

A Destructive Experience Dennis' PhD 1989 – 1995.

I have recorded the following account of my experiences as a Ph.D student many years ago because of the very negative impact that this episode has had on my life and, in particular, on the development of my career. I hope that anyone contemplating a Ph.D who reads this document will become aware that Ph.Ds can go badly wrong, particularly if the student-supervisor relationship is strained in some way. My advice in such circumstances is to withdraw and, if possible, find another topic and another supervisor. If you cannot find another topic or supervisor at the same university, try another university. At all costs, do not make the mistake of persisting with a supervisor or supervisors who do not want to supervise you or else are dealing with significant personal or professional problems.

Two supervisors who were close colleagues: one to supervise the theoretical part of my thesis (Dr. H) and the other to supervise the experimental part (Dr. W).

Aggressive behaviour already on day 1.

About three weeks Dr. W went on sick-leave and remained at home for most of the first two years, apparently suffering from post-natal depression. Dr. H informed me that she would be unavailable until the end of the year. Though I could not make progress with experimentation, he persistently refused to discuss the theoretical part.

No progress for the first 8 months because Dr. W's presence was necessary for operation of equipment necessary for fieldwork.

I contacted Dr. W by telephone after nine months but found her in a very distressed state and unable to talk to me.

Finally we undertook some fieldwork at 12 months, but Dr. W was clearly very resentful at having to be involved. Fieldwork was characterized by numerous admonishments and crying.

Another three months later the necessary instrumentation became available and I got to measure the samples collected earlier. Dr. W was at home again for several more months. I recall that I spent much time writing Fortran programmes to undertake various analyses, but in fact was duplicating programmes that were already available on the laboratory computer. My supervisors had never informed me of these programmes, so that I was completely unaware of their existence!

About this time the relationship became extremely tense and there were several highly unpleasant, unprovoked, encounters with Dr. H. I was now 15 months into the thesis, but had achieved about one week's worth of real progress! However, I was now committed, could not walk away without major loss, and persisted in hopes of a renaissance in the relationship between me and my supervisors.

About 12-15 months into my thesis, having spent most of this time waiting to conduct fieldwork and to make my first measurements, I encountered Dr. H on campus one weekend. I asked him whether we could discuss the theoretical part of my thesis so that I could make a beginning (at that time I had no idea what this work was to comprise). Dr. H informed me in a very belligerent tone of voice that this was his holiday and that he had no intention of discussing my work. He then turned away from me and walked off.

In order to repair my relationship with both supervisors, I volunteered to assist Dr. H with his own fieldwork, twice spending a period of around 2 weeks with him in the field. However, on both occasions I found him very bad tempered, generally declining to talk to me or interact in any way, preferring instead to socialize with other students. I recall that on the first of these expeditions, the department's Land Rover became stuck in deep mud (for which Dr. H appeared to hold me personally responsible), defying many efforts on our part to extract it. After perhaps three hours I volunteered to walk to the nearest village for assistance, nearly 10 kilometres away. A half hour later Dr. H and the other student had rescued the vehicle and soon they passed me on a lonely stretch of country road. Rather than stop the vehicle to pick me up, Dr. H drove straight past me to the village (where we were to spend the night), leaving me to walk the remaining 7 or 8 kilometres. I also recall attempting to discuss my work with him at the hotel later that evening but being hacked down immediately, Dr. H rolling his eyes to the ceiling, expressing the words "Oh God!", and again stating very emphatically that he did not wish to discuss my work.

Then, about 21 months into my candidacy, now even further behind schedule, Dr. H finally discussed the theoretical part. He gave me a meeting of about 40 seconds, handed me two papers, one of them nearly thirty years old and outlining a discredited theory, and the other incapable of contributing to my thesis because the specialist software to develop the ideas embodied within it were not available to me. There was no discussion whatsoever of any analytic approaches or of available software. Furthermore, the experimental work and the two theoretical papers were not closely related, thus providing ample opportunity to waste even more time trying to integrate them and make them yield something useful.

Some 24 months into the thesis, I got to do some more of my own fieldwork with Dr. W but, again, there were explosions of anger and admonishments in front of technical staff and other post-graduate students who were assisting with the field work. My morale had begun to collapse and I began to feel major embarrassment and increasing strain.

It slowly became apparent that many staff and students had been given pejorative feedback about me, including many who had no connection with my project whatsoever. One student informed me confidentially that Dr. H had been making me the object of jokes. Though these jokes were not particularly nasty, this news made me feel distinctly uncomfortable. On several occasions in the laboratory I was given the distinct impression that I had been made an object of derision by both supervisors. Any attempt

on my part to repair the relationship would backfire and various attempts at levity on my part resulted in umbrage and even more admonishments.

