

Jon's despair

Dear John,

I am a final year biochemistry PhD student in one of the best labs in Europe in the UK. You can call me Jon. I have actually met you in person during grant proposal writing in the university couple of years back

My main reason contacting you – and I hope you do not mind – is your advice. A thread in a postgraduate forum suggested that you are open for anonymous advice. Hence, here I am contacting you. What I am going to describe here is strictly confidential between me and you and will not be used for other purposes. I'll try to be as concise as possible.

Background

3rd year PhD student from three-years PhD program (end: Sept 2011);

Overseas student

Stipend funded by a pharma company as a fellowship

Research funded by supervisor's grant and pharma companies.

A paper published in a journal with impact factor >5.0 and cited for 20 times so far after 2009.

I wear my heart on my sleeve, but confronting my supervisor, I respect him so much that turns me to a coward. I can only be a 'yes-man'. This behaviour is encouraged within the group because my supervisor hardly listens. I think to please him, we just follow 'his orders'. Also, I have been suffering from bullying and harassment from the post docs which is mostly jealousy like my fellowship stipend is similar to post doc salary after tax. Unfortunately, again, I have no proofs of recording except one single photo of my name initial alteration to an offensive word on my reagent bottle label. However since I am just a 'visiting student' in the lab and I do not really want to create conflicts – I keep quiet even until now. My supervisor hardly knows the situation in the lab. Although he put himself as a grand-father figure, sometimes I feel that he treats his people are no different than lab tools. His lab is famous for long hours and stress-related issued. I was naive when I joined him. I thought I could handle his demands but now things started to get worse.

It started several months ago. My research project is becoming really interesting and 'hot'. I presented the data during a group retreat. My supervisor gave me a rotation PhD student and last month another PhD student for mentoring and helping the project. Earlier in January, one of the students found my -80°C sample box was left outside and destroyed. A week later, I found another sample box was left outside and again destroyed. I was not suspicious at first by assuming it was all an accident.

However, it started to bother me. I was in a dilemma for reporting or not-reporting because I know that it can backfire as I have no proof and people can easily dismiss it by assuming I am looking for attention. After discussion with one of the thesis committee members, I reported the issue to my supervisors and general 'warning email' was sent. Monday morning the following week, just before I started to work, I had a panic attack which required medical attention. I guess from built-up anger. Thursday the same week, after strong request from my supervisor, I went back to work – just to find news that my freezer was turned off. Apparently the freezer was found thawed on Monday afternoon – destroying my reagents (why no one told me since Monday?). I reported this to my supervisor and he suggested me (!) to be more careful! Shortly after that I suffered from second panic attack which left me 1-2 hours paralyzed from hyperventilation. Medical checks indicated that I have some underlying hereditary problem with my heart and this is worsened by stress

Now it has been 3 weeks since that full-of-panic-attacks week. The panic attacks left me traumatic. I tried to go back to lab but every time I see the lab building from far, I am shivering, sweating, and feel like I just want to run away. Earlier Monday this week, I met my supervisor – accompanied by the University Chaplain – to ask for his advice of but according to him, all this 'apparent sabotages' are easily rectified (with no real actions suggested). I also received a warning for not present in the lab too long. My latest student also accused me of disappearing in the lab without really discuss the issue with me. I gave all my explanation of my busy day life in the lab and my supervisor said that I should attend the student. I could not argue again – I am such a coward. I am going up and down, running around like headless chicken to meet his demands. Yet, he demanded me to go back to lab as I have students to mentor – as soon as possible. From there he accused me of data manipulation and all these sabotages and my ill-health are all self-inflicting to cover my tracks and fear of getting caught. I have proven my innocence the same day as one of my students showed his data which reproduce my findings. No apology from my supervisor.

Now, I am supposed to go back to work though I am still ill (stress?) and waiting for cardiologist appointment. Before I ran away, I had been on my way to the lab for work. I just do not know what to do. I feel disappointed with supervisor as he cares about the project more than his student well-being – maybe I am too selfish – but the fact that he could accuse me of data manipulation and turned things against me is an insult. Going back to the lab is like going to a slaughter house. I do not know whom I should trust with these apparent sabotages and the distrust from my own supervisor. Every time I think about work, I shiver and have difficulty breathing. I have not been able to sleep – always haunted by nightmares which are work-related.

I feel hopeless in the university because even the postgraduate coordinator said that he 'gives up' if my case is against my supervisor. My supervisor has

quite some power in the university. Many people are afraid of him. My thesis committee is even so – one of them is his ex postdoc while the other one is trying to wash his hands from any issues as he is getting a divisional head position. I know for sure that many issues in the past relating to my supervisor have been swept under the rug.

My current plan is to resign as these already got to my health severely although people suggested to things. Firstly to ask the possibility for just write up and submit since March/April is the deadline for stop working in the lab anyway (though my prof wants me to stay longer). Secondly, to salvage what I have done and submit for a master degree (M.Res/M.Phil?). I still need to find out whether an M. Phil is possible or not. I am trying to cope with myself – to get accept the fact that I have wasted at least 2-3 years if I resign. To certain extend, I do not know what to do next, I feel I am such a failure and not sure what I am going to put on my CV. What do you think I should do? I still need to discuss these options with my funding body though I am sure they want me to go ahead finish up. I have started counselling (though not from Uni) and it does not help me much. If you think it is best to discuss it on the phone, feel free to call me 07***** or give me the best time to call you.

