

Isabella's supervision

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I first thought about applying for a PhD during my undergraduate science course, when, in my second year, I gained some understanding of what a research degree might entail. I thought I would enjoy it. I felt engaged during lectures and was good at research methods and statistics and decided to look into an academic career. I did well in my course and pushed myself hard to achieve a first-class BSc to give myself the best opportunity of securing a funded PhD position.

After my undergraduate degree, I started a Master's at a Russell Group University and discussed PhD options with a top Professor at the University. I approached him because I had come across his work before and he was teaching my favourite module. He ended up becoming my Master's and PhD supervisor. He was a great support and assisted with my application, culminating in a fully-funded four-year PhD in the topic area that I had most enjoyed throughout my degrees.

I was thrilled to be starting the PhD and could not believe I had been offered the position. My ambition was to become an academic and lecturer, and maybe even one day a top Professor, like my supervisor.

Questions

1. Discuss how Isabella came to register for a PhD
2. Is there anything you would have recommended at this stage?

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When I started, I got on with my supervisor well and for the first two years of my PhD I had very few complaints and was thoroughly enjoying the process.

However, the second half (final two years) of my PhD were in contrast, unenjoyable and very distressing for me. The unenjoyment was almost entirely due to the breakdown of the relationship I had with my supervisor.

I believe that the breakdown of the relationship was due to two events. The first was that my supervisor left my university, and, although he continued to be my primary supervisor, the distance between us made communication very challenging. The second was that I disagreed with my supervisor on a how to progress with a study that we had planned together. He expected me to do what he told me because he was more senior. The fact that I didn't agree, or do what he had suggested, led to the total breakdown of the relationship.

Questions

- 1. What should happen when the primary supervisor leaves the institution?**
- 2. How should a disagreement of this kind be addressed?**

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My supervisor had been offered a job at a different University at the start of my third year, and the physical distance between us had a very big impact on the relationship that we had. Previously, my supervisor was in the office down the corridor from mine, and we met regularly enough (once to twice a term) and would see each other at lunchtime for personal and informal catch-ups.

He had a very hands-off approach and I was left to my own devices but never felt alone or unsupported. I enjoyed the freedom I was given despite sometimes feeling out of my depth. However, as soon as my supervisor left to a different city, I found myself unable to approach him as I had before. We no longer had the freedom to meet as and when we wanted. The relaxed approach that I had enjoyed before started to feel like a slippery slope into being unsupported.

There was no structure in place for regular meetings and this led to a complete lack of contact apart from a couple of meetings (over two years) at his office to discuss results, All other communication was limited to e-mail, and, on very rare occasions, phone calls. The communication was all targeted to the work and was very efficient: talk only about a specific point. We had lost any chance to communicate personally and this challenged our relationship in lots of ways. Looking back now, I realise why there is a formal structure in place for doctoral students; when things go wrong, and you and your supervisor haven't followed any rules, there really is no safety net and no one to support you...

Questions

1. Discuss Isabella's view of formal supervisory structures
2. What makes a good meeting?
3. What should she do now?

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By the time I was in the middle of my third year and my supervisor had been at a different university for several months, I began to feel very alone. The intervention study that I was conducting for my PhD at this time was intensely time consuming and challenging. I had little support from my supervisor or indeed anyone else at the university.

The project involved daily intervention with four-year-old children at a school some distance from my home. Overall, I worked intensely for six months gathering data feeling more and more isolated and distant from the university.

Moreover, during the time of the fieldwork, I began to realise that there were many problems with the design of the intervention that I feared would have a great impact on the results. When I analysed the results and shared them with my supervisor he was keen for me to collect more data because he stated that the overall findings were positive. Although this was true, I had an issue with carrying on, largely because the additional data collection - in order to get desired power for significant effects - would have taken me 18 months and I was keen to address the difficulties I had faced during the project.

These difficulties included not only some personal issues I had collecting the data, but also the limitations with the study. For example, the children were not engaged because they were too young, the game was too difficult for them, and the outcome measures we had used were problematic. As I was at that time nearly at the end of my third year, I had I felt gained enough research knowledge and expertise which should enable me to express my own opinions about a project, and in this case suggest that we should not continue with the study.

But disagreeing with my supervisor turned out to have catastrophic implications. Rather than having a measured discussion about the limitations I had raised, my supervisor was outraged that

I had (in his words) “refused” to do what I was told. He claimed that I was only wanting to stop the study because it was hard work. He dismissed all of the limitations of the study that I suggested, claiming them to be irrelevant excuses.

His attitude towards me (hostile and dismissive) made me feel like I was a failure, and as though I was not cut out to work as a researcher. In reality, I was burnt out, struggling to cope with the pressures of such an intensive study and (importantly) making valid points regarding the practical and scientific limitations of the design.

Questions

1. Discuss the supervisor’s approach
2. What should Isabella do now?

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I involved my graduate tutor and secondary supervisor, who stated that I should do what I felt was best. Both understood the limitations of the study, agreeing that these were legitimate reasons to discontinue the collection of data. My secondary supervisor said I should not continue with this study but pursue something new. Unfortunately, my supervisor did not agree. After this difficult period of time (lasting over two months of e-mailing back and forth) my supervisor and I did not rebuild the relationship.

