

**THE AETIOLOGY AND TREATMENT OF NETWORK INFERIORITY
AND CONFERENCE INSECURITY SYNDROME**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the alarming effects of recent conferences upon the mental stability and self-confidence of marketing academics. A frightening spectre now haunts the IMP membership: - the spectre of a virulent malaise.

Specific papers presented at the Academy of Marketing (U.K.) conference of July 2000 and the 16th IMP conference at Bath in September 2000 have precipitated a severe feeling of network inferiority and marginalisation among many IMP members. They find that their inter-personal relationships are in jeopardy and their work ties with collaborating researchers have been put under critical public scrutiny. Additionally, several traumatic events at the Bath conference have adversely affected the harmony of international relationships. The IMP network may be imploding!

One paper, by Australian authors, stressed the all-important role of international collaborative research on the shaping of communication networks. It pointed to the emergence, with the IMP network, of an 'Elite Invisible College' of key, prestigious researchers. A consequence of this has been the creation of a marginalised group, which we call 'Network Inferiors'. These members are not vital to the collaborative research network and are less prolific in output.

The malaise, which has now occurred, is termed Network Inferiority and Conference Insecurity Syndrome (NICIS). It may not be endemic nor untreatable and the paper proposes several positive steps to arrest and eradicate the syndrome.

The probable causes of NICIS are discussed and set within the historical context of inferiority and security at religious and cultural gatherings. A psychoanalytical insight is offered, based upon both the drive model and relational model. Thereafter, three clinical features of the NICIS syndrome are identified prior to a proposed research methodology for the study of the malaise. Six key factors are derived from a multi-factorial perceptual mapping technique. An agenda for the treatment of the syndrome is offered in considerable depth. The paper concludes with important comments on the managerial implications of the study.

THE AETIOLOGY¹ and TREATMENT of NETWORK INFERIORITY² and CONFERENCE INSECURITY³ SYNDROME

1. INTRODUCTION

There are disquietening and ominous signs of the adverse effect of conferences on the mental stability and self-confidence of marketing academics. Three journal papers, published from the proceedings of the Academy of Marketing (UK) Conference of July 2000, are probably a significant cause of this condition.

1. 'Who Are We and What Are We Doing'? by Baker and Erdogan
2. 'Where Are We Going? Perceptions of US Marketing Academics'³
by Polonski and Mankelow
3. 'Where Are We Going? Perceptions of French Marketing Academics'
by Hetzel.

Did delegates suffer from insecurity as a result of reading these conference papers? Is it likely that this malaise might be contagious and spreading to other marketing conferences?

Yet academics are not normally damaged as a result of reading other peoples' work. In fact, many researchers can barely recollect what they have read, except as a means of citing the papers in a bibliography. The impact of most conference presentations is short-lived. However, strange things happened at another recent international gathering where certain research papers had a more dramatic effect on a number of academics.

Several of those present at the 16th IMP Conference at Bath University in September 2000 suffered a significant erosion of self-esteem and a detectable feeling of insecurity. They became increasingly aware of a feeling of marginalisation. Some researchers behaved as though they were mere spectators of that body of elite academics who are at the epicentre of the IMP Conference network. On their return home from Bath, several participants reported having consulted their doctors, psychiatrists, sex therapists and religious mentors. Their low spirits, pleas for help and confessions of inferiority and inadequacy have not been resolved.

¹ Actiology being the study of the causation of diseases

² Inferiority indicates a perception, or reality, of lower rank or status

³ Insecurity implies a state of constant anxiety and unease

Is it likely that their condition may now be chronic? This author believes not, and that there are grounds for optimism.

This paper first examines the probable causes of Network Inferiority and Conference Insecurity Syndrome (N.I.C.I.S), as it is now being termed. Subsequently, the evidence of the historical origins and clinical features of the mental illness are presented. This leads to a proposed methodology for analysing and assessing the severity of the syndrome. Some preliminary fieldwork findings are discussed. The paper concludes with an agenda for the treatment and alleviation of this distressing condition affecting IMP researchers.

