IHF Bayerisches Staatsinstitut für Hochschulforschung und Hochschulplanung

Leadership, Cooperation and Conflicts in Physics: Research Leaders' Perspectives

Maike Reimer, Isabell Welpe, Theresa Görg & Bianca Burkert

September 11th 2025, Göttingen

Bild: Markus Spiske, https://unsplash.com/photos/QozzJpFZ2lg

Vorsicht vor Professor Mobber

Nachdem Colette Nesemann ihre erste wissenschaftliche Fachpublikation geschrieben hatte, passierte etwas, das sie bis dahin für unvorstellbar gehalten hatte. Es geschah, als die Doktorandin im Fach Psychologie mit ihrer Doktormutter über die Arbeit sprach. „Und die sagte: Das können Sie so nicht veröffentlichen“, erinnert sich Nesemann. Der Grund: Das Ergebnis der Untersuchung, auf der das „Paper“ basierte, war nicht ge- schend. Und ist- schl-

Erschreckend oft kommt es an deutschen Unis zu Fehlverhalten und Machtmissbrauch wie b-

sie nicht Arbeiten. Punkten ‚Fröhlich mich ra junge ihre

durch einen bt es Promo- dem Macht- t. Da wäre

mutter Fachbe te. Sie wollte von mir wissen, was

CAREER FEATURE | 06 May 2025

Can Germany rein in its academic bullying problem?

Researchers and administrators are exploring ways to restructure a rigid hierarchy that can breed power abuses.

By Virginia Gewin

Find a new job

SPIEGEL Panorama

Menü Startseite > Panorama > #MeToo > Max-Planck-Gesellschaft: Vorwürfe gegen Professoren

Abonnie

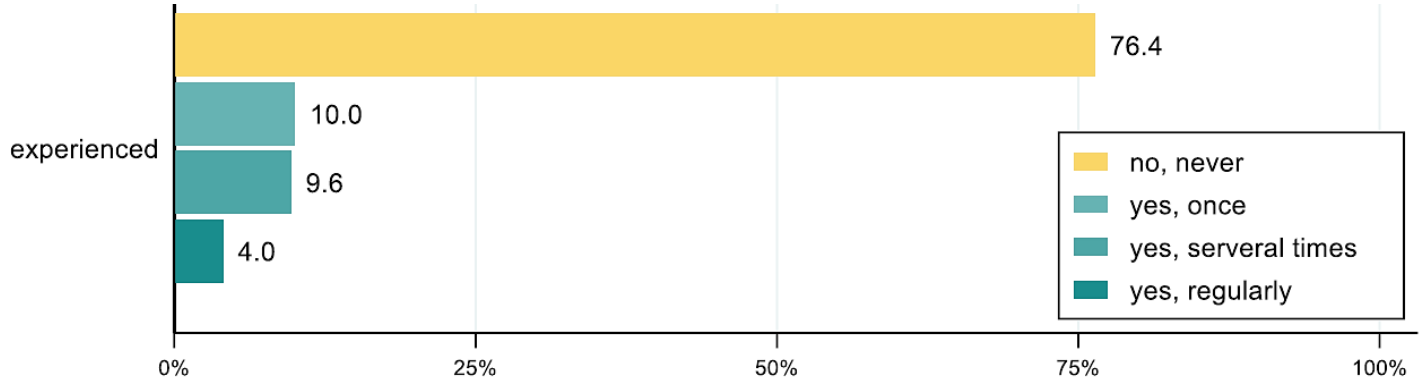
Machtmissbrauch an Hochschulen

"Ihr Verhalten war unvorhersehbar, und ich hatte Angst und Stress"

Junge Forscher berichten dem SPIEGEL, wie sie von Professoren am renommierten Max-Planck-Institut schikaniert worden seien. Sie wollen anonym bleiben - aus Angst, ihre Karriere zu ruinieren.

Von **Kristin Haug**
27.02.2018, 00.27 Uhr

About a quarter of ERC reports power abuse at work



N=2.748

Reference period: “in the last 24 months”

Definition: “By using their position of power, a person harms others and takes advantage for themselves or their favourites.”

Quelle: Ambrasat et al. (2024).

Die Republik, 20.3.2019

Das Versagen

An der ETH soll eine Astronomie-Professorin ihre Doktoranden über Jahre gemobbt haben. Jetzt wird sie entlassen, obwohl die Schuldfrage nie geklärt wurde. Wie eine Institution von Weltruf alles verrät: die Professorin, die Unschuldsvermutung, sich selbst. Der

Von Silvan Aeschlimann, Dennis
19.03.2019

Die Gegendarstellung de

Willkür

Ein neues, internes Dokument zeigt: Der Fall Carollo ist an der ETH kein Einzelfall – aber der einzige, bei dem es jetzt zu einer Entlassung kommen soll. Weder die Leitung noch die Aufsicht der Hochschule von Weltruf kennt einen einheitlichen Umgang mit Vorwürfen gegen Professoren. Der Fall ETH, Teil 4.

Von Silvan Aeschlimann, Dennis Bühler, Dominik Osswald (Text) und Dominic Nahr (Bild),
16.04.2019

Die Republik, 16.04.2019

nature

NEWS | 08 June 2022

Max Planck's cherished autonomy questioned following criticism of misconduct investigations

Demoted archaeologist Nicole Boivin calls on the German government the prestigious research society – several other directors say that inves into them lacked transp

Alison Abbott

nature

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NEWS | 19 November 2021 | Correction 22 November 2021

Scientists question Max Planck Society's treatment of women leaders

sses concern

SPIEGEL Panorama

Abonnement | Anmelden

Menü | Bildung > Max-Planck-Gesellschaft: Ehemalige Institutsdirektorin fordert schärfere Kontrolle der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft

Offener Brief an Bundesbildungsministerin

Geschasste Institutsdirektorin fordert schärfere Kontrolle der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft

Im Zwist mit der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft legt die ehemalige Direktorin Nicole Boivin öffentlich nach: In einem Brief an das Bildungsministerium verlangt die Archäologin mehr staatliche Kontrolle.

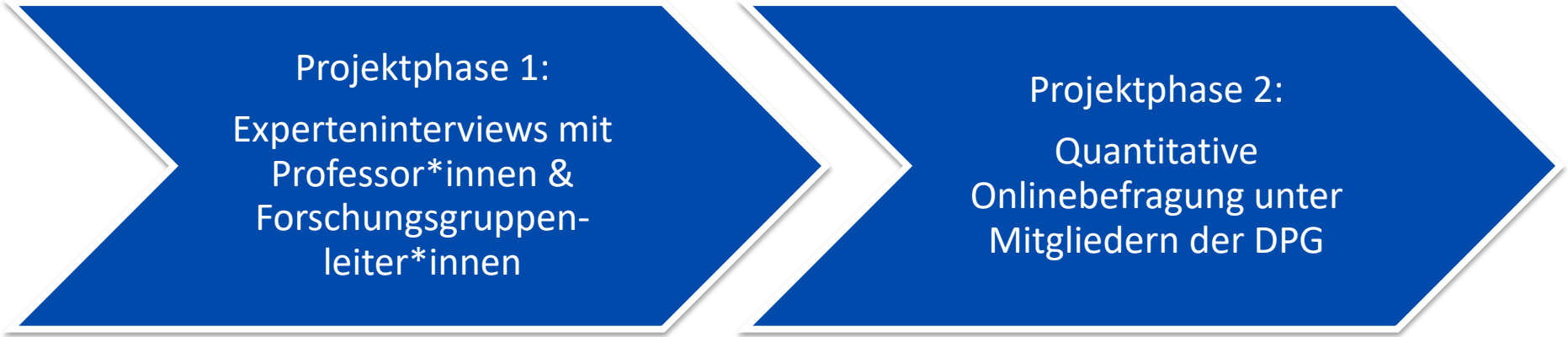
08.06.2022, 20.34 Uhr

Aufbau

IHF Bayerisches Staatsinstitut für Hochschulforschung und Hochschulplanung

DPG

In Kooperation mit Prof. Dr. Christiane Koch, TU Berlin, Institut für Theoretische Physik, Leitung Fachverband Quantenoptik der Deutschen Physikalischen Gesellschaft (DPG)