Realizing my increasingly difficult circumstances, I then prepared a proposal in order to get some input from my supervisors and to attempt to orient my work in a direction that would lead to a PhD. However, my supervisors refused to comment. One evening, perhaps during a mid-term break, I contacted Dr. H by telephone to discuss my work, but received a very aggressive response and Dr. H hung up after less than one minute.

Subsequently I tried to discuss those two papers with Dr. H, but he refused to allow any discussion. Over the next two years he provided no supervision of any sort, preferring to turn his back to me or simply to walk away from me without any interaction. Time and time again, during the working day, during the evenings or even on weekends (if both of us happened to be on campus), Dr. H refused even to acknowledge my presence – never even bothering to greet me.

Several efforts of my own over the next two years now went wrong for reasons that I could not have anticipated prior to starting them. Neither Dr. W nor Dr. H ever looked at any of this work, instead subjecting me to a litany of unhelpful, obstructive behaviour and undermining me with a succession of verbal and written complaints to the department. One such letter had been left lying on a bench in the laboratory one day. It was very disheartening indeed to read the extremely uncomplimentary material that Dr. W had written about me, especially given her absence of most of the first two years and the extreme patience and good will that I had demonstrated over that period.

On several occasions during those years property of mine went missing. On one occasion, at the end of the second year, again voluntarily assisting Dr. H and another post-graduate student with their fieldwork, I found myself yet again being systematically ignored during that two week interlude. Evidently, I left some footwear (a pair of jandals) in the Land Rover following that fieldwork. When I looked for them the following week, I found that one of them had been thrown into a rubbish bin and the other had been thrown behind some equipment on the other side of the garage that housed the Land Rover.

About one year later (some time in 1992) late one Friday night while moving my belongings to a new flat, after several trips between the two flats I left my entire complement of scuba equipment in a small storage area next to the laboratory, intending to pick it up and bring it to my new flat the next week. Only my supervisors and the technician had keys to that room and I was told that none of the security guards had the necessary keys. However, all of my equipment, valued at around £1500, disappeared and subsequently I never recovered any of it.

One day during mid 1992 Dr. H deleted all of my files (data, current versions of thesis chapters and Fortran programmes that I had written over the last two years) from the laboratory computer and vanished for a week of fieldwork, leaving me believing that I had lost everything. I spent that week with the technician, investigating software for the

recovery of lost files – without success. After a full week, another post-graduate student located my lost files on a floppy disk in a cupboard in the laboratory. When he returned it was obvious to me from his smug and sneering behaviour that he knew perfectly well what he had done.

Meanwhile, Dr. W returned to work for a day or two every week, but insisted that I recalculate and redraw one particular plot so often that the total time spent on that plot finally amounted to well over a year. The benefits of repeating this work so often were extremely small, as the final plot product looked almost exactly the same as the first and because the confidence intervals were so large. Of course, this process wore me down, but I felt that I had to comply because of the probable repercussions from two supervisors who had so frequently demonstrated their willingness to take draconian action with me if I did not.

About four years into the thesis I handed Dr. H some draft chapters in order to obtain comment that would assist me to orient my work but he took ten months to return them, but with practically no comment. My financial situation was now very dire and so I asked him whether I should submit and he agreed immediately. Five months later three examiners reports, including his own, tore me to shreds. One of Dr. H's objections related to a particular mathematical approach I had used. He claimed that this method was inappropriate, but subsequently I checked with several experts who agreed that my approach was in fact the best approach. However, it was also clear that the delays of the preceding years had left me with insufficient material to warrant a PhD and that the write up was not yet at the required level. Essentially, on his agreement, I had submitted perhaps a full year too early.

I now revealed to the department what had been going on over the last four and a half years. This action provoked a major fight between my supervisors and the department (later I was to discover that both Dr. H and Dr. W had been fighting with the department for many years). Dr. H tried to get me to accept a Masters degree but I refused because I had always intended to read for a PhD and because I had acquired a sunk cost of four and a half years. My refusal provoked yet another outburst of anger and he virtually kicked me out of his office, slamming the door as I left. Years later, I simply do not believe that Dr. H's strongly worded suggestion that I accept the Masters was for the benefit of a student unable to reach the level of a Ph.D, but rather to get rid of me and to get me to carry the blame for the problems of the previous four years.

I was now given a single year to complete the work for the PhD. Dr. W had long since withdrawn her services as my supervisor, so that I was left with Dr. H alone. They now went overseas for a year-long sabbatical and so I had to send revised draft chapters to Dr. H by e-mail. However, he took fifteen months to provide very sparse comment. In the meantime, the rift between them and the department had grown worse. I was informed that they were both threatening to resign and that the department had made it clear to them that their resignation was exactly what the university wanted.

