

Carol's PhD diary 2002 - 2005

Episode I

13th October 2002

I. Background

After completing my undergraduate degree in 1998 I was utterly ready to get away from academia and so was really excited when offered a job with a charity out in South Africa – working at a project housing former street-youths. Surely this type of practical work would be far more rewarding, and also actually make a difference to people's lives, than the previous 21 years of my life – which had been spent in full-time education since the age of 4!

Whilst the ensuing 18 months of 'social development work' in a foreign country where I'd arrived knowing no one was far from easy, I was glad to have thrust myself into such a different cultural environment – and certainly felt that the work was doing something to make a difference. However, I felt utterly under qualified for the job, and as my work visa was expiring in June 2000 (hence I was required to return to the UK), I applied to do an MSc in Development Management in London University commencing in Sept 2000.

Throughout the one-year masters degree I worked incredibly hard, always with the aim of taking my newfound knowledge and skills back to work in South Africa if possible. In fact, I was so motivated and engrossed in my work that I didn't initially realise that my presentations and essays had attracted the attention of most staff members. When approached in the first term by my supervisor about the possibility of doing a PhD after my masters I almost laughed in his face – there was no way I was going to get stuck in academia! However, over the year I began to accept that I do really enjoy academic work and am well suited to academic life in comparison to how much my skills and personality had struggled as a practical 'field-worker' in South Africa. Yet by the time I finished my masters, receiving the departmental prize for the highest grades, I still did not feel suited to a PhD. So rather than try and return to work overseas, I rejected the

department's offer of a PhD, but still chose to remain in academia - gaining a job as a research assistant and junior lecturer at another London college starting in October 2001.

2. PhD Application and Admissions

During my time here I remained in close contact with my previous lecturers – all of whom were strongly pressuring me to apply for a PhD. I enjoyed visiting my old department (particularly as I wasn't happy in my new department) but was irritated by the inability of my old lecturers to even discuss the possibility of me not doing a PhD – they all took it for granted that I of course must do one, the only debatable issue was where I would study. In the end I applied to do a PhD at Wessex University (having known of a well respected authority on South African development from the research I had done for my masters dissertation) simply to appease my old lecturers. I emailed the Wessex academic I knew could be a potential supervisor and he encouraged me to apply, saying (over email) that he would 'provisionally' agree to supervise me, providing my application form went through all the Wessex procedures with no problems. I still wasn't convinced this was what I wanted, and kept the entire application procedure secret from my department so as to ensure I would always have the job to fall back on. Furthermore, at the back of my mind I knew I would never be able to afford to do the PhD anyway, and so banged out a very slap-dash application form to Wessex over Christmas 2001.

I then forgot all about it and focused on my work, but around Easter 2002 received an unconditional acceptance letter from Wessex – they didn't even want to interview me! To my surprise, the 'Head of Graduate Studies' from the Wessex department then telephoned me – offering me advice in applying for an ESRC studentship. He was so helpful, and even posted me copies of successful application forms from previous students that I started to warm towards the idea (particularly as I was still struggling in my department), and so completed all the forms for ESRC funding. However, even at this stage I still did not really believe I would get the funding and/or actually do a PhD – in fact I moved into a new flat in Essex around this time, fully believing that I would be remaining in the area for the foreseeable future.

In July/August 2002 I heard that I had received the ESRC funding and so realised I needed to really decide whether this PhD was something that I actually wanted to do, and would be fully committed to for (at least) 3 years. I took some time off work to fully think through all the issues, and also spoke to my parents and boyfriend (a final year PhD student in Bristol) about it. In the end I made a pro-active decision to accept the PhD and move to Wessex rather than obstinately remain where I was. In fact, as I re-read my research proposal I actually got quite excited about

the whole topic once again. Ironically, almost as a test – just after having accepted Wessex I was asked to interview for a highly competitive job working for an agency that I have always dreamed of working with – yet, I still felt that I'd made the right decision about going to Wessex and so turned the interview down.

3. Arrival and Induction

Prior to arrival at Wessex I had been required to send a one-page outline of myself (academic and personal interests and photo) to the dept, and in return the department had sent out an 'induction timetable' to me. Unusually, this commenced on a Sunday afternoon, involving afternoon meetings in the department and an evening meal at a restaurant! I arrived in Wessex on the previous night – having never been to the city before in my life, and also having never met my supervisor or visited the dept etc, so I really was a complete novice! However, the collegiate system meant that I was affiliated to a college (I had chosen a graduate one so as to avoid all the over-excited 18-year olds!) and had chosen to live in one of their out-of-town properties (the cheapest option). The house has only 8 people (all postgrads) and so was a friendly and welcoming environment from the start – rather than just a room on a corridor (which is what I feared living in college might have resulted in).

The departmental induction lasted Sunday-Tuesday, and was really informative, but also very welcoming. All the new PhD and MSc students were together (approx 25 students), and the department paid for our meal out to the restaurant, and lunch the next day – so we could all get to know each other, plus laid on a drinks reception later in the week for us to meet the staff. I was impressed! Having heard horror stories from friends who'd been literally abandoned from day one in their PhD departments, this seemed like a good start. Also, I emailed my supervisor during the induction and he wrote straight back saying how much he was looking forward to meeting me and that he'd stay late in his office that evening so I could see him once my induction was finished. Our first meeting was really relaxed, and he came across as a very caring person – actually interested in my welfare and how I was settling into Wessex – rather than talk then about my research, we agreed to meet the following week, once I was more settled in. I told him I was interested in doing some undergrad tutoring if possible and although at the time he said he doubted I would be able to get anything in my first year (especially due to the Wessex collegiate tutoring sys) he emailed me later that week saying some possible tutoring had come up – perfect!

In terms of non-academic arrival to Wessex, considering I know no one in the city it could have been very daunting. However, the college system has worked brilliantly and the latter half of my

first week involved inductions in college where I met other new (and old) postgraduates. The college also held a formal dinner (for free!) where I met my personal tutor (a college fellow) – who sat with me at the meal and seemed very approachable if and when I might encounter problems, and even if not he organises termly drinks evenings for all his students – which sounds nice! Later that same week the college had another dinner for me to meet my college mentor (an older student), who was also very friendly and approachable. The college bar is also very relaxed – with comfy chairs and tea/coffee, where I’ve met lots of other new postgrads and also chatted more to my housemates (all of whom are at my college).

So at the end of my first week in Wessex I certainly feel welcomed by both the department, and my college – and have also been successfully navigating my way around town with the help of a map and bicycle! I’m sure the three years won’t all be plain sailing but the department (as a whole, and also my supervisor) and college have certainly done their utmost to make me feel welcome in my initial week here.

4. Expectations

As a social sciences student (i.e. no lab work) my expectations of departmental support before arrival were relatively low. Furthermore, having entirely written my own proposal (rather than responding to an advertised PhD, as is often the case in the sciences) and secured my own funding I expect to work relatively independently. However, I will have a weekly seminar (on research methodology) in the department – with my fellow first year PhD students, and thus will not be entirely isolated. Furthermore, the welcoming nature thus far of the department (not just the induction, we also have set tea/coffee breaks with staff twice a day) and college has alleviated my previous fears/expectations of isolation and loneliness in a new city as a research student.

5. Problems so far?

To be honest I haven’t really encountered any serious problems so far. Our house had some plumbing problems at first, but once we contacted college they sent out a maintenance team to fix it. At the department I do not have my own work desk (I might be allocated one, depending on demand from third years – who take priority, but I won’t know for definite until next week), which is frustrating – but there are plenty of shared places to work in the department and university as a whole anyway.

Episode 2

January 2003

1. Personal Issues

The first term of my PhD is now complete – though to be honest term dates don't really affect me – and as this term seems to have been dominated by personal (rather than academic) issues, I felt it best to begin by explaining these. Firstly, less than three weeks into the start of my PhD, my boyfriend proposed and we're now in the excited process of organising our wedding for June next year. This excitement and joy has not only clouded my ability to focus on work, but has also consumed time which I should have spent working (e.g. seeing relatives, organising the wedding, plus post-marriage housing, and employment logistics for my fiancé). Secondly, four weeks into my PhD I was knocked off my bicycle by a car and suffered cracked ribs – which have been intensely painful and thus hindered my ability not only to work but even to get out of bed!

Although both these events have significantly reduced my ability to function adequately and concentrate on work, I have been extremely impressed at the support offered by staff members. In the immediate weeks following the bike accident both my supervisor and head of graduate studies were not only actively interested in my welfare, but also very lenient regarding work. Indeed, I missed two of the supposedly 'compulsory' PhD seminars (see section 4) because I simply could not get myself out of the house, yet the staff member responsible for these seminars accepted this without proof or requiring me to 'catch-up'.

2. Finding a place to work

I think the hardest thing I have struggled with in this first term is finding a place to work and settling into a routine. Despite being allocated small storage space in the 'post grad research room', this is a tiny and claustrophobic environment and the 'hot desking' system means that nothing permanent can be left out (and the storage space is tiny), which is frustrating and prevents any sense of 'belonging' to the office or department as a whole. As an alternative, I have found working from home more productive (particularly since the accident), but often feel that I 'ought' to be in the department in order to show my face and meet other post grads/staff members.

I find it particularly hard to accept the lack of space provided for PhD students as my fiancé – a science PhD student at Bristol University – has proper office allocation, and is thus able to treat his department and PhD as ‘work’ rather than ‘personal study’ (which is the inference to be taken from my lack of decent space allocation). Working from home has also meant that I have struggled to settle into a regular routine, as I often need to travel into town and back in order to get books etc. Of course, this has been further hampered by my limited mobility since the accident.

3. Supervisor relations

During the course of the term I met formally with my supervisor on three occasions. At our initial meeting he indicated that the nature of our relationship was up to me and that he would not be badgering me, but rather I should contact him (via email) whenever I wish to meet with him. So far this has suited me well – whenever I have emailed him he has always replied within a day, suggesting a convenient time to meet within the next few days. Before meetings I email him work, which he has always read in advance, and we then discuss ideas together. I have found him an incredibly warm and kind man on a personal level (he is somewhat my senior and manages to take a paternal attitude without being patronising in the slightest), and also a keen and thought-provoking mind on the academic front. In our first formal session I presented an array of research ideas (as the focus of my PhD was not yet confirmed) and as we discussed ideas together the intended focus of my PhD became evident without him pushing me into a hole or forcing me to research ‘his’ area. Rather, he successfully managed to stimulate me into realising what I wish to research. In a subsequent meeting I presented a working draft of my research proposal (the formal version of which has to be submitted at the start of the third term in order for me to be upgraded), of which he was very complementary, whilst also suggesting further reading ideas and also questioning my focus and methodology.

I would say that our relationship thus far is good – though we have not met regularly that has suited me, especially as my work productivity has been relatively low. Despite enjoying his lack of pressure on me (I am aware of other first-year PhD students who meet with their supervisors weekly, and yet others whose supervisors regularly telephone them at home!), I suspect that this has contributed to my low work productivity. However, this flexibility has also worked in my favour – allowing me to often work in my fiancé’s office in Bristol, and also allowing me time to recover from cracked ribs without having to daily force myself into town.

4. Departmental first-year PhD Seminars and assessment

The only formal obligation I have is to be in the department at the weekly (Tuesday mornings) research seminars for all first-year PhD students. These cover a range of topics – largely related to methodology – and we each have presented a topic. These seminars are run by the head of graduate studies, who when asked by a fellow student of mine why these seminars were held replied “because the government says we have to” – which seems to sum up the general attitude towards the seminars. Much of the content has been irrelevant (with the exception of a session run by ex-PhD students who talked to us about the process and experience of undertaking a PhD in the department and gave very useful tips and advice) and the staff attitude seems to be that this is something we ‘have’ to put on, rather than something which is of actual worth for PhD students.

There is no 'official' record of attendance, but I once sat next to the head of graduate studies in the seminar and noticed that he was noting down absences. In my own case, whenever I have missed a seminar I have approached him rather than vice versa - and both times he was aware I had missed the seminar.

We have not been told whether our presentations or bibliography (submitted end of first term) in the methods seminar are assessed or not - but I presume not. There was significant confusion regarding whether this was to be annotated or not, and I got the impression from the head of graduate studies that he really didn't care what we handed in so long as he received something. I also got the impression that no-one would actually read our bibliography, rather it was just to check we had actually been doing something with our first term and not just whiling away time doing nothing and/or getting depressed or stressed. Therefore I submitted non-annotated bibliography including books I had read and those I intend to read in the next term.