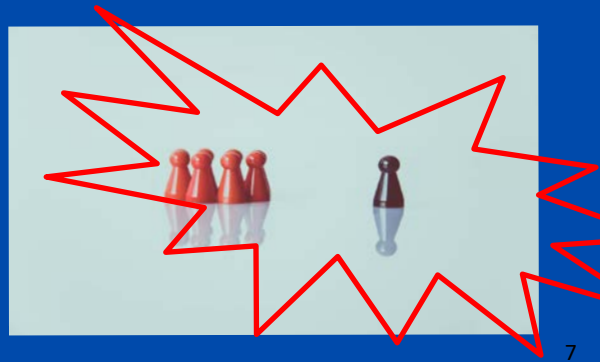
Goals

1. Broadening of the empirical basis

2. Contribution to leadership and conflict management in Research

3. Focus on actual conflict experiences

- „Normal“ conflicts
- Accusations



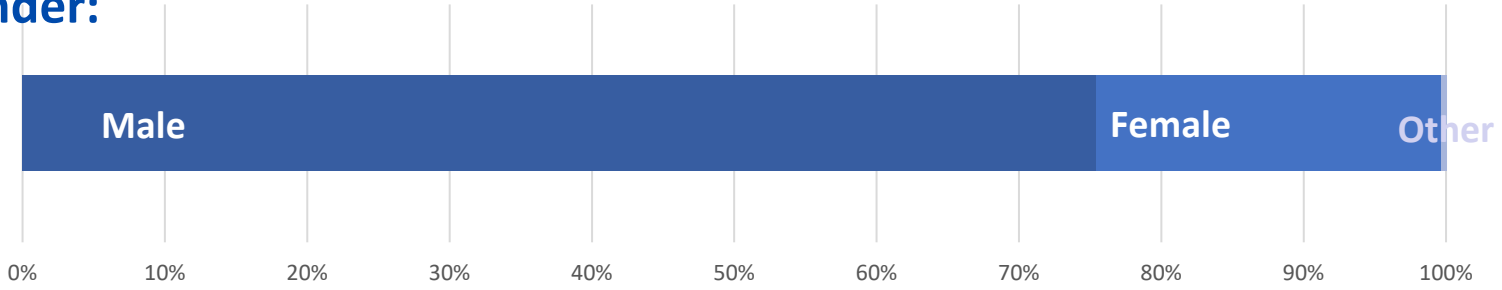
Physics as Research Culture

- Hard/Pure (Natural) Science
- Universties and non-university research organizations
- Internationality
- Collaborative, division of labor
- Hierarchically structured large to very large groups
- Large to very large author teams

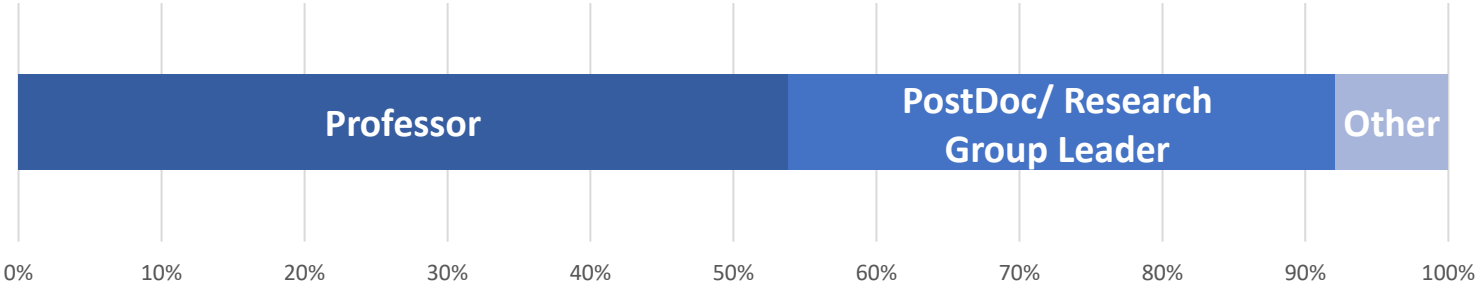
Quellen: DPG (2019), Sorgner (2022), Reimer et al (2021).

Participants

Sex/Gender:

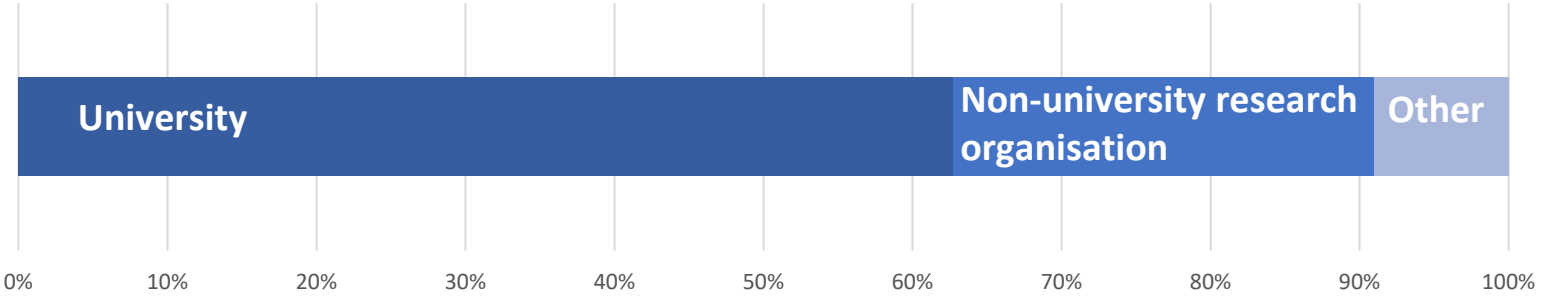


Position:

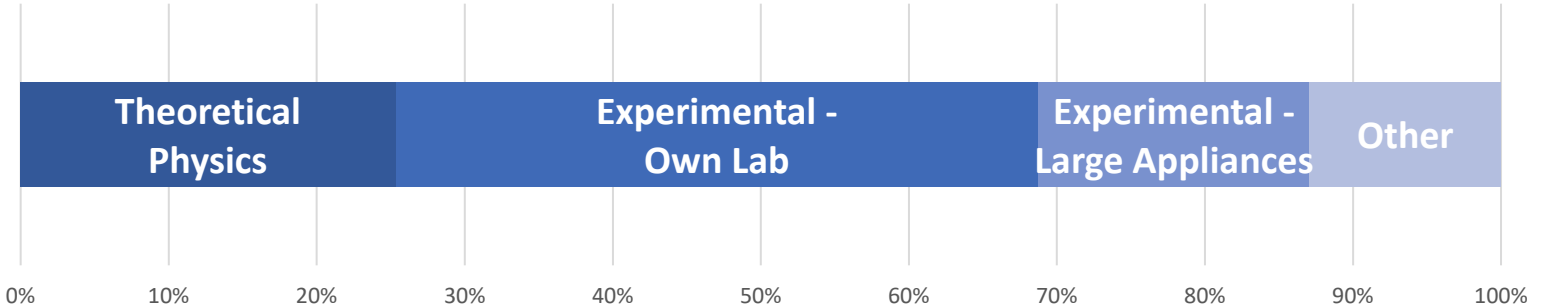


Participants

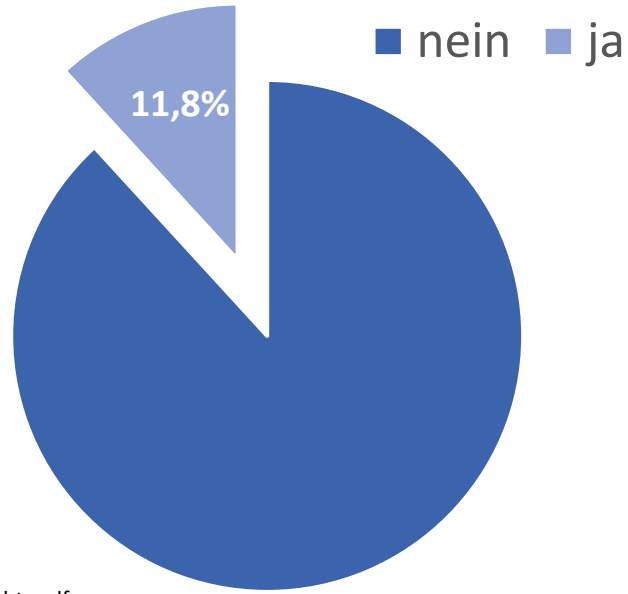
Organization:



Area:



Experiences of accusations of misconduct



N= 50
Variable: vf_erlebt_self

4 % Scientific Misconduct

(z.B. Plagiat, Datenfälschung, unangemessene Author Attribution...)

