

# How emotions and expectations shape researchers' professional experiences

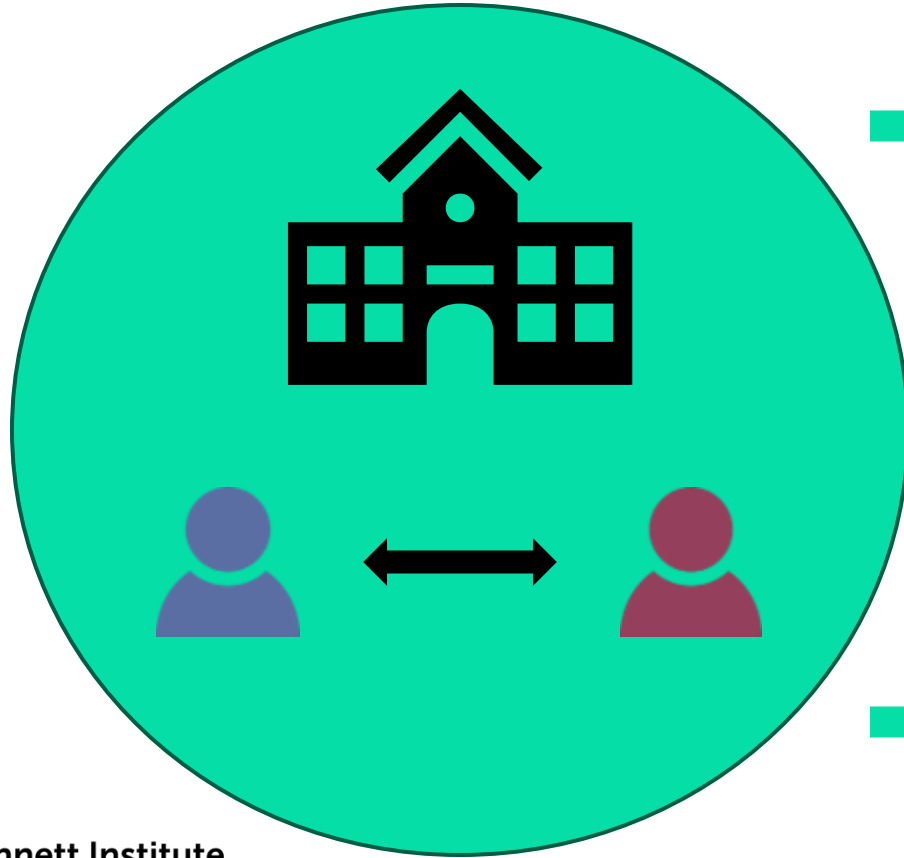
**Research on Research at the University of Cambridge**

Lara Abel, 30 June 2025



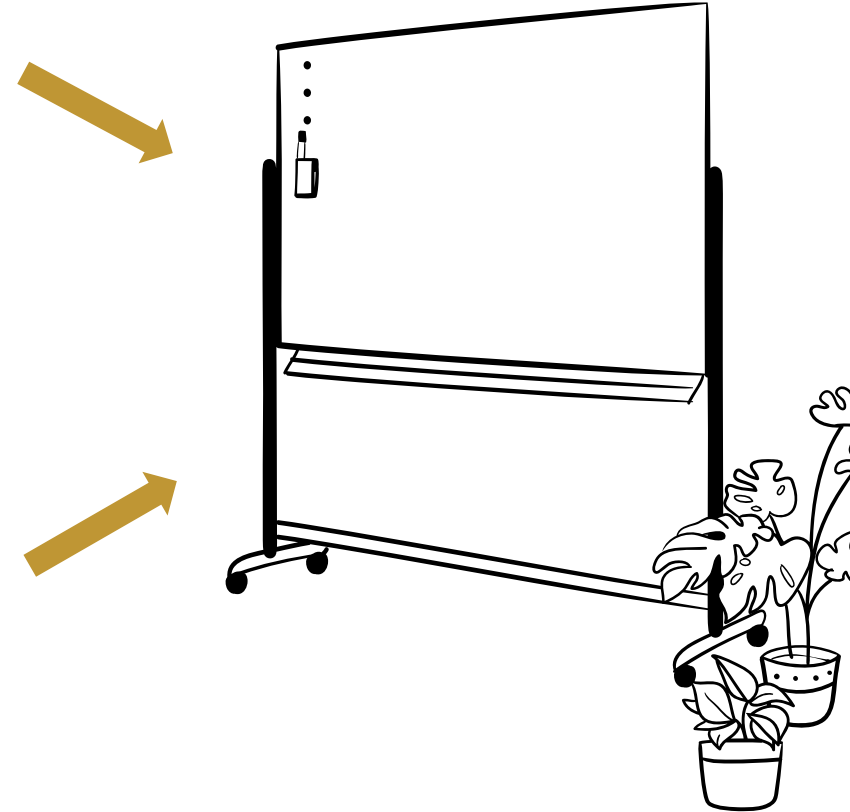
**Bennett Institute  
for Public Policy**  
Cambridge

