

Charlie's First Year

Act 1: The very beginning

I did not know I was going to the University of Barchester until about one month before the start of the new academic year. When I heard that I had been awarded a one year faculty studentship I was so relieved. Pauline, the Departmental Officer thought that I may not be pleased with just the one year, but after five near misses of PhD studentships of one kind or another, it felt so good just to know what I was going to be doing. Obviously, I was also very excited. I had found out the news whilst at work (secretarial temping for a marketing company in London) but when I got home even better news was waiting. On my answerphone was Pauline saying that somehow more money had become available and that now I had three year's funding. With this news and the fact that I was about to go on a two week holiday abroad, I was simply 'on top of the world'. However, it did mean that I only had just two weeks to sort out what I knew was going to be one of the biggest changes in my life.

First I had the difficult task of finding somewhere suitable to live. I did make inquiries about campus accommodation but I was much too late. The accommodation office sent me some details of rooms available, but not knowing Barchester at all made looking virtually impossible. Luckily a friend of mine from Middlemarch Metropolitan University (where I had done my first degree) had a sister living nearby. So I went to stay with her. I met this complete stranger off the bus and she put me up for a couple of nights while I attended the induction week and searched for somewhere to live. It was very important to me to find somewhere which would not be a problem when my partner came to stay. The flat I found was great except for three snags. First it was two bedroomed, therefore, I needed to find a flatmate, as I could not afford the rent on my own; second, it was totally unfurnished and third I could not move in for two weeks.

Life seemed hectic, new and exciting but it also felt very scary at times. I could not believe that here I was miles from home and on my own. What on earth was I doing. I was in the north of England and my partner, family and friends were all down south. On top of this, I was the only external applicant in my department. I did not know anyone nor even the way around the campus and here I was just about to start a PhD having come straight from my undergraduate degree. Experiencing all these changes at once and having had so little time to prepare left me feeling rather stressed.

On a more positive note I had found Sue, my colleague who I was sharing an office with, and she seemed very nice. Also the other postgraduates in the department had left me a note welcoming me to Barchester which felt good. Then on the second day of the induction week I bumped into my co-supervisor who then promptly told me that he was going to be away abroad for most of the first term but that he would arrange to see me before he went. Immediately following this, the Postgraduate Tutor, who had interviewed me some five months back, came around the corner. After welcoming me he then informed me that my main supervisor was going to be on sabbatical for two terms. Sue just looked at me and said later that she could not believe it. I nearly burst into tears. Too much was happening too fast. I was left feeling totally disorientated and very alone.

1. Comment on the department's policies on recruitment, selection and induction as experienced by Charlie.
2. What should Charlie do now?

Act 2: Researching sensitive issues

I had not anticipated the extent of the effects that my research area could have on me. Here I was researching an emotive and highly sensitive topic: 'Childhood Sexual Abuse' and I had gone and left my total support network in London. I knew, however, that I had not lightly chosen this area of study, having already devoted much time on this subject at undergraduate level, including my dissertation. Which I must say was the best thing I had ever done. However, I believe I could not have guessed totally the implications that this research might have, perhaps not only for myself but also for my supervisor. Remembering back to my interview, I distinctly felt the interviewer's (Postgraduate Tutor) discomfort in asking me about my own experiences of childhood sexual abuse. He first apologised that my intended supervisor (a female) was not able to be present at the interview through sickness. I knew that he would mention this issue. After all I had not hidden this fact from my application, and it was his job to ensure that I was capable of doing the research in question.

Further moments of awkwardness came when issues of 'self' were raised during supervision sessions. This again was unavoidable given that I had chosen to conduct my research from a feminist perspective, where my own standpoint is of significance within the research. To best illustrate the above I would like to share the following.

I attended a three day course: 'Doing Fieldwork' at the University of Coketown. Of particular interest to me was the workshop on using 'story telling' as an interview technique. A personal side line to this was that I had struck up a friendship with an older male delegate who also happened to be a psychiatrist. Now whether it was because he was older or in a position of power I don't know but I found his attraction to me had stirred up a lot of old feelings connected with my own childhood abuse. In an attempt to understand this, I wrote down, in the form of a story narrative, what had happened and how I had felt. I found this exercise to be extremely useful.