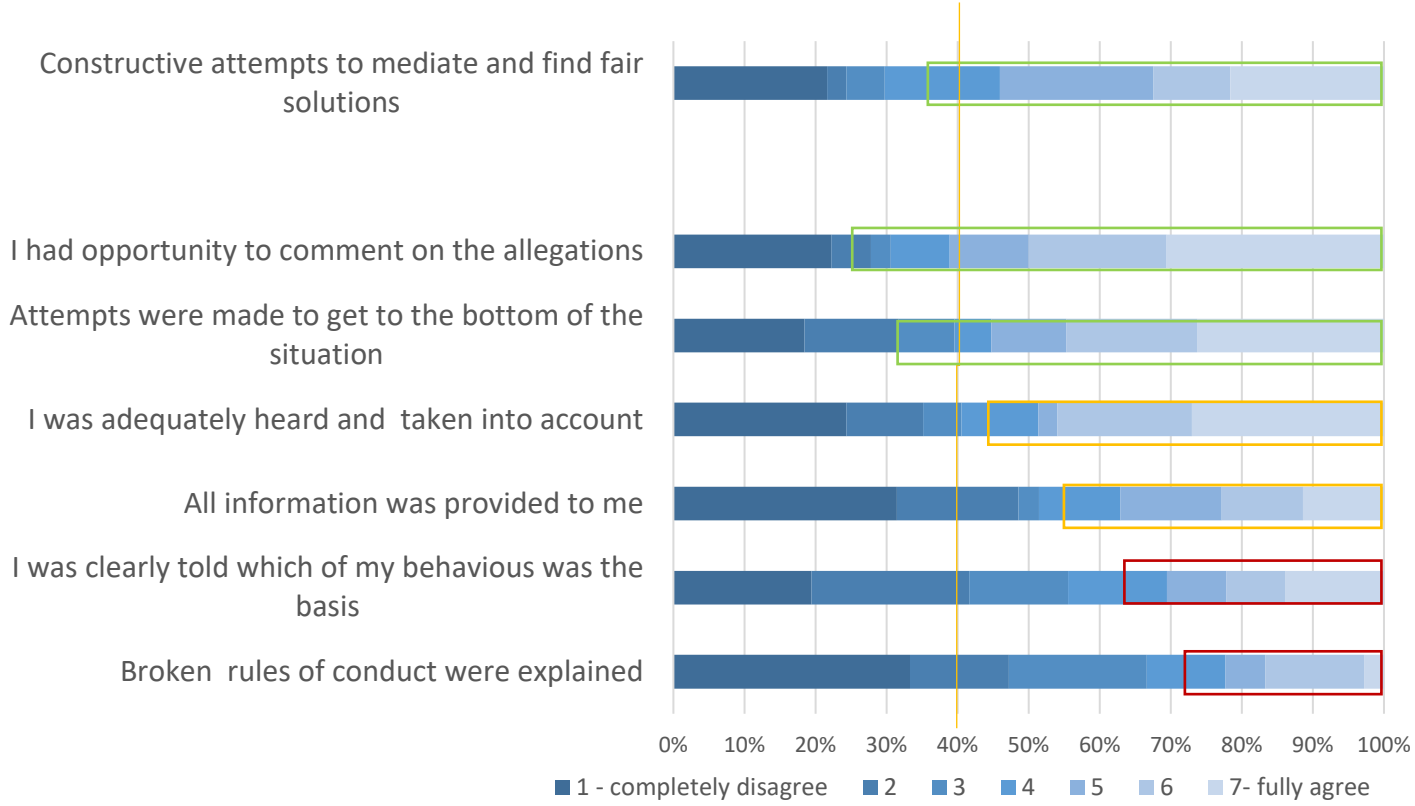
11 % Non-scientific or Leadership Misconduct

(z.B. Machtmissbrauch, Diskriminierung, Einschüchterung...)

2 % Other Misconduct

(Angaben z.B.: Lack of layality, delay of publications, unfair assessment)

Room at the top for both Mediation and Investigation



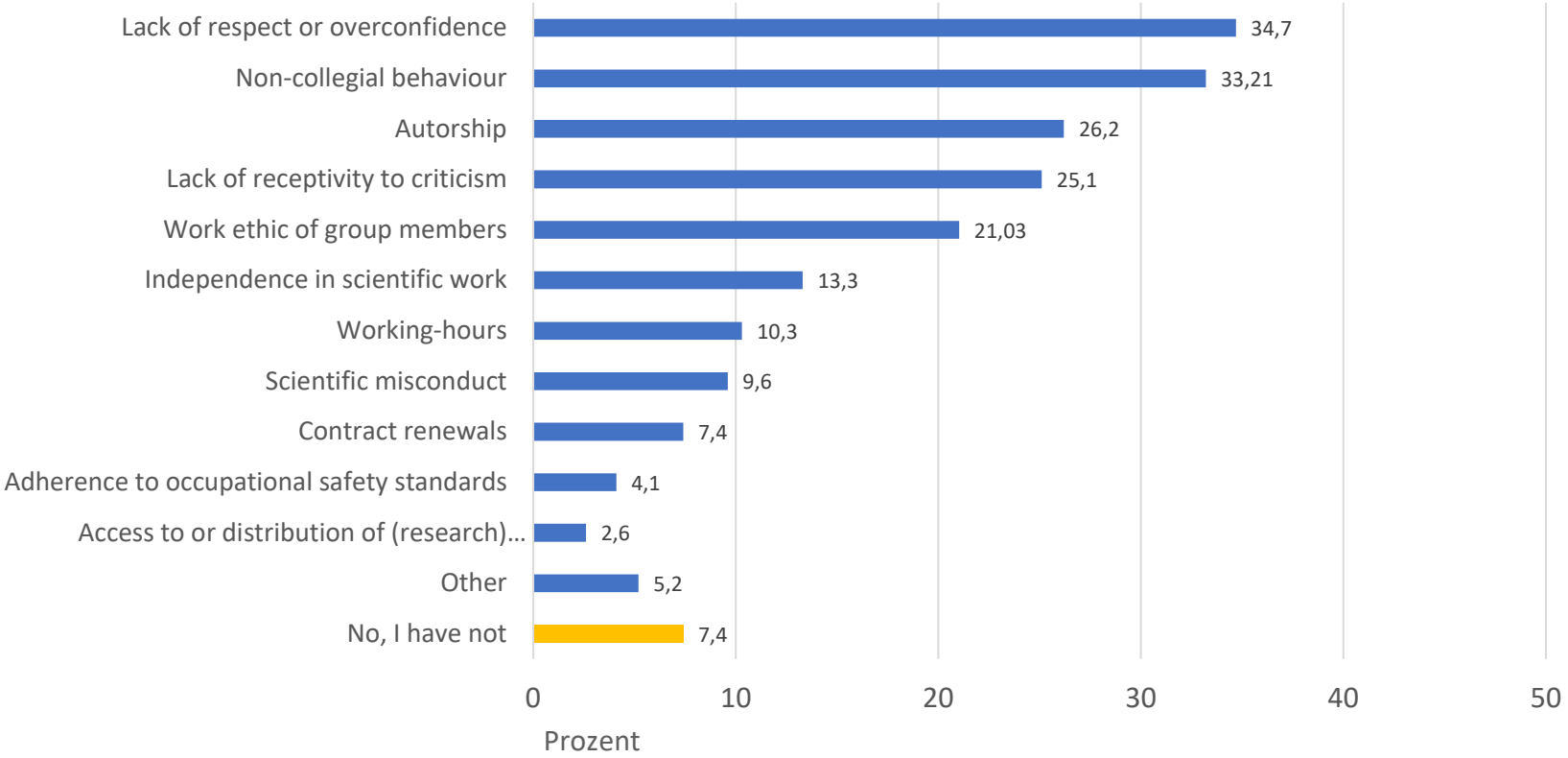
“It was about claims to leadership and the distribution of funds within the group. All researchers involved in leading the group and a mediator were present at the discussion.”

