

Pressemitteilung

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Abuse of power and misconduct in science: Commission presents innovative report

Cases of abuse of power and misconduct in science are repeatedly made public, sparking discussions about necessary changes in the science system. Unfortunately, unethical behaviour often goes undetected. This affects all scientific fields, including psychology. A commission of the German Psychological Society (DGPs) has now published a report that includes a systematic analysis of the causes of this problem along with proposed solutions. The suggestions include separating the supervision and evaluation of doctoral theses and eliminating grades for doctoral theses.

In 2021, the DGPs board convened the commission "Incentive System, Abuse of Power and Scientific Misconduct" to investigate the causes of abuse of power and scientific misconduct in the scientific system and to propose solutions. The commission identified 12 key problem areas that appear to be particularly relevant with regard to unethical behaviour in science. "Our proposed solutions address different levels of the science system," explains Prof. Dr. Daniel Leising of the Technical University of Dresden, who chaired the commission's work. "We can and should all work individually for better structures. This concerns especially those who currently hold a professorship."

The commission emphasises that individual commitment alone will not suffice to sustainably prevent unethical behaviour. Systemic changes are needed, and should be managed and implemented at higher levels such as faculties, universities, the federal government and the federal states. For example, measures can be taken to improve the collaboration between professors and early-career researchers, such as separating the supervision and evaluation of dissertations and limiting the number of doctoral students that are simultaneously supervised by the same advisors. Furthermore, appointment procedures can be improved by tying appointments to the assessment of relevant soft skills (e.g., leadership, conflict management and integrity).

"The strength of the report lies in its systemic approach to abuse of power, misconduct, and incentive systems - moving away from the focus on supposedly pathological individual cases, on extremely unethical behaviour of individual "outliers", and towards the question of why they are able to operate with such impunity, and also why some tenured researchers may abuse their position of power without even realizing it. The report thus goes beyond many of the reports and recommendations published by other institutions to date," explains DGPs President Prof. Dr. Stefan Schulz-Hardt. "We will now look at the proposals in detail. We have already initiated some changes that we can introduce as a professional society." These include, among other things, the second survey of the DGPs ombuds panel on power abuse and scientific misconduct in psychology. Stefan Schulz-Hardt adds, "With the publication of the report, however, we also want to explicitly invite other scientific societies, major research institutions and political decision-makers to join the debate so that we can implement systemic changes together."

The commission's report can be accessed here, along with an accompanying statement from the DGPs board (both in German): <https://www.dgps.de/schwerpunkte/integritaet-und-anreizsysteme-in-der-wissenschaft>

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About the DGPs:

The German Psychological Society (DGPs e.V.) is an association of psychologists active in research and scientific education. The research focus of its more than 5400 members is on human experience and behaviour. The members publish, teach and take position in the world of universities, research, politics and everyday life. The DGPs press office informs the public about contributions of psychology to socially relevant topics. In addition, the DGPs provides journalists with a database of experts in various fields who can provide information on specific issues. Would you like to learn more about us? Visit the DGPs online: www.dgps.de