (e.g. Ambrasat & Heger, 2020; Björkqvist et al., 1994; Brescoll, 2016). These unconscious biases make it more likely that identical (leadership) behaviour by male and female leaders might be seen as leadership *mis*conduct when exhibited by women - or in other words, as *ab*use of power rather than simply the use of power.

In this article, we will therefore:

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[2] This is distinct from scientific misconduct (e.g. plagiarism, data manipulation and failure to name co-authors or conflicts of interest) and sexual misconduct (e.g. harassment, assault, or rape).

a. discuss possible reasons for the unusually high number of women prominently accused of leadership misconduct, arguing that one relevant factor is unconscious bias (chapter 2),

b. incorporate completely anonymous accusations into a framework of "academic mobbing" (Westhues, 2004) or "institutional mobbing" (chapter 3),

c. outline the strategies used in organizational contexts to deal with unconscious bias and assess their effectiveness (chapter 4), and

d. on that basis, give recommendations for the design of processes and procedures for dealing with conflicts at universities and research organisations (chapter 5).

2. Possible reasons for the very high percentage of women in academic organisations, who are publicly accused of leadership misconduct

We consider three possible explanations for the strikingly high proportion of women in academic leadership positions who are publicly accused of leadership misconduct:

a) *Possibility 1:* **It is simply coincidence.** *Male and female leaders in academia behave in a comparable manner and their behaviour is perceived in the same way, but it just so happens that more incidents in which women have been accused of leadership misconduct have become public knowledge.* As such incidents are not systematically documented or known in sufficient numbers, this is difficult to prove or disprove. However, the Max Planck Society (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, MPG) offers the possibility for a theoretical approach, as three high-profile cases involving female defendants have come to light between 2018 and 2020,[3] but no comparable case involving a man, while less than one-sixth of directorial positions at the MPG are held by women. One can imagine this situation as an abstract thought experiment in the form of the classical urn model: 250 light and 50 dark balls represent the (roughly 300) male and female MPG directors, respectively, and each known case corresponds to a blind (random) draw (without replacement). In this mode, the probability of three dark balls being drawn randomly in succession would be very low (in the range of 0.004).

Against this backdrop, we find it plausible that in the chain of events from (mis)behaviour to conspicuous media reception, factors come into play that are not random but systematically put women at higher risk of being accused, sanctioned and reported on. In the following, we focus specifically on two possible systematic factors: The actual behaviour of women in (academic) leadership positions and how it is perceived by other actors.

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[3] They were Professor Hélène Ruiz Fabri (Max Planck Institute for International, European and Regulatory Procedural Law, Luxembourg; first publicly known 2020); Dr. Guinevere Kauffmann (Max- Planck Institute for Astrophysics, Garching; first disclosure 2018); Dr. Tania Singer (Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences Leipzig, first disclosure 2018, see Rubner, 2020; Buchhorn & Freisinger, 2020).

b) *Possibility 2:* **Women actually lead worse than men.** *Women may actually more often engage in behaviour that can be defined as leadership misconduct.* Previous empirical findings from leadership research do not point in this direction: Mai et al. (2017) demonstrated an overall high similarity of male and female leaders regarding key personality traits, while both genders differed from the population average in a similar way. In a study on the selection processes of top managers, Kunzmann et al. (2018) showed that male and female candidates did not score differently in performance tests and that their aptitude on standardised assessment procedures was similar on average. Also, in a meta-analysis on leadership effectiveness, Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) found that female leaders were rated slightly better overall by their employees and co-workers than male leaders.