“Some doctoral students complained that my requirements for the doctorate were too high and did not correspond with university regulations. But my boss backed me up—those were the internal rules of our non-university research institute.”

“The conflict was reported directly to my supervisor without even consulting me first. Our meeting to resolve the conflict therefore came as a complete surprise to me, and I was unprepared.”

“I received a call from the HR manager, who informed me about the official complaint. For data protection reasons, she was not allowed to disclose any details about the person or the exact facts. ... The result was nights of speculation about who it could have been and what the reason might have been...”

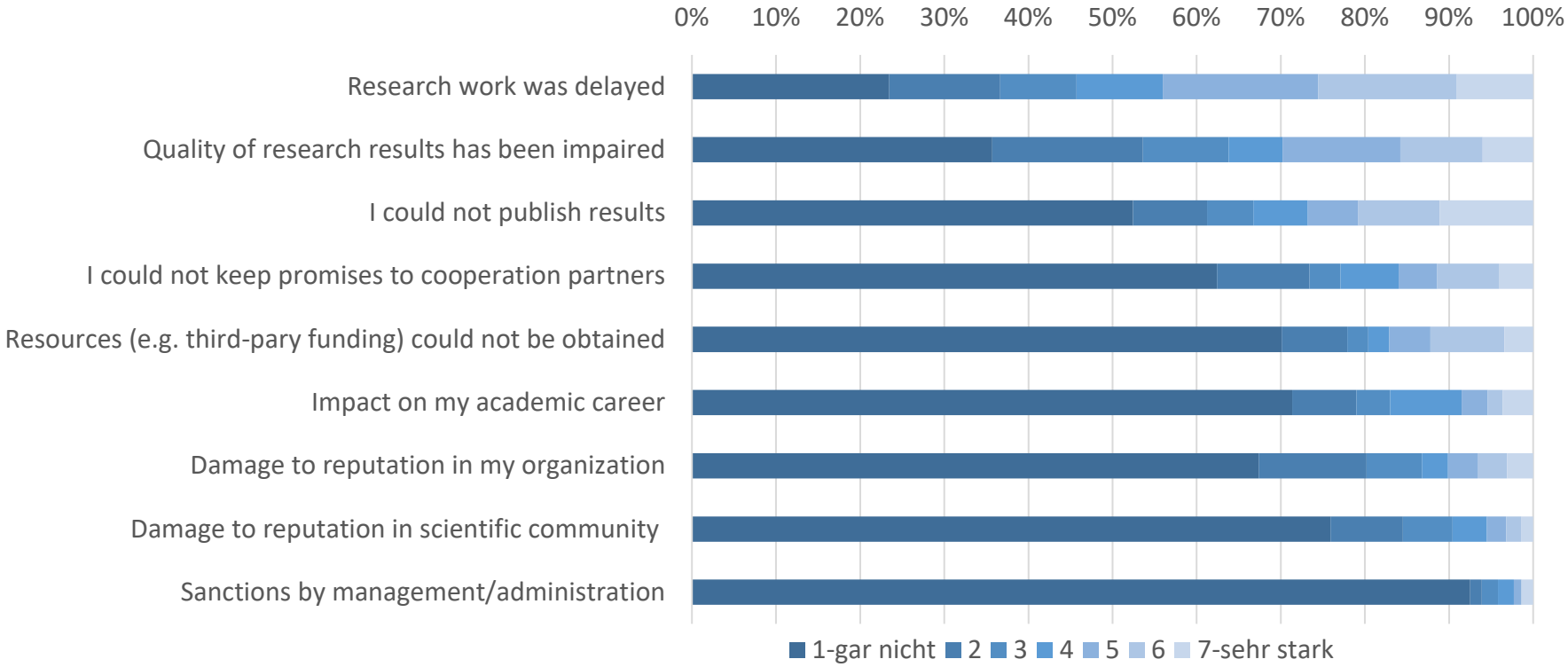
Most frequent conflict aspects



N= 271,
Anteil Nennungen

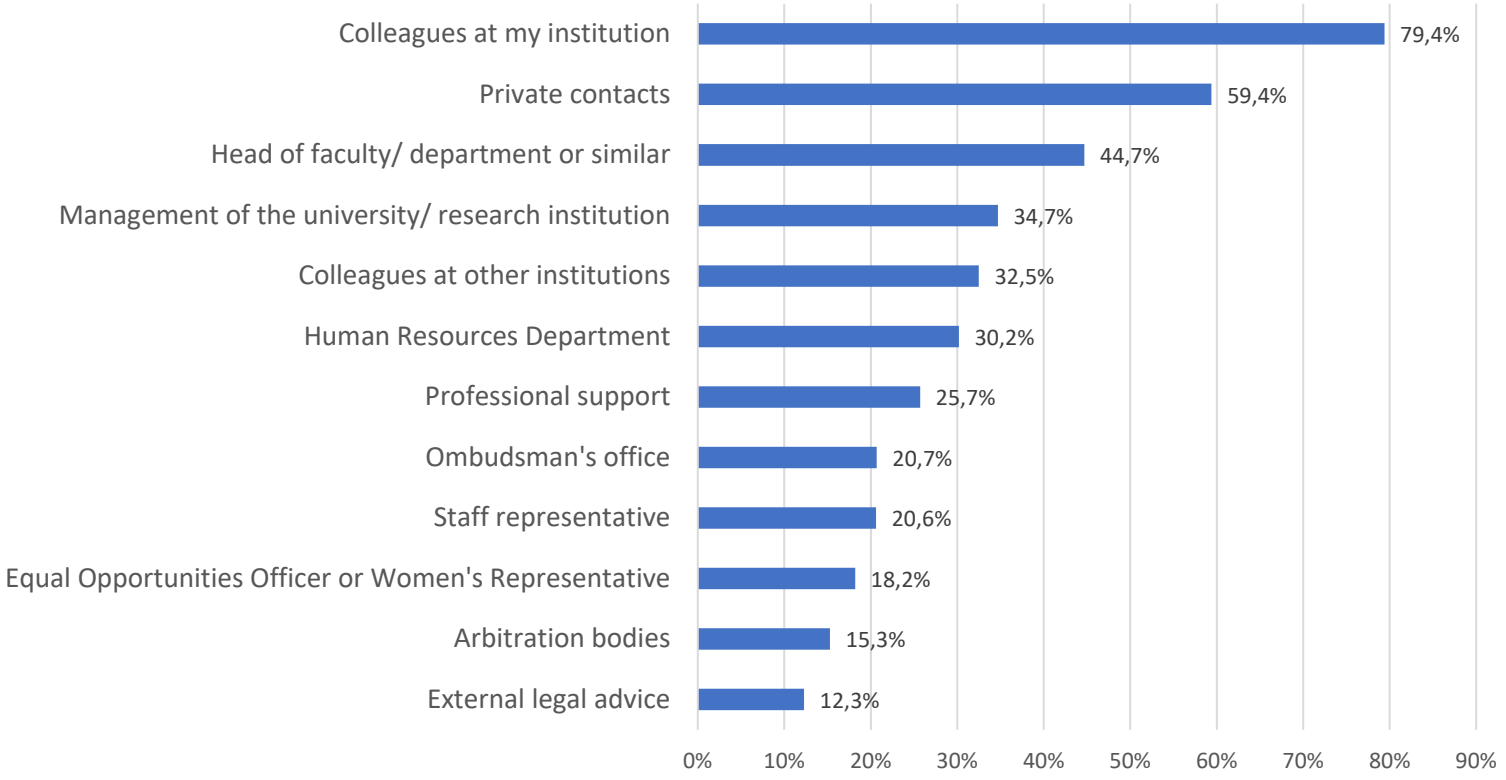
Mangel an Respekt; Selbstüberschätzung	That he was very... Cocky. Brash, arrogant. I think he was perhaps trying to cover up his insecurity.
Mangelnde Kollegialität	She announced at very short notice that she would now be spending a month in //country//. And that was at a time when the project—it wasn't a good time. And I didn't like the tone of it either— “I’m gone.”
Autorenschaft	The person did not make an original contribution and should not really be an author, but it was made clear to me... what the consequences could be if I were to enter into conflict now: that he would go to the editor. That he would sue me. And the problem is—if it becomes public, then no matter how it turns out, whether I am proven right or not—things will always stick.
Fehlende Kritikfähigkeit	... and the person was very—a little resistant to advice.
Wiss. Selbständigkeit	When you have to guide people by the hand very much, so that at some point I said: “Do you think this is really the right thing for you?”
Wiss. Fehlverhalten	So the two biggest issues related to people who had plagiarized in their theses, especially one in the doctoral program.