2. PROBABLE CAUSES OF THE SYNDROME

Academic speculation may be a creative activity, but it does require some supportive evidence to be convincing. The study reported here is not sufficiently far advanced to warrant rigorous hypothesis testing. Instead, we are forced to rely, initially, on a substantial number of anecdotal testimonies from reputable sources amongst IMP researchers. The juxtapositioning of 'reputable' and 'IMP researchers' does pose an additional problem of credibility.

It transpires that the most reliable evidence of the origins of the distress and symptoms of N.I.C.I.S can be traced to the contents of four conferences papers presented at Bath in the year 2000. These are the following:-

1. 'Are Relationships Doomed'? By Chen and Wilson (of the USA)
2. 'The Significance of Weak Ties' by Eriksson, Lindstrand, Majkgård and Sharma (of Scandinavian countries)
3. 'Attempts at Giving and Receiving Hugs' by Holmen, Pedersen and Rosenbroijer (also of Scandinavia)
4. 'A Network Analysis of the Evolution of Personal Research Networks among IMP Researchers' by Morlacchi, Wilkinson and Young (from Australia)

Several English IMP researchers, who read the first paper, believed that their own inter-personal relationships now appear to be doomed. The second paper produced even more alarming and disturbing results by highlighting the dangers of their weak ties with fellow researchers. The third paper traumatised many Scandinavian researchers when, after reading

the paper, their attempts at giving and receiving hugs at the conference resulted in outright rejection and also some accusations of sexual harassment from the German group. Clearly, the third paper had resulted in unforeseen adverse effects on the harmony of international relationships amongst IMP researchers.

Of greater impact was the fourth paper by the Australian researchers, Morlacchi et al. Special concerns arose over the matrix showing the network links between collaborating IMP researchers in different countries, including Sweden, Finland, Australia, the USA and the UK. Many researchers, who are much less conspicuous in the network, we now are obliged to class as 'Network Inferiors'. They are not regular co-authors of papers. These people quickly realised that they were not key players in the IMP Network, nor were they focal nodes who act as links between different researchers. In fact, they were peripheral and often isolated. More crucially, they realised that they were not members of 'The Élite of the Invisible College'. The élite are highly productive, long-serving members who dominate the collaborative research hierarchy. No wonder that their self-esteem was damaged!

3. HISTORIAL BACKGROUND TO THE SYNDROME

Network Inferiority Syndrome and peripheral status at gatherings has only recently begun to receive serious attention by the research community. Yet the basic syndrome is not of recent origin. Enquiry into the problems identified at Bath has produced some evidence of a long-established and more general malaise.

As early as the 8th century the Persian historian Kidnobody (c.756 AD) made reference to some inconsequential and peripheral people attending various gatherings to worship at religious shrines and temples. Self-abasement and self-flagellation ceremonies by other social outcasts occurred in villages around Babylon. Those individuals involved may have been only marginal believers in the true faith, (comparable to new members of IMP conferences who do not accept the doctrinal importance of the Holy Trinity, - interaction, relationships and networks).

The history of general clinical neglect of treatment for the syndrome may account for the fact that over half of all Americans alive today have experienced childhood isolation (David Wilson (1948)). However, the growing acceptance of Network Inferiority as a distinctive IMP-related phenomenon is reflected in the forthcoming paper 'Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders Among IMP Members' (Ford, I D (2000)). Researchers and, indeed, clinicians are in disagreement about the significant features of N.I.C.I.S. It has been forecast that the Oslo IMP Conference in 2001 will be characterised by Lack of Interaction, Broken Relationships and Network Disintegration. This is likely to make more urgent the treatment of the syndrome, as discussed in Section 8 of this paper.