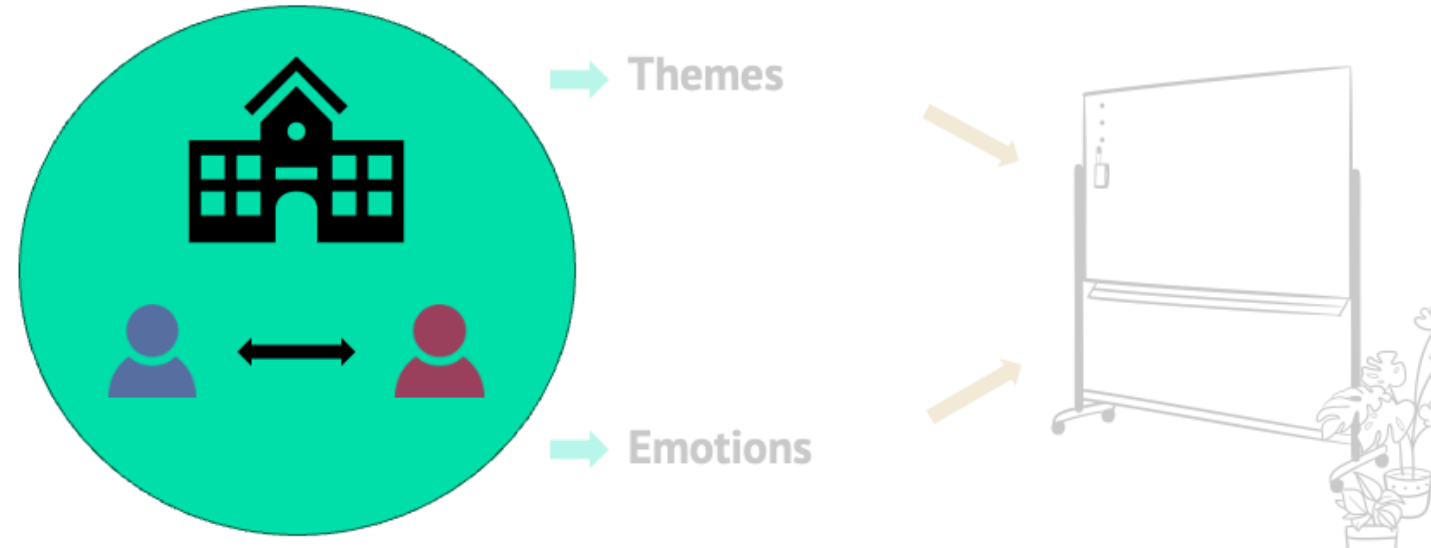
# From understanding to intervening



→ **Themes**

→ **Emotions**

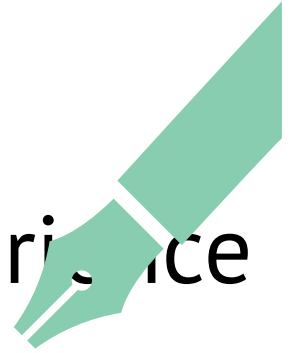




# Research

# Narrative-based methods

Narrative writing prompts on the postdoc experience  
(Your Voice – YV)