Consequences of Conflicts:



N= 204-235
Anteil Nennungen

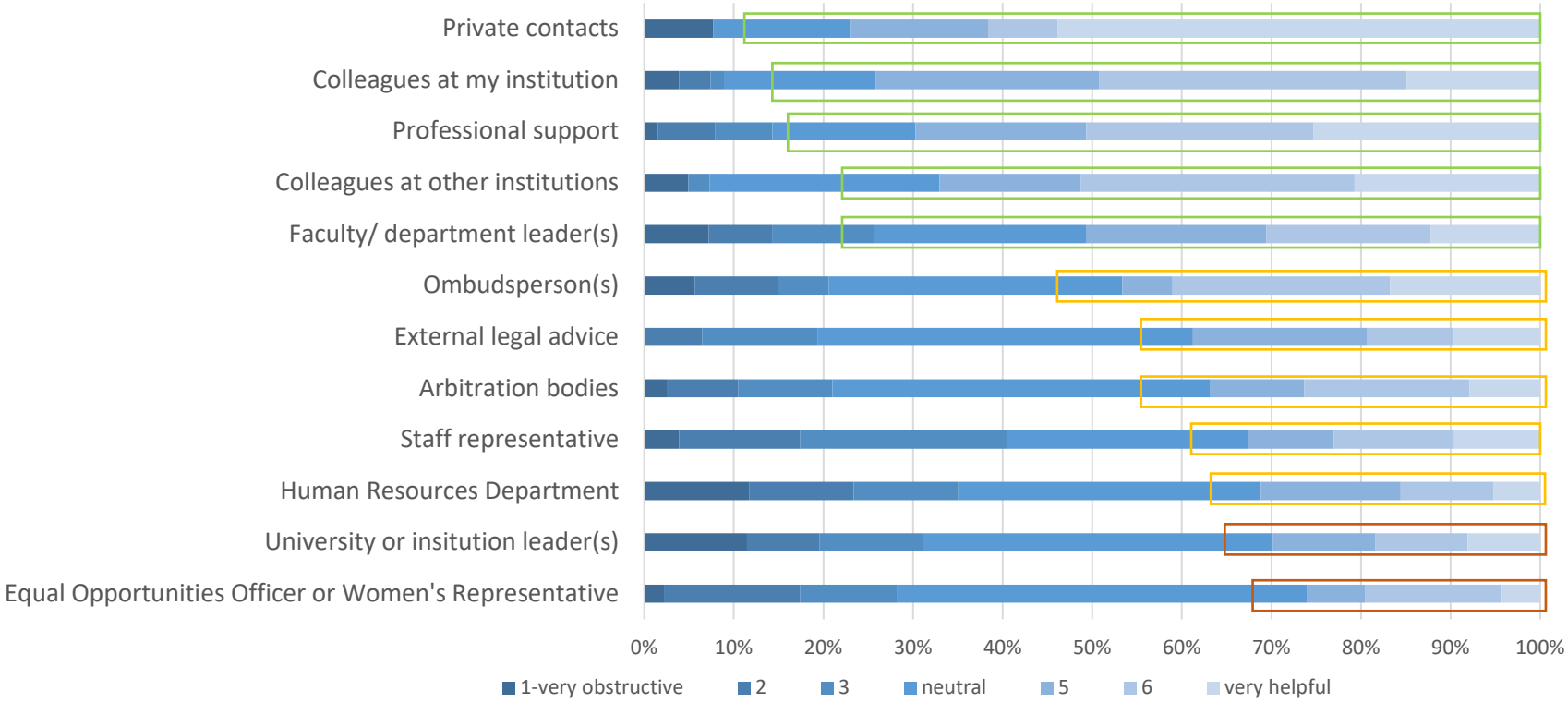
Others involved?



War eine der folgende Menschen oder Einrichtungen involviert:

N= 252
Anteil Nennungen

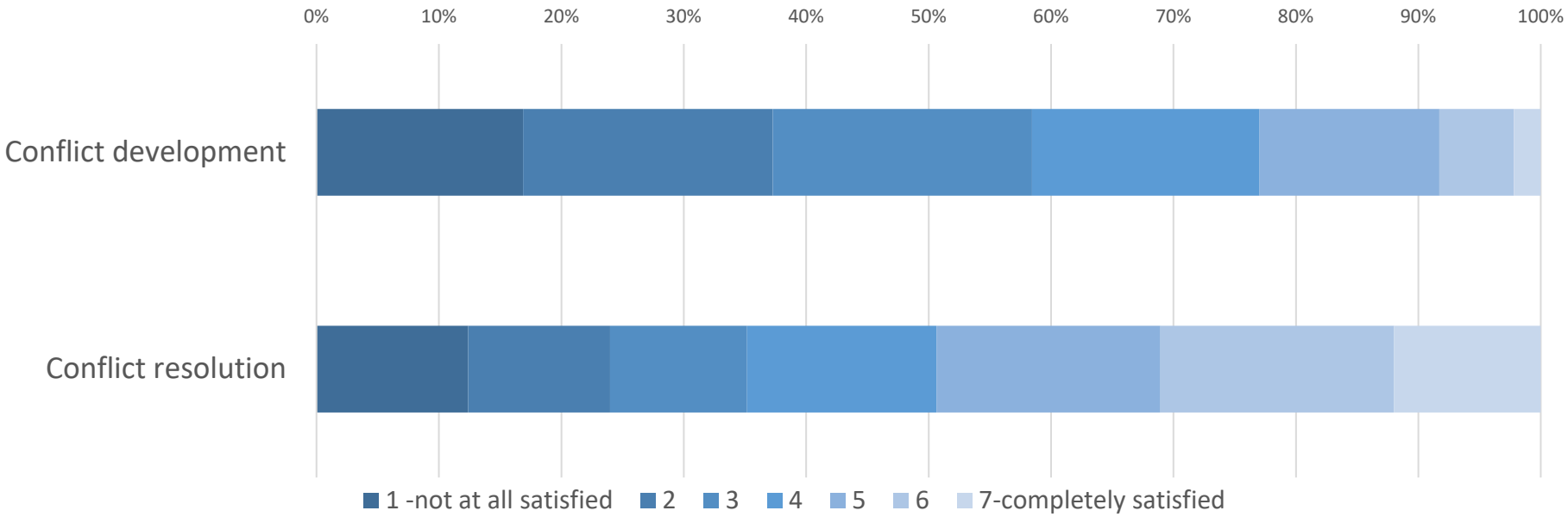
Who helped, who was obstructive?