4. A PSYCHOANALYTICAL INSIGHT

How have academics managed the pain and anguish of inferiority and insecurity? The mental world which individual IMP researchers create within themselves to handle distress and conflict has been lucidly interpreted by the internationally famous American psychoanalysts, Stephen Mitchell and Jay Greenberg in their book 'Object Relations in Psychoanalytical Theory' (1983). They argued that there were two dominant tendencies within the field; first, a drive model in which the mind is pre-structured to use relationships with others as a source of drive gratification. Second, the relational model in which it is the actual interaction with others that creates the structures of the mind. So there we have it! Hakan Hakansson uses the drive model to handle distress in his relationships with David Ford and also with Geoff Easton. On the other hand, Ian Wilkinson uses the relational model to structure his mind in dealing with interactions with Louise Young and Nigel Barrett.

5. CLINICAL FEATURES OF THE N.I.C.I.S SYNDROME

Three clinical markers merit brief mention for further investigation:-

(a) Congenital Onset

The international genome project offers exceptional insights into the inferiority condition. Unfortunately, the N.I.C.I.S. phenomenon cannot be studied at birth, because all babies are inferior to adults in speech, I.Q., dexterity and personal hygiene. It is only later that they may become inferior IMP members. Colleagues' suggestion that the author be cloned and genetically modified has received widespread support but has proved prohibitably costly.

(b) Emotional Immaturity

Several otherwise normal IMP researchers have been diagnosed as immature. They have suffered the associated stigma of having their research papers placed in the children's track at conference.

(c) Knowledge Defects

Whilst a few IMP researchers have I.Q's within the range of acceptability, almost all suffer significant knowledge defects. This was diagnosed by Kristian Moeller's Finnish research team. They were alarmed that no one had detailed knowledge of David Ford's seminal and widely acclaimed four-stage model of the development of relationships (Ford (1990)). Ford himself was distressed at this news.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is proposed that multi-factorial perceptual mapping offers the most promising breakthrough in analysing and assessing the extent of network inferiority and conference insecurity. Six measures should capture the key ingredients of the syndrome. These are to be tested on a sample of IMP researchers attending the 17th IMP Conference in Oslo in 2001. A five-point Likert scale will be used on the following factors, which have been developed from those proposed by Morlacchi et al., in their paper referred to earlier:-

1. The Adjacency Matrix

This measures who is unfriendly with and refuses to sit close to the respondent at conferences (i.e. actors – actor's matrix).

2. The Affiliation Matrix

This represents how frequently the respondents have their papers turned down by reviewers (i.e. actors – non-events matrix)

3. Connectivity Index

The number of times the conference keynote speakers fail to cite the respondent's research work.

4. Centrality Index

The respondent's inability to successfully engage Lars-Gunnar Mattson in a theoretical discussion, when he is planning his next sabbatical in California.

5. Closeness Index

The proximity of bedrooms at the conference. (Several researchers from Turku and Helsinki have refused to be interviewed on this index).

6. Betweenness Factor

This refers to brokers of important information (e.g. how many people wanting to find their way to the bar always ask Peter Turnbull for directions)

To explore the validity of the above perceptual mapping techniques, a pilot study has been carried out.

7. PILOT FIELDWORK INVESTIGATION

In the rich tradition of IMP research, the author carried out a series of unstructured, face-to-face interviews at the Bath conference in September 2000. A sample was drawn from the list of conference attendees. This list showed the following:-

- 59 from Scandinavia (26 Swedes, 20 Fins, 9 Danes, 4 Norwegians)
- 43 from the UK and Ireland (though 2 Irish people refused to be associated with the English)
- 34 from Continental Europe (the Danish and British researchers do not wish to be included as Europeans)
- 8 from North America

Note: The Australians were ignored due to cultural incompatibility

A representative sample of 5% of the above population was chosen from each geographical category. By chance, the whole sample was assembled for interview at the bar of the hotel.