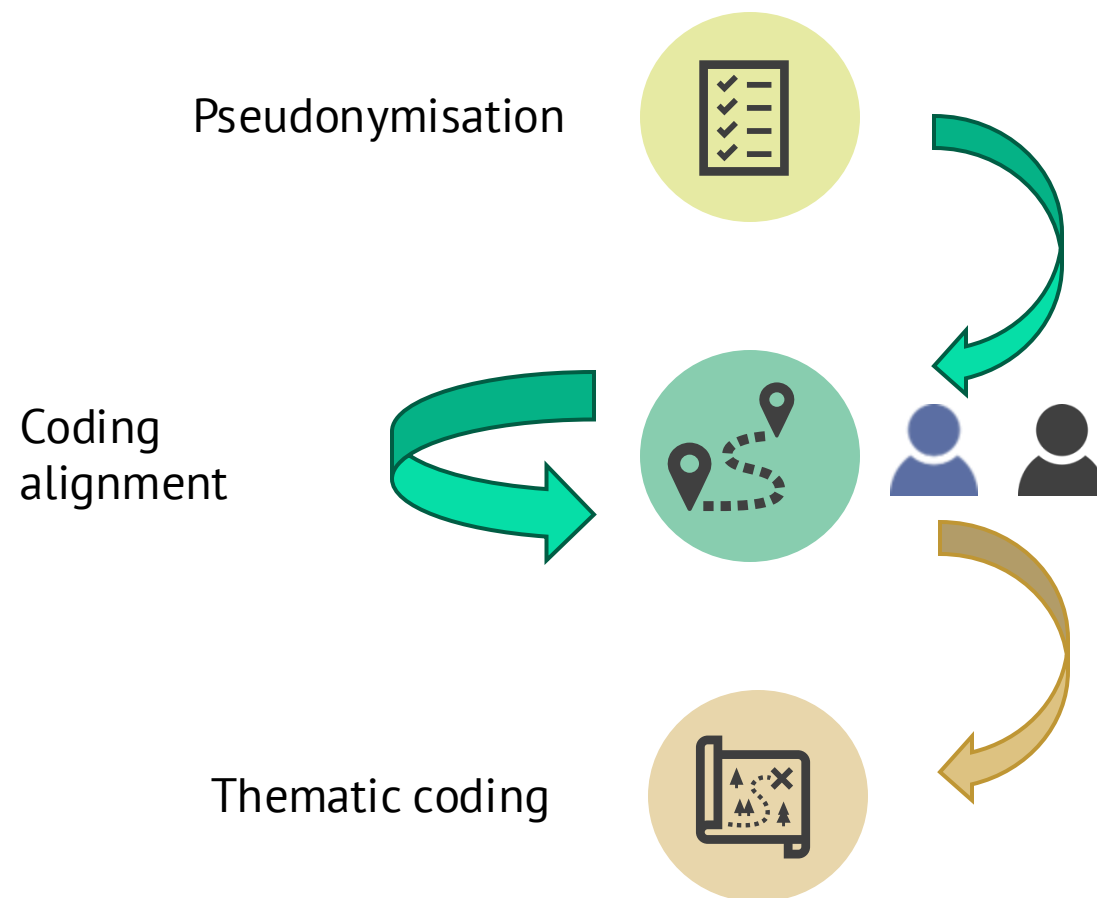
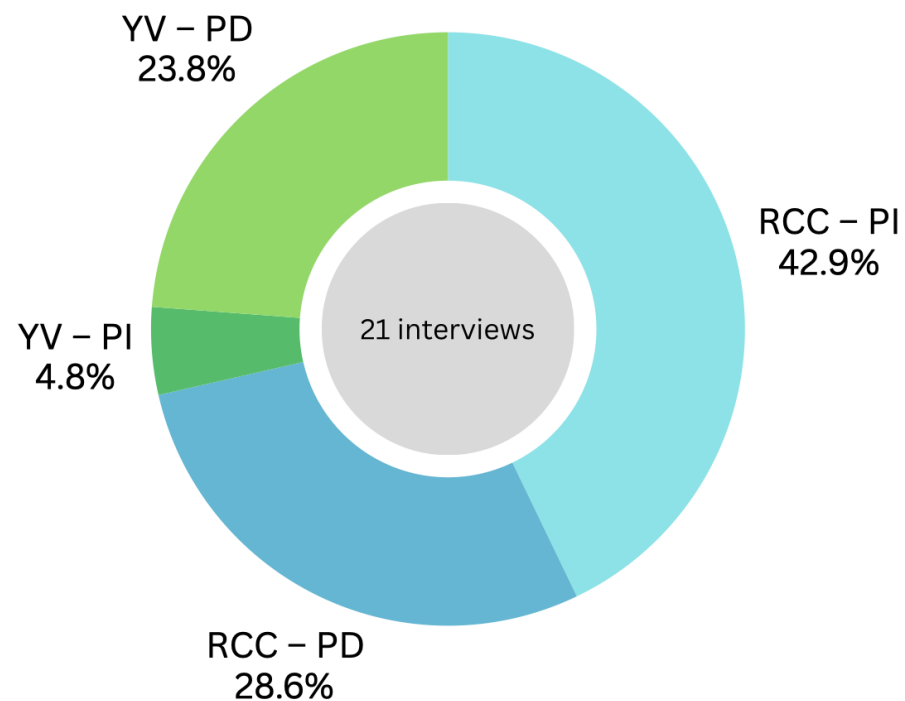
Research Culture Celebration (RCC)