War eine der folgende Menschen oder Einrichtungen involviert:

N= 31 - 201
Anteil Nennungen

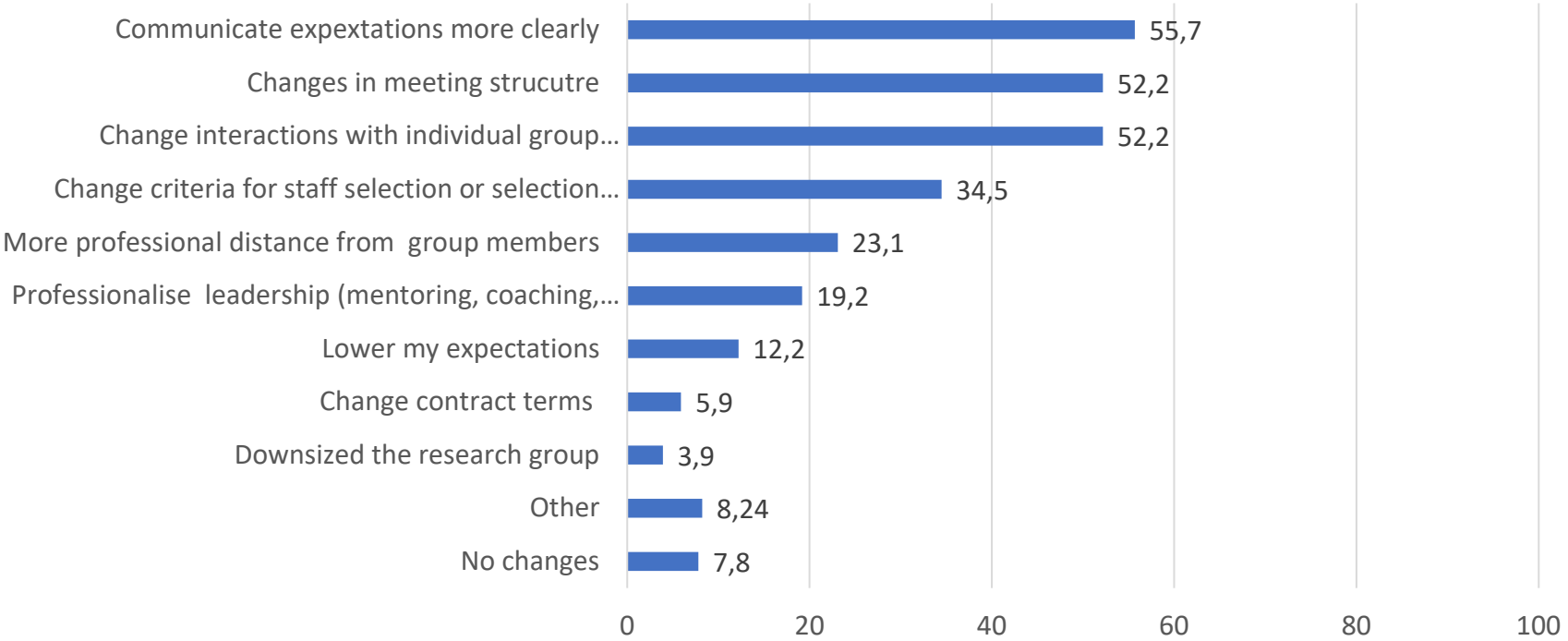
Satsisfaction with development and resolution



Wie zufrieden sind Sie mit der Konfliktlösung / dem Verlauf des Konflikts?

N= 231/251,
Anteil Nennungen

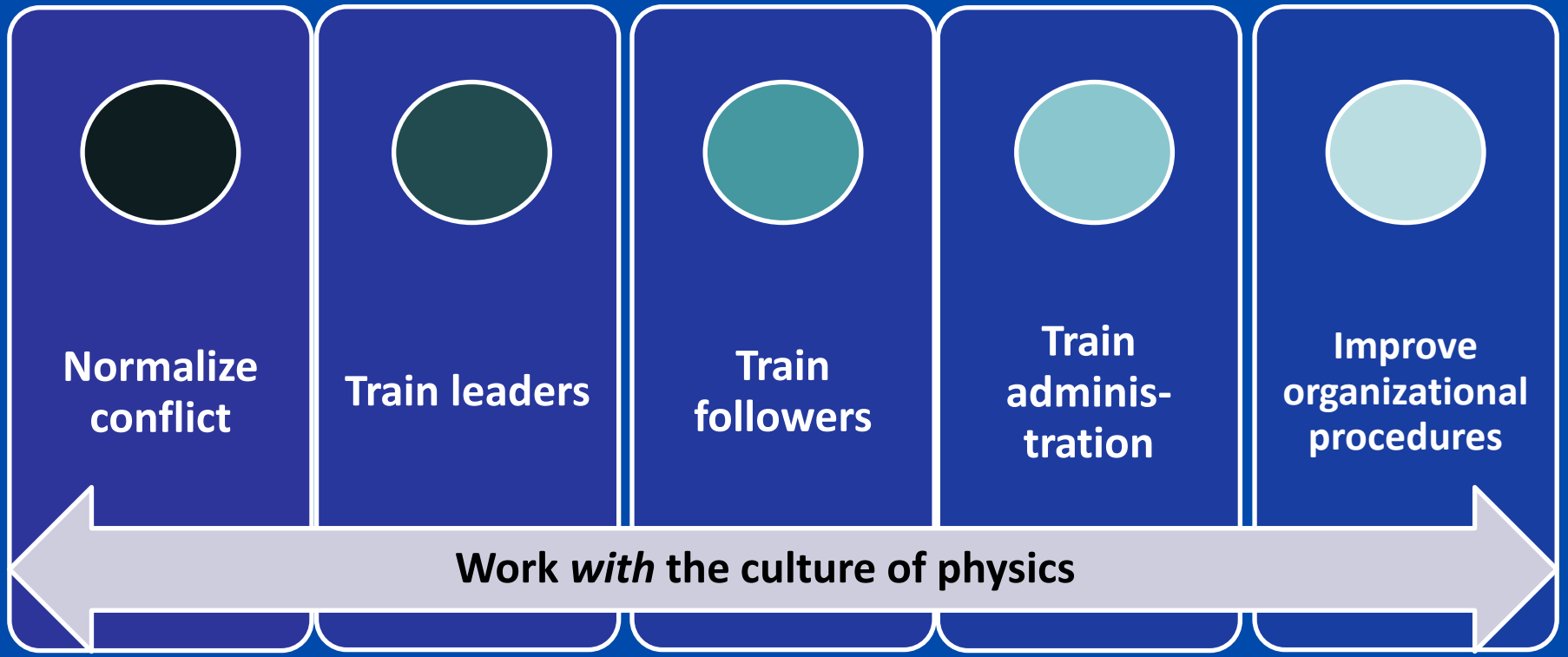
Changes in leadershio as response to conflict experience



Haben Sie aufgrund dieser oder ähnlicher Erfahrungen etwas an Ihrer Führung verändert oder für Ihre allgemeine Führungspraxis mitgenommen?