c) *Possibility 3:* **Unconscious bias and perceptual stereotypes cause similar behaviour to be judged and evaluated unequally.** *Men and women behave comparably, but for women this is more likely to lead to (anonymous) reporting and an escalating process of administrative (and media) response.* This is supported by extensive research spanning more than three decades on perceptions of female leaders which suggests that, in a variety of professional contexts (including academia), supervisors, peers, and collaborators evaluate and respond differently to women compared to men for identical behaviour (including behaviour that is typical and meaningful for leaders), often judging women more negatively (e.g. Abel, 2019; Eagly et al., 1992; MacNell et al., 2015; Mai et al., 2017). The reason behind this is that many characteristics and behaviours associated with competent leadership (e.g. practicality, aggressive advocacy of organisational interests, assertiveness, expression of criticism, or low-level emotionality) contradict stereotypical role expectations for women but are congruent with role expectations for men (Eckes, 2002; Fiske et al., 2002). Therefore, women face negative reactions to assertive or instrumental behaviour that is appropriate for the leadership role, while this is not perceived negatively in men. Conversely, female bosses are not viewed more positively when they are conciliatory, benevolent, caring, or emotional (e.g. Abel, 2019; Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Brescoll, 2016; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008), as this is expected from them as women anyway. At the same time, they risk being perceived as incompetent or weak leaders if they exhibit caring and social behaviours, as this does not match the role expectations of leaders. In summary, female executives often stand out negatively either in their role as a leader or in their role as a woman, while men can serve both roles at the same time without contradiction and can even score additional points with well-dosed caring and social behaviours. To make matters worse, disagreeable behaviour (such as expression of dissatisfaction and anger) tend to be attributed to external circumstances in male leaders ("He's having a bad day") and therefore to not permanently devalue them (Bolino & Turnley, 2003). In contrast, in women the exact same behaviour is perceived more strongly as an expression of personality and thus as an unchangeable characteristic ("She is difficult"). Consequently, women in high positions where they assert themselves, exercise criticism, prioritise tasks according to strategic aspects and (have to) demand performance from employees almost inevitably disappoint the expectations placed on them in terms of caring and conciliatory behaviour. Specifically, for the academic

context, male tutors have been shown to be rated more approachable, engaging, or friendly than female tutors, even when performing identical activities (MacNell et al., 2015). In addition, students expect more personal support from female professors for specific concerns (e.g. changing a grade or counselling for stress) and respond more negatively and emotionally when that request is not met (El-Alayli et al., 2018). These and other gender-specific "double standards" have been blamed in part for the lack of female leaders in the first place (e.g. Bereswill & Ehlert, 2018; Easterly & Ricard, 2011). We therefore deem it plausible that behaviours that are more likely to be accepted as a sensible use of power among men may more likely be classified as misuse of power and misconduct in women and also to be reported as such anonymously or openly.

3. Anonymous accusations in the context of academic or institutional mobbing

The prominent cases of recent years (e.g. Aeschlimann et al., 2019b; Rubner, 2020) show patterns that have been described for some time, especially in the United States, as "academic mobbing" or "institutional mobbing" (Crawford, 2020; Westhues, 2004, 2006). In this framework, (anonymous) accusations can be seen as part of a process of collective, institutionally embedded actions against one or a few individuals in the (academic) establishment who is or are to be disempowered or removed (Westhues, 2006). This process follows regular patterns in different kinds of institutions and organisations. Anonymous allegations play the role of a "critical incident" that adds a new dynamic to pre-existing conflicts between the accused and other actors (e.g. research associates, administration, or management) by triggering official actions (Armstrong, 2012; Khoo, 2010; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). The actual (anonymous) complainants may be part of the mobbing or bullying collective, but they may also merely provide the occasion to take action against a disliked person. Other individuals not directly involved (e.g. research associates, members of the administration, ombudspersons or confidants) become active or passive accomplices, more or less inevitably, as they get embroiled in the psychological and social process and (have to) position themselves according to their own agenda (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Petersen & Pearson, 2020).

While this does not exclusively happen in academic organisations, it stands in striking contrast to the notion of science as an assembly of rational, reflective and self-critical people committed to objectivity and truth-seeking ex officio (Keim & McDermott, 2010; Petersen & Pearson, 2020; Pyke, 2017; Seguin, 2016). In reality, academic institutions are just as prone to conflicts that escalate into bullying processes as any other group of people. If anything, they have some characteristics that make them more vulnerable:

- *Intra-faculty dynamics*: Professors are formally of equal rank and form a college. In fact, however, their interactions are characterised by more or less subtle internal differentiations based on performance and by strong competition for recognition and resources (Armstrong, 2012; Fehrenbach, 2020; Gorlewski et al., 2014; Jensen, Patel,

& Raver, 2014). There may be collaborations based on mutual research interests; but a strong focus is on reputation and standing in the scientific community, which is not tied to a university or research institute. A high degree of collegial cohesion, mutual support and personal commitment is therefore not necessarily present.