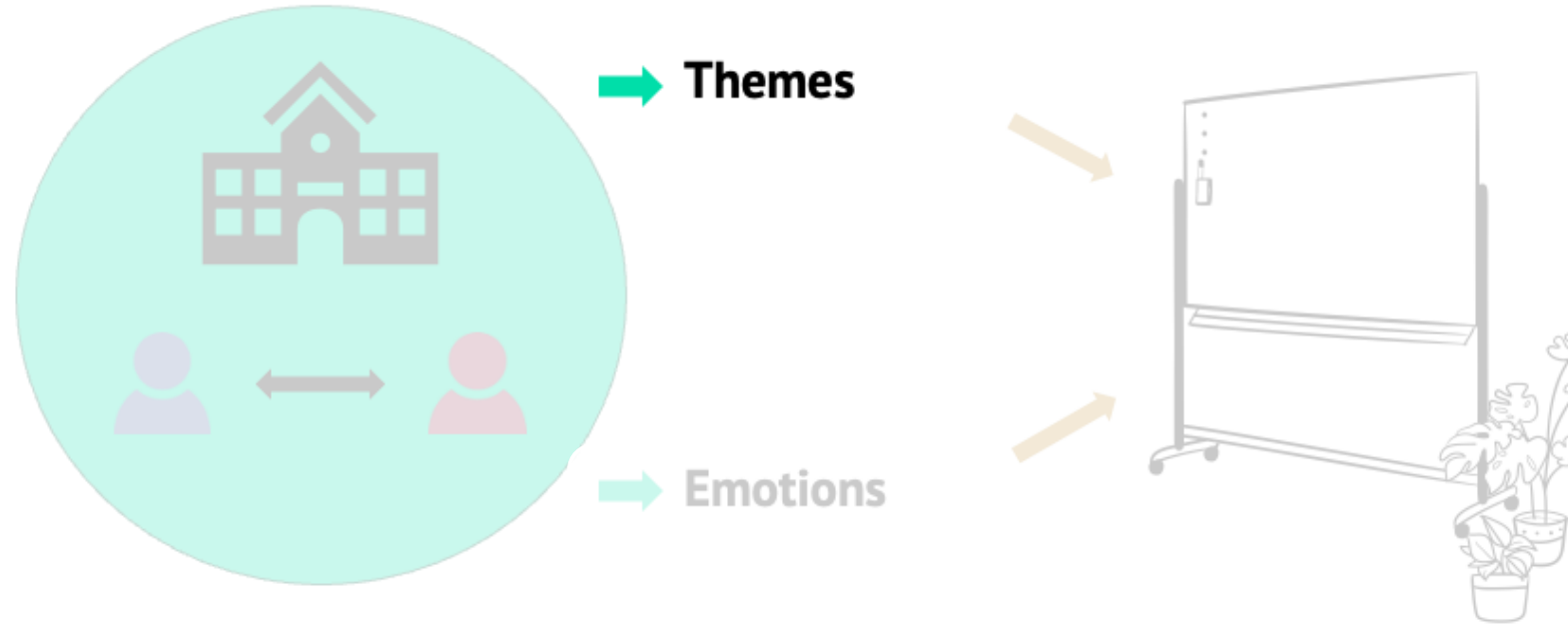
**+ Follow-up interviews**



# Coding procedure



# Analysis



# Themes



# Supervision, Autonomy (18) & Support (40)

## From micromanaging to granting autonomy

- ❖ Requires trust and the ability to delegate
- ❖ Room for growth and development

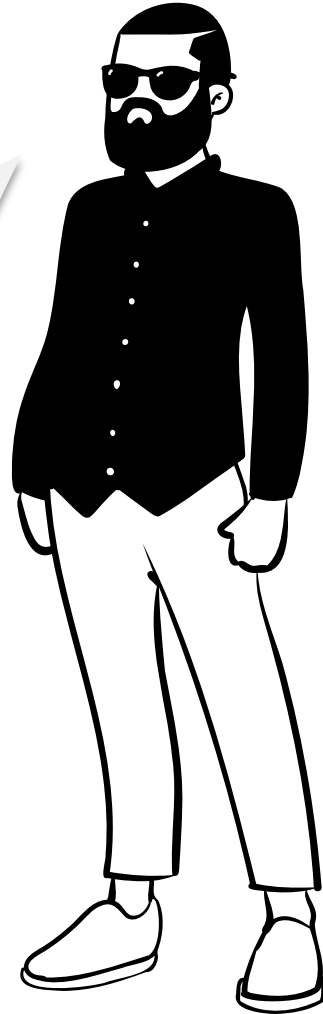
## Team structures matter

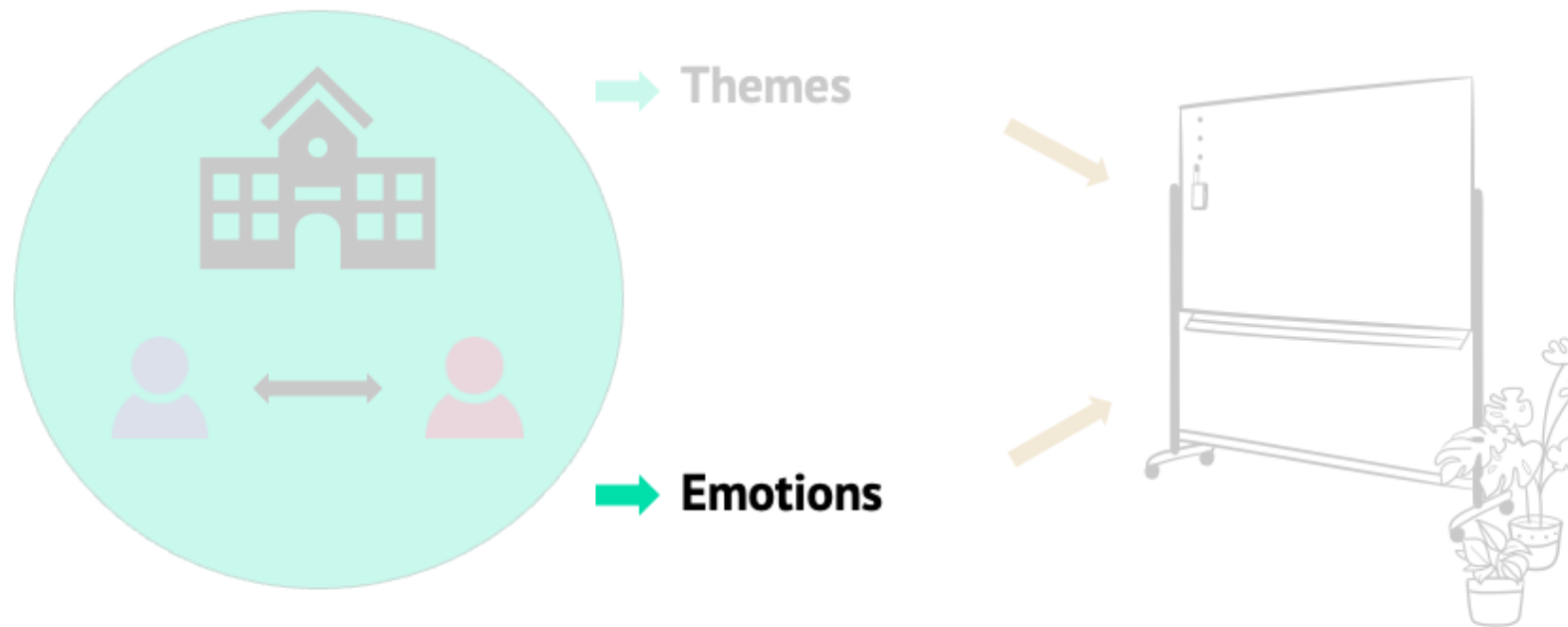
- ❖ Flat teams enhance autonomy
- ❖ Requires expectation alignment