N= 254
Anteil Nennungen

Recommendations of participants



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Thanks for your attention


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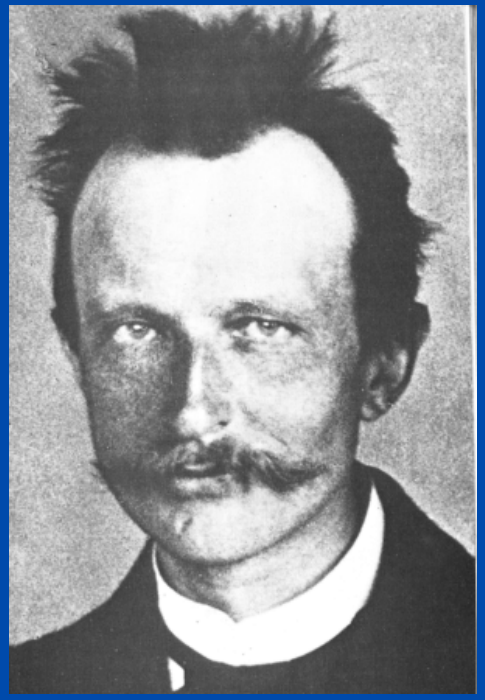
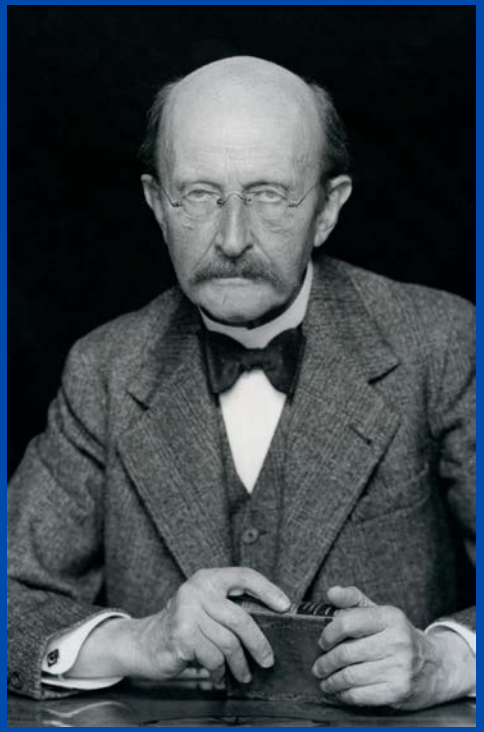
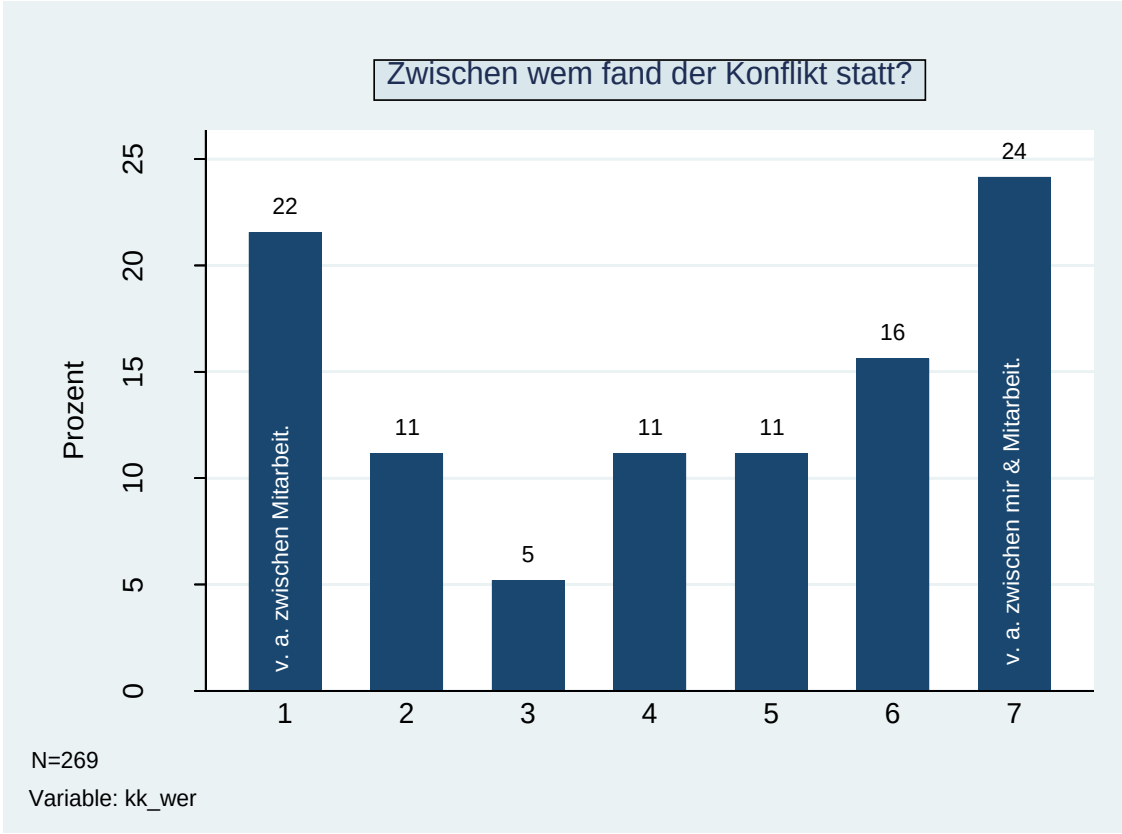