- *Professors as leaders:* Guiding and leading staff is not part of faculty training, and there are also those that consider *"following leaders to be the antithesis of a professorship"* (Björn Brembs, quoted in Lohaus, 2019, p. 424). However, on a day-to-day basis, senior scientists perform extensive, complex leadership activities that are *"relatively nebulous"* and involve *"a good deal of responsibility, but very little actual power"* (Armstrong, 2012, p. 100). At the same time, their professional performance is measured almost exclusively in terms of research output, so that collaboration with staff is strongly instrumental and evaluated primarily in terms of results.

- *Dynamics between academic leaders and administration staff:* As members of the administration act in an increasingly professionalised manner and operate less within the framework of academic self-governance, their goals and agendas of faculty and institution leaders and administrators tend to diverge from those of professors. This harbours the potential for conflict and power struggles (Fehrenbach, 2020; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Petersen & Pearson, 2020; Scholz & Stein, 2010).

- *Dynamics between professors and "young academics":* A growing divergence of interests and potential for conflict between doctoral students or postdocs (who do not (yet) hold permanent positions) and established professors has been noted (Czesnick & Rixen, 2021; Haug, 2018; N[2], 2019; Schraudner et al., 2019). This is attributed to structural changes (e.g. increasing quantitative mismatch between aspirants and target positions in research; increased pressure to publish; fewer exit options due to high specialisation...), but also to generational conflicts, where the values and demands of the *"old ones"* are no longer seamlessly absorbed and accepted by the *"young ones"*

- *Homogeneity and low awareness of issues among stakeholders:* Academic leaders are a very homogeneous group in terms of gender, background, attitudes, and values, and their manners and practices make it difficult for "others" (those who are in the minority) to be accepted as equals in the community (Armstrong, 2012; Teelken et al., 2019). Moreover, they are the "selected few" who themselves have successfully navigated the competitive and demanding culture of academia. As a result, they have internalised this culture and see no need for change (Giorgi, 2012; Petersen & Pearson, 2020; Pyke, 2017; Seguin, 2016).

- *Increase in competitive pressure to be efficient and publish at high level:* This acceleration is accompanied by a diminishing identification with the respective university or research institution, which lays the groundwork for a lack of communality (Fehrenbach, 2020; Gorlewski et al., 2014). Increased pressure can negatively impact and exacerbate all of the areas of conflict described above.

Academia thus constitutes a hierarchical, not generally problem-aware and outwardly egalitarian system, at least at the professorial level, that is highly competitive and characterised by the power dynamics between non-academic leadership and academic

service providers. Such environments may well be prone to mobbing or bullying processes, in which, those individuals who visibly differ from the norm of the respective institution are generally at high risk of becoming targets (Keim & McDermott, 2010; Westhues, 1998). This applies to women in higher positions in academia[4] and is reflected in recent findings, showing that female members of research institutions perceive the climate as significantly more hostile, experience more aggression and attacks, and evaluate opportunities to deal with misconduct more negatively - and this tendency is even more pronounced at higher hierarchical levels (Ambrasat & Heger, 2020; Baldi-Unser et al., 2019; Björkqvist et al, 1994; Krishen, Lee & Raschke, 2020; Prevost & Hunt, 2018; Staub, 2020; Teelken et al, 2019).

4. Measures against unconscious bias and their effectiveness

Under the term "unconscious bias", scientists have studied the phenomenon that unconscious perceptual patterns lead to unintended discrimination against women in hiring and promotion to higher-ranking positions in business and public administration. To counteract this, training measures, workshops, or seminars are recommended to raise awareness and encourage reflection on stereotypes (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Easterly & Ricard, 2011; Williamson & Foley, 2018). The Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) Zurich also relies on such trainings after highly publicised scandals of academic bullying (Baldi-Unser et al., 2019).