Their arrival home coincided with the arrival of a new department head, following the unexpected death of the incumbent head who had accepted me into the PhD programme five years earlier. From the start the new head adopted a similarly aggressive posture with me, delivering several warnings to me in front of others. For example, on one of these occasions in the corridor outside his office, he stated baldly in public that he “didn’t want his department to be associated with second rate research”. Clearly, my supervisors had been busy covering themselves with the new head by painting a picture of a mediocre student who deserved everything he got. On another occasion he said to me that I should be aware that I might not be awarded the PhD. I believe that Dr. H had made his intention to fail me very clear to the new head soon after his arrival.

In the final months before submission Dr. H demanded in an angry tone of voice all drafts on which he had recently provided handwritten notes. I realized immediately that this was to ‘prove’ to the university that he had done his job all along. I also saw that he might use this material to justify failing me.

The second examination of the thesis took nine months. One day I went up to the department to see the head about the status of my thesis. Coincidentally, at the time of my visit he was meeting with my supervisor. The head’s personal assistant told me that the head did not wish to see me, but I insisted on a meeting because I had now waited some nine months for news of the examination. I was made to wait about an hour and a half before being received by both the head and my supervisor. I lasted about one minute, during which time I was shouted at by the head and ordered to leave his office. He, too, slammed his door in my face as I left.

Several more weeks passed and finally I received a telephone call from Dr. H to tell me that the decision had been taken not to award the PhD. He then spent about ten minutes informing me that I was an inept and mediocre person and that I was also difficult to get on with. He stated that the PhD is a demonstration of a student’s capacity for independent research, whereas he and Dr. W had to tell me everything, and that was why he had personally recommended that I not be awarded the degree. I then attempted to explain some of my difficulties to Dr. H, but he refused to listen, talking across me yet again and terminating the conversation immediately.

The next day I had to see the head who gave me another litany of abuse. On one hand he declared that he didn’t propose to look into the matter of the supervision of my thesis because it would serve no useful purpose. On the other hand he stated that there would be no place for me in research. His manner was as unpleasant as my supervisor’s, delivering a series of put downs and back answers. When I tried to tell him of the problems, he effectively made out that I was lying and he refused point blank to listen to any complaint about the supervision I had received. When I informed him that I had found my experience as a student at his department very un-enjoyable, rather than inquire as to why, he proceeded to affect great surprise and declared that in future his department must look harder at prospective research students before accepting them into post-graduate programmes.

He then ordered me to make a few corrections in order to receive the Masters degree. These corrections took about one hour, but my supervisor made me wait another month before signing off the papers for a Masters with the lowest possible grade of pass (C - minus). For that final meeting Dr. H arrived a half hour late but made no apology. In order to receive the Masters degree I was ordered to sign a document in which I accepted all responsibility for the outcome. I signed that document because I had no further energy for a fight that I could not possibly win and because otherwise I would walk away with nothing to show for the previous 87 months.

Dr. H now showed me his report on my thesis. This three page report was written in very large (perhaps 16 point) font and gave six objections that justified his decision to fail me. However, I was able to disprove five of them immediately. For example he claimed that two diagrams were in fact the same diagram, whereas the second of the two involved the same construct rotated through a small angle (about 3 degrees). The captions to those diagrams made that point clear, but my supervisor clearly hadn't noticed or else didn't wish to notice. The sixth objection concerned a single error in several pages of mathematics – a plus sign that should have been a minus sign and, moreover, in a context that made no perceptible difference to the calculations involved. I attempted to point out his misunderstandings but was hammered down immediately, Dr. H stating very emphatically that there was to be no right of reply and that the decision was final.

I was not allowed to see the report of the external examiner, but was shown the report of the second local examiner, a long time collaborator of Dr. H. This report also contained some odd objections and in particular he made a big issue of my handling of 'noisy data', in which I had retained outliers that he felt should have been removed from one particular data set. Actually, given the procedure I used to perform the necessary calculations, those outliers made little difference to the result which involved large confidence intervals. In any case, there is no agreed way of handling such situations and it comes down professional judgment. Recommending failure for a reason like that seems to me an over-reaction that is perhaps explicable only if Dr. H had been influencing that examiner in some way.

Later that week I had to see the head one last time to complete paperwork and as usual got snapped at repeatedly. My 87 month enrolment terminated with more domineering behaviour from the head and his office door closed rather hard in my face. I was given no information whatsoever about procedures relating to graduation, so that in fact I never did graduate. However, the head did let slip that my supervisors had withdrawn supervision early in my candidacy. I now understand that this was out of anger and resentment at their own situation with the university. Apparently, their persistent failure over several years to obtain permanent full time positions had led to ongoing fights with the department and the university authorities. I have since been told that they greatly resented the instruction from the then department head to supervise my thesis at that time. Along with Dr. W's ill-health over the first two or three years, I now understand that my ultimate failure was almost guaranteed.

