

## **ALBA-IBRO Diversity Podcast - From Postdoc to PI**

### Episode 4 - Navigating power dynamics: how to lead through troubled waters

#### Transcript

Alicja Puścian | 00:00.500

It's not that you should not speak up if you think something's wrong. It's not about that. But you need to be realistic about how much from the position that you are at currently, how much you can actually impact the situation, what you can change and what you cannot change, especially with people who are higher than you in social hierarchy, in science.

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:22.162

Do you dream of being the next group leader? But feel overwhelmed by the challenges ahead, then we've got just what you need.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:33.041

What if you could learn from scientists all over the world? What if you could listen to them as a guide to what comes next?

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:40.666

You've come to the right place. I'm Jonathan Weitzman.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:43.908

And I'm Renaud Pourpre.

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:45.369

And you're listening to the Alba Ibro Diversity Podcast.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:49.744

Turn up the volume and let's dive into running your own lab.

Jonathan Weitzman | 01:00.984

Previously on the Alba Ibro Diversity Podcast, we set sail to build a strong crew, a team that rose together towards discovery. But even on the calmest of seas, there's always undercurrents and winds that you can't imagine. So as the captain, how do you manage power dynamics when they arise? How do you find allies when the waters become troubled?

Renaud Pourpre | 01:27.464

In today's episode, we'll navigate the turbulent waters of power, trust, and alliance. We'll see how to spot toxic currents before they sink you or your team, and what solutions you have to find calm waters again. We can learn to navigate a system that already existed when we came on board. So what kind of scientist could you be when the storm starts to rise?

Alicja Puścian | 01:56.568

The story that I want to tell you about happened when I was a postdoc.

Renaud Pourpre | 02:00.508

This is Alicja Puścian, an assistant professor at the Nenki Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She has co-founded and led student and diversity organizations such as Women

in Science in Poland and at Yale University. She now promotes global inclusion through the ALBA Network and the Fulbright Commission.

Alicja Puścian | 02:21.414

I started in the United States. I just came to the new lab. At Yale. And there was another postdoc who was way more senior than me. She was well established in the lab who started bullying me from the get-go. She really had a lot against me and didn't like me to use the equipment that was meant for both our experiments. She didn't want me to change or adjust anything that I needed to be adjusted for my own research work. It was really hard. She was not. Only harassing me and walking after me. At one point, it also got physical. She pushed me.

Jonathan Weitzman | 03:02.072

Here is one of the stories about when power dynamics take a dark turn and what it's like to face hostility. Of course, this is just one story. This is why we asked Angeline Dukes, the founding president of Black in Euro, who we met in the previous episode, to help us define what a toxic environment can be.

Angeline Dukes | 03:20.650

I do think that conflict is inevitable, right? Like, as human beings, like, we're bound to have some level of conflict. But I think it's the way in which we address that conflict. And if people feel heard and seen and are able to feel like they can communicate well with others, that's, you know, a way to deal with conflict. Like, I think that there are positive ways to deal with conflict. But I think if at any point someone feels very unsafe and unwelcome in a space, they feel like they can't show up anymore. That environment has now become very toxic for them. So internally, you know, if you're a person who's uncertain if you're in a toxic environment or not, I think it has a lot to do with, like, your own physical reactions to entering that space, right? Like, do you automatically get very, very anxious? And is it whether it's like physically entering the lab space or even via email, right? Like, do you start to panic every time you get an email from your PI or from, you know, a lab mate? Like, does your anxiety levels go up? Is it like raising your blood pressure? Are you feeling very stressed out? And like, getting like heart palpitations every time, you know, you hear about those things. I think that is a good indicator for you that, like this is not a safe space for you anymore.

Renaud Pourpre | 04:26.316

Threatening winds cannot be seen with the eyes, but they can be felt. In the same way, toxic environments may not be very visible. They take many forms, which makes them very difficult to identify.

Angeline Dukes | 04:39.976

Yeah, so, unfortunately, most of the Black and neuro community members that I've had conversations with at some point in their lives have experienced a toxic environment. As a student, as a trainee in a lab, or even their current like work environments, Any level of discriminatory, right, whether it's like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, right, xenophobia, like to whatever extent. And I think all of those things play a huge role into creating those toxic environments. And I'll be honest, I think to some extent, right, academia is toxic as a whole. Like, I think that we have been confronting that, right, where just the systems and how it's been built is just not. A safe space for most people.