Results

One Englishman was too lacking in confidence and also felt too inferior to be interviewed by the author.

Two Scandinavians (females) were so engrossed in discussions of Conjoint Analysis of Network Structures that they did not deign to listen to the questions.

The American was using his laptop computer to book his return flight home and left suddenly, without apologising.

The in-depth case study of the Portuguese and Hungarian participants was aborted, due to language problems. However, they were already showing signs of depression and conference inferiority after attending Ian Wilkinson's Keynote lecture.

Despite these limitations to the study, the author felt that the underlying propositions and research methods proposed held exciting challenges.

8. AN AGENDA FOR THE TREATMENT OF NETWORK INFERIORITY AND CONFERENCE INSECURITY SYNDROME

The following is offered as a realistic approach to the recognition of the existence and alleviation of the severest cases of N.I.C.I.S.

- 8.1 A Thirst for Knowledge Requires Suffering
- 8.2 Life and Lust at Uppsala
- 8.3 The Route to Academic Success
- 8.4 Use of Eclectic Sources for Academic References

8.1 A Thirst for Knowledge Requires Suffering

Going to IMP Conferences now assumes all the ambience and self-denial of medieval pilgrimages to holy shrines. Ancient religious pilgrimages invariably had a visionary leader, a rousing speaker and an amusing entertainer. Such roles at IMP conferences are traditionally filled by Hakansson (the visionary), Ford (the keynote speaker) and Turnbull (the jester). The suffering of IMP delegates knows no limits! Academic pilgrims, going to Oslo and future venues, likewise must suffer hardship in their pursuit not of holiness, but of knowledge and fame.

Researchers who experience traumas and unbearable suffering when responding to requests for conference papers to be submitted by impossible deadlines can take heart from the experience of others who achieved fame. For example, the Russian composer Tchaikovsky was driven to acute depression and required extensive psychiatric therapy when attempting to write three symphonies to a deadline. He thought that Fate was conspiring to prevent him achieving success and happiness. Many writers of conference papers must feel that Fate (or a reviewer) is against them.

On his eventual recovery, Tchaikovsky made use of his sufferings as the themes of his compositions.

Symphony No. 4 had the theme 'RESISTANCE TO PRESSURE'

Symphony No. 5 had the theme 'ACCEPTANCE OF THE INEVITABLE'

Symphony No. 6 had the theme 'OVERCOMING FEAR OF FAILURE'

These symphonies are widely acclaimed for their great melodies and originality. If only more IMP papers were acclaimed for their originality.

Hence the suffering by conference 'inferiors' must be accepted in a stoical manner and the above themes recognised as common to all creative writers in their pursuit of joining the elite of the IMP Invisible College.

8.2 Develop a Lust for Life and Learning

It appears that a career move to Uppsala University would be helpful to sufferers of N.I.C.I.S.

Uppsala has been described as 'A combination of venerable stones and irreverent youth' (Daily Telegraph, Oct 3rd, 1998). The writer states that Uppsala University is as supportive of frivolity as academic study. Heritage and tradition are no more cherished than the irreverent behaviour of its students. A lust for life and learning are also greatly valued by its staff! Campus life was illustrated by a female student showing a dessert, which she was eating. She stated that this was a metaphor for university life at Uppsala 'Sweet on top, sinful and spicy underneath'. The university has clearly changed from its foundation in 1477 as a theological centre. It is worth noting that Hakansson, Snehota, Mattson and Axelsson have now left Uppsala, whilst Virpi Havila remains there. Perhaps the lust for life still has its appeal for the select few.

8.3 The Route to Academic Success

One escape route from Network Inferiority is to follow Lincoln Addisons' guide to success. It will lead to gaining star billing at prime times at IMP Conferences.

1. Choose Your Subject with Care

It should be important enough to attract attention, but obscure enough to put off rivals.