However, the next submission (start of the third term - end of April) is our 'research proposal' which basically determines whether we are approved for fieldwork or not. We have not been given clear guidelines on the method of assessment although it has been mentioned that in addition to the 20-page document (which will be read by two academics in the dept - not our supervisors), we will be expected to give a verbal presentation at the start of next term, and then defend it in a viva-style interview. If successful we are approved for fieldwork, if unsuccessful we can re-submit in October or drop-out. Most of the above information has come to me from past students, although the head of graduate studies (who leads our methods seminars) has begun mentioning it more frequently now we are in the second term.

However, these seminars have been a great opportunity to meet the other first-year PhD students, and has enabled me to make friends with people in Wessex and chat to others about the PhD process so far. Though this has been nice for me on a social level I am aware that others have found this meeting crucial in order to express their frustrations and worries about their PhD to fellow students – whereas I think I just resigned myself to a term of poor productivity after the accident and so any work achieved is a bonus!

5. Settling into Wessex

I moved to Wessex knowing absolutely no-one, and hence suspected the first term would be somewhat isolated and lonely (particularly with my fiancé living in a different city). However, the collegiate system has ensured my immediate acceptance into a ‘community’ (it is a post grad college). Furthermore, as my house is owned by college my six housemates (all previously unknown to me) are of a similar age to me and also new to Wessex, and so we have developed good friendships. In addition, as I play a lot of sport (except when injured obviously) I have met people through University clubs. Also, as I have settled into a Church here in Wessex I have also met some ‘real’ people not connected to the University, which has been incredibly nice.

I have also been impressed at the array of courses available to me as a Wessex student and have made the most of this by attending both language and computer courses, which have proved invaluable and would have been well beyond my means if not subsidised by the University.

Despite only having been in Wessex for 3 months I already feel at home here and have begun to make some good friends despite being away with my fiancé most weekends. Much of this is attributable to the college and university system, but also my own initiative in using these opportunities to meet people with similar interests to me.

6. Hopes for this term

As mentioned previously, personal issues have somewhat dominated my first term, and as my ribs are now almost recovered I hope to be able to focus more solidly on my PhD this term –

working towards producing the research proposal for my PhD upgrade at the start of the third term.

Episode 3

April 2003

I. Daily work routine

In previous 'PhD updates' I had expressed concerns about settling into a regular work routine and finding a set place to work. However, by roughly half-way through my second term of studying at Wessex (I am now commencing my third term) I had settled into a regular work pattern and have been working from home ever since. I generally go into town one or two times a week in order to attend seminars and collect or return library books. Although I initially felt guilty for working from home (feeling that I 'ought' to be in the department), my supervisor has expressed no concerns about my lack of departmental appearances, and working from home has proved very effective in terms of work productivity and quality of life.

Although I was initially frustrated not to have an office in the department, I am now enjoying the freedom this gives me to work whatever hours I desire. As summer is now approaching I tend to work from home in either the morning or afternoon (depending on the weather), and then use whichever slot is better weather to train (I cycle competitively for the university), and then use the evenings to catch up on lost work hours (again, working from home). This has proved a huge bonus for my academic work productivity, allowing me the freedom to work when motivated rather than force myself to sit at a desk when the sun is shining and I am desperate to be out on my bicycle (and thus not really focusing on work). Additionally, such work-flexibility has also boosted my cycling training as many of my team-mates struggle to find enough daylight hours to train (as they have to be in an office), and are only free by the time it is getting too dark to ride.

Therefore, I am now relishing the freedom of PhD in the social sciences, not only compared to the 9-5+ working world, but also compared to a more lab-based scientific PhD in which regular office hours are expected. Although this is something of a turnaround from my previous 'doctoral story', in which I bemoaned my lack of office space and inability to find a regular routine, I believe that the earlier period of frustration was necessary for me to fully appreciate the amazing flexibility I am now fortunate to have. In addition, as I have very strong time management and self-discipline

skills, I feel that both my working hours and productivity have actually increased as a consequence of being able to work from home and set my own agenda.

2. Submitted work

As mentioned in an earlier episode, at the end of the first term all first-year PhD students were required to submit a bibliography (the conditions of which were extremely vague), and as expected at the time there has never been any feedback regarding this submission. However, the more major submission was the 'upgrade report', submitted at the start of the third term as my application to be upgraded from 'Probationary Research Student' to a 'PhD Student'. Although the head of graduate studies was initially vague about the contents of this report, as the deadline loomed closer, information became more widely available and by the end of the second term we were given a clear indication of what was expected from the report.

Rather than spend the entire second term just writing an upgrade report that would subsequently serve little purpose for my PhD, I decided at the start of the second term to continue my readings, literature reviews, and writing of key thoughts *not* with the mindset that such written papers were 'for' the upgrade report, but rather with the more long-term hope that some of the material from these papers would ultimately go into the PhD thesis. This seemed a more sensible and efficient approach to take, and thus I refused to get caught up in the term two 'upgrade report panic' common amongst most of my fellow PhD first-years, and instead simply continued reading and writing with the thesis in mind. After discussing the contents of the various papers I had written during the second term with my supervisor, I then spent the Easter holidays extracting the most relevant sections in order to form a coherent upgrade report. The only downside to this approach is that my final upgrade report was more than double the length requested by the department (18,000 words rather than the requested 5,000-7,000 words), but my supervisor felt it best to maintain the extra length as it reflected the depth of work I had conducted thus far.

I submitted the upgrade report at the start of the third term in late April. I have been informed that the assessment procedure will involve two departmental academics (not my supervisor) reading and writing comments on the report and from that deciding whether to award me a pass, request minor corrections, request a viva-style interview to ask me further questions, or fail the report and request re-submission in October (or suggest dropping out). Given my supervisors encouraging comments thus far, I certainly do not expect my report to fail, but realise that minor corrections and/or a viva interview are possible. We have just been informed that the assessors

for each of our reports have now been determined, and we should expect to hear our feedback (i.e. pass, corrections, viva, or fail) by the end of May.

In addition, to this report, all first-year PhD students are expected to give a departmental presentation on their PhD research topic in the third term. We were given the impression that this would be a highly formal and critical event, and that our two upgrade report assessors would be present. However, I presented my research in week two of the third term to a room of my fellow PhD students plus my supervisor and the head of graduate studies. The environment was incredibly relaxed and neither of my two 'upgrade report' assessors attended. However, the presentation seemed to go very well and I received very positive feedback from the two staff members and also the students (though this might be more to do with my gift of the gab rather than presentation content!). There were also lots of helpful questions afterwards, which at least showed people had listened and were interested. In addition, my supervisor said he was pleased with my presentation, which was very encouraging, though it would have been good to get some more formal feedback (perhaps from the head of graduate studies whereas my supervisor had read the presentation in advance) on both the content and style of presentation. I now await news about the upgrade report.

3. First-year PhD research seminars

As I have mentioned previously, all first-year PhD students are required to attend weekly research seminars, which have varied significantly in terms of relevance and interest. However, the timetable for this term appears to be of more interest and applicability than past terms, focusing on topics to do with the practicalities of fieldwork, as well as sessions on structuring a thesis and writing up. Although only two sessions have been held thus far this term they have already been of far more interest than previous terms – largely because of the practical nature of topics selected. In addition, the usual head of graduate studies is on sabbatical leave this term and his replacement is somewhat easier to relate to, thus encouraging a more informal and participatory style to the research sessions.

4. Supervisor relations

As I have got to know my supervisor progressively better I have continued to be impressed with him as both an individual and a supervisor. Throughout the second term we met on three formal occasions to discuss my work, but also on several informal occasions – for example, he organised for me to meet a USA-based colleague who has researched similar areas to my PhD, and was in Wessex as the external examiner for one of my supervisor's PhD students. Although we have not

met as regularly as many other PhD students and their supervisors this style has suited us both, and when we do meet they are usually long sessions (2-3 hours). I was particularly impressed last term that whenever I emailed asking him to read some of my work (often 50+ pages at the very last minute), he had always gone through the contents rigorously and was ready for a long discussion in our meetings. Not only would we verbally discuss my work, but he would also always return my work with thorough and detailed written comments, which are of immense help for redrafting.

The typical format for arranging such meetings is that I email him suggesting a few different convenient times (usually in the next 3-7 days) and then he replies (usually within one day) confirming which time/date suit him best. I then email work for him to read over and also send an indication of the key topics I'd like to discuss during the meeting. Since the outset of my PhD the onus has always been on me to make contact with my supervisor in order to arrange meetings, and this has suited me very well as I feel that a more aggressive supervisor-led style would detract from my ability to immerse myself in work and then emerge for air to see my supervisor at my discretion (but probably once every month or so). Although I realise that many other students would struggle to work alongside such a student-based approach to supervision, my strong time management and self-discipline skills have made this approach an asset rather than an obstacle to my PhD.

5. Additional work stuff

At the end of the first term of my PhD I was requested by my old department at London University to return to work for them one-day-a-week for one term as they were temporarily missing a lecturer. I spoke to my supervisor about this and despite me having conducted very little work in my first term (due to cracked ribs) he agreed that if I believed myself able to fit in lecturing in London alongside my PhD work then he would support me (I needed his support in order for the ESRC to allow me to conduct non-PhD work). Once again, I was impressed at his treatment of PhD students as adults capable of managing their own time, whereas I know of other supervisors who treat their students more like undergraduates and have refused to allow students to conduct any non-PhD work (as if they are juniors unable to assess their own abilities to combine PhD and non-PhD work). Therefore, throughout the second term I travelled to London one-day-a-week and enjoyed the experience of working back in the academic environment as 'staff' rather than 'student' (e.g. access to the staff tea-room!), as well as the financial bonus of 'real' work. However, I felt that work on my PhD suffered a little as I struggled not only to fit all my work into the remaining four days, but also struggled to fully focus on the issues and immerse

myself in my PhD when each week was disrupted by travel to London to teach a subject very slightly different to my PhD. Therefore, I am now working full-time on my PhD.

Straight after the end of the second term I travelled to my fieldwork site (South Africa) for a brief visit (and holiday) in order to establish preliminary contacts for my proposed research visit to a local university (October – December 2003), and then one year of fieldwork (January – December 2004), whilst also finalising the details of my fiancé's post-doctoral position at the same university. The visit went extremely well and we have both finalised arrangements for the 15 month period we intend to stay there (whilst also competing in a 109km road race!). In particular I was once again grateful to my supervisor as his good reputation amongst academics at that university ensured that they warmly welcomed me based on my association to him. I had very productive meetings with academic staff and look forward to clarifying my methodology in association with the University before commencing my fieldwork proper.

Towards the end of the Easter vacation, first-year PhD students in the same discipline but from a selection of universities (from the Wessex consortium) gathered for a conference at Cumberland Lodge, Great Windsor Park. This three-day conference involved each student giving a presentation about our PhD research, alongside presentations from academic staff, and also provided an opportunity to meet PhD students in my subject from other universities. Whilst a good experience in terms of meeting new people and rehearsing my upgrade presentation (and a good training ride there and back!), the conference itself was somewhat disappointing as the staff-led sessions were poorly organised, and feedback on student presentations focused solely on style rather than content.

6. Future intentions

As I await news of my upgrade report status I am continuing to read and write papers as literature, context and methodological background for my thesis. In addition, my supervisor has advised me to work on turning one of my literature papers into a journal article to be submitted over the summer (prior to departure for fieldwork), in the hope that this will be published by the time I return to Wessex for my third year, and thus serve as a boost for writing up and securing a job. As this will be my first article submission to one of the major journals I expect the article preparation to consume a large amount of the summer, alongside fieldwork preparations.

7. Personal issues

The house in which I reside has continued to have serious structural problems, such that I was evacuated last week due to asbestos, we currently have no hot water, and the nine of us are sharing a single bathroom! However, my supervisor has been incredibly understanding and when problems in the house have been severe I have simply gone to Bristol (where my fiancé lives) to work, as he has a spare desk in his office. In addition, other personal issues are dominating life as I am getting married in 6.5 weeks (late-June) and thus currently combining PhD work with wedding preparations. My fiancé and I will then spend the summer in the UK before travelling to Cape Town for my fieldwork (and his postdoc) in October. As he will be writing up his PhD over the summer I anticipate that we will both work from home and thus believe that producing a journal article by the end of the summer (particularly as it will be based on a paper I have already written) is feasible, and will also enable me to publish in my new married surname (as I already have a few previous publications in my maiden name).