Jonathan Weitzman | 05:18.434

Before we can learn to navigate, we must understand the waters we are all sailing. Where did these tides come from? Why do some people move forward so easily, while others struggle to stay afloat? On that topic, Angeline explained to us that the roots of this turbulent sea can run deep back in the history of academia.

Angeline Dukes | 05:38.151

Yeah, I mean, I think that it's been like since the inception of higher education and science as a whole, right? Like, it was always intended to be a very privileged place, right? Like it was... Built as a space for single, white, or like, even if they're not single, right? If they have, like a wife to take care of the kids or something, you know what I mean? Like? It was made for, like, straight white men to be able to thrive in these spaces, right? Where, like, they were very homogenized. And they could quote, unquote, do things like, based on merit, right? And anytime someone other came into that space, right? Whether it's a woman, it's a person of color, it's someone, you know, who was queer, right, like someone who was disabled. As they're coming into these spaces that were never intended for them to thrive, having to make adjustments to accommodate them. And to make sure that, you know, they have the support that they need. There's always so much pushback against that. And the fact is, science and academia and higher education as a whole has changed so much over the years. In which it is supposed to be intended for everyone to be able to thrive. But the fact is, it's just not. It's not there yet.

Renaud Pourpre | 06:39.903

No, we still aren't there yet. In the previous episode, we met Dori Grijseels. A postdoctoral researcher and co-lead of the ALBA Network Gender and Sexual Diversity Committee. Dory described how these trends manifest themselves today.

Dori Grijseels | 06:56.125

Another issue that I think we can't really ignore is increased anti-immigration stance. In Germany at the moment, I work with a lot of people from all over the world. And can see people, especially from eastern Europe and from, you know, South Asia and Africa, struggling with... Getting visas, staying on visas, being in vulnerable positions in labs. As there is a push towards anti-immigration policies, we're actually seeing a drain on the people we can get in academia. The current situation in Germany, what is becoming more and more apparent, is a sort of systemic issue with bullying and harassment. So I don't know if you saw this documentary that came out. In Germany, about Max Planck and about the harassment. And they interviewed over 40 people, all, you know, sending different types of harassment, bullying. And I see, we see that, I think we see this across academia, right? Because of this very hierarchical structure, people remain in power, are allowed to have these behaviors. And sometimes people are being called out and luckily are being fired. But even, you know, in a case like Lawrence Krauss, who very clearly was shown to have sexually harassed people, he then is just hired by another university. This is also a massive issue where specifically for inclusivity, where especially vulnerable people, so people on visas, are being pushed out by sort of this hierarchical structure.

Renaud Pourpre | 08:28.072

We have a role to play in shaping navigation routes. We have built some parts of them, limited others. And we continue to maintain them today.

Jonathan Weitzman | 08:37.217

We know that these few stories are hard to take in. While we love travel stories peppered with adventures, we prefer to contemplate them rather than experience them ourselves. These storms should only exist in fiction, yet they are very real. So hang on tight. We ask our guests what we can do when faced with troubled waters.

Alicja Puścian | 08:58.315

I cannot say that strongly enough. Think about your safety. There are different situations. Some of them can be really threatening to your not only physical safety, but also psychological safety. In a way that is going to impact you for a long time. Don't stay in those situations. I cannot say that more strongly. Even if you are in a dark spot, like I was, and you keep thinking, this is going to end my scientific career, your life, your value as a human being, your integrity is more important than any kind of career that you can have. So if you feel deeply threatened, move away from that environment at all costs possible, but make sure to do it safely for yourself. And having an ally, I think, is a fundamental part of that. Somebody you can rely on, talk to, and ask for help when need be. And one other thing that I will highly recommend, try not to engage in conflicts that don't have to. Appear on the scene. Sometimes they are just not worth it. And I myself have been in situations many times in my life that I have taken issue with the people who are in the positions of authority. So clearly above me in social structure that I could not have won. So those were the battles that I had no way of winning at that stage of my scientific career.

Renaud Pourpre | 10:30.110

You got it. Safety first. But even the strongest captain can't face a storm alone. Sometimes you need to look out. Someone else on deck. Angeline has some good advice to help.