There is however no conclusive evidence of immediate or long-term effectiveness (for an outline, see Chang et al., 2019 and Williamson & Foley, 2018). In particular, mandatory measures can also have the opposite effect by causing backlash or by bringing about and legitimising stereotypes, even causing them to be realized in women's behaviour in the first place (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015). Workshops also seem to temporarily change the attitudes towards female leaders that training participants express in surveys, but hardly change actual behaviour (such as involving more women in one's own networks, Chang et al., 2019). There are no studies addressing whether such trainings also reduce the risks for female leaders; however, in light of these findings, it seems unlikely that the influence of unconscious stereotypical perceptions can be permanently altered and influenced by isolated trainings.

An important starting point for more effective interventions can be derived from the fact that the greater the uncertainty and ambiguity of a situation, the more likely it is that stereotypes influence actions (Heilman, 2012). Conversely, the effect of unconscious stereotypes should be reduced if clear and binding structures and procedures for evaluation and decision-making exist and are made known universally. In order to improve the quality of scientific collaboration within and across all hierarchical levels, as well as with administration and management in the future, and to make it more bullying-free, it is therefore particularly important to improve the procedures and processes for dealing with conflicts and with (anonymous) accusations of non-academic misconduct or abuse of power and ensure that all parties involved will be treated

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[4] As stated above, fewer than 50 of the more than 300 directors of the MPG are female, and the proportion of female professors nationwide and across all disciplines is about a quarter (data available from the Federal Statistical Office, own calculations)

according to the rule of law. In the following, we formulate recommendations to enable academic organisations to deal with (anonymous) allegations of non-scientific misconduct in a fair manner and less influenced by stereotypical patterns of perception.

5 Recommendations for dealing with allegations of non-scientific misconduct

"Rules of procedure shall be adopted for cases below the level of criminal liability or suspected wrongdoing under labour law or civil service law. This, in turn, must meet constitutional requirements."

Deutscher Hochschulverband (DHV)[German University Association], 2019

5.1 Upholding tried and tested principles of the rule of law

The principles of jurisdiction set forth in the *Grundgesetz* [German Constitution] are intended to ensure equal treatment of all defendants. Apart from the fact that institutions are required to base all internal procedures on these principles, they are also suitable for counteracting unconscious bias tendencies. To this end, managers of research organisations and universities, ombudspersons and other stakeholders involved should pay particular attention to the following nine points and ensure they are included in their procedures:

1. **Presumption of innocence for all parties involved:** The presumption of innocence must be maintained until the proceeding is concluded; there should be no prejudgements (e.g. by the terms used or the attitudes displayed towards the persons involved), nor should any sanctions be initiated without final clarification. The reversal of the burden of proof should be avoided at all costs, i.e. the accused must not be required to disprove the allegations (which may often be impossible in the case of anonymous complaints about observer-dependent phenomena such as leadership misconduct).
2. **Equality before the law:** All parties are to be treated equally and have the same rights and obligations. The one-sided guarantee of anonymity must be avoided, as must unequal treatment of comparable behaviour among men and women, managers and employees, or scientific and non-scientific personnel. The rule of law guarantees all its citizens the same rights and duties and equality before the law. Denying members of certain (professional) groups, e.g. doctoral students or chair holders, the same rights in legal or internal conflict procedures violates not only the *Grundgesetz* and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, but also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Any deviations from these principles would ultimately be detrimental to all members of an academic organisation, as it would open the door to unequal treatment.

3. **Naming of the concrete circumstances** (in any case: place, time, actors in the context of the alleged misconduct) **and right to be heard:** All accused persons always the right to a hearing on the allegation, and must be informed of the time, place and the exact circumstances of an allegation. They must have the right to comment and the opportunity to fully inspect the files at any time. Anonymisation may be tantamount to a denial of these rights and has the consequence that the accused are no longer able to adequately assess the allegations, comment on them, and make appropriate statements to the investigating authorities.

4. **(Legal) counselling:** The accused are entitled to (legal) assistance and counselling in legal as well as internal proceedings, if necessary through ombudspersons or personal confidants. If no further persons are admitted with the reference to anonymity or the internal character of the proceedings, this principle is violated.

5. **In dubio pro reo:** If the facts of the case cannot be satisfactorily clarified, the boards must, in case of doubt, decide in favour of the defendant(s). It is contrary to the essential principles of law to give the benefit of the doubt to the assumed victim or even to make no decision at all.[5]

6. **Opportunity to learn:** If the accusation proves to be correct, the choice of sanctions must be proportionate and, where possible, must also provide opportunities to learn from mistakes, for example through notices, warnings and temporary probation. Resorting to layoffs, demotions, or transfers without first fully exhausting such measures prevents opportunities for development of the institution and its members.