Episode 4

September 2003: end of Year One

I. Term Three (April – June 2003)

As my previous 'PhD update' was written only at the outset of my third term at Wessex, it seems appropriate to commence by detailing the rest of that term, before moving onto the present.

The weekly research seminars for first-year PhD students continued throughout this term, alongside weekly presentations given by one of the first-year PhD students on their research project (essentially a verbal presentation of our upgrade report). However, despite the increased usefulness and relevance of the topics in the weekly research seminars, attendance by my fellow-PhD students fell dramatically. I suspect this to be a combination of three factors. Firstly, the absence of our usual head of graduate studies (a fairly forceful character and not some to get on the wrong side of) on sabbatical leave, leaving the seminars to be run by a far less domineering and forceful (though by no means less senior) member of the department. Secondly, over the three terms student's had become gradually aware that the so-called 'compulsory' nature of these seminars was hard to enforce and that absence appeared to incur no formal penalty (only the wrath of the now absent head of graduate studies). Thirdly, students were feeling the pressure of the upgrade report deadline and their impending verbal presentation, and thus preferred to use the time on their own work. Attendance was also low at the weekly student presentations (not

surprising given they were held immediately after the research seminar), and as mentioned in my previous update, they were far more informal than we had been led to expect. Since term has ended the seminars have obviously ended, and as they are held for first-years only, they will not be a feature of the rest of my PhD.

As mentioned in my previous update, I submitted my 'upgrade' report (to upgrade from being a 'Probationary Research Student' to a 'PhD candidate') at the start of my third term. Towards the end of the term I received notification by email from the departmental secretary that I had passed my upgrade and that formal notification and comments on my report would be placed in my departmental pigeon-hole. As the upgrade reports were marked later than we had originally been informed, we were all very grateful to receive immediate emails rather than a delayed pigeon-hole note, or worse, a list on the department notice-board. The comments on my upgrade were received a few days later and whilst one academic had written very little, the other had made a significant number of comments and suggestions for further readings. Although this academic has a reputation for being very aloof within the department, when I emailed him for clarification on his comments (his handwriting was barely legible) he replied quickly and with full details of suggested literature. This was immensely helpful in giving me a post-upgrade focus as I immersed myself in his suggested ideas and altered my research ideas and 'papers' accordingly (as mentioned previously, I have written 'papers' on different aspects of the PhD as I have gone along, in the hope that they might contribute to the final thesis). For most PhD students (myself included to a small degree), submitting the upgrade report (and giving the oral presentation) had been such a climax that work motivation and productivity dropped significantly afterwards (the summer sun might have also had an impact!).

I have recently received formal notification (an official letter in my college pigeon-hole and copied to my supervisor) from the university, that I have been successfully upgraded to PhD candidate status.

2. Current Work (Summer 2003)

I am currently working on an article to be submitted to a major journal, based on the theoretical foundations of my PhD. This is taking considerably longer to complete than I had expected, considering that it is rooted in one of the 'papers' I have written in my first-year. However, I am extremely grateful for the advice of two academics in the department (not my supervisor, who is more a specialist on the practical/fieldwork side to my PhD) in helping me to refine the article. Despite having no formal obligation to help me (i.e. they are not my supervisor), one professor in

particular has devoted significant time in reading my drafts, and repeatedly meeting with me. Although the other is often hard to pin down, I am hoping that my persistence in contacting him (by email and knocking on his door whenever I am in Wessex) will pay off as he has at least agreed to read and comment on the article – though I have yet to receive any feedback. The work on this journal submission has provided an excellent focus to the post-wedding summer, and although it will be incredibly disappointing if it is rejected after so much work, it has also refined the theory of my PhD and hopefully provided written material for my ultimate thesis.

Since getting married at the end of the third term, my husband and I have been living in Staines (approximately one-hour from my studies in Wessex, and approximately two-hours from his studies at Bristol). We are both working from home and due to his need to write-up, submit and have his PhD viva *before* we can leave for Cape Town (where I am conducting my PhD fieldwork, and he has a postdoctoral position), we are actually both working very hard despite being newlyweds! We both tend to travel to our respective universities once a fortnight, and I usually find the day gets consumed with returning/removing library books, general admin (there always seems to be a form that the university, college, or ESRC need me to complete!), and seeing academics (including my supervisor), rather than any real ‘work’. However, as the other 9 days of the fortnight comprise ‘pure’ work only, one-day of meetings and admin seems justifiable.

I have also been using the summer and my non-Wessex location to meet with a few academics from other universities (mostly in London) who hold some expertise on my PhD research area. This has been useful in providing advice, further reading suggestions, and general contacts with others working in the same area. Furthermore, it has also been a real encouragement to now feel sufficiently confident to discuss my research with others. One of the academics I met with over the summer, I had met with previously, just before I started my PhD. At that previous meeting I had felt somewhat ‘railroaded’ by her, particularly her opinion of what I should or shouldn’t focus on in my PhD. However, at this subsequent meeting, a year on, it was great to feel so confident about my work and be able to ‘fight’ for my opinions.

There have also been two conferences that I have attended over the summer. One was a very small Wessex-based one-day conference and the other the annual international conference for my subject. I attended both on my own, and thus found it difficult to force myself upon people in the tea/coffee breaks, and was thus a little isolated. However, I was very glad to have attended them both, not so much for the information gleaned in the sessions, but more for the experience learned – with the hope of presenting a session at both conferences next year or the year after.

Although I was informed of the former small conference by my supervisor, the latter was not advertised within the department and thus many of the other postgraduates did not even know they had missed the annual conference. I wonder if the staff simply assumed that postgraduates would know of the conference and/or be on the mailing list, but for those who have not come straight from previous studies and/or who previously studied a different subject, that is clearly not the case. I felt it was a shame that such conferences are not more widely advertised to the postgraduates.

3. Supervisor Relations

I continue to have good relations with my supervisor, indeed he attended our wedding in June, and has also used our house as a car park when travelling overseas (we live very near to the airport). Despite no longer living in Wessex, I continue to see him regularly – either to discuss work (usually once every month or so) or just to say ‘hello’ (usually once a fortnight when I go to Wessex). I really appreciate his attitude to supervision in the sense of it being not solely an academic position but also a personal/social one (this is possibly due to the Wessex undergraduate tutoring style), and a dual-relationship in the sense that he also shares his personal and academic concerns in our meetings. Whilst I appreciate that not all supervisors have the time or personality to conduct such a holistic relationship with their PhD students I would hasten to add that my supervisor is not a naturally outgoing type, but a very formal ‘old-school’ man (e.g. we often ‘take’ lunch at his college high-table), but one who recognises the need to address both the academic and non-academic needs of his student as individuals rather than ‘departmental revenue’, for which I am eternally grateful.

4. Departmental Relations

For most of my first-year I have felt very anonymous within the department, often walking around the corridors without recognising, or being recognised by, anyone. To be fair, this is largely a consequence of my choice to work at home (although this has been encouraged by the lack of desk-space in the department) and also the immense size and diversity of a department encompassing both the arts and sciences. However, over the last few months, I have gradually begun to notice a change, as I now recognise and am recognised by, more staff and students. In a small part, getting married has facilitated this, as I have had to complete lots of ‘red-tape’ in the department office, inform various staff members of my new surname, and also had lots of staff and students (not just the women!) gushing over our wedding photos and congratulating me. Whilst perhaps not the most conventional way to feel part of the department, it is extremely comforting to gradually feel that I am accepted and have a role there, whereas I previously often felt like a

stranger or intruder in my own department. I wonder if one way around this might be to create an environment in which staff and postgraduates can mix and interact more freely throughout the year and not solely at the 'welcome event' in the first week when no-one remembers who they have met anyway.

5. ESRC funding

As an ESRC-funded student, I receive an annual grant as well as a 'Research and Training Support Grant' which is paid directly to the university. In order to gain access to this money (£470, but going up to £700 from next year onwards) I have to produce receipts for the departmental finance administrator. At first I was not aware of this (the university do not advertise this because if I don't claim it they get to keep it), and so am now trying to claim for any and everything! What has amazed me is that in addition to my annual grant (£8,000, rising to £9,000 next year, and then £10,500 the year after) I have been awarded an 'overseas fieldwork expenses' amount of £6,000 (as well as an extra £2,000 for an 'overseas institutional visit' to the University of Cape Town for my first three months). Whilst very happy to be given so much extra income (albeit all claimable by receipt only) on a purely selfish level, it seems somewhat incongruous given the lack of ESRC studentships available for postgraduates. Indeed, over five people in my year applied for ESRC studentships and were all rejected. I am almost embarrassed to admit to having been awarded ESRC funding, and find it incredulous that they willingly throw so much extra money at students already receiving an ESRC grant, rather than expanding to fund more students.

6. Personal Issues

As mentioned previously, I got married at the end of June, and thus the wedding organising plus moving both our belongings out of our respective homes and cities, and into our new (albeit temporary) home in the week preceding the wedding, has certainly had a negative impact on my work. What with a week of pre-wedding stresses, plus two-week honeymoon, and one-week of unpacking and settling into our temporary home, I probably lost at least a month of work. However, my supervisor (as always) has never complained, simply trusting that as an adult I am capable of organising my own work timetable. Indeed, since my husband is writing-up his PhD we have both been working very hard since settling into our home. The flexible nature of my daily routine has not altered much in the sense that I continue to treat work-hours as flexible. We tend to work in the mornings and evenings, often taking time off in the afternoons to (e.g. to go shopping or cycling), and try to avoid working weekends whenever possible (easier for me than my husband).

7. The way forward

Although originally planning to leave for Cape Town in early-September, the delayed submission of my husband's PhD means that we're now more realistically looking at late-October or even early-November as a departure date. As I have lived there before, we already have a place to stay when we first arrive, as well as a car, and so the major fieldwork preparations are organising our flights and visas. The former cannot be booked until my husband has had his viva (as required by his funding body), and we are in the lengthy and frustrating process of currently submitting the latter.

Episode 5

5th January 2004

1. Final months in UK (October - December 2003)

My previous 'PhD update' was written in September, at the end of the UK summer, and thus I start this episode by outlining the progress achieved in my final months in the UK (October – December 2003), before departing at the start of December for 15 months of fieldwork in South Africa.

The main focus of this period was consumed with completing and submitting a paper to the major journal for my subject (as mentioned in the previous update). As this was quite an ambitious aim (the first paper I have submitted to such a prestigious journal), redrafting and refining the paper took considerably longer than I had anticipated. However, two professors in my department offered me help – one giving me considerable amounts of time and advice over several different redrafts, the other (who proved hard to pin down), providing thorough written comments on the final draft. I finally submitted the paper at the end of October, and received notification (by email) that it had arrived. Since then I have heard nothing from the journal, but would hope to receive comments from the peer reviewers at least six months after submitting (i.e. end of April 2004). Even if rejected, the process of writing this paper has been incredibly helpful – both in terms of clarifying the theory of my PhD as well as entering the academic maze of journal article submission. Very few of my fellow students in the department have submitted journal papers at such an early stage in their PhD, and I am grateful to my supervisor for encouraging me to take the initial step (yet not forcing me to write 'his' article, or even to add his name as a co-author). I think it is a shame that more supervisors do not encourage their PhD students to enter the world of journal papers at an earlier stage. Given the time that the review process takes, if accepted, I

still wouldn't expect my paper to be printed until the third year of my PhD, thus showing the advantages of early submission.

During this time spent in the UK there has also been an interesting situation that developed within my department at Wessex. The backdrop to the situation is that the department charges postgraduate students annual 'bench fees' of £100 for general things like stationery, photocopying, printing. However, from 2003 they decided to increase the annual levy to £400 without providing any additional services, and without informing the students in advance – we were simply informed when the invoice arrived in our pigeonholes. Despite significant student protests to the department, the amount remained unchanged. Thus students decided to take action one step further: all postgraduates were informed *not* to pay the bench fees while one postgraduate student contacted Wessex University's Proctor, and also the Student Union's legal services, to inform them of the situation. After the Proctor's intervention the bench fee was immediately returned to its £100 annual rate, but for postgraduate students entering their first year in 2004, the fee will be £400. We also managed to negotiate with the department, that students away on fieldwork should not be liable for the fees. This is an interesting case of the department assuming that they can railroad postgraduate students, and then their subsequent shock at our universal outrage and action. Unfortunately, we were not able to improve the situation for future students.