I really look forward to hearing from you. I feel that I could much relate myself o your article in 2001 'Nowhere to Turn to'. I excel in my academic life. When I was an undergrad, I was even awarded as the best student in the country (not in the UK but still in EU) and my undergrad thesis was awarded as the best thesis of the year. This is the first time I feel hopeless with nowhere to turn to. I am so lost in life now. Not sure what I want to do next.

Thank you

Yours desperately,

Jon

Q: How would you respond to Jon's email?

Dear Jon,

Thank you for thinking of me. I do not give advice over the phone but I am glad to give a view by email on your situation as you have described it to me.

I am not a professional counsellor and you may want to get advice from others. But, from what you say, you are in a very difficult situation, which has understandably caused you a great deal of worry and I am glad to make some comments if that might help.

1. You must be very clear about your priorities. You have obviously done good work and have been recognised as a distinguished academic. So you should not let these matters divert you from achieving them. You are obviously capable of getting a doctorate and should keep this in your sights. But,

2. You need a lot of support, help and advice. You do not mention two sources: the Students Union and the University Counseling Service. In most universities there is someone in the Students Union who specialises in pg matters and will offer advice in confidence. Also University Counseling Services offer an entirely confidential service with respect to students with difficulties like yours. They will not, without your agreement, contact anyone else in the university. If you contact them, you should emphasize the urgency of your situation, your feelings and the fact that you are receiving medical attention.. Explain the whole story to them and your aim to complete your PhD.

3. You need a break to address your medical problems and get yourself ready for re-entering your studies. It is quite common for pg students to suspend their registration for 6 months or longer if they are unable to continue to commit themselves fully to their research. I imagine that the Counseling Service will want you consider that avenue and would write in support if necessary. You may also need to check on any implications for your Visa?

4. This will give you some breathing space to get fully fit and to work out a plan for the completion of your doctorate. Remember that your supervisors will be hoping that you are successful - if only because their reputation within and outside HE depends on their PhD students being successful. And they are not your examiners - who will be drawn from outside the group you have been working with. In fact, very few students who submit fail, although many are told by examiners to do some more work or corrections. And they will be wholly concerned with the quality of your work and your personal defence of it.

5. There are other things you may want to consider: more presentations outside your department - to conferences and seminars - and publications. These will enable you to check with experts that your work is up to the

standard of a PhD.

Remember that many PhD students have similar difficulties and have overcome them. Do keep me updated. And come back if you think I can be of any more help.

All good wishes
John

Dear John,

Thank you so much for your input. In regards with you suggestions, appointment with counseling service has put me in 2 weeks 'waiting' I have several mentors including my previous study coach from my home country. I have several advice which run similarly like yours but I am not really sure what counseling service can actually help? Maybe for the letter of support. I wonder how this works in a lab-based PhD like in biochemistry? 6 months or even one year out will mean a huge gap. Surely my supervisor who is already annoyed by my illness will not like this idea,

If it is just for advice, I believe my mentors are more than enough to 'ease' my mind and gathering advice. In the college, PG students are pretty 'cut-off' from the student union. As I have mentioned before even the dean of PG 'gave up' if things are related to my prof in previous cases. Hence I feel hopeless. Knowing my supervisor, I doubt whether he sees PG students as part of his reputation.

Currently, going back to the Uni is out of option for me. I just do not feel 'at home any more in the university - especially with my prof has already some distrust in me.

I hope you do not mind if I asked you more questions. I have to admit that I am not familiar with the system in the UK.

1. I have done my transfer from M.Phil to PhD (part of the 3 years PhD program) - would it be possible for me to just 'take' the M.Phil and do or restart or transfer my PhD somewhere else? I feel this is the best option.
2. Theoretically speaking, I am supposed to finish by Sept 2011 and according to plan I am supposed to stop any work by April (6 months before). Is it possible to just 'go directly' writing up? If my supervisor does not agree, would it be possible to 'go ahead'? I am very sure that I have enough data with 1 publication in >5 impact factor journal, >10 external presentations, >5 poster presentations, and >5 international and national conferences where I presented my data. One of my thesis committee told me that I have enough data however my supervisor prefers me to stay longer (not sure - maybe a year more)

Again thank you and I really appreciate this.

I look forward to your reply.

Best wishes,

Jon

Q How would you respond now?