Angeline Dukes | 10:44.114

Absolutely. Yeah. I think from the trainee perspective, I think the most important thing is to find allies and people that are like, willing to help advocate on your behalf. You end up questioning, right? Like, did this really happen? Is this like something that's a big deal? Am I overreacting? Should I just brush it off? Right. Like, and getting in your own head, and you can sometimes talk yourself out of it. Be like, oh, maybe it wasn't that bad. But when you're actually speaking with other people who have, you know, an outsider perspective from it, it can be helpful to reinforce that, like, no, that was actually a problem. Like, no, this was actually a really big concern and you should speak up about. This, and you should address this because it is a big problem. And maybe it's your PI who's perpetuating some of these and helping create this like toxic environment. Having someone else who can help advocate on your behalf is going to be essential, right? Like, having other people that you feel comfortable with talking to about these issues. And you know will have your back and are there for. You can help you address the problem. Because it is intimidating, right? Like, it's so scary when you're the one, you know, in that environment, you're feeling so worried, you're feeling very anxious about this. To be able to speak up for yourself requires an immense amount of bravery. And so it can be very helpful to know that you have support and you have allies, and you have people that are willing to also help with that. So I would say like that is the most important. First step is to just find other people that you feel

comfortable with, that you can talk to and be open with. And who could understand and give you good advice. You do not have to suffer in silence. So there are like specific university resources that you should look for to, you know, be able to have that level of support at the local level. As students, and even like as employees, if you're a postdoc or a lab tech, you have resources at the university or the institution that you're at, right? There are protections for you. You may not be fully aware of them. And like, that's when it's a good time to, like, talk to HR or talk to the ombudsman.

Jonathan Weitzman | 12:28.402

Angeline reminds us that no one needs to sell these waters alone. You can be braver together. But sometimes the harsh reality hits. Alicia remembers a difficult moment from her journey. This was something that

Alicja Puścian | 12:42.850

I really took very, very hard. And I didn't find an immediate respite. Into the people in the lab and also in the management of the department. I went to the person who was supposed to be handling all of those conflicts, you know how it goes. There is also always a person assigned to this kind of thing. You should report to them. They should advise you. Yes. So I went to them and what they told me was, I know the lab in which you are working, it's such a wonderful environment. I can't believe that this would be happening there. And this was the end of the story. So I really didn't have support, even from the people who are dedicated to handling ethical issues. I was very afraid. It was my first week, two weeks of being in the lab. I was afraid that they are going to fire me, that they are going to deport me, maybe. I don't know. I was just really, really frightened by what might happen. I was also feeling very badly because as a result of the situation, I couldn't do my experimental work. So I was also scared that I wouldn't be able to deliver on the scientific level. I really didn't know what to do. I called the hotline after all. Because it turned out that they did have a Yale hotline for people who are being harassed or bullied. and, you know, or just in a very bad shape mentally in relation to work. And they told me to take notes and try to go through this situation in a way that is not going to be threatening to my physical safety. And this is what I did. And it really happened that after a time and after talking to my PI. This kind of stopped and started being a way calmer environment for me. This woman, because it was a woman, she ended up leaving the lab, after all. But I worked with her for several months after those events.

Renaud Pourpre | 14:51.136

What to do then? What to do about your own loneliness in a vast, threatening ocean? Alicia tells us how she manages this herself.

Alicja Puścian | 15:00.276

So this is one. Of a good examples of power dynamics when you are new in a place that you don't know, you don't understand the rules, you don't know who to turn to, how to handle the conflict, who to ask for help, if anybody, and how you yourself should respond. That's a really tough situation because you feel you have no power, and the power lies in everybody else's function, in everybody else's position. And I think, fear... It's just such a strong ingredient in all of this. I think I would have handled it way better if I wasn't so afraid at the time. Because I started thinking way too much about how it might impact my career. Maybe I will have to go back home. Maybe they will fire me from this dream position. Because my postdoc was something very, very important for me. It was an extremely important

experience that I wanted to have, that I really sacrificed a lot to have. So when you are afraid, you're just losing your mind. So if I had any advice for a person who would be under similar circumstances, which I hope none of your listeners will, I would say, try and handle your fear first, because that's your worst enemy. It won't allow you to think clearly. And you won't be able to take yourself out of those potentially dangerous situations if you won't handle your emotions. So that would be my advice.