2. Preparation for South Africa

Although my previous PhD update indicated that initial delays meant that I would be leaving for fieldwork in South Africa in early-November (having originally intended to depart early-September), departure was in fact subsequently delayed until early-December. The reason for the initial delay was my husband's PhD write-up taking longer than anticipated due to problems with his mathematical coding. However, he submitted in early-October and, as his supervisor knew our predicament, he had selected an external examiner who promised to viva my husband within a month of submission. So we spent what we thought was our final month in the UK organising things for our departure (e.g. packing up the contents of a house). However, after 6 weeks of silence from my husband's university (my husband had been instructed not to contact them, but to wait to be informed about his viva), we finally heard that his viva had been set for early January 2004, 3 months after his submission (rather than the promised one month). We were both obviously deeply distressed and contacted the university to discover the reason for the delay - which was the external examiner refusing to set the viva date any earlier (despite having only been selected because he had promised to give the viva within a month of submission). We are both angry and upset about the way that my husband's viva has been organised, particularly the

knowledge that we are powerless to do anything. We do not even want to risk lodging an official complaint for fear of upsetting the examiner prior to the viva (although we intend to do so after the viva). The most frustrating thing is that one man (the external examiner) has the power to dictate the PhD student's life, with the latter being a powerless pawn in the process. I feel that there ought to be more stringent and formal procedures to ensure a quicker response time between submission and viva notification, as well as allowing the student more say in the process. We are now concerned about what will happen when I face the same process in two years time.

Unfortunately, as I had already had to put my PhD on 'hold' for two months as I could not proceed without being in South Africa, we decided to fly to South Africa as soon as we heard about the viva date, and my husband has now had to return (alone) to the UK for his viva. Thus the behaviour of his external examiner has now caused us the expense of an extra flight, as well as the emotional pain of several weeks of separation after only 6 months of marriage. It is also frustrating to know that the delays to my PhD could have been avoided, for if the external examiner had informed us nearer to the time of thesis submission that the viva would be so delayed (rather than waiting 6 weeks to inform us), we could have travelled out to South Africa then.

As mentioned earlier, I put my PhD temporarily on 'hold' for two months, while we waited for news of the viva. Given that my delayed departure for fieldwork was entirely for personal reasons (I did not want to leave without my husband), I was concerned that my supervisor and department at Wessex, might put strong pressure on me to fly out alone and commence fieldwork. However, as always, I have been immensely impressed with the caring attitude taken by both my supervisor and the department, recognising that I ought to stay and wait with my husband, even if that meant that my PhD is now likely to overrun at the end. I am very grateful to them for treating me as a specific individual, rather than just enforcing the set university rules/expectations. I was also concerned that as Wessex requires all postgraduates to reside at least 6 of their 9 terms within 25 miles of Wessex, I might be in danger of breaking such rules by delaying my departure for South Africa (I moved away from Wessex after getting married). However, by some strange by-regulation, the university officials have decided to accept that as my work in South Africa is crucial to my PhD, the time spent there counts as though I was in Wessex!

3. Arrival in South Africa (6th December 2003)

Although the initial few weeks in South Africa were somewhat hectic what with trying to find a flat to rent, buy a car, and also settle into work (we both started working at the same South African university only 2 days after arriving), we are now relatively settled.

I am spending the first 3 months of my 15 months stay working at this university as part of the ESRC's 'Overseas University Visit' (OUV), and will then spend the final 12 months conducting PhD fieldwork. This is proving a perfect way of easing into life in South Africa, as well as an excellent opportunity to get advice from local experts on my intended fieldwork. Unfortunately the ESRC payment system for both the OUV bonus and then fieldwork expenses is somewhat frustrating. Although the ESRC calculated the exact amount of bonus and expenses to be awarded to me (based on the scale of costs in South Africa), these monies were paid to my department at Wessex rather than directly to me. Even more frustratingly, the department requires receipts for the full amount (as you can imagine, collecting receipts for £9,000 is very irritating). If I fail to produce receipts for the full amount, then my Wessex department will keep it. I find this utterly incredible given that the ESRC has identified this money as to be given to me for my time in South Africa.

4. Work in South Africa

During my 3 month 'Overseas University Visit' I intend to conduct a pilot study as preparation for my subsequent fieldwork. I have been allocated a supervisor for my visit, and she has so far been very helpful in providing advice. As I arrived here during their long summer vacation, as well as the Christmas break, the department has been relatively deserted. This was initially good in terms of having access to the university at a time when few students are present, but over the Christmas and New Year period the department became lonely and deserted, with access to most facilities closed. As I am still at the early stages of this research visit, I am currently using UCT's access to the recent census material in order to gain quantitative information, before selecting fieldwork sites and commencing the pilot study proper.

This pilot study will hopefully serve not only as good preparation for fieldwork, but will also provide a chapter for my thesis. In addition, I am using the material as the abstract for a paper that I am currently submitting to the annual international conference for my subject. If accepted, I

would also hope to ultimately turn the work into a paper that could be submitted to a journal (see the next section for more on this).

5. Supervisor relations

Despite being so far away from Wessex, I continue to have good contact with my supervisor via email. I tend to email him whenever I have specific question(s), and also if I have written something that I wish him to review (I have emailed him four times since arriving in South Africa one month ago). As I have lived in South Africa before, and thus have found re-settling in relatively easy, these questions are purely about work rather than personal issues. It is helpful that he always replies within one to two days (three at the most), with direct answers and if he hasn't yet read the document, then an indication of when he will be able to do so.

It is also nice that in addition to providing answers to my work-based questions, we both share personal issues, to keep each other updated on news. For example, although a very small thing, it was lovely to receive a Christmas card from him to our new address here in South Africa – showing that his care and interest in his PhD students extends beyond the narrow realm of their work. However, I expect that I will not need to contact him too much over the next few months as the supervisor that I have been allocated for my three months here at the university in South Africa (who my Wessex supervisor knows very well), is obviously better placed to answer questions about my field-based work, than my distant Wessex-based supervisor. However, in my initial few weeks here while finalising the goals for my research visit, it has been vital to remain in good contact to ensure his approval, and he has already provided advice on the work I am conducting here.

In addition, approximately two months ago, he sent me an email suggesting that I submit an abstract to the international conference for my subject – which I attended last year but did not submit an abstract as I was still at a preliminary stage in my PhD. This conference is not only the major event for my subject, but my supervisor is also the joint convener of a session specifically addressing South Africa. This therefore provides the ideal platform for presenting some of my work and receiving feedback from experts in the field, as well as providing an excellent opportunity to meet with others specialising in this field. As my supervisor is a co-convener of this session he has advised me that in order to ensure fairness he will not be able to review my abstract, so I am certainly not guaranteed acceptance (but should hear back by early February).

My supervisor did not give me any strong advice or instruction about what I should submit as a paper. However, once I had been in South Africa for a few weeks I decided to use my time here to conduct a pilot study, and will then turn the results into the paper for the conference. I then contacted my supervisor to confirm whether he thought this was acceptable, and he said it was fine but advised me to be absolutely certain that I will be able to conduct the work as I have to submit the abstract before the work has even commenced. This clearly will not divert me from my thesis as I would hope the pilot study would form a chapter of my thesis anyway.

Since my upgrade in June, there have been no formal checks on my progress by anyone. I would not even refer to my supervisors checks' as formal, but as rather informal. As my supervisor explained to me at the outset of my PhD – the relationship is very much dictated by me, and it is my responsibility to contact him when I wish to discuss something, as he will not chase after me. This suits me perfectly, as I dislike having someone standing over my shoulder instructing me. However, I am aware that he has to submit reports on my progress to the University (I believe these reports are termly), but I do not have access to these reports. However, I have been informed by a friend who completed her PhD at my department in Wessex that at the start of the second term of my third year (when I will still be on fieldwork in South Africa, due to earlier delays) I will be expected to submit two chapters of my thesis for review by members of the department. I have not yet had an official notification about this though.

6. The way forward

For the next three months I will conduct my research visit at this university in South Africa, and then branch out on my own to conduct 12 months of fieldwork. Although the parameters for this research visit (funded by the ESRC) are very vague, after discussions with both my Wessex-based supervisor and the supervisor I have been allocated here, I have decided to use the three months to conduct a pilot study in two or possibly three neighbourhoods that I later hope to conduct PhD fieldwork in. This provides an excellent opportunity to test out the areas and questions for my PhD fieldwork in advance, and also to refine my PhD methodology in light of both the pilot study findings, and advice from local experts (academics and others). As I am still at the early stages of this visit, at the moment I am using the University's access to the national census data in order to select the neighbourhoods where I wish to conduct research. This census data was not available to me back in the UK, and, even in South Africa, the costs of private access would have been beyond my budget – so access to the University's resources during this visit is invaluable.

Once I have completed the pilot study and written it up as a paper for the international conference (if my abstract is accepted), and ultimately as a preliminary thesis chapter, I will then commence 12 months of fieldwork proper. I intend to work from home during this period, and am hoping that the good contacts I have already developed at the University will enable me to pop back in from time to time to discuss my work and gain advice.

Obviously I am also hoping that both the journal article and conference abstract will get accepted. For the latter that would then mean applying for funding to fly to the UK in August 2004 for the conference.

Episode 6

23rd March 2004

I. South African University research visit (December 2003 – March 2004)

My last doctoral story was written at the outset of my three-month position as a visiting research student at the South African university. This position lasted from December 2003 until March 2004. Thus, having completed my visit two weeks ago I am now in a position to review the value of the time spent there as well as to offer my plans and hopes for the next 12 months of South African-based fieldwork.

The two key aims of the research visit were firstly, to access the census 2001 data; and secondly, to conduct a pilot study in 2-3 neighbourhoods. At a more general level, the research visit was intended to aid the progression of my PhD at this stage, ease the process of settling into South Africa, and also help in developing links with local academics that are conducting active research in this field. At this stage of my PhD, moving from the first year of theoretical investigation, into the second year of practical fieldwork, the timing of the research visit has been ideal, providing the perfect opportunity to ease between the two different phases. Rather than arriving in South Africa and feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the enormity of the fieldwork task ahead, I have been able to settle into South Africa within a structured programme of research, as well as gain advice and insight from others in the department regarding my PhD. I would suggest that wherever possible, such academic arrangements are ideal for the beginning of overseas fieldwork

for PhD students as it is a time in which one can easily feel lost both in terms of arrival in a new foreign land, and also in terms of progressing into a new stage of the PhD – both without the support of a ‘home’ (family and/or culture) environment.

In terms of the more specific aims of the visit, the University’s access to South Africa’s Census 2001 data has proved vital to my research. This data was only released a few weeks before I arrived in South Africa, and the cost of accessing this information as a private individual would have been far beyond my budget. Thus my visit was both timely and cost-effective. I have benefited greatly from the ability to access and analyse the census data at the University’s laboratory, and staff there were also incredibly helpful in explaining the software packages to me and helping me in my initial attempts to analyse the data. I spent approximately the first month accessing this data and writing my findings up in a very descriptive-type paper. I then used these findings to select the neighbourhoods in which to conduct a pilot study.

The second key aim of the research visit was to conduct a pilot study in 2-3 neighbourhoods based on the census data and also then write this study up as a paper (to present at a conference later in the year, and also as a chapter of my PhD thesis). However, after commencing initial interviews in two selected areas, research in one of the neighbourhoods snowballed significantly, to the extent that I am now conducting an extended fieldwork case study in that area. I was initially nervous about commencing fieldwork, after so many months of theoretical preparation, and thus was immensely relieved that although arduous, the fieldwork in one area was progressing so rapidly and unearthing such fascinating trends. Therefore, in consultation with both my local and Wessex (via email – see section 3) supervisors, I decided not to conduct a pilot study and instead to focus deeply in this one area. Therefore, for my final month I was rarely in the department, spending most of my time conducting research in the field rather than sitting at a desk. Fortunately my local supervisor was more than happy with this, and although I did not really need to be based at there for this final month I felt a duty to complete the ESRC-funded period (and was also using the University’s library and internet facilities). Although this empirical success has hastened the commencement of my PhD fieldwork, it has also meant that the pilot study paper was never written (and hence the conference paper will be written nearer to the time – see below).