The following supervision session, I talked about the possibilities of incorporating the use of "stories" into my research. I had some concern about the idea of showing my "story" to my supervisor, but to illustrate my point I decided to go ahead. However, I felt rather embarrassed and ashamed at the same time. Several weeks passed before I heard anything back from my supervisor and during that time I had been regretting leaving him the "story". I knew that it was OK to experiment with different ideas, after I was only in my 2nd term of my first year. However, because the "story" was personal I felt I had made myself vulnerable in some way. The struggle in finding the balance between researching an area which is not only sensitive but also directly of relevance to me, and trying to establish oneself as a competent researcher in an academic environment was proving to be an issue which I had not prepared myself for. I believe one of the problems was as a result of having come from being in Psychology (my first degree) to an Applied Social Science department.

I was now feeling extremely nervous about my supervisor's response (even though I liked my supervisor and felt that I could talk to him). My supervisor came into my office and sat down. He looked puzzled and said he was not quite sure why I had left him the "story" to look at. I explained again that it was simply to illustrate the technique of using stories. He looked relieved, and commented to the effect that he had thought I was trying to tell him something in an indirect way, about how I might be feeling in our supervision sessions, as he was an older man and in a position of power. I assured him there was no hidden agenda and thanked him for his concern. However, I still felt rather silly and embarrassed.

1. Comment on the supervisor's situation and response to Charlie's research problems.
2. What should Charlie do now?

Act 3: Too much work and too little money

Around the beginning of the Summer term, one of the academics in my department approached me to see if I would be interested in doing a joint project with her. The project was to involve the analysis of over a 1000 letters written by victims of childhood abuse. Given that the project was directly related to my research I jumped at this golden opportunity. However, there were several drawbacks. To begin with I could not get over the fact that the project was much larger than my own PhD in terms of the number of participants involved (which is actually now working out to about 1,500 to my approximate 40), and we only had approximately 3-4 months to complete the project unlike the three years for a PhD. I started to feel that this might be a mission impossible. On top of this, I was being given very little in terms of financial reward. At first this was not a problem, after all I knew that it had the prospects of many long term benefits, for example, the use of the data for my own research and publications. However, by the end of the summer term, my studentship was completely exhausted and I didn't know how I was going to manage until the new academic term in October.

My financial situation was worsened due to other circumstances. I have a joint account with my partner who had only just finished his undergraduate degree in Middlemarch. I also studied for my first degree in Middlemarch and having come straight onto a PhD we have considerable debts. So despite my studentship being more money than my LEA grant, I was this year in effect subsidising my partner. We have, and still are constantly struggling financially, paying back debts of one sort or another, as well as having two places to rent, and although my partner immediately found work after his exams, it has not been consistent. Therefore, I was faced with having very little spare time, due to the commitments I made to the project, to try and find other (paid) work. Furthermore, I did not only have the project to do, I was also involved in designing four questionnaires for a local Rape Crisis Centre; I had a 5,000 word essay on reliability and validity to write for my Advanced Qualitative Course; and after asking for the possibility of some teaching (to earn some money) I was given a lecture to do, for which I have to prepare for October and of course the list goes on, that's without such things as Literature Reviews.

I have been feeling totally overwhelmed. The word that comes to mind is flooding. To make matters even worse, my partner, whilst having been accepted at Coketown University for his PhD, was unable to secure funding. The added worry that this has given on top of everything else has made the summer extremely tough. At times I feel so stressed that to concentrate on anything has been impossible. I have been receiving some support through a student counsellor. However, what I feel I really need is a holiday with my partner, but with no time nor any money a holiday has been out of the question.

By the time the deadline came for the analysis of the letters and the report to be completed we had coded only 400 letters (out of 1500) and had inputted onto the computer database even less (120 out of 1500). So there is still a very long way to go and despite working flat

out I feel that I have hardly made a difference. At the beginning the letters (which range from 1 page to 30 pages) were taking at the most 5 hours to code. Of course we have got a lot quicker with practice. The latest problem for me has been in not having a computer with a big enough memory to take the database. It is very important that I can have access to a computer in my office, due to the sensitive nature of the letters where confidentiality is so very important. At present I feel very frustrated and so very tired. However, I never think about giving up because I know that my partner and I have come too far, both having returned to education as 'young' but 'mature' students. I also know that I am in a very fortunate position with many excellent opportunities and furthermore, at the end of the day it is my choice to be doing the PhD. However, I just wish that things could be easier.

Q1. What support can supervisors really give?

Q2. What should Charlie do now?

Team task

On the acetate provided, provide some guidance for

1. postgraduate research students
2. supervisors
3. institutions