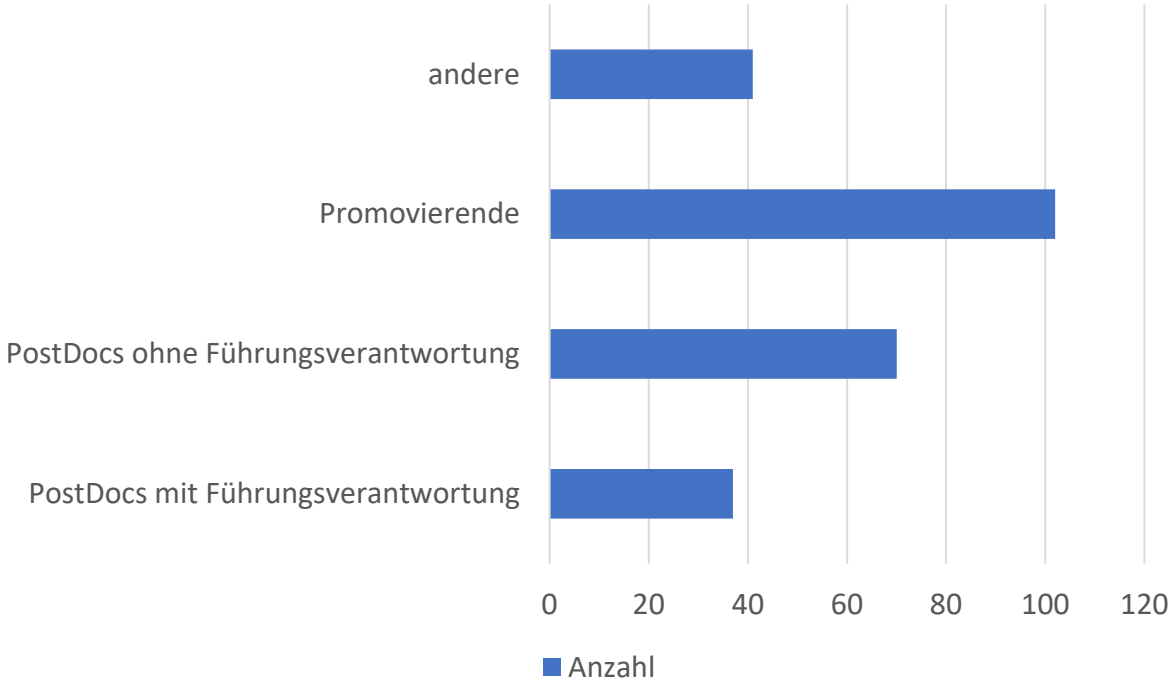
Max Planck: From follower to leader

All images: Public Domain // Wikimedia Commons

Research Leaders Betroffenheit



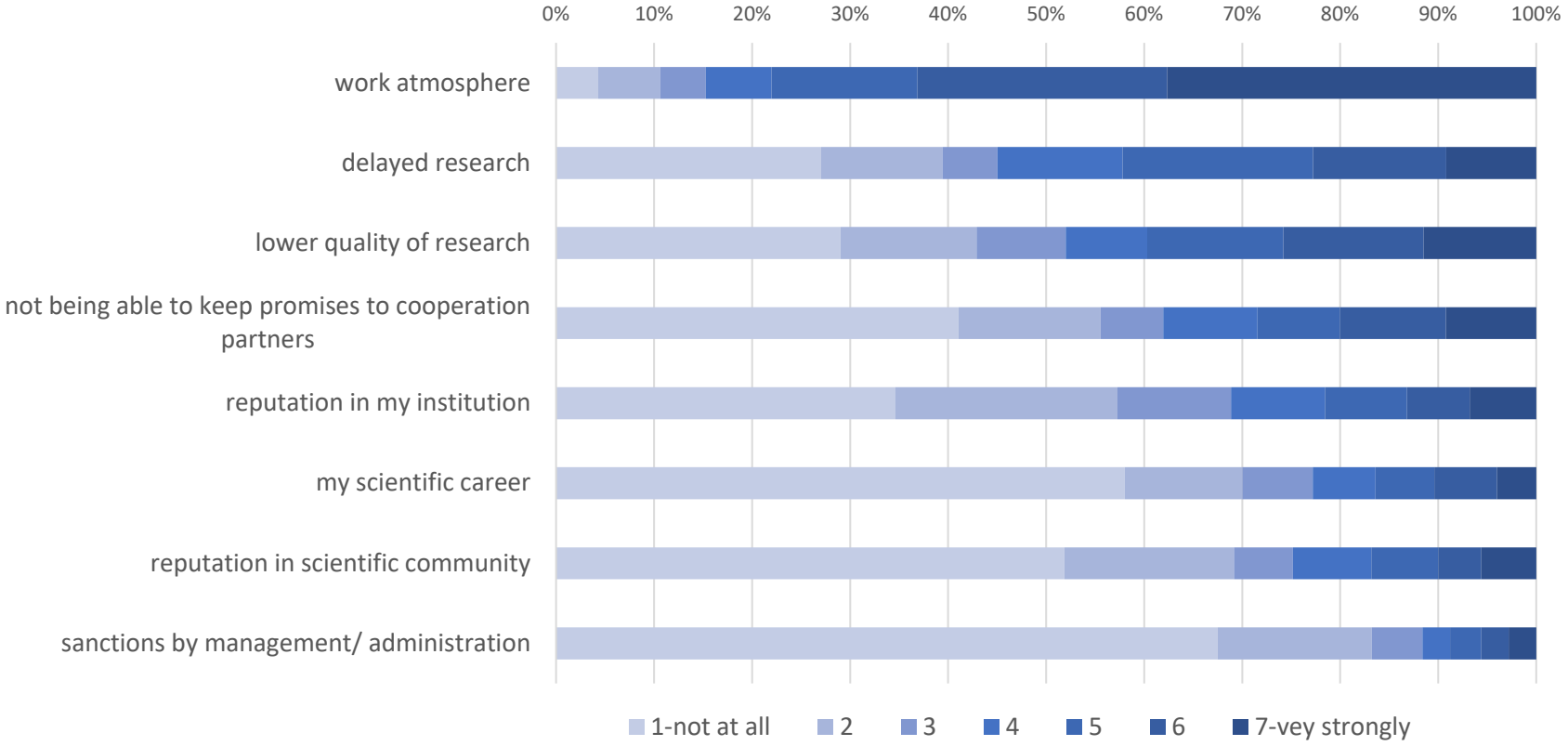
Die Hauptbeteiligten sind meist Promovierende



N =250

Befürchtete Folgen der Konflikte: Arbeitsklima, Verzögerungen und Qualitätseinbußen

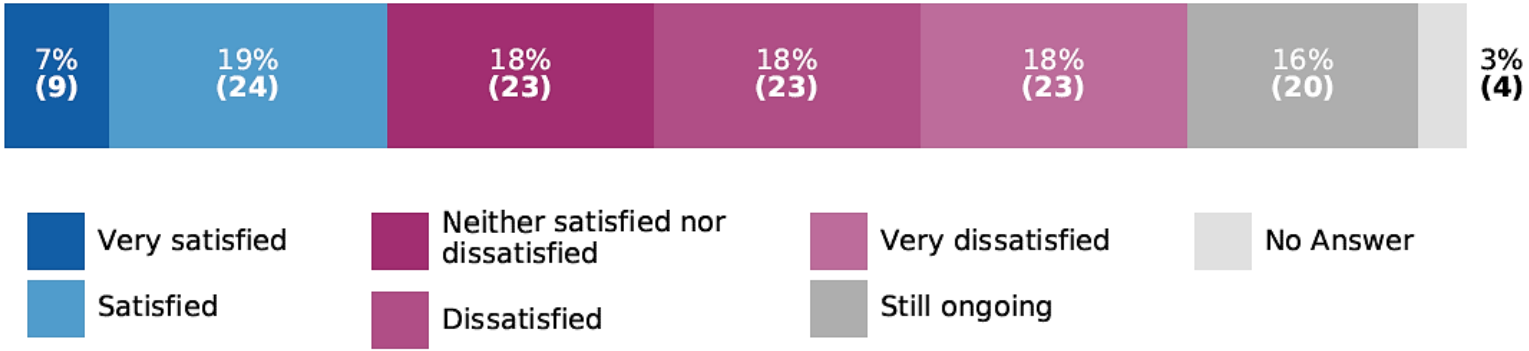
N= 239,
Anteil Nennungen



Zusammen-setzung

Area	Theoretical Physics	Experimental Physics – own laboratory	Experimental Physics – Large Equipment Research	Other		
All	25,3%	43,4%	18,3%	12,9%		
Female	*22,1%*	*48,5 %*	*19,1%*	*10,3%*		
Male	*22,8%*	*45,5%*	*17,5%*	*14,2%*		
N	94	161	68	48		
Current Position	Professor (including Junior professorships with or without tenure, visiting, honorary or senior professors and emeriti)	Junior research group leader	Postdoctoral research associate with leadership responsibility	Postdoctoral research associate without leadership responsibility	Non-university Management position	Other
All	53,8%	3,8 %	25,8%	8,7 %	3,0%	4,9 %
Female	*61,8%*	*4,4 %*	*20,6 %*	*8,8 %*	*0 %*	*4,4 %*
Male	*58,4%*	*3,8 %*	*26,3%*	*2,88%*	*4,8%*	*3,8%*
N	198	14,	95	32	11	18
Current organisation	University	Max-Planck-Society	Helmholtz-Association	Leibniz-Association	Fraunhofer-Society	Other Organisation
All	59,8 %	6,7 %	12,4 %	4,0 %	3,8 %	13,2%
Female	*61,8%*	*8,8%*	*11,8%*	*4,4%*	*2,9%*	*10,3%*
Male	*57,1%*	*5,7%*	*14,2%*	*4,3%*	*4,3%*	*14,6%*
N	222	25	46	15	14	32
Country	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Other		
All	80,2%	3,5%	2,7%	13,6 %		
Female	*79,4%*	*4,4%*	*2,9%*	*13,2%*		
Male	*81,9%*	*2,9%*	*1,9%*	*13,3%*		
N	296	13	10	50		
Nationalität	Germany	Other				
All	88,8 %	11,2%				
Female	*81,5%*	*18,5%*				
Male	*90,8%*	*9,1%*				
N	245	14				

Seldom known, mixed results: Official support points



N=2.378 – Mitarbeitende der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft

Quelle: Olsthorn et al. (2020). PhDnet Report 2019. doi:10.17617/2.3243876.