## Finding the right balance

- ❖ Between autonomy and support
- ❖ Requires time, energy, resources

“Someone that you **get on with** and they let you have some **autonomy**, like, not micromanage, but also at the same time, not like giving no **support**. So, there's a **balance**, right?”  
– *Postdoc*





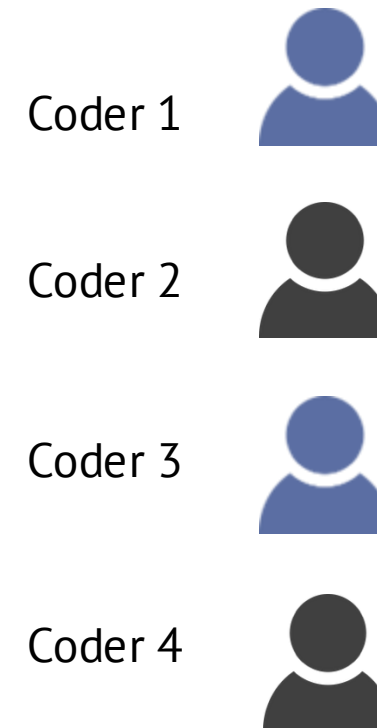
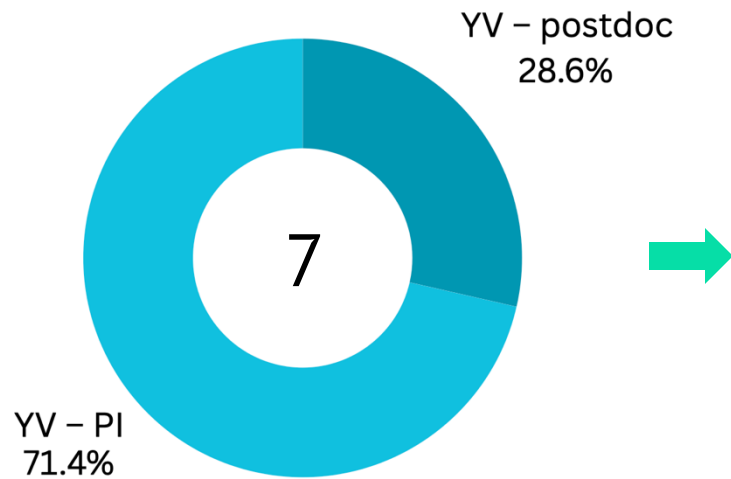
# Analysis