For the next year I was too upset to respond but eventually took legal advice and provided a 20 page letter detailing the behaviours of my two supervisors. After another three months I received a letter admitting the problems and wishing me the best of luck with my career.

On several occasions while walking downtown or attending science lectures, I would encounter staff and students of that department. Evidently they had all been told that I had been an inept person who should never have been awarded a PhD. Thus, my supervisors had covered themselves very nicely!

About nine years after I left the department I contacted the external examiner, now based in England. We had a confidential exchange of e-mails during which it became clear to me that he had been aware of problems with the supervision of my thesis and that Dr. H had indeed played the key role in the decision to reject my thesis.

In more recent years, two full professors at the department have informed me that my supervisors had attacked many staff and students and that over a period of more than 20 years the university had made several unsuccessful attempts to get Dr. H off the staff on account of persistent bullying behaviour. After I left, a number of people looked through my thesis and one or two of them informed me that they estimated it to be fully deserving of a PhD.

After the rejection I enrolled in a PhD programme at an overseas university and, after another four years, passed with flying colours (a full eleven years after beginning my work towards a doctorate). At the time I felt that I had no option but to try again, as otherwise I would spend the rest of my life feeling deeply unhappy with the treatment meted out to me.

In spite of my eventual success, I can attest to the enormously destructive impact that my experience at that university has had on my life. It destroyed my reputation and my self confidence, left me very unwell for a long period, left me far behind in my career and even damaged my private life over many years. Those seven years were a real nightmare and it took more than another ten years to achieve proper financial and emotional recovery. That's an awful lot of ruined years for me!

In recent times I have been informed that Dr. W has "an uneasy conscience" about the whole episode. From my perspective, her admission is much too late because the damage has already been done.

My eventual rehabilitation was only achieved through my second attempt at a PhD, through ongoing activity on various science councils and through publishing my own research. For me this activity was strictly necessary in order to replace the failed and beaten person that I was for so many years with a new, capable and credible person with so much to offer.

John' questions

1. Your account assumes that your supervisor was one of the official examiners. In the UK this would be irregular. Could you confirm that this is normal practice in your country?

I believe so. It certainly was the case during my time as a student here, though years later my overseas supervisor did not examine my thesis.

2. You give no indication of any of the following:

a. any monitoring of progress, upgrading, probationary registration etc - eg by a committee beyond your supervisory team

Initially I registered as a MSc student, though I made it clear that I wanted to work towards a PhD. This was normal practice for PhD students in this country at that time. I am unaware of the existence of any committee beyond my two supervisors.

b. the existence of a postgraduate tutor with the responsibility of overseeing supervisory process

There was no such person in my time – certainly not for me. However, my submission of an academic grievance led to a major overhaul of the University's supervision policies. Today every student's progress is monitored and students have recourse to some other member of staff who can provide advice independent of the supervisor(s).

c. replacement of supervisors unavailable for short or long periods

I do not know whether or not such a possibility was available. It might have been but perhaps I was never informed about it.

d. a complaints system

Perhaps it was possible to complain, but I was reluctant to do so for fear of a major backlash that might have led to the termination of my candidacy. Closure of ranks (academic and administrative staff) effectively solves a university's problems when dealing with unhappy students.

e. use of any advisory service available to you - eg students union, university graduate administrator or dean

Again - I simply do not know whether or not such services were available. Probably they were but a student takes a great risk when using them.

f. a code of practice, possibly in the form of a postgrad handbook to which you could refer

I do recall that a code of practice relating to supervision was indeed available, and probably was published in the university calendar. I guess that I must have paid little attention to it, at first buoyed with enthusiasm and quite unaware of what I was in for over the next seven years.

g. any reference to university regulations - eg about frequency of supervisions

I was not aware of any rules around frequency of supervision meetings etc. I spent the first year feeling very puzzled about my experiences (in particular - lack of contact with my supervisors and ongoing unavailability of equipment and other resources) but, of course, my situation was highly unusual. Later, when I worked towards a doctorate in another country, I became aware of a vastly superior attitude to supervision there to universities in this country. Of course, when making comparisons I must remember how truly dreadful my first experience was.

Could you insert references to any of these - eg their existence, availability, effectiveness (or, I guess, otherwise)?

It's hard for me to comment all these years later. They must have existed, but I must have paid little attention. My own belief is that such policies mean little. We see this in the workplace in this country, which is rife with bullying. If a manager (or a supervisor) wants to get rid of a person, then all available means are used to achieve the desired objective, even fabricating lies or simply exaggerating minor things to justify a dismissal. I have seen it many times now and I imagine that it's the same in the UK?!