Jonathan Weitzman | 16:41.455

But to take it further, perhaps when the horizon is empty, we shouldn't just look for a lighthouse in the night. Angeline tells us that when we're up against the wall, it's still possible to launch a distress flare, not to see, but to be seen. But only if you find deeply inside yourself the courage to light it up.

Angeline Dukes | 17:00.339

Don't be afraid to leverage social media and like folks at other institutions and at other places to find that level of support, right? Even if they're not, you know, within your local bubble, We have so many wonderful ways to connect with people from all around the world now. I can guarantee you that you are not the only one who has been through this. As we've talked about, academia has had a very long history of systemic oppression. And you, like, are not the only, You will not be the first, and, unfortunately, will probably not be the last person to go through that. And so what that means is that there are other people who can relate and can give you advice and are there to support you. But it does have to do with you being brave enough to say something about it and to ask for that help, right? People won't know that you're struggling if you don't speak up for yourself.

Renaud Pourpre | 17:42.570

During the exchanges with our guests, we realized that the captain must be brave to hold the helm in the storm and lead with integrity. You may understand now that there are no miracle solutions, but what can a new team leader do to implement change?

Jonathan Weitzman | 18:00.087

For that, let us listen to practical tips from our guests. Dory lifts the veil on what a team leader can do right from the start.

Dori Grijseels | 18:08.556

I think it's good to be aware of the situation surrounding you, surrounding your team. So, especially when you're recruiting. Vulnerable people or minoritized people. So, say, for example, you're recruiting someone on a visa, you know, I think it's important, as a group leader to be particularly engaged with, what are some of the issues that they might face? How can I help with this? What can I do in terms of, you know, talking to admin or making sure that they feel secure? You know, you can imagine that if you're on a visa and you're constantly thinking about, will I be kicked out of this country? Or will there be issues with this? That will take away time and energy from your job. So I think as a group leader, the best thing you can do is position yourself so that your people feel comfortable coming to you and talking to you about these issues.

Renaud Pourpre | 18:55.592

Angeline then followed with setting common rules, creating a space where everyone dares to say when things aren't going well.

Angeline Dukes | 19:04.014

You know, at the start of the lab, or at any point, honestly, like where everyone in the lab gets to come together and... Bring up like some of these, like common ground rules and like contracts of a lab. That way, we can make sure that there is less room for this toxic environment to fester. And that the trainees feel empowered to be able to speak up. We agreed to all of this. I'm not feeling safe right now. This is against what we had went over as a lab. And now the PI can become more informed, right, about, like, what's happening. Because I think sometimes, too, PiS don't know exactly what's going on in the day to day of the lab, right? They're there, but they're not like there full time. And so... I think creating spaces for people to be able to speak up. And whether that's, you know, even like an anonymous Google form where people can, you know, if they don't want it like tied to their name, they could just send in something and you can, like, get that information. Still, where it's like, now, you know that there is something that's happening that needs to be addressed.

Jonathan Weitzman | 19:54.799

For Alicia, to be a group leader is to be the most adult of adults. You should not look away from your responsibility.

Alicja Puścian | 20:01.611

It's a very common attitude to actually think that things will blow over. They will figure it out amongst themselves. It may be bad today, but tomorrow they are going to forget about it and move on to other stuff. Don't do it. Just don't. It's your responsibility. You need to be the adult in the room. Even though we are all adults, you are ultimately responsible for handling whatever is in your lap. That would be my number one advice. You are absolutely not the parent, but you need to be the most adult. Of the adults who are present. You need to say it out loud that this is your responsibility. How the conflicts are handled, because you are the one who is accepting the consequences for it. Trainees come and go, and the PIS stay, and they're responsible for whatever is happening in the social group that is called the lab, and do it as calmly as possible. Try not to add to the fire that is already burning in a very, very explicit and hot way. If you remain calm, there is way more chances that this is going to go well. But having said that, there are circumstances and events that require an immediate response, a strong response that is unequivocal. For example, when somebody crosses a line in a way that is very clear and very explicit. When it comes to ethics, respect towards other people, the sexual orientation, the religion, the language, the diversity, whatever it might be. I've seen it all. That needs to be stopped immediately, explicitly, and in the moment, because the potential harm that comes out of that is just too much. You just have to stay engaged. In your own social environment, it matters even more because you are a part of it. You are creating the social fabric of whatever you are taking part in. I believe in the power of doing things together. I think people get along way better when they have initiatives, they handle together, when they try and organize things, especially for the junior people, for the early career scientists. When you have something in common, even if the cultures are different, you have way higher possibility of influencing other people if you get along well. So the responsibility of a PI. In my mind, would be to really try to understand the colleagues that are so different and try to learn from them also. Not to preach to them in the first place, but figure out what you have to learn from them. And maybe then, when you have

a good connection, you can talk about what do you think and how things should be handled in your mind. But it has to be a conversation.