2. Ongoing work: Research papers

In my last doctoral story I mentioned that I had submitted a paper to the most prestigious journal for my subject, and in January 2004 I discovered that the article had been rejected. Whilst one of

the reviewers felt it should have been accepted (with revisions), the editor chose to side with the other reviewer. The editors' cover letter summarised: "the reviewers are rather critical of the paper but they all recognise the value of what you are trying to do and their criticisms are focused on presentation rather than substance". In addition, cover sheets from the reviewers were sent to me, and the reviewer who felt it should be rejected on two fronts: firstly, because it seemed more relevant to a different subject-focused journal and therefore "not well directed at [the journal] audiences"; and secondly because the background literature overlooks a specific area of research that the reviewer felt was vital. Very helpfully, the other reviewer that felt it should be accepted (albeit with major revisions), wrote copious notes on the manuscript (which was sent to me) as well as the cover sheet in which she praised the research topic but felt the paper was unnecessarily long and needed to be rewritten to be "tight and strong ... at present it's too diffuse".

I was obviously upset by this rejection, not least because I had spent so much time refining the paper, but also because I had hoped it would form a chapter of my thesis. However, although I have not yet had the time or inclination to go through the comments provided, they should prove useful in amending the paper for my thesis. Furthermore, the rejection appeared not to be on the basis of the substance of the article, but more the style and approach used. This has encouraged me that the basic content of the paper can still be used in my thesis, and could also be sent to a different journal if and when time allows revision.

On a more positive note, I have been asked by Dr Anne Wright, an expert in crime issues in developing countries, to turn my MSc dissertation (from 2001, at a different university) into an article for a special edition of a highly-esteemed journal. Although I do not know her personally, she was given my contact details by my masters' supervisor, and she will be editing this special journal edition. This is incredibly encouraging, and although will distract me slightly from my PhD work for a few weeks (as I am no longer researching the same topic) it seems worthwhile for the overall academic (and career) worth. I have set aside two weeks next month which I will devote to writing this article.

The second piece of good news regarding research papers is that the abstract I submitted to the annual international conference for my subject has been accepted. This will involve a return trip to the UK in August, which I will combine with personal time with family and friends as well as work-time discussing my progress thus far with my Wessex supervisor (see section 3). This visit is a particularly timely opportunity to discuss my fieldwork progress as upon returning to South

Africa in August I will still have seven months left to make any changes based on my supervisor advice. In order to fund this trip I applied for funding from the conference travel bursary and was amazed to be awarded \$300 US dollars as well as having my conference fees paid. I have also applied for a university travel bursary to contribute towards the rest of my costs. As I regularly hear fellow students and colleagues complain about a lack of funding in the social sciences I am always determined to apply for whatever funding is available (rather than just complain), and am constantly amazed (as are my colleagues!) at the funds it is possible to acquire with a little determination. Many of my fellow PhD students did not apply for the conference bursary because they believed they would receive nothing, so are shocked (and a little miffed) at my good fortune! Although I have not yet written the paper for this conference (indeed, I am still conducting the fieldwork that will form the basis of the paper!), I hope that the process of writing the paper will help me to form some coherent arguments about my fieldwork thus far. This will not only provide a good basis to discuss ideas with others at the conference, but also with my supervisor in Wessex, and hopefully the paper will also serve as a thesis chapter.

3. Supervisor relations

Despite having been in South Africa since early December, I continue to have close contact with my supervisor – emailing each other approximately once a fortnight, though that increases significantly when there is something specific to discuss. Indeed, as my pilot study rapidly developed into full-blown fieldwork in February, I contacted my Wessex supervisor in order to clarify the direction of this fieldwork and also to gain advice about quashing the pilot study idea and instead making the area an extended case study. Although my supervisor was too busy to reply with his thoughts until over a week after my initial email (it was the end of term back in Wessex), he did send an email reply within a few days to let me know that he had received my email and would reply properly in the coming weeks. The quick acknowledgment of my email is something I have come to appreciate with my supervisor, especially with such long-distance supervision.

I continue to have no other contact with my department back at Wessex, though my college did email me in February to inform me that I had an annual progress meeting with the senior tutor, which I of course was unable to attend! I am not really concerned by this though as in my subject I am aware that approximately 80% of my class are currently overseas on fieldwork and thus the department consider us the responsibility of our supervisor. However, I intend to use the trip back to the UK for the conference in August as an opportunity to visit Wessex and catch up with staff there (especially my supervisor of course). Though many will be away for the summer

vacation, I will be in the UK for a full month before the conference (as my husband also has a conference in the UK in July), which should provide adequate time to make several visits to Wessex. I am very pleased that this trip falls half-way through my fieldwork time, thus giving me the perfect opportunity to discuss my work thus far face-to-face with my supervisor and gather his thoughts and advice – with still seven more months left in South Africa, to take on board his suggestions for change if necessary.

4. Fieldwork (March 2004 -)

For the past two weeks I have no longer been based at the University and have instead been based from home, focusing on my fieldwork. Although it has taken me a while to set up 'office' at home (e.g. the internet, buying a printer) I am enjoying having a single base from which to conduct fieldwork as in the latter stages of my visit I found I had documents both at work and at home, and never felt properly settled at either, especially as I spent most of time out on fieldwork.

Fortunately the links I established ensure I can still use the resources when necessary and intend to attend a fortnightly research seminar. It is also useful to have access to the library (aided by my husband's official card, as a postdoctoral fellow) as background reading for writing papers and analysing my findings.

Although officially working from home, I tend to be in the 'field' from 2-3 days a week, and spend the other days writing up material and organising further meetings. The area I am researching hosts a diverse range of communities, for while research in the low-cost housing area simply involved knocking on doors and meeting people in the streets, in the wealthy residential area one needs an appointment in order to gain access, as is the same for interviewing the various non-residential institutional stakeholders in the area (e.g. businesses, a private school, the United States consulate, and several retail outlets). Both methods are very time consuming, and thus I seem to spend most of my time both interviewing and organising interviews with people, leaving the writing time somewhat marginalised. However, I have planned each week up until I return to the UK, dividing my weeks between those spent in the field and those writing the MSc-based article, as well as 3 weeks that will be set aside at the end of May to reflect on my findings and consider some analysis before completing the final 3 weeks of fieldwork.

I am currently conducting fieldwork in a specific area, and intend to continue with this until 18th June (with a 3 week break in May to reflect on my findings). The period 22nd June – 14th July will be spent analysing the fieldwork and writing the conference paper before I then travel to the UK for a month (15th July – 15th August). During this month I will hope to meet several times with my

supervisor in Wessex both to review my conference paper and also to discuss my fieldwork thus far and its future direction. In August I will attend the international conference for my subject in Glasgow, and then return immediately to South Africa to continue fieldwork. The period from September to December will then be spent conducting fieldwork in my second site (four months is hoped to be sufficient as it will not be such an extended case study as the first area). This will then leave me with January to March 2005 to analyse the fieldwork and begin writing-up while still in South Africa and hence close enough to my fieldwork sites to be able to go back and check up on any loose ends.

Episode 7

March – December 2004

1. Introduction

My last doctoral story was written at the completion of my three-month position as a visiting research student at the South African university, and as I was just commencing fieldwork in my first site (March 2004). As I now write this 9 months later I have completed fieldwork in my first site, analysed the data and written two papers about it, travelled back to the UK for a month to see my supervisor at Wessex University and present one of those papers at a major international conference, and am now nearing completion of fieldwork in my second site.

2. First fieldwork site

From February – June 2004 I conducted fieldwork in my first geographical site, which involved conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with a range of residents and local stakeholders (e.g. council officials, NGO workers). As this was my first venture into conducting practical fieldwork on my own I was initially very nervous, particularly about gaining access to people and thus was ultimately concerned that the fieldwork would fail. However, my fears were gradually allayed over time as people opened up their hearts and homes to me and allowed me to interview them even though I offered nothing in return. Obviously though, the most difficult aspect was first gaining access to the area. I was fortunate to have been given a contact by a friend who knew someone living in the poorer area (this fieldwork site hosts both a wealthy and poor area), and this resident showed me around the area on my first visit. Subsequent to that I developed my own links with residents and was soon wandering about the streets meeting and greeting people with ease. Once again, gaining initial access to the wealthy area was difficult, but developed through a contact I had made in the poorer area. Although I found the initial days and weeks of

fieldwork incredibly daunting and nerve-wracking, I am not sure what advice could be offered to counter this for future students, as in many ways this was part of the fieldwork experience. The student is also often far from family and institutional (e.g. supervisor) support structures, but again, this is also in many ways part of the fieldwork experience. I suppose my only advice would be that a supervisor be on close call at this stage (via email) in case of emergency.

3. Analysing and writing up data

Although hard to know exactly when to stop fieldwork in my first site (one could continue collecting data for years) I was grateful for the deadline of having to prepare a conference presentation about this field-site by August 2004. I therefore completed fieldwork in this site in June, and by that time felt I had a sufficiently large and representative sample in both areas. Although I had taken a three-week break in the midst of this fieldwork in order to reflect on my findings, I was still unsure of what direction my paper would take and still needed to code and analyse the masses of data that I had collected. I was surprised at just how long it took me to do this analysis and was therefore very grateful that I had allocated myself two months for this purpose. Although I did successfully analyse the data and write it up into a paper I found the position of working from home at a desk all day very isolated and dull. Therefore I was very glad when the time came to return to the UK for a month, both to see family and friends, but also to meet with my supervisor at Wessex and also present my findings at an international conference.

4. Return visit to UK: seeing supervisor and presenting work

I returned to the UK for a month (mid-July to mid-August): two weeks of which were spent residing in Wessex (they provided accommodation at a reduced rate), one week at a conference and one week elsewhere (for my husband's work). The time spent at Wessex was invaluable as it enabled me to catch-up with my supervisor, update him on my fieldwork progress and seek his advice on future directions. Although we have always maintained strong email contact while I am overseas, it is impossible to fully communicate one's experiences over such a limited medium, and thus the opportunity to meet during this time was incredibly useful. I realise that not all PhD students are able to afford a return trip half-way through their fieldwork (I was fortunate that my trip was part-financed by a bursary from the conference and also from my department), but wherever possible I would highly recommend it. Although I had not been going off down blind alleys (metaphorically speaking!) during my fieldwork and was actually right on track, it was great to be able to share my experiences and preliminary findings with my supervisor and get his support and encouragement before heading back for the final half of fieldwork.

The final week of my UK visit was spent attending an international conference in Glasgow (which is covered in the September 2004 document I wrote on 'publishing and conferences') which provided an excellent opportunity to present my initial fieldwork findings to a wider audience. My findings were very well received, which served as a real boost for returning to South Africa and commencing research in a brand new field-site.

5. Second fieldwork site

Although I retain some basic links in my first fieldwork site and occasionally attend meetings there, my research in that area is effectively finished, and I commenced research in a new field-site in September 2004. This second area is a very middle-class suburb and thus it was hard (yet again) to obtain an initial contact. I therefore scrolled through old copies of the local newspaper (going back four years) and though this was time-consuming and arduous it provided me with the names and numbers of several key players in the suburb. I subsequently contacted these people and set-up interviews, and then the sample snow-balled from there. Although this could lead to a very one-dimensional sample, I have ensured that my sample represents all sectors of the field-site. Generally this fieldwork takes the form of setting aside 2-3 hours a week for making telephone calls (usually spread over two different times in a week) in order to set-up interviews, alongside approximately 3-4 days per week of actually conducting interviews (usually ranging from 2-6 interviews in a day), and then at least one day a week writing up the material into legible handwriting. This schedule has not afforded me sufficient time to analyse the data and thus I am not yet sure what my findings will reveal.