7. **Sanctions for allegations that are not substantiated:** Invalidated allegations should not go unchecked or without consequence and comment. If an accusation proves to be unsubstantiated, it must be determined whether it was knowingly made in bad faith or negligently. If this is the case, appropriate sanctions should be initiated against the accusers in any case.[6]

8. **No exclusively internal procedures:** When allegations have been made, investigations should be officially delegated to independent individuals or commissions with clearly defined responsibilities and jurisdictions. This is absolutely necessary, since members of the faculty or research institution are inevitably involved in the social processes, pursuing their own agendas (consciously or unconsciously), and dependent on those at management level who employ them (Armstrong, 2012). A fair and transparent process is not possible if responsibilities are left unclear, decisions are made "behind closed doors" and the bias of internal investigators or juries is denied or declared irrelevant.

9. **Develop criteria and definition of non-scientific misconduct:** Institutional managers are responsible for defining and communicating the rights and obligations of all actors in teaching and research as clearly as possible, using behaviour-based descriptors (see also Chapter 5.3). A (mis)behaviour can only be sanctioned if it is clear in advance

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[5] This does not imply that institution leaders should not take any action at all if faced with an inconclusive case. Rather, they could seize the opportunity to improve future collaboration or facilitate future processes of internal investigations.

[6] To determine whether an accusation was levelled malignantly or negligently will not always be possible. Nevertheless, this principle would induce whistle-blowers to act cautiously and make an increased effort to substantiate their claims - which in turn could facilitate a constructive, non-escalating conflict resolution.

which behaviours are acceptable and which are unacceptable (prohibition of ex post facto laws, see chapter 5.2).

5.2   Clearly defining correct behaviour and misconduct

Like scientific misconduct, so-called non-scientific or leadership misconduct is located in a grey zone and cannot not easily be defined in many cases. It seems plausible that - even more than in the case of scientific misconduct (Bouter & Hendrix, 2017) - a large part of conflictual behaviour takes place in grey areas that are open to diverging interpretations. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify what is acceptable to both sides. This is intended to facilitate collaboration, too, and in addition, sanctions are only possible if misconduct can be identified, verified and also objectively confirmed or refuted, independent of observers. Such a definition must already exist in advance and has to be made known and transparent to everyone, so that both managers and employees have the opportunity to align their expectations and actions. Clear and behaviour-based instructions also reduce ambiguity and the influence of stereotypical unequal evaluations of the same behaviour among women and men.

To this end, managers of universities and research organisations and other stakeholders should pay particular attention to the following aspects:

1.   The academic institution must establish a **definition of leadership misconduct** ex ante, e.g. in the form of a **behavioural criteria catalogue**. It must be possible to determine this objectively and independent of observers (e.g. "physically intimidating behaviour - yelling above a defined decibel level; crying; offering events on Friday afternoons; emails on weekends"[7]). Misconduct should not be tied to the subjective perceptions of affected individuals or observers, (e.g. "bad atmosphere", "climate of fear") as such perceptions are subjective and observer-dependent and also do not always align with legally relevant categories (e.g. Schraudner et al., 2019).

2.   In addition, it should be stated explicitly **which forms of misconduct are covered by labour, criminal, and civil service laws.** These should additionally be made tangible through concrete behaviour-based examples. When such behaviour occurs, the appropriate authorities should be called in.

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[7]These and similar behaviors were cited in interviews or in the media as examples of unacceptable leadership behaviour in the context of the cases discussed in this paper.

