

**Jane's letter**

8<sup>th</sup> February 2008

Dear John

Many thanks for agreeing to read this, for your assurance of confidentiality, and for your offer of advice. I really appreciate it.

I will try to put down quite a complex situation as briefly as I can.

I am a part-time student in full-time employment.

comments on; I wrote up detailed notes after each supervision; and I read, attended training sessions, and gave a paper and ran a workshop at an

what I had sent (it was 20 pages long!), and suggesting an alternative agenda for discussion, which included questions about data analysis, questions arising from a training session I had been on, questions about possible directions to take in the analysis etc.

I don't know if they got this e-mail, but I do know that as soon as I walked into the room I realised something was very wrong. S quickly became quite agitated, and began to insist that I should reduce my contracted hours in my job. She also seemed unable to remember what had been agreed in previous supervisions, and I felt 'told off' (a bit like in school) for not doing work which she thought should have been done. As I had asked in the November supervision which aspect I should prioritise, I became very confused and quite upset. It seemed as if every answer I gave was somehow wrong and this seemed to make her even more angry.

I ended up almost crying (I'm 44 years old!) and telling her that I had had problems in my personal life. This seemed to mollify her for a moment, but soon she was off again. She kept saying that she was 'shocked' – certainly I felt shocked, both by her behaviour and by what she was saying. She also said things that directly contradicted her comments from previous supervisions (such as: 'there is a conflict of interest between you writing an article to be published [I had done this in December as well as the transcribing

In the end, I thought it best to write to S and M, stating my concerns, and asking for clarification. I ended it by asking them if they could not only offer

concern, or if it is just that this one piece was not what they expected and they don't know what to do with it. I take on board that I should probably be reading more – but I think probably it is more that I should be reading in a more focussed way, not just trying to swallow books wholesale.

I now feel that I don't want to be in the same room alone with S & M again. I don't want to submit my work to them, particularly not if it is in embryonic form, for fear of another attack. (I should say, by the way, that when my work has been criticised before, I have always felt that it was constructive in intent, and that even if we disagreed about approaches, or ideas, that there was something to learn from someone with a very different perspective. I'm not averse to constructive criticism on academic grounds, but this time, I really don't feel that this is the case).

I am afraid that whatever I submit next time will not be good enough, and that no matter what I do I can't succeed. It's as if I've been set up to fail in advance. I feel afraid to ask for guidance, as if I can only ever present a nearly finished piece for discussion.

Added to all this Angst, is the personal aspect. I considered S and M to be ... if not close friends, at least people that I thought well of, and who I hoped would think well of me. I don't want S to be ill; I don't wish her ill (though it is hard to wish her well just now) and I don't want to be a burden to her or to M. At the same time, I feel that what has happened is just not right somehow.

So what to do next? I'm not sure if the trust that existed between me and my supervisors can be repaired. I think probably the best thing would be to try to find another supervisor, but the department is small and to my knowledge no-one there is interested in my field – it would probably mean moving to another part of the university. That's not impossible in itself – my work falls between two disciplines anyway - but there are more questions. How do you go about doing this? And how do you approach another supervisor when you've just been told that your work is not good enough? What are the procedures for doing this? Thousands of questions like this spring to mind, all based on what my friend said: is it like doctors' surgeries –

I'm sorry – this has turned into 5 pages, and I have tried to keep it short!!! It is a complex problem, though, and I wanted to do my best to be fair and try not to be unjust to anyone in my telling of it.

If you have any advice for me, I would truly appreciate it.

Best Wishes  
Jane

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### **Team tasks**

- 1. Discuss what advice you would give to Jane and put the main points on the acetate provided**
  - 2. What lessons are there here for**
    - Postgraduate research students?**
    - Supervisors?**
    - Departments/institutions?****Please list them on the second acetate**
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