One of the hardest things about conducting a second set of fieldwork was the fact that I was trying to write up the first fieldwork site at the same time. Originally I intended to set one day a week aside in order to take a break from fieldwork and write up results from my first case-study. However, this proved impossible as the fieldwork sample grew in size, and also the fact that even if I managed to take a day off it took me half of that day just to get my mind back into the previous field-site. Therefore I decided to award myself three weeks away from fieldwork in order to write up results from the first field-site. This writing entailed formatting my conference presentation into a paper suitable for journal submission, and secondly writing a paper for a conference to be held next year, and also formatting that paper for journal submission. Both of these papers are now completed and awaiting comments from selected academics before I intend to submit them to different journals (the conference paper has been submitted to the conference for reviewers'

comments). Although this detracted somewhat from my current fieldwork I feel very satisfied that I have already written up so much of my earlier fieldwork.

As I mentioned earlier, I found working from home alone incredibly dull and lonely, and thus when I returned to South Africa (from the UK) in August, I contacted the university department at which I had previously conducted three months of research and asked if I could be given office space. Fortunately they agreed and I now find myself in a much more conducive working environment, sharing an office with other PhD students which whom I can share my experiences, and also along the corridor from respected academics who have agreed to read and discuss my work. Thus my advice for PhD students going overseas on fieldwork would be to try and establish a local academic base wherever possible.

6. Reflections on training for fieldwork

During the first-year of my PhD, based in Wessex, the department had run a weekly training programme for all first-year PhD students. The first term covered theoretical aspects of research such as key subject-based concepts, while the second term focused on more practical subjects such as writing in an academic style, and the third term addressed more practical issues related to fieldwork. Unfortunately by the time these fieldwork sessions were run, all PhD students had already submitted their 'upgrade report', in which we had stated how we intended to conduct fieldwork, and thus the sessions were a little tardy for students. However, issues such as survey and interviewing techniques as well as different methodological approaches (e.g. quantitative and qualitative) were covered in the weekly sessions. The format of these sessions was fairly one-dimensional with the staff member explaining a methodological style and then distributing some academic papers about this approach. There were no sessions on 'nitty gritty' issues such as research ethics, negotiating access to participants – or to put it bluntly, how *exactly* we expected to go about implementing such (often lofty and idealistic) methodologies once 'in the field'. At no point were students asked what approaches they intended to use (though this had been covered in our upgrade reports) and thus we were never forced to defend our methodologies to open scrutiny.

Having now almost completed my fieldwork, I feel that the Wessex-based sessions were of no guidance because although they covered specific methodological approaches, I had already analysed the literature on these approaches in writing my upgrade report. What would have been far more useful would have been a more practical and hands-on series of sessions about the problems and successes of actually *doing* fieldwork. Perhaps a few third-year PhD students could have been invited to talk first-hand about their experiences of errors made and overcome, accidental and intentional successes, tips for gaining access to communities etc. This would have been far more beneficial than simply academic readings about methodological tools. Although I had written in my upgrade report that I intended to access various communities by going through existing institutions (e.g. churches), in poorer areas it was impossible to identify any formal institutions. Instead I befriended a resident, who served as my guide in one area – but I was never certain to what extent I was diluting or benefiting my fieldwork by working with a local guide, and whether Wessex would approve or disapprove of such tactics upon my post-fieldwork return, especially as my approach in more wealthy areas was entirely different. Furthermore, I discovered that I detest telephoning people in order to set up interviews (i.e. cold-calling), and often wondered if others felt the same and/or whether other approaches for gaining access to people exist?

In sum, my key criticism of the Wessex-based training that I received was its lack of practical application, and in particular its failure to address the issue of ‘how to gain access to people/communities that you wish to research’. I would advise future training courses to:

1. Encourage students to openly discuss their intended methodological approaches and which aspects they feel least certain about (and through this to encourage students to realise that uncertainties about fieldwork are normal).
2. Invite third-year (post-fieldwork) PhD students to run at least one session for first-year PhDs – talking in very practical ways about *how* they did their fieldwork, and then answering questions from the first-years.
3. Run sessions that are focused on *practical* topics such as: how to gain access to a community, how much involvement to have from community leaders/guides that might taint your neutral position, how much confidentiality to offer, how to ask questions without appearing rude and intrusive, whether to take notes or use a Dictaphone, when to stop fieldwork, what sample size is large enough.

Furthermore, I have received no training at Wessex on how to analyse qualitative data once collected. Instead I have read academic papers about this and have taken the manual (rather than

using a software package) 'coding' approach. It would have been helpful to have a session on this before leaving for fieldwork as I have tried to analyse the data while in 'the field'.

7. Reflections on my time/project management schedule

Throughout the various stages of my PhD I have set myself weekly and monthly goals and deadlines and this has been extremely beneficial. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the PhD task, I have always been able to focus on smaller goals and therefore receive feelings of accomplishment on a regular basis. I earmark set blocks of time for specific tasks, often with smaller goals attached. Often the deadlines created are adjusted as it becomes obvious that I have been too optimistic or pessimistic about how long a task will take. For example, I allowed myself a set two-week period away from fieldwork in order to re-write my MSc thesis for publication, but after three-days of writing realised that with hard work I would complete this task in one week. Thus I altered the deadline and reallocated the excess week to a different task. In reverse, I allocated two-weeks away from fieldwork in order to write a journal paper, but discovered after one week that this was going to take far longer to complete and thus re-adjusted my timetable and shifted various deadlines in order to allow myself four weeks to complete the paper. Even within this four week schedule I would set smaller deadlines such as a date to complete data analysis, a date to complete literature survey, a date to complete the first draft and a date to make amendments. I have found this approach enormously useful in providing daily and weekly goals that provide a reason for getting some work done everyday, and also enabling the PhD to feel less overwhelming. Obviously such goals need to be flexible though, as demonstrated above.

Episode 8. Looking ahead (January 2005)

I.

As fieldwork in my second site draws to an end I face the prospect of analysing the data and starting to write up my findings, both as an independent case study and also in comparison to my first field-site. It is not yet certain whether I will conduct fieldwork in a third site or not. While I am keen to use only two case studies and thus be able to spend my final three months in South Africa (Jan – March 2005) writing up my findings, my supervisor has voiced concerns that perhaps I ought to consider research in a third area. The decision we reached (when I was in the UK) is that once I have finished research in my second site I would analyse my findings and then discuss

(over email) with my supervisor as to whether the depth of research in my two case studies compensates for a lack of breadth.

2.

I will also be attending a conference in Pretoria (elsewhere in South Africa) at the end of February and presenting the second paper that I have written about my first field-site. I am also now in the process of submitting an abstract for a conference back in the UK in September 2005. I would like this abstract to address my second field-site but as the data is not yet analysed, the abstract is proving somewhat speculative.

3.

I am also now starting to think about writing up the thesis as a whole, and though I always intended to write-up in the old-fashioned thesis book-style I am started to consider whether the 'four-paper' approach might not suit me better (at Wessex, and possibly at other institutions, we can submit four accepted journal papers (in addition to an introduction, methodology and conclusion) as our thesis). I have not yet decided which approach to take, but given that I have already written two journal papers on my research this would seem an ideal option. Obviously I will first have to see whether the two papers are accepted for publication or not.

4.

I hope to submit my thesis by December 2005. Although my original departmental and ESRC deadline was September 2005 (exactly three years after I commenced), I have been given a three-month extension (by both the department and the ESRC) because I conducted a three month research post at the university in South Africa when I first arrived. This research visit was funded by the ESRC at that time (in addition to my normal quarterly grant) and so although my ESRC funding expires in September they have already paid me for the additional three months and have changed my end date to December 2005. As I return to the UK in April, I am confident that the 8 months I have allocated for writing up will be sufficient, though I have witnessed from others (especially my husband) that it always seems to take longer than expected.

5.

The other area of work that is currently occupying me is applying for postdoctoral funding. I am hoping to return to South Africa after my DPhil (and viva) in order to complete further research and though the department is keen to have me, they cannot fund me. Furthermore I have the added complication of combining my career with that of my husband's, and thus am applying for

various UK and overseas fellowships (as is he), and hoping we will both get overseas funding. If I submit my thesis as hoped by the end of 2005, then I would hope to be back in South Africa at some point earlier in 2006 (depending on the viva date).

However, as always, my supervisor has treated me like an adult able to make my own decisions (with him acting more as an advisor than a dictator) and willing to accept my decisions after asking specific questions to ensure I had thought of certain things. I believe it is a vital component of the supervisor-supervisee relationship that both respect one and another as adults – with the latter recognising that the former has extensive experience in the broad arena of academia, as well as the former recognising that the latter has extensive knowledge of the specific area they are researching. This is something I really value in my supervisor.

Episode 9

April 2005

1. Introduction

My last doctoral story was written at the start of December 2004, whilst completing fieldwork in my second site in South Africa. In the interim five months I have completed my fieldwork and analysis, and returned to Wessex in order to focus on writing the thesis for submission (hopefully in October, but by December at the very latest).

2. Final fieldwork decisions/discussions with my supervisor

At the end of December 2004 I finished fieldwork in my second site and was keen to make that the end of my fieldwork so as to focus on analysis and writing up in my final year of funding (my funding expires in December 2005). However, my supervisor (back in Wessex) was keen for me to undertake research in a third fieldwork site given that I still had three months remaining in South Africa. We discussed this issue over email and I expressed not only my belief that I had acquired sufficient data (in terms of depth if not breadth) in just two fieldwork sites, as well as my fears that I would overrun (without funding) if I spent the next three months conducting fieldwork

rather than analysing data and writing up. His major concern was that the examiners in my viva would question whether two fieldwork sites was sufficient for three years of research.

However, as always, my supervisor has treated me like an adult able to make my own decisions (with him acting more as an advisor than a dictator) and willing to accept my decisions after asking specific questions to ensure I had thought of certain things. I believe it is a vital component of the supervisor-supervisee relationship that both respect one and another as adults – with the latter recognising that the former has extensive experience in the broad arena of academia, as well as the former recognising that the latter has extensive knowledge of the specific area they are researching. This is something I really value in my supervisor.

Therefore I emailed my supervisor indicating the type of answers that I would give if confronted with such a question in my viva and after considering my comments he seemed content with my decision to remain with just two fieldwork sites.

I really appreciated his willingness to listen to my opinions and allow me to make the final decision regarding further fieldwork, whilst still expressing his concerns as an academic advisor. Obviously I do not want to fail once in the viva, but equally I cannot afford to overrun on my thesis and still be writing after my funding has expired.

3. Taking on non-doctorate work: good or bad use of time?

Towards the end of my time in South Africa, the university at which I was based made several requests of me to provide academic support to the department. For example, I was asked to analyse some data for a professor that was not proficient in the appropriate software, as well as to give a lecture (on a topic not relevant to my thesis, thus involving significant preparation) to some visiting students. In addition, in this same time period I was asked to review a book that was not relevant to my doctorate for a (relatively) prestigious journal, and also give some seminars at a nearby university (in South Africa).

Although such activities could easily be condemned as distractions from the doctorate, I accepted these tasks as providing training in the diversity of the future academic career in which I hope to enter, as well as providing useful networking environments. In addition, as most of the work was not relevant to my thesis it provided a welcome break from the (often dull) daily writing drill,

without taking up so much time as to disrupt my schedule of work. Furthermore, I was paid for all this non-doctorate work, which is always a bonus for a student! Of course, not all students have the luxury of being able to choose whether to conduct non-doctoral work or not (needing the payment for survival), but even for those with secure funding, a limited amount of non-doctoral work seems to me a good outlet for other academic ideas, so long as it doesn't take too much time away from doctoral work and can be fitted into the students' personal work schedule.

4. Writing and submitting papers to peer-reviewed journals

I have decided to take the 'four paper approach' to doctoral submission as allowed by Wessex. This involves submitting the thesis as a collection of four papers that have been submitted to peer-reviewed journals (but not necessarily yet published) in addition to an introduction, methodology and conclusion. Therefore, the focus of my work at the moment is on writing journal papers rather than the more traditional focus on 'writing-a-thesis'. I find this approach much more manageable as it allows me to easily break my work up into sizeable chunks with easily identifiable targets (e.g. to submit a paper to a certain journal).