# Procedure

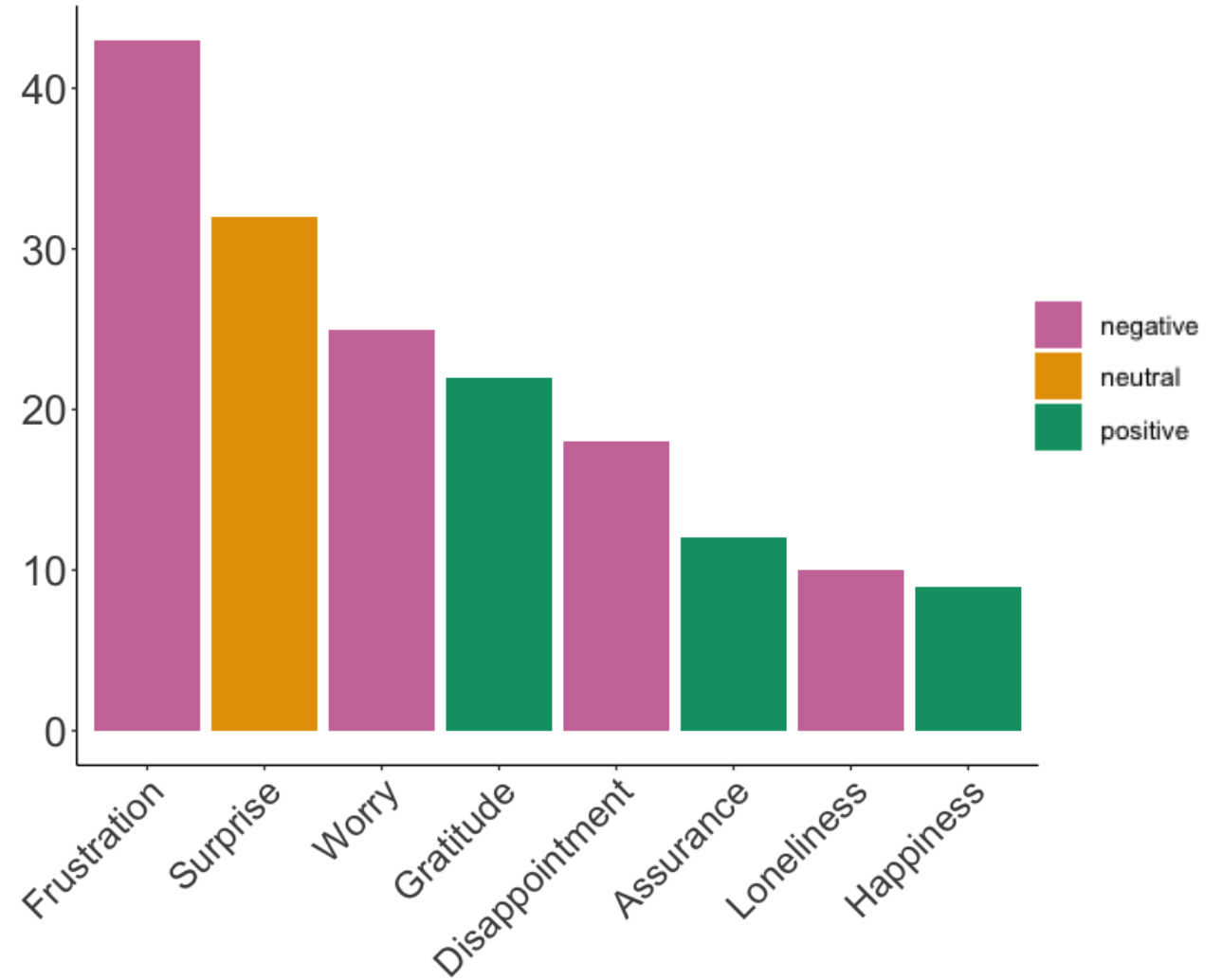
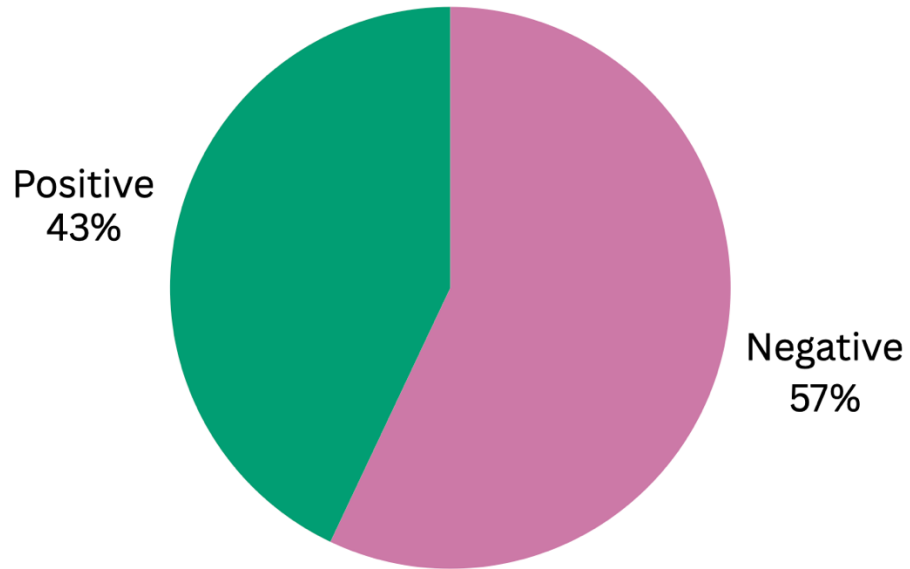
coding alignment

coding

analysis



# Emotions



# Frustration (43)

## **Institution – the academic system**

- ❖ Precarity and lack of support
- ❖ Lack of recognition
- ❖ Power imbalances and rigid hierarchies
- ❖ Admin, regulations, procedures

## **Social – working with other**

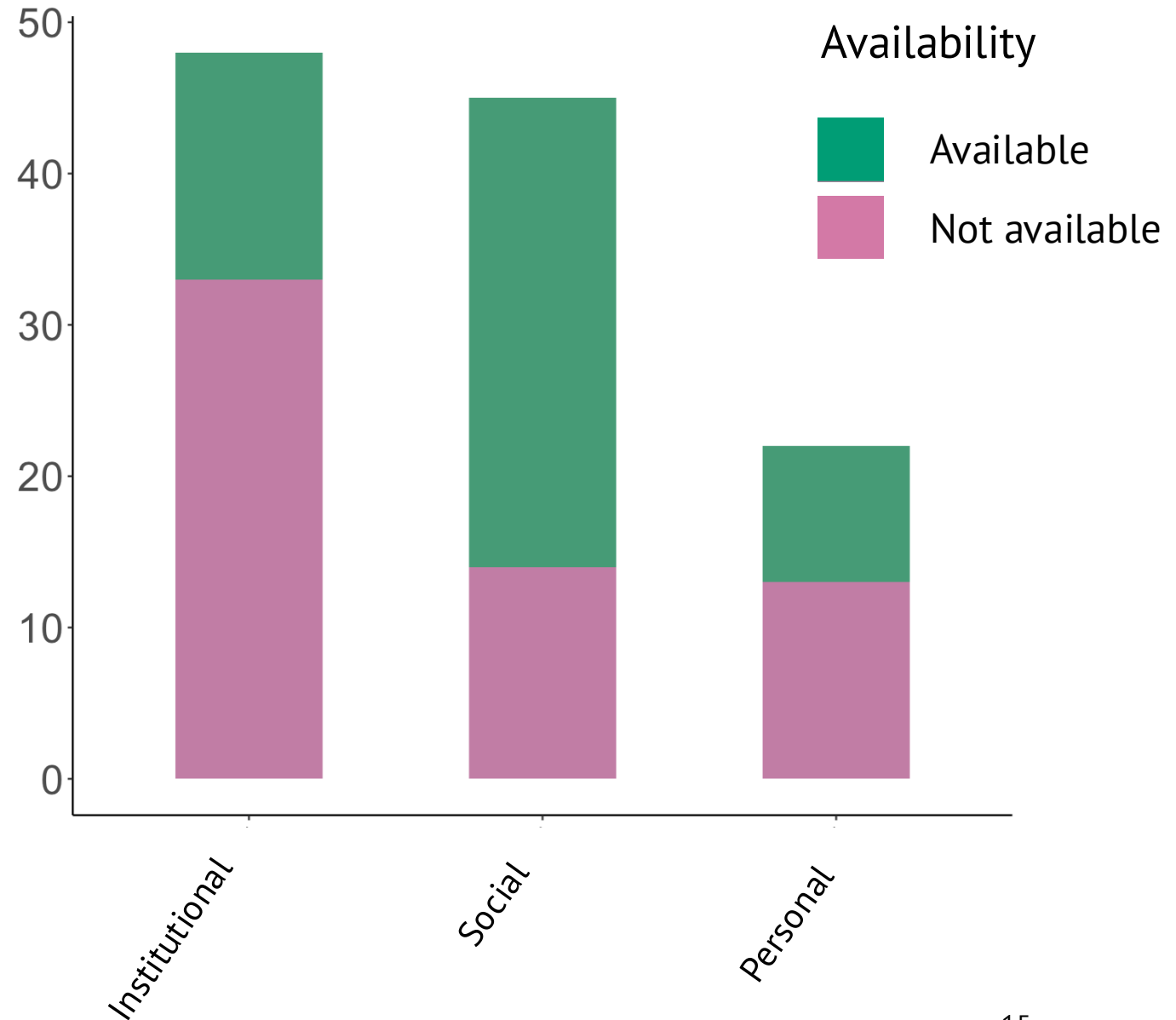
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Expectation misalignment
- ❖ Unhealthy relationships