2. Manipulate the Output Arising from Your Research

Create a special journal. Edit it yourself. Publish your own and only your loyal friends' work. Ignore the work of rivals.

3. Produce a Lot of New Words and Concepts

Originality and rigour are less important than 'buzz' words. Your concepts may be old or weak, so wrap them up in wordy phrases.

4. Develop Personal Gravitas

Speak slowly, look imperious and take yourself seriously (not many others will). If necessary, ignore difficult questions and raise your voice to prevent the chairman of

your session from stopping or interrupting you. Integrity and scholarship are less impressive than a charismatic presence.

8.4 Use of Eclectic Sources for Academic References

It is insufficient to cite Hakansson, Johanson, Easton and Wilkinson in a bibliography. There are many other world experts on business-to-business interactions etc. For example, when asked 'What effect do networks have on relationships?' the following answers were given:-

- (a) George W Bush (President of USA)
'Relationships counted more than votes in Florida'
- (b) Karl Marx (Political Philosopher)
'Network domination by the proletariat was an historical inevitability'
- (c) Albert Einstein (Physicist)
'Whether the network determines relationships or relationships determine networks depends up on your frame of reference. It is all relative.'
- (d) Saddam Hussein (President of Iraq)
'I drop nerve gas on all subversive relationships and networks. I don't know the difference, nor do I care'.
- (e) Bill Clinton (ex-President of USA)
'The relationship with Monica Lewinski was never sexual'.
- (f) Woody Allen (Actor and Producer)
'Relationships are never symmetrical. The lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won't get much sleep'.
- (g) Portia (from the Merchant of Venice)
'The quality of relationships is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from Heaven, on the Network beneath'.

CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Network Inferiority and Conference Insecurity Syndrome (N.I.C.I.S) has emerged as a worrying malaise affecting several academic researchers. Though coming into prominence in the year 2000, it is not likely to be a Millennium Syndrome, repeating itself every thousand years.

However compelling the evidence, it would be a mistake and an injustice to attribute the spread of N.I.C.I.S to the Bath IMP Conference paper by the Australian researchers

Morlacchi, Wilkinson and Young. Likewise, it would be mischievous if any one attempted to negatively correlate this debilitating malaise to the rapid growth of self-confidence in Australia following their successful hosting of the Olympic Games in Sydney. Australian self-confidence is so clearly linked to culture that it is too recent a phenomenon to provide reliable data.

Nevertheless, it is possible that Inferiority and Insecurity is a form of Network virus introduced carelessly (rather than maliciously) into the IMP membership by our Australian colleagues.

This paper presented here has traced the historical origins of the syndrome and compared the traumas and sufferings of religious pilgrims with those of researchers facing the anguish of writing and presenting papers at IMP conferences.

Several clinical features of N.I.C.I.S, such as Emotional Immaturity, Knowledge Defects etc., (as developed from Smoller (1988)), have been discovered among IMP researchers. The proposed measures for assessing the severity of N.I.C.I.S, developed in the Methodology Section, were not shown to be entirely reliable in the pilot study, but are being pursued, nonetheless.

The treatment of N.I.C.I.S, advocated in Section 8, is intended to deal with the more serious cases and have already been acclaimed as a major breakthrough. Several Danish researchers, led by Laurids Hedaa, have accepted the need for stoic suffering (see 8.1). They have adopted Tchaikovsky as their role model as a means of triumphing over their fear of failure. Some Uppsala researchers have refuted the claims in 8.2 that a career move to their university improves the lust for life. Further, the cynical route to academic success shown in 8.3, has upset Luis Araujo, who demands to know why his career plans have been made so public. Our libel lawyer has advised that the case is now subjudice. Finally, there has been a very high response to the inference from 8.4 that the Internet provides an easy and unusual source of international references and expertise on networks and relationships. Several police prosecutions of IMP members may be pending due to their having gained access to networks of dubious material on bizarre relationships.

There are no obvious management implications of this research.

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