At the start of 2005 I submitted two papers to two different journals and am still awaiting replies from both of these. These two form a major part of the thesis and thus if either are rejected this will throw my thesis plans into jeopardy. Then in March 2005 I submitted another paper to a small South African journal as well as a book chapter to an editor (this piece of work had been requested from me). Neither of these latter two submitted publications are expected to contribute to the final thesis, partly because their focus is not directly relevant (there are other topics that I want to cover in the thesis), but also because they are not being published in sufficiently prestigious journals. Therefore, I still need to write and submit two more journal papers, as well as write an introduction, methodology and conclusion. I believe this is more than realistic in the eight months that I have available (May – December inclusive), and therefore I am hoping to submit somewhat earlier (October), so as to be able to viva by December. Of course, I realise these perfectly-laid plans may yet come to ruin!

5. Conference experiences: presentations, media madness and submitting abstracts

In February 2005 I attended a specialist conference in Pretoria, South Africa that focused on a specific issue of urban change. I presented a paper that was based on some of the research I undertook in the first-half of 2004 (i.e. based on findings from my first fieldwork site). This conference was a fairly small gathering of international experts (approximately 30 delegates) and thus I really felt part of a 'community' of people actively interested in my research area. In particular, once I had presented my research I felt confident to approach people (and indeed, many people approached me) to discuss ideas, as everyone present shared a similar research area. This differed significantly from previous conferences I had attended which were larger subject-based (rather than issue-based) meetings comprising hundreds of delegates interested in a variety of topics albeit all falling under a similar subject category. Whilst such larger conferences proved worthwhile for hearing the 'big names' in the field, and gaining an opportunity to present research to a 'distinguished' audience, this smaller more specialised conference provided a much better opportunity to meet others actively interested and engaged in similar work. I suppose one would refer to this as 'networking' (though I shirk from the title, disliking the implication of 'using' people for ones own gain), and indeed I have remained in good contact with many of the academics that I met at this conference – for example, one has been to visit me in Wessex to discuss possible research collaboration, a handful of others have provided comments on some of my written work (and I have returned the favour), and others have requested permission to use some of the material from my research in their lectures. In essence, I feel that I would strongly recommend this type of small 'symposium' style arena to postgraduates eager to receive comments from other 'experts' in the field and also to meet people that are actually interested in your research area (and probably have more specialist knowledge than your supervisor).

An additional experience that evolved from attending this conference was the development of some media excitement about my research. Something that I felt utterly ill-equipped to handle.

Having presented my research findings (based on fieldwork in Cape Town) to the conference, and received positive feedback from several delegates I thought (as with most academic events) that this would be the limit of interest in my research. Unfortunately, there were several journalists in the audience who (unbeknown to me) proceeded to inaccurately publish my research throughout South Africa's newspapers (especially in Cape Town). The following day I received phone calls

from several informants who were (understandably) angry about what they had read in the national press; furious with me for (apparently) having betrayed them. However, at this stage I had no idea what they were talking about! I therefore contacted my husband back in Cape Town and asked him to buy a selection of national and local newspapers to ascertain exactly what had been said about my research (and also, indirectly at least, about me). Despite the excitement of his colleagues upon finding out that I was allegedly 'famous' (!), he read out a selection of the articles to me (all based on the same generic text that had obviously been sold to the newspapers by a single journalist) and I was able to work out what the offending comments were, and also to ascertain which sections were an inaccurate representation of what I had said in my conference presentation.

I contacted several of the prominent newspapers in the Cape, demanding to speak to the editors who (surprisingly) agreed to allow me space to write my own article about my research to be published the next day. Having established this agreement I then contacted my angry informants to explain that their concerns were caused by journalistic errors rather than by my actual comments, and also asked them to look out for my article the next day (I offered some the option of reading this article before I submitted it to the newspaper – but they all felt this was unnecessary).

The following day my article was published and although letters continued to flow into the Cape Town newspapers about this topic up to a month later (it is a contentious issue in the South African context), I chose not to respond for fear of unnecessarily dragging the whole thing out. What was most important to me however was that the communities in which I had conducted the research were content with my article and felt adequately represented by my comments. Amazingly, they did! However, I organised a meeting with community representatives for the following week – so as to provide an opportunity for them to question me if necessary. In fact, this meeting was full of praise for me having raised awareness of these issues and for fuelling a debate that was still raging in the national press (I am sure that my work was not the sole reason for this).

Although this situation did work out okay in the end for me and my informants (though for weeks afterwards non-work friends and acquaintances would approach constantly me to ask if I was the person being criticised/praised (depending on the newspaper) in the media!?), I felt utterly ill-equipped to deal with such a situation and wonder whether this is something institutions ought to address in their pre-fieldwork guidance/training for doctoral students? Whilst my situation might

seem unusual I would think it likely that most students incur some non-academic criticism and/or interest in their research and would benefit from some level of training in how to handle this. For my specific example (which cannot be all that rare) I would have benefited from advice on how to handle the media as I was very naïve in this respect (although I learnt fast!).

6. Reflections on training

The lack of pre-fieldwork preparation goes far deeper than just the absence of any training for media interest. For example, the fact that I had not been required to submit my research intentions for ethical approval ensured that the possibility for exploiting my findings (either by myself or a third party – in this case, the press) had not been adequately considered by myself or my institution. I do recall having to write something about this in my application for research council funding – where I wrote something along the lines of “I will ensure full confidentiality for all respondents and act with ethical care”, something which I also wrote in my department upgrade report. But of course, such a lofty promise actually meant nothing substantive as I had not been required to confirm what I meant by this or how I would ensure this, and had certainly not received any departmental guidance or training on the ethics of fieldwork practice and confidentiality.

It is possible that such training/ethical approval would have required me to provide pseudonyms for the areas in which I conducted research (at present I anonymise all respondents but keep the ‘real’ name of the suburb), which would certainly have better contained the media excitement. As it was, the media focused on the specific area in which I conducted research – a gated community adjacent to a low-cost housing area – an area which I had named in my presentation (though such examples of this housing situation are so rare that any pseudonym might have been useless) and then dramatised the negative aspects of this development without mentioning the positive aspects that I had also spoken of. For example, the heading “SAs gated communities slated by UK academic” was not only sensational journalism but also false given that I spoken about only one gated community and mentioned both positive and negative aspects of its specific situation. However, because I had named the area, residents were angry with me. I am still debating whether to anonymise the suburb name in future (especially as the residents were happy with the article that I wrote about my research in their area). It would be helpful to have some departmental guidance on these issues of confidentiality, ethics and how to conduct myself professionally vis-à-vis my respondents.

Despite this post-conference media excitement I have not been put off from presenting my work at conferences, and in fact I believe it a vital part of the doctoral process, crucial for exposing both students' and their work to the wider world of academia (including support and criticism): and thus I have recently submitted three further abstracts for forthcoming conferences. All three abstracts have been accepted and thus in the coming months I will be presenting: an interactive paper about research methodologies to a specific Wessex-based student workshop; a more formal paper based on findings in my second field-site to the national conference for my subject; as well as presenting other findings from my second field-site to the national conference for another subject (that is linked to my research). This will be the first time that I have presented findings from my second field-site (all previous conference presentations have been based on the first field-site) and thus will hopefully provide a timely pre-submission (and pre-viva) audience of critical response.

7. Returning to the UK after overseas fieldwork

As mentioned in the introduction, I have now left South Africa and returned to Wessex to concentrate on writing the thesis (or rather, the papers that will comprise the thesis). Amazingly, this move only forced me to stop working for one week as I packed everything up for freighting home, moved out of our accommodation, said farewell to South African friends, then moved back to England and settled into new accommodation, spent time with my family and settled into my new work environment.

Before returning to Wessex I was very concerned about finding a space in which I could focus exclusively on my work (preferably not at home, especially as at that stage I did not even know where 'home' would be) and where I could also safely leave work overnight. Given the odd time at of year that I was returning the postgraduate research room in the department was full (as were the study rooms in my college) and I started to panic a little, especially as the university at which I was based in South Africa had provided me with desk space in a shared postgraduate room and thus I was used to the schedule of going into a set work-space everyday. However, at the eleventh hour my supervisor offered me the option of working in his departmental office (he works from his college office) and thus I am now in the very privileged position of having an office

entirely to myself (something which I suspect no other postgraduate in the department has and certainly many staff share offices!).

So far this has proved a fantastic place in which to work, as I am completely free from distractions, and although this at first seemed a little isolated after having shared an office in South Africa, I am now a regular attendee at the departments' morning and afternoon tea/coffee breaks. These provide an excellent opportunity to chat with others in the department (and I am meeting all sorts of new people – having been away for 15 months) before returning to the solitude of work in my office. Of course, not all departments' are able to offer such facilities but I do think it is crucial to make an adequate provision of work-space for all final-year doctoral students, and especially to bear in mind that those returning from fieldwork often turn up at unusual times of year (when rooms may be full). Unfortunately this arrangement is temporary as my department is moving buildings in June/July, though fortunately my college has offered me a private study room to work from during the departments' transition.

Since being back at Wessex I have met once formally with my supervisor (and we have also chatted informally at tea time as well as over the phone). We had a general discussion about all sorts of things (!) as well as discussing my progress with respects to writing the thesis. I showed him a chart I had compiled of papers I had written as well as the papers' that I still intend to write (with suggested deadlines) and he was more than happy with this. He also informed me that he will be incredibly busy this term with marking undergraduate papers and thus advised me that he will struggle to read much of my work this term. I really appreciated him telling me this in advance so that I know where I stand. Given that in the past he has always read my work with great speed I am not in the slightest concerned that he is virtually unavailable this term as I recognise that he has duties beyond supervising me and also know that once term is over he will be fully available again.

8. Work schedule

As mentioned in previous 'doctoral stories' I continue to work to a strict schedule of daily, weekly and monthly deadlines – providing a focus for each day (rather than getting caught up in the enormity of a thesis) as well as targets that once achieved can be rewarded. For example if I finish my target for the day by 3pm then I can leave early and go out training. Likewise if I train in the mornings and arrive late at work, I can't leave until the target has been achieved (unless it

becomes obvious that it is an unrealistic target). The monthly targets are derived from assessing forthcoming commitments that consume specific days (e.g. a conference, a job interview) as well as work that needs to be completed by external deadlines (e.g. a conference paper or presentation, a lecture), and work with self-determined deadlines (e.g. a journal paper to be submitted as part of my thesis). Once I know what available days I have in the month I allocate broad targets for each week, and then at the start of the week plan out smaller targets for each day. Thus far this work schedule has served me well – especially as I feel less overwhelmed by the doctorate because it has been split into smaller chunks – however, there are other students that would feel overwhelmed by the idea of having a target for each day and thus a different type of work programme would be needed. But what is important is having some sort of work programme (whether written down in strict lists or a jumble of ideas in ones' head).

9. The future

In terms of completing the thesis I still have three more journal papers to write (one of which will comprise some of the conclusion of the thesis) as well as the introduction, methodology and conclusion. In addition, I am presenting work at three conferences over the summer. My aim at present is to submit my thesis in October and hopefully have successfully defended the thesis by December.

In terms of my post-doctoral future I have been awarded two years of funding from the Leverhulme Trust to conduct postdoctoral research at the University of Cape Town. I am really pleased as this was my favourite option for post-doctoral work. In addition it makes completing the thesis easier because I have a clear goal for the future and also because I am no longer worrying about what will happen after I submit.

Episode 10

Examination

December 2005

I.

I submitted my PhD thesis at Wessex University 3 years and 4 days after I had started. Three weeks later I received communication from the University Graduate Studies Office informing me

of my viva time and date, a Friday afternoon in six weeks time, with the express instructions that: “on no account should you contact the examiners yourself except where you have to confirm a date for the viva”. I was also informed that only three people will be present at my viva examination: myself, the internal examiner (Christopher), and the external examiner (Gerald). My supervisor certainly does not intend to be there.

The next week I received the following email from Gerald:

Dear Carol,

I received your dissertation yesterday and look forward to reading it. I have of course read bits and pieces in the past, but it will be nice to see how it all comes together.

The arrangements for my trip have been made. I am not sure of the etiquette re meeting you prior to the viva (but I don't see why it should be a problem). I get in on Thursday and then it looks like your supervisor and Christopher have planned a pretty full schedule for me. Your supervisor has asked me out to dinner on Friday night. I hope that you are included in this. If not, I hope that we can find some time to talk. I am planning to leave Wessex on Saturday and stay in London until Tuesday (so maybe we could try and meet on one of those days).

I am looking forward to meeting you and I am sure that the viva will go well.

Best wishes,

Gerald

2.

