Conflict Resolution for Post Docs
February 18, 2009

Case #1
Post-doc wants to ask her PI for assistance with a difficulty she is finding in her data sets. She taps gingerly at the door. The professor ignores her, and continues typing on the computer. She clears her throat, and taps a little harder.

PI: "Do you think I'm deaf?"

PD: "Um, pardon me? Um, no I'm so sorry, I just thought..."

PI: (still typing): "No apparently you didn't THINK....sit down." (PD sits, and waits a few seconds. PI continues typing).

PD: "Um, Professor Hechicera, I'm having a little trouble with the data sets from last week..."

PI: "Please be quiet, I'm trying to concentrate."

PD: "Oh sorry...." (Phone rings, PI answers)

PI (to phone, angrily): "What do you think I am, a copy editor? Get it right, and stop bothering me." (Slams down phone, and catches sight of student. Gives exaggerated sigh.) "What do you want?"

PD: (nervous): "I'm *really* sorry for bothering you. I just really need some help with figuring out what went wrong."

PI: "Really. (Sarcastically) How would you know if what you are looking at is wrong?"

PD: "Um, well, the results are way off from the trends shown in the previous three weeks..."

PI: "Aha. I see, you’ve found an error and now you want me to fix it?? Tell me: do I actually pay you to DO anything independently around here?"

PD: (near tears): "No, no, I mean yes, of course, you pay me. I just hoped that you could help..."

PI: "Well, in fact, no, I can't. If you haven't noticed, the rest of us are ALL a little busy. For once, you're going to have to stand on your own, and take care of this. Have a report on your findings to me by tomorrow."

PD, shattered, slinks out the door....

Issues:
What could the PD have done to better present her case?

Why do you think the PI responded the way he did?

What are the implications of finding data or research errors to a PD, as opposed to the PI who owns the grant funding the research?
Case #2

PI: Dr. Tenure
PI's husband: Al
PD: Polly-Anna

It's late in the afternoon, mid-week. The lab door bursts open and Al rushes in, yelling for his wife. Polly-Anna PD says, "Sorry Al, she's at the Dean's Office in a meeting - can I help?" Al tells her that he's running late and has an urgent appointment. He asks her if she would mind picking up Wilhelmina, his daughter, at daycare. Polly-Anna says it is not a problem and gets Wilhelmina.

The following week, Dr. Tenure is heading out of the lab to another meeting, and catching sight of Polly-Anna, says, "Oh, Polly-Anna, I'm afraid I might not get out of this meeting in time to get Wilhelmina. Would you mind picking her up again, just this once?" Polly-Anna hesitates, but then says, "Yes, of course..."

It soon becomes routine for Polly-Anna to pick up Dr. Tenure's daughter, and to watch her for up to 3 hours, a couple of times each week. Polly-Anna is always careful to make up the time she misses in the lab, and doesn’t really mind watching the child because she has become fond of her. However, one day at the end of a lab staff meeting....

Dr. Tenure: “So, that's about it for this week. Don't forget, we're all supposed to attend the visiting lecture on the new procedures for chelating lime. It starts at 4:00 PM, so Polly-Anna, you can grab Wilhelmina for me, and I'll just meet you at home after the lecture is over...OK everyone, thanks!"

Polly-Anna is upset about being excluded from the lecture in order to serve as a personal babysitter. Not wanting to cause trouble, she leaves the meeting without saying anything.

Issues:

How did this situation get out of control?

What assumptions were made by Dr. Tenure?

Why did Polly-Anna not feel comfortable protesting?

How could she approach Dr. Tenure about this issue?
Case # 3  

PI: Dr. Jones  
PD: Pierre Aubergine  
Undergrad: Samantha  

Pierre is teaching some sections of Dr. Jones’ “Basics of Engineering” course; he is called into Dr. Jones’ office one afternoon. When Pierre arrives, he sees Samantha, one of the students in his class. Pierre thinks he was generous when he recently gave her a ‘C’ on a mid-term, but he assumes she is complaining to Dr. Jones about the grade.  

Dr. Jones: "Hi Pierre, thanks for coming over - please sit down. You know Samantha, correct? Samantha has brought forward a concern to me, and I think we should discuss it. Samantha?"  

Samantha (looking embarrassed): “Well, I just, sometimes, sort of, have some trouble understanding Dr. Aubergine.”  

Pierre: “Well, Samantha, I'm always available after class, and during my office hours, to help explain any assignments or concepts to you.”  

Dr. Jones: "No, Pierre, what she means is that she has trouble understanding your accent. When you teach in class, she has trouble figuring out what you are saying, as your accent is pretty heavy.”  

Pierre (looking astonished): “Bien sur?!? I mean really?? Well, I'm sorry, but none of the other students seem to have this problem.”  

Samantha: “I've talked to a few of the other students, and they all say it's very hard to understand what you say.”  

Dr. Jones: “Pierre, your accent is certainly noticeable. Are there ways you can work on your speaking skills, so the students can better understand you?”  

Pierre (stands up): "I think I don't need to change anything. I think Samantha needs to focus, and learn to listen, and realize that not everyone speaks like an American, thank goodness." He leaves, obviously angry.  

Samantha looks very embarrassed and Dr. Jones looks bewildered.  

Issues:  

What could Dr. Jones have done differently in raising this issue with Pierre?  

Why do you think Pierre responded so angrily to this issue?  

What could Pierre have said or done differently from his perspective, to try to solve the problem?