Dear Jon,

Your points roughly in order:

1. Keep in mind that it is your PhD not your supervisor's. What he does or does not like, his attitude to you and your work, should not prevent you getting your rights to fair and just treatment, and he will not be an examiner.
2. I think you should give the Counseling Service a chance. At the very least it should give you another view on your situation.
3. If you are not well enough to work on the doctorate, then you could suspend registration while you recover
4. You are investing a huge amount of resource in this doctorate and have the right to everything offered you in the Postgraduate Handbook.
5. Check on the institution's regulations in your handbook. I imagine there is nothing to prevent you submitting for either degree within the permitted period. You probably do not need anyone's permission to submit a thesis for an MPhil if that is your preference. But from what you say, you have done the basic work and if you do move to another institution, you would probably have to start all over again as work done at one institution, especially if it has already been submitted as part of a degree, cannot be submitted to another. The new institution might wonder why you had not competed at your current one.
6. You final para: yes, if you have such a good record, why not check the regulations and submit a PhD thesis without doing any more laboratory work. You could share your drafts with mentors etc. If what you say is true about the standard of your work, and you write a convincing account, the worst that can happen is that the examiners could require you to revise and resubmit you work in a year's time. It is very unusual to fail without that opportunity being offered, and that gives your examiners' prescription of what needs to be done for it to pass. More likely, they will ask for corrections.

Final advice: read your Handbook and do not let this supervisor get you down.

Let me know what you decide and how you get on.

Best wishes

John

Dear John,

I was diagnosed with acute stress syndrome. I followed your advice and had a couple of sessions my counselor from university. After discussing all the things that I have in mind, he agreed to write a letter for the dean of postgraduate. The letter says that I am considering to resign however I still would like to consider alternatives such as directly writing up and the possibility if I continue writing up for a change of supervisor who can help me writing the thesis. I have not spoken with my supervisor yet. To be honest, talking to him is no good except making me more stressed out. It seems suspending the registration will not really help. The university, workplace, and the town have given me more of bad memories. With my current condition, none from the lab has shown any concerns whatsoever. Such a disappointment. I hope this is the best for me.

Thanks for your input again.

Best wishes

Jon

9 months later:

Dear Jon,

Clearing my desk and wondered how you are getting on now. I hope you have found a way forward.

In any case let me know if I can help.

Best wishes

John

Dear John,

Firstly, merry Christmas and happy new year! I am very flattered to receive your attention. Many thanks! My apology for my untimely manner of replying to your kind email. I have been having some difficulty with internet connection here and I have been busy meeting friends and family after 8 years apart.

So what happened after I received the letter from psychologist regarding the acute stress syndrome, I forwarded the letter to the lab and my supervisor advised me to resign and come back after I am healthy since I still need to complete the research and repeat the

experiments (under allegations of fraud). I discussed this with the Dean and the Dean agreed to take over the case and consider this case an irretrievable relationship. Starting end July, the Dean of Postgraduate took over me. He advised me to submit and complete my thesis. I completed my thesis by August and checked my another professor by mid September. I completed my submission form by then and I moved home and looked for job while waiting for my viva arrangement (and my fellowship ended in September).

Things started to reveal itself. End of November, I received a phone call from my professor from my undergraduate years. He called me because my (ex-)professor (supervisor) complained to him about me being impossible to be reached and he told him that I have been manipulating data and he halted my thesis submission. I was shocked and contacted the Dean of Postgraduate. He confirmed this and he said that it had been halted since end of November. I was shocked and disappointed - why I was not consulted in the past 2 months. I flew to the UK and arranged a meeting the next possible moments. The Dean of Postgraduate could not attend the meeting and The Dean of Research replaced him. The meeting was to ask my statement about the allegations which I strongly denied. I was surprised to find that even postdocs who trained me from the beginning of my projects washed their hands and deny any involvements though I have their signatures on my lab book confirming the reproducibility and repeatability of my data and even their initial findings which initiated my PhD project! This allegations are with no proof. Even my professor denied sending an email confirming that my student managed to repeat my experiments - though it is black and white on paper! I was forced to accept the offer of my professor to resign and agree to come back to repeat my experiments when I recover from PTSD.

I personally doubt I can come back. I am trying to recover and it is more and more disappointment that I get from this university. I realize why most of the students (more than 5 cases, I can tell you this) in the past 3 years just left without fighting. I am now skeptical to go against my ex-professor especially with his influence. A friend told me that this might involve patent-filling but I am not really sure. I have not heard anything from my lab mates since last February (2011) and even from the Dean following the meeting! I find it useless to follow up. I consider this as a sunk cost and a major set back - a life lesson. Now I am trying to get Master degree here in Management - and leave science - after I discover that my professor tried to use his influence to block my career and job applications. I have discussed this with my mentors and family. They strongly suggest to leave it. It is useless to fight what I cannot fight against. Walking away is the things to do but I must leave it is what I am feeling best for me. I need to start something new... As much as I love science, now I find that contributing to science does not have to be in lab.

I cannot express my gratitude towards your kindness. It seems even you are more attentive than any people in the uni/lab. Many thanks. I do hope we can keep in touch. I am now putting my PhD work as 'working/research experience' on my CV.

Thank you once more, I am more than happy for you to use our correspondence so that others learn from my experience.

Jon.

Team task

What are the lessons here for

1. Postgraduate research students
2. Supervisors
3. Institutions

Write your suggestions on the acetate provided