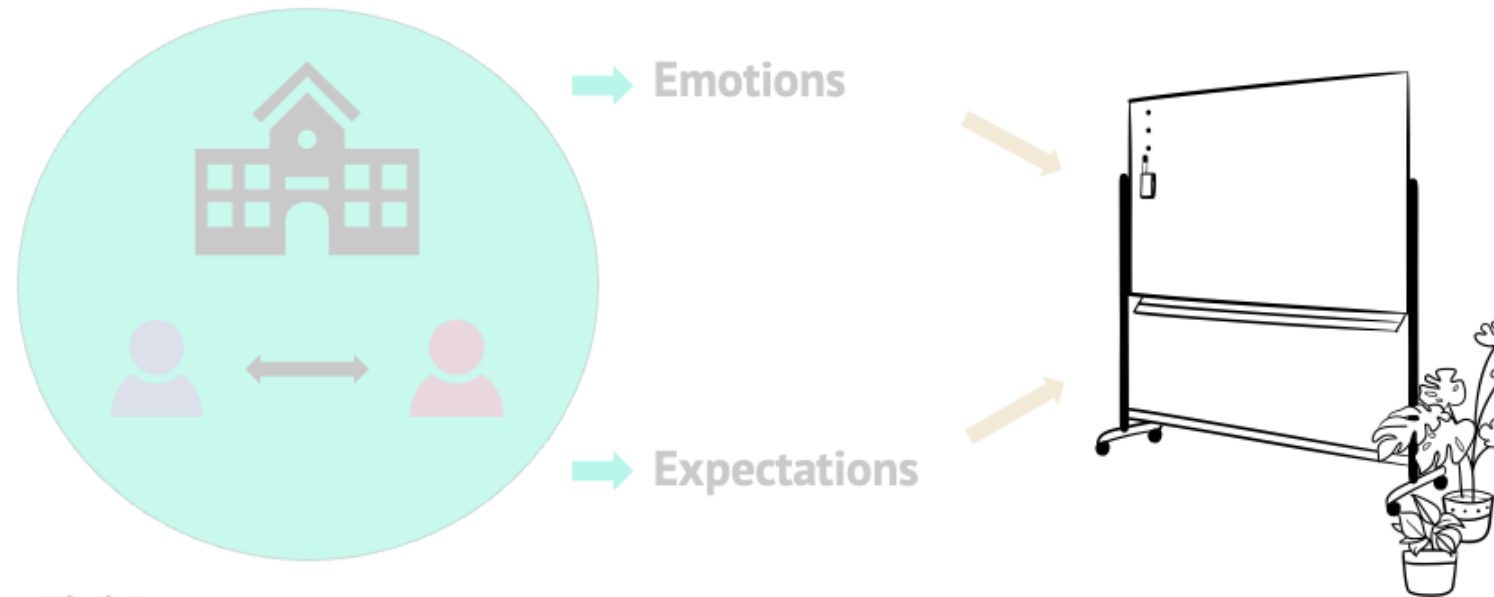
The most frustrating conversation I have so often is: 'Everybody would want to do what you're doing if they could. You know, all the lecturers, they'd all want your, you know, they'd all want to be researchers full time.' I'm like: 'I don't think they want this. I don't think they want precariousness.' – *PI*



# Resources

- ❖ Institutional resources tend to be perceived as insufficient
- ❖ Social resources regarded as the main source of support





# Interventions

# Team handbook workshops



Expectation  
management & alignment



Codifying  
research culture

FEATURE ARTICLE



RESEARCH CULTURE

## Why every lab needs a handbook

**Abstract** A lab handbook is a flexible document that outlines the ethos of a research lab or group. A good handbook will outline the different roles within the lab, explain what is expected of all lab members, provide an overview of the culture the lab aims to create, and describe how the lab supports its members so that they can develop as researchers. Here we describe how we wrote a lab handbook for a large research group, and provide resources to help other labs write their own handbooks.