Questions

1. Discuss the contributions and roles of second supervisor and graduate tutor
2. What is the way forward for Isabella?

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For the final year of my PhD, I designed a new study with the help of a collaborator I had worked with previously. Without this collaborator I believe I would not have completed my PhD. The communication with my supervisor was limited to a few e-mails here and there. I was almost entirely ignored by him (for instance not receiving replies to e-mails for a number of weeks and after multiple reminders). I felt as though I was no longer important or a valid person to him. Moreover, with the clear lack of support from him, I knew that any chance of working in academia was going to be severely challenged by a failure to get a reference. I started to think about careers outside of academia, despite wanting to become a lecturer and academic.

I tried to repair the relationship over the last year of my PhD by attending skills sessions and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in an attempt to improve my ability to communicate and resolve the anxiety I was suffering as a consequence of the breakdown of the relationship. The anxiety was worst at any time that I received an e-mail from my supervisor.

The emails would typically be dismissive and negative about the work that I had done, or at the best, neutral in tone. They would send me into a panic that I had failed or lead to tears or a general sense of sadness.

Questions

1. **What makes effective feedback?**
2. **How should a supervisor couch any criticisms of a student's work**

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I also found any time I did spend with my supervisor very distressing. On the two occasions I travelled to his University to discuss results of two studies I had conducted as part of my PhD, I travelled on public transport home in floods of tears due to the way that he had made me feel during the meetings: unimportant, not capable and a failure. This consumed me for many months at the end of my third year and into my final year and was very hard for me, and for my family to witness.

My ability to cope improved slightly in my final year after the therapy and skills sessions and away days that I attended, which were run by my University Doctoral School. These aimed to provide and equip students with skills needed to work alongside difficult supervisors. Together, the skills sessions and therapy helped me to manage my anxiety and approach the relationship differently. I tried to see our relationship as functional and only asked for things I absolutely felt were necessary. I tried to view e-mails as neutral and not negative and I tried to send the worrying and anxious thoughts about his hatred for me away on the “worry train” (a therapy technique).

These techniques helped to some degree and the support from my family was invaluable. They would console me and listen to me when I was upset, but they couldn't fully understand how this breakdown had led to such a catastrophic change in my personality and how it affected me that much. I think it is impossible for anyone else to understand why a breakdown of a relationship like this makes such a huge impact on your life. I think it is because that person, whom you admire and look up to, and who influences the outcomes of your work and your professional life, has so much power and influence that without mutual respect, it can lead to very emotionally driven outcomes.

Questions

1. **Comment on Isabella's strategy**
2. **Discuss the support available at your institution**

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When it came to writing my thesis, my supervisor did provide me with some limited feedback. But, during my viva, the examiners commented that they believed I had completed much of the work alone.

Fortunately, I passed, but the examiners commented that the changes I needed to make would have been far fewer if I had been given some proper guidance from my supervisor. I had not asked anyone else to read my work because I was ashamed and embarrassed, feeling like it was all my fault and that I didn't deserve anyone's time.

Looking back now, I think that my supervisor could not forgive the fact that I did not do what he had suggested. I felt for some time that I was perhaps imagining his dislike for me. This was confirmed at the final stages of my PhD when we had the first (and only) honest conversation over the phone in which he stated that he felt I had not done enough work to pass my PhD and that he had "stopped caring" about my work after I refused to carry on with the intervention study as he had asked.

Hearing this was awful but, in some way, reassuring to me – I wasn't mad! I hadn't imagined it – he really had stopped caring and switched off. It shows how bad my mental health was at that time the fact that hearing this was a positive, but it allowed me to rebuild my confidence in myself as a person and believe that it was perhaps he who was difficult and a challenge, and it was not all my fault.

PhD friends who were his supervisees told me that they would never disobey him. Indeed, one friend reported that her husband had given her an ultimatum: stop working so hard for him or 'I'll leave'. She reported to me that she felt she had to do as our supervisor asked despite these problems at home because, without our supervisor on side, she would not progress in her career.

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But she is now working as a post-doc for him, still working evenings and weekends just to get the work done that he demands. I am glad that I stuck up for myself, and glad that I recognised that doing what someone says, even if you disagree with it, is not the way we should be working.

What is shocking to me is that I had so little support mechanism in place as a doctoral student being treated this way. My secondary supervisor was very caring and kind but felt he had no power to override my supervisor's decision and did not intend to. It was a case of "he [your supervisor] is a dog. We all know it, but you've carried on and done it on your own and that's great".

Questions

1. **Comment on the responsibility of a second supervisor in such a situation**
2. **What are the arrangements in your department for changing supervisors?**

What occurs to me from this experience is the following:

1. He was an extremely senior man, with a lot of power and making a lot of money for the university. As a result, no one wanted to speak to him about his behaviour, and he was in a position to do as he pleased. I, as the vulnerable PhD student suffered alone.
2. The supervisor is your mentor, manager, guide and hero. Yet they have no training in any of those (hero might be hard to train in!) Why are they suitable for such a job? Some may not be...
3. If this happens to someone such as a PhD student, who can they turn to? Who will help and who will stop it from happening again? My supervisor has had no retribution for his actions and not suffered as a consequence. I think his behaviour was unacceptable and he was a bully. In a normal workplace that would not be tolerated.

Team task

What lessons are there here for

1. Doctoral students
 2. Supervisors, and
 3. Institutions?
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