I am now unsure of how to proceed given that no contact is supposed to pass between myself and the examiners. I feel that my options are:

1. To forward the email to my supervisor and ask him to deal with it and reply directly to the examiner.

While this removes responsibility away from me and enables me to act ‘by the book’, by answering through my supervisor it may look as though I am ‘telling’ on the examiner in a juvenile fashion, suggesting that I am unable to resolve my own problems. The examiner might also recoil at receiving an admonishing email from my supervisor – with obvious implications for his attitude at my viva.

2. To reply to the examiner informing him that we’re not supposed to have contact.

However, this breaks the university regulation stating that no contact should occur between us and also risks offending the examiner by telling him something that has presumably already been spelt out in his letter of invitation (for obvious reason I do not wish to offend him prior to my viva)!

3. Not to reply to the email.

Although this ensures I am not breaking university rules this does risk offending the examiner, with obvious implications for his attitude in the viva.

3.

In the end I decided to reply to his email. This is the reply I sent:

Dear Gerald,

Thanks for your email.

I am really sorry but the University regulations sent to me with notice of the date of the viva expressly instructed that I should not have any contact with my examiners prior to the viva. I do not wish to break these rules and thus jeopardise the examination. I hope you understand my position.

However, I would of course be delighted to meet with you at some point after the viva (either on the Saturday morning in Wessex or in London) and look forward to making up for the lack of communication between now and then.

Best wishes,

- Carol

A few days later I received this reply from the external examiner:

Dear Carol,

Don't want to cause you any problems, so see you after the viva.

Best of luck.

Regards,

Gerald

4.

A week later, I received an email from the Research Council who had funded my doctorate over three years and three months (I had been given a three month extension to cover a sponsored period of work at an overseas university) informing me that as I had submitted my thesis early (i.e. before the three years and three months were over) I had to repay the remainder of my maintenance grant to them.

This is the email I received:

Dear Carol

We have been processing the Fees to the universities and have had the confirmation from Wessex University for students who are registered with them.

On the returned form it states that you have already submitted your thesis. Could you please confirm that you have submitted and also the date.

If a student submits early, Research Council regulations state that the award has to be terminated from that date (please see Page 23 Paragraph 2.102 of the 'Guide for Postgraduate Award Holders').

As a result therefore you will not be entitled to any Maintenance Grant or Tuition Fees. As you have already been paid your October grant we will need to reclaim a proportion of the grant back you will be advised of this once the termination has been put on the system.

5.

I was very shocked by this email and also rather outraged at the idea of being penalised for having submitted my thesis in good time. I would have rather expected the Research Council to praise me for such timely work, not reprimand me!

Given that the Research Council's regulations clearly stipulate that I must reimburse my maintenance grant if I submit before the final deadline, I realised that I could not fight against this. However, I did feel in a position to argue with the Research Council's interpretation of when a PhD student stops being a PhD student. While the Research Council clearly interprets postgraduate studenthood as terminating when the thesis is submitted, I disagree. In the period between submission and the viva examination I am very much still a student, and very much *not* a Dr! I am spending my time revising for the viva and in fact am unable to commence my postdoctoral position until I have pass my viva and complete any necessary corrections (this is a stipulation of the Leverhulme Trust postdoctoral fellowship that I have been awarded), and thus am unable to continue with my career, or earn an income, until after my viva. This action on the part of the Research Council is therefore taking away my means to pay the rent.

6.

Armed with support from my supervisor, college, department and the University Graduate Studies Office (all of whom verbally confirmed that I am still a student), I contacted the Research Council to argue my case.

The person I spoke to in the Awards Department agreed with me but said she was powerless to change the rules, thus confirming me as liable to pay back money that I desperately needed to pay the rent. However, this Research Council representative then suggested that I request to take my 8 weeks of annual leave *after* submitting my thesis, thus leaving me with only one week of maintenance grant to repay; which is what I have done.

I now await my viva.

Episode 11: preparing for the Viva

My viva is due to take place tomorrow, seven weeks after I submitted my doctoral thesis. The majority of these seven weeks have been spent doing anything other than thinking about my thesis! However, in the immediate two weeks preceding the examination I began preparing for the viva.

I began this short-term preparation by reading the book 'The Doctoral Examination Process' by Tinkler and Jackson which served principally to confirm that all viva examinations are different and that therefore I should not rely on specific expectations of what will occur. It was however very helpful in providing advice for ways of thinking about one's research in the period just prior to the viva.

My principal preparation activity has been re-reading my thesis - which took considerably longer than expected. I found this a rather cumbersome task as I know the material so well, and thus some sections felt rather dry. It was also of course embarrassing to find 15 typing errors (the first of which is on page two) though I suspect the examiners may find even more. However, every so often I would read a section that I thought was really rather good, which was a nice boost.

Whilst reading the thesis I made notes (approx. two sides of A4 per chapter) partly so as to aid my concentration and prevent me from reading the material without taking it in, but also as a revision aid. Having re-read the thesis I thought about how I might answer broad questions such as:

- What would you do differently in this research if you could start again?
- What original contribution do you feel this research makes to your field?
- What are the implications (theoretical and empirical) of this research?

I also tried to think of a one minute and a five minute summary of my research, in case this is asked.

In addition, I re-read the major book and some recent articles written by my external examiner and also re-acquainted myself with some of the literature cited in my thesis. At this point I realised that I am insufficiently familiar with some of the theoretical literature as I read most of it during my first year. Although I have tried to read up on this, I am aware that my grasp of the theoretical literature is weak and thus recognise this as a potential problem in the viva. The day before the viva I re-read all the notes I had written whilst reading the thesis and tried to think about the major arguments in my thesis (rather than the content per se).

On the whole I am not too worried about the viva: I am pleased with what I have written in the thesis and feel confident about my approach and findings as well as my knowledge of the empirical literature and how my work fits into the field. Furthermore, given that my work has been widely presented in the academic community (e.g. at conferences and journal publications) I feel reassured that the work is 'up to scratch'. In addition, the positive remarks made by the external examiner in his email are also cause for encouragement, as well as the positive reports my internal examiner has made on my work earlier in the doctoral process. However, despite all these positives and a general sense of confidence about my work, there is a nagging fear at the back of my mind that it could all go horribly wrong, especially given the many 'viva horror stories' that I have heard over the years. The UK viva process means that two men essentially have the power to decide that my three years of work are insufficient to be awarded a doctorate. The uncertainties inherent in such a subjective process necessarily ensure some nerves on my part.

Episode 12: The viva

I arrived early for the viva and was fortunate to find the departmental postgraduate secretary in the tea room and so chatted with her for a bit – which helped to calm my nerves a little. I also went to the toilet about six times – just to be on the safe side! I then walked to the departmental lodge (where my internal examiner had told me to meet him) at exactly the same time as the internal examiner and so we greeted and he ushered me into the examination room. The viva was held in the head of department's office – which is a huge and somewhat overbearing room with a large table in the centre. I sat at one end of the table, and the two examiners at the other end. It was all very formal with everyone wearing very academic attire and I sat there in silence awaiting the viva to commence. The external examiner spoke first by commenting that I looked a lot younger than he expected – which seemed a rather inappropriate comment to me, and only served to increase my nerves. I had no idea what I should say in reply. Fortunately, my internal examiner then spoke and tried to put me at ease by informing me that they had already decided to recommend the award of the doctorate to me. This was a huge relief and although I was still really nervous, as the viva progressed I did gradually relax with the knowledge that I had definitely passed.

The internal examiner started off by asking me a few basic questions – in fact, the very questions I had anticipated (e.g. what would you do differently if you did this research again). Even though I had prepared for these questions I was still so nervous that I answered these initial questions really badly (after the viva the external examiner commented that I didn't start off very well, so this negative perception is not just my imagination).

The external examiner then spent the next two hours being very critical about certain aspects of the thesis and grilling me on all sorts of things – in fact, if I hadn't already been told that I had passed, he was so critical that I would have suspected failure. The external examiner had clearly read my thesis very thoroughly (I was less sure how much the internal examiner had read as he spoke very little!) and his main criticisms focused on the theoretical basis to the thesis. He felt I should have approached it from a state perspective (rather than a society perspective) and kept on asking me “why didn't you look at this from the state perspective?”. I tried to answer his question in various different ways - emphasising that this hadn't been the aim of my research and that I had taken a different approach, though a state perspective would be a possible area for future research - but he wasn't convinced and just kept repeating the question.

In the end I didn't know what to say. To be honest, I wanted to say that to have approached it from that angle would have been a repetition of his doctorate 15 years ago, but I didn't have the guts! Eventually, he gave up and moved on to other issues – focusing on one chapter in particular that he felt was rather weak. I had myself always felt this chapter was one of the worst aspects of my thesis and he seemed to accept this when I admitted this to him.

The other area that he kept repeating was his opinion that I had been “too nice” in both my research approach and writing – he felt that I should have come down harder on one side or the other, and also that I should have been willing to offend people. I argued very strongly that I felt the role of the researcher was to be independent and neutral but he vehemently disagreed and wasn't willing to accept my answers. He kept on about this topic until (again) I just did not know what to say.

By this time I got the impression that the internal examiner really wanted to be elsewhere (for the last hour of the viva he kept looking at his watch) and they agreed to call it a halt after two hours of questioning. I didn't really feel that the internal examiner acted as an independent chair (not that he was meant to, but departmental gossip had told me that this internal usually behaves as such). He just felt like a second examiner, albeit a rather quiet one. I felt the viva had been quite tough, but I suppose they just wanted to make me suffer and ensure I could stand up for my work – part of the academic initiation!

At the end of the viva they gave me a list of very minor corrections – all of which are typing errors and style issues and so shouldn't take long to change. However they will require re-printing the whole thesis, which at the moment I can't afford to do. The internal examiner said that he trusted me to complete them and that he didn't want to see it before I print it and submit the final version to the Graduate Studies Office (which will then go to the Library I presume). I got the impression he didn't really care whether I did them or not and certainly didn't want to have to read through the thesis again.

Episode 13: Post-viva

After the viva I had tea with both examiners in the departmental common room. Now that the viva was over, the external examiner was all smiles and friendliness. He was really positive about my work now and seemed actively interested in my future academic career. He asked if he could

join me at the pub for a drink, so we went off together and had a nice relaxed chat about my work – what a contrast to the intensity of the viva! We also meet up the next day for a chat over breakfast – it was really nice to meet him and be able to have a discussion about our respective work.

My supervisor also came down to the pub after I'd been alone with the external for about an hour (I had arranged to meet my supervisor and also some friends at this pub, who gradually all trickled in). My supervisor congratulated me and bought me a drink. I think he had known in advance that I was going to pass as he'd met with the external examiner the day before my viva. I had brought a present for my supervisor to the pub and so he was really delighted about that and we had a nice chat. I will make a point of seeing him again before I leave Wessex at the end of the month.

I feel delighted and relieved to have passed and to finally have it over and done with after such much hard work. Hooray! I am now going on holiday for a week and then will come back to Wessex to do the corrections before starting a postdoctoral position in South Africa next month. I am also going to lobby the department for a hardship grant to cover the cost of re-printing the thesis as that will cost approximately 20 pounds per thesis – money which I cannot afford.

Epilogue: Carol's suggestions

After three and a quarter years of doctoral study, some of my key pieces of advice would be:

(a) For postgraduate research students:

- **Set clear goals for the research project to be achieved at various stages (e.g. a goal for each year, term, month, week). Reevaluate this regularly but be aware right from the start of how much you need to do in three years and what type of deadlines you need to achieve this.**
- **Take ownership of the project - this is your PhD not your supervisor's.**

(b) For Supervisors:

- **Try to forget everything you know about the academic system – this is the perspective of your PhD student!**
- **Always tell your students in advance if you will be unavailable to see them or read their work for a specific period of time.**
- **If your students wish you to read their work before a meeting ask them to always send it to you 1 day in advance (or whatever time period works for you) and schedule in a few hours prior to the meeting to read their work.**
- **Try to reply to your student's emails as quickly as possible (especially if they are on overseas research) – even if your answer is “I'm busy right now but promise to reply to your email on Tuesday” – that way the student at least knows you have received the email and will respond.**

(c) For Examiners:

- **Give the student as much advance notice about the viva date as possible.**
- **Be aware that the student will be very nervous and may take a while to relax and give productive responses to your questions.**