5.3   Supporting transparent and constructive resolution of conflicts

In order to create and maintain a productive and healthy working atmosphere, it is essential that organisations provide rules, procedures and points of contact for resolving conflicts constructively and early in a natural and non-problematising manner. Since investigations conducted by members of academic organisations are not judicial or police investigations, none of the parties involved can be obliged to cooperate or to be truthful. Therefore, such investigations should be limited to what they are actually capable of accomplishing. They should aim to support solutions in a constructive, dialogic and open manner. To this end, facility managers and other stakeholders involved should pay particular attention to the following points:

1. Any discussion should be based on objective or objectifiable facts and events (what, where, when, who), in order counteract the often emotionally charged, agitated and unsettled mood. Anyone involved needs to resist time pressure, for example through media reports.
2. The approach should emphasise openness, dialogue and transparency on all sides. Involved parties should be supported and encouraged to talk to each other rather than about each other, and to listen to the "other side" as well. Maintaining anonymity tends to deepen conflicts, creating a monologue instead of a dialogue and threatens to harden the fronts.
3. Dependencies between the conflicting parties should be reduced. Many conflicts initially involve junior scientists (doctoral or post-doctoral researchers) and their senior advisors. A change of advisors must be made possible in acute cases. Generally, senior researchers and supervisors fulfil many roles towards junior researchers, such as mentor, scientific collaborator, employer, and assessor. In the long run, these roles should be disentangled and divided among several persons to alleviate the situation. The highly selective nature of the academic system must be openly communicated from the beginning when taking on supervision, the possibility of "failure as an opportunity" must be considered, and exit options from academia must be discussed.
4. However, if there is a real threat, immediate separation and protection of the respective threatened party is required (e.g. if acts of revenge or violence are carried out or are announced).

6. Conclusion

Disputes, incompatible interests, failed collaborations, rivalries, and other conflicts occur in every community, and in academic contexts possibly even more than elsewhere. Organisations can influence whether these are resolved in a constructive manner with a focus on damage control, or degenerate into destructive, harmful cycles through the processes and procedures they provide for dealing with conflict. Therefore, governance bodies are responsible for designing, implementing and constantly improving high-quality procedures.

An important aspect for the design of such procedures is the question raised by this journal issue: To what extent must or can persons that accuse others of leadership misconduct be protected by guaranteeing them anonymity? The most important argument in favour of

upholding anonymity are the strong hierarchical gradient and the great dependencies of lower level employees (especially doctoral candidates and postdocs) on senior scientists. Reporting of problematic events, which is desirable in principle, can therefore only take place if whistle-blowers know that they are protected by anonymity from the negative consequences of their reporting - especially for their further academic careers (Czesnick & Rixen, 2021). Advocates of anonymity, in a way, see it as a solution to the problem of dependency and argue for it with good intentions ("The road to hell is paved with good intentions", the vernacular). In our opinion, however, this goal must be pursued and achieved in other ways, since the unconditional prioritisation of anonymity may partly solve a problem, but at the same time only creates new problems that may be even greater:

- Guaranteeing anonymity puts the accused in a situation in which the principles of rule of the law (described above) can no longer be upheld. In particular, the principles of "equal treatment" and "right to comment and full access to files", which are non-negotiable in terms of constitutional legality, are put at risk. This is particularly important in the case of non-scientific misconduct, which often occurs in interpersonal interaction and is difficult to show objectively in impersonal material (Czesnick & Rixen, 2021).

- Second, insuring the anonymity of whistle-blowers can de facto reverse the power imbalance, rather than counterpoise it, especially if whistle-blowers in lower positions are represented by more powerful actors and individuals who may in turn pursue their own agendas. Thus, the assurance of anonymity also opens up an opportunity to specifically defame disfavoured persons with little risk to themselves.

- Last but not least, an absolute guarantee of anonymity cannot be upheld in the context of criminal or civil law procedures, as it conflicts with binding procedural principles (Herrmann, 2020). Ultimately, the protection of all parties involved should be paramount during a still unresolved allegation.

Although gender alone cannot explain everything, we deem it plausible that women in academic leadership positions have an increased risk of being accused of non-scientific misconduct and, consequentially, of being involved in escalated, hostile processes, due to biased perception of their leadership behaviour. This has serious repercussions for themselves, but also for the system of academics, its performance and its credibility. The best and most time- and cost-effective intervention measures against unconscious bias, however, are not trainings but improved structures, procedural rules and processes. The most important thing is and remains the establishment and support of an open and trusting work culture that can reduce the risk of disputes arising and, in particular, escalating. Fair and transparent procedures based on the rule of law contribute to this and enable conflicts to be handled appropriately for all parties involved.

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