

Ana

Episode 1

April 2012

Dear Prof. Wakeford,

I thought you might like to hear my story to warn other PhD students.

My name is Ana. I had my PhD viva in Neuroscience at the University of Madrid three weeks ago and I passed with the maximum distinction – Cum Laude. I am now working as a postdoctoral researcher in London and I am so glad that things worked out good in the end. But things might have been very different.

Doing my PhD has been the most challenging – but also the most depressing and extremely difficult experience - that I went through in my entire life. When I was a teenager my dream was becoming a scientist to study human mind and behaviour. That was the reason why I did my undergraduate degree in Psychology and a PhD in Neuroscience.

I graduated in Psychology in 2006, with first class honours, at the University of Madrid and started a combined Masters-PhD program at the same university. (That is how I first met the man who was to be my PhD supervisor, someone who had already made my life a nightmare a few months before.)

During that first year I was doing my masters and working full-time. It was a tough time. Despite my situation, my PhD supervisor, who was teaching one module, turned out to be remarkably demanding and not especially supportive at funding-wise (although he had promised me funding in my first interview). Despite my outstanding CV and all the effort, funding did not come (partly because my supervisor did not move a finger in contrast to other students' supervisors).

After the first year, I decided to move to the UK during the summer of 2007. I needed to improve my English (essential for a scientific career) and earn money to survive while waiting for the funding. He did not approve of this, and took my name off a well-published paper (despite we had agreed I was a co-author on it). In September 2007, I got a research assistant position in his lab.

Upon starting my PhD itself, I noticed that he was paying too much attention to me and even slightly flirting with me. I did not want to pay much notice, since I knew he had a partner. I thought he was just being nice with me. But in December we went on a work trip to Berlin and we had an affair.

Q: before turning the page, discuss this situation with other members of your team

Episode 2

After this event, sexual tension in the lab was unbearable. I must admit that I felt attracted to him at the beginning, but things went complicated when he started to be more demanding, and sexual harassment started. He asked me to stay in the lab until late (9pm). The situation got much worse when his partner discovered all the emails and text messages he was sending to me. That was the inflection point. My supervisor went from being extremely nice, kind and beneficial to my success, to being horribly demanding and incredibly sharp in any comment on my work or myself. He criticized my work, my opinion, what I wore and how I behaved, and he always did this in public. I have never felt as humiliated as he made me feel.

(John asks why she did not submit a complaint?) I did not put a complaint because of three reasons. First, I was very ashamed and wrongly thought that I was the only person responsible of that situation. Second, because I was really scared of anything he could have said/done if I had complained (Sadly, I developed like a phobia of him). Third, the Spanish scientific community is very small, and if you make "enemies" in there, it is very unlikely that you will get a job in any University.)

Q: before turning the page, discuss this situation with other members of your team

Episode 3

This situation ruined my self-esteem and confidence in my work, with long-lasting effects (some of them are still present), and obviously had a tremendous negative impact on my scientific career. Also, because of the duration and intensity of these episodes, I had to go to see a psychologist, broke up with my partner at the time and developed some serious health problems, tremendous bruxism, still a problem today. I was desperate for transferring my PhD somewhere else, but it was not easy at all. First, because my supervisor did not want me to transfer my PhD. Second, because it was extremely difficult to get funded anywhere else. Third, because Spanish scientific community as I mentioned is very small and feudalistic moving from one feudal court to another means you are a problematic person. Actually, I tried once, and the person I contacted for transferring my PhD called my supervisor without any notice and asked him what was the problem with me, and why I wanted to transfer my PhD to her lab. That was not especially positive for our relationship, as you might realise.

(John asks whether there were not progress reviews at which these issues could be raised?) There were independent progress reviews during the PhD, but they only assessed the work, not the relationship between the PhD student and the supervisor. Also, it is not very difficult to pass these reviews.

Q: before turning the page, discuss this situation with other members of your team

Episode 4

There was a point that, although I did not want to quit my PhD because it was really important for me, I thought I could not handle the situation any much longer. Luckily, I found this scholarship that allowed me to spend a year abroad, as a visiting PhD student. That was how I started to solve my problems.

It was very hard to convince my supervisor about me going on a year's grant abroad, but finally he accepted. We agreed that I was going abroad one year, and then I was going to start to write my PhD thesis on my return. It turned out that during my year abroad, I came across an excellent researcher, whose line of research was extremely interesting to me and there was a potential post-doc position at her lab that could be offered to me if I finished my PhD by the end of the year. I was fascinated with the idea and contacted my supervisor to try and finish my PhD as soon as possible to be eligible for this post.

Q: before turning the page, discuss this situation with other members of your team

Episode 5

First, he went completely mad and refused the idea. Then, he realized he legally could not stop me of finishing my PhD and accepted. However, he said that he would only correct my thesis once it was complete. The idea of having to write an entire PhD thesis without any supervision at the chapter level terrified me. But it was the only exit so I accepted the offer. I spent 6 months writing up with no guide whatsoever, and the only hope was that I did not have to do too many corrections. During this period, he was on and off by email, only to remind me how bad I do things and how poor is my scientific understanding.

By the end of this time and once my thesis was almost complete, I started to receive emails and phone calls from his partner saying that she was about to divorce him and she was going to sue me because it was all my fault. After this, my supervisor turned up completely out of the blue and decided not to supervise me any more. I had an understandably serious nervous breakdown. I had been suffering from sexual and psychological harassment for almost 5 years only for the sake of finishing my PhD, and when my thesis was almost complete he decided he was not supervising me anymore. This is hard to digest, especially when you cannot complain to anyone, unless you want to ruin your scientific career in you home country (feudalism).

Q: before turning the page, discuss this situation with other members of your team

Episode 6

However, my determined nature helps me to cope with this situation and I found an interim solution. I found someone else in my university who was happy with taking over my PhD supervision, since her relationship with my ex-supervisor was already ruined. I have to say that I was a bit concerned about this idea, because she has not supervised anyone before, and her reputation as a scientist is not great. But realistically, she was the only option. Finally I submitted, had my PhD viva three weeks ago and passed with Cum Laude.

Team exercise

Outline on the acetate provided the lessons here for

- 1. Postgraduate research students**
 - 2. Supervisors, and**
 - 3. Institutions**
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