**BENJAMIN C TENDLER\*, MADDIE WELLAND, KARLA L MILLER AND THE WIN  
HANDBOOK TEAM**



**Bennett Institute  
for Public Policy**  
Cambridge

# Postdoc Academy Workshop

TUESDAY, JULY 8

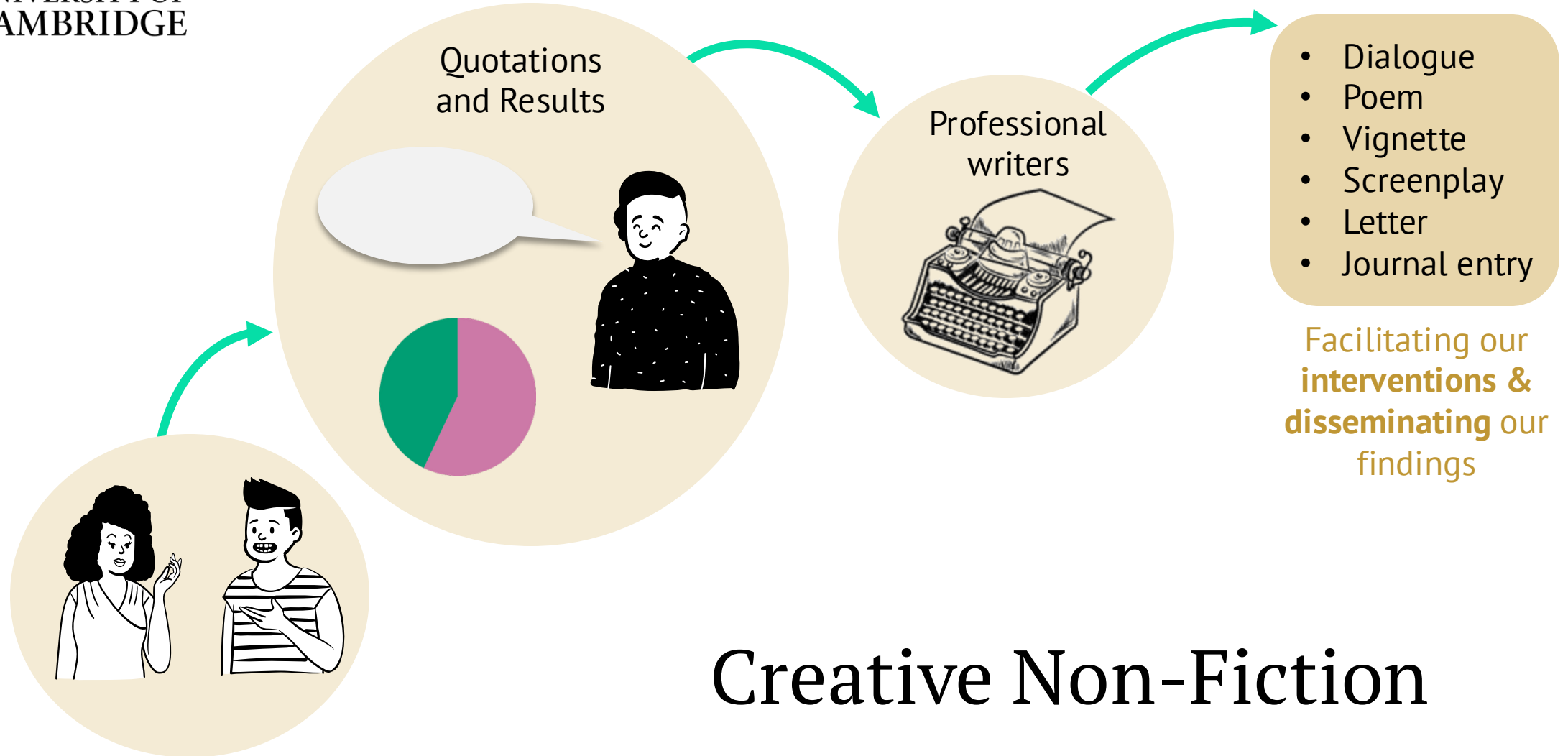
## Strategies for a successful postdoc



Jul 8 @ 10:00am

● Information Session ● Skills Development

The postdoctoral period is a pivotal career stage during which you will need to balance new learning and strategic forward-planning with the day-to-day responsibilities of your role. There is no singl...



# Research on Research Group members



**Steven  
Wooding**  
Head of  
Research on  
Research



**Lara  
Abel**  
Researcher



**Allison  
Beggs**  
Researcher



**Debbie  
Birkett**  
Project  
Administrator



**Luisa  
Ciampi**  
Researcher



**Agata  
Czech**  
Researcher



**Mollie  
Etheridge**  
Researcher



**Becky  
Ioppolo**  
Project  
Coordinator



**Yingjie  
Li**  
Researcher



**Molly  
Smith**  
Researcher



**Noam  
Tal-Perry**  
Researcher



# Questions?

Thank you!



Get in touch: [arrcproject@admin.cam.ac.uk](mailto:arrcproject@admin.cam.ac.uk)