Jonathan Weitzman | 22:51.187

No one is saying that taking responsibility is easy. In fact, being brave can put you at risk. But when you decide to take on this responsibility of navigating, you make yourself vulnerable. And it is this vulnerability itself that makes it a courageous act. But let's be honest, not everything rests on the shoulders of the group leader. The team exists in the context of an institution that should share responsibilities.

Alicja Puścian | 23:21.133

But it's a matter of an institution. And I want to circle back to that. Because just like PI is the head of the lab, there is somebody who's the head of the department. And there is somebody... Who is head of the institution, be that the university or a research institute. And they are the ones who should be making sure that the values, or at the forefront of the communication that it produces towards the world are actually being upheld by both the PIS and everybody else who is working within those institutions. If it's not, then something is not OK with the leadership of this institution, and they need to be held accountable for that.

Jonathan Weitzman | 24:01.676

Our system is not perfect. And on that note, Alicia shares with us one last piece of advice.

Alicja Puścian | 24:07.942

Listen to the opinions that you don't really want to hear, because that's a guiding post. If you know that you are hearing from somebody that this is something that you should not do, and you feel very strongly against it, That's the advice that you should ponder on for an extended period of time, because there is something within you that produces this strong response. That you don't want to go in that direction, don't want to even listen to the other side of the conversation. So I think being realistic about the steps that you need to take to actually fight for whatever you want to have. Maybe you need to take a step back, re-examine what has been discovered by you so far, and try to think about whether or not it's novel enough. Maybe it's not the kind of research that you really want to be engaged in. Maybe that's the advice that you don't want to hear so badly. So I think being realistic is very, very, very important. And if you are in a position, I was in that position, that you are in an environment that is going to make it very hard for you to succeed, not because of who you are, not because of how hard you work as a scientist, but because of the ramifications concerning the social structure. If you know that this is a place where you cannot succeed, go as fast as you can and open your eyes to other possibilities. This was one of the biggest mistakes of my scientific career. So have your eyes open, open yourself to possibilities. And if you know there are some intrinsic factors, whatever they may be, other people, the structure of the place, the external expectations, whatever it is, If you know that there are factors that may be blocking you, try to have an open mind about what can be your next step. Because the more options you take under consideration, the higher the possibility. That you're actually going to succeed. Don't close yourself. Depending on who you are, what are your values, what are your goals, There is going to be places and people and systems that are better suited to who you are than other systems. And I think remaining open-minded about it and not being afraid to try, reach out, talk to people, see how it looks like in different institutions, different countries. Even to the options that you would not consider your first choice in the



first place, because maybe they carry value that you may not see it. Or maybe they are just a step that you have to take to get to the other place. That is your ultimate goal. So that would be my advice, most definitely.

Renaud Pourpre | 26:56.543

As we come to the end of this episode, one thing is clear. Navigating the scientific field is no pleasure cruise. It's a capricious ocean. Where some winds send you off course, while others keep you stuck in one place.

Jonathan Weitzman | 27:18.118

What we have heard here is not just a series of personal stories. They serve to illustrate the complexity of managing a crew and preparing for the ocean. What we described in this episode is only one vision of academia. The reality may be more complex and diverse, but our guests have shared their own experiences and vulnerabilities. They caution that we have not yet built safe sea routes for everyone.

Renaud Pourpre | 27:48.810

So maybe it's time to move forward to another horizon, contemplating your success. Because on a stormy ocean, should we really compare each other's accomplishments? This raises the next question in our podcast series. Can we ask, what does success mean in academia? We'll find out in the next episode. Thank you for listening to this episode. And we thank our guests, Alicia, Dory, Angeline, for sharing their stories and their tips with us.

Jonathan Weitzman | 28:30.039

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