

Academic Isolation vs. Integration

How to become an active member of your research field

WORKSHOP FACILITATORS:

Daiane Scaraboto, University of Melbourne

Marcia Christina Ferreira, Brunel University, UK

Bernardo Figueiredo, RMIT University

Becoming an active member of your research field ...

Why should you become an active member of your research field?
Much more than producing many papers and building a reputation.
It involves mitigating academic isolation (promoting integration).
But, why should I engage in it? And how should I do so?



Why academic isolation/integration matters

Academic success (Kirchmeyer, 2005)

Productivity: volume of publications

Job satisfaction: time spent working, ability to do research, promotions

Career mobility: ability to work where you want

Mental health (Gorczyński, 2018; Shaw, 2014)

Young academics disengage from interactions to become more productive.

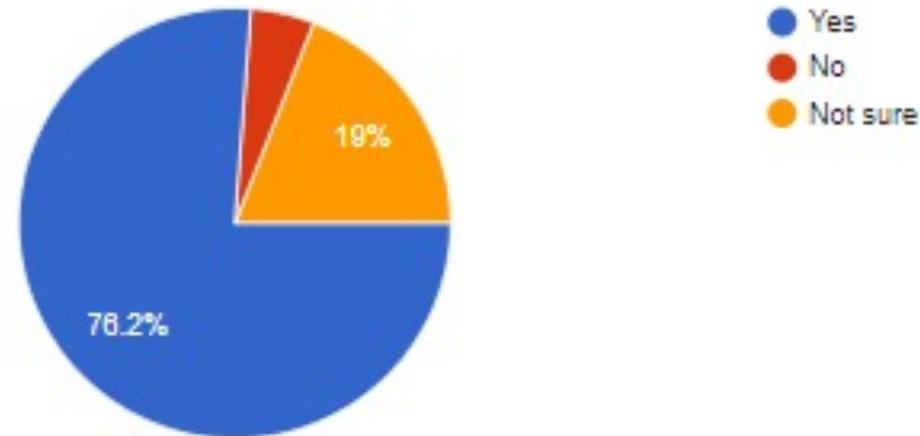
Isolation at work is the main factor affecting mental health for 40% of academics and more than half below the age of 35 (Guardian 2014)

Many academics turn to counselling to learn ways to cope with emotional distress

This group

Academic isolation is defined as an involuntary perceived separation from the academic field to which one aspires to belong, associated with a perceived lack of agency in terms of one's engagement with their academic field (i.e. a specific network of scholars, institutions, and knowledge, such as "services marketing" or "CCT"). Have you experienced isolation as an academic?

21 responses



Your experience(s) of academic isolation

“ ... Feeling like you are always behind, not feeling how much work is been done”

“Less support”

“Not being able to communicate with other researchers and collaborate them”

Bullying, watching others being bullied, poor leadership, overwork

“...Lockdown has been the cause of much of my isolation...not having others to share thoughts and ideas... Isolation can cause anxiety as it is difficult to gauge my progress and standard of work compared to others”

“The inability to physically network with peers; unsure of research progress; mental fatigue; stress; writer’s block”

“The inability to physically network with peers; unsure of research progress; mental fatigue; stress; writer's block”

“Isolated from the community and lack of face-to-face conferences, sessions, workshops make me think I am almost totally isolated from the academic environment”

What is isolation?



Isolation



Solitude



Loneliness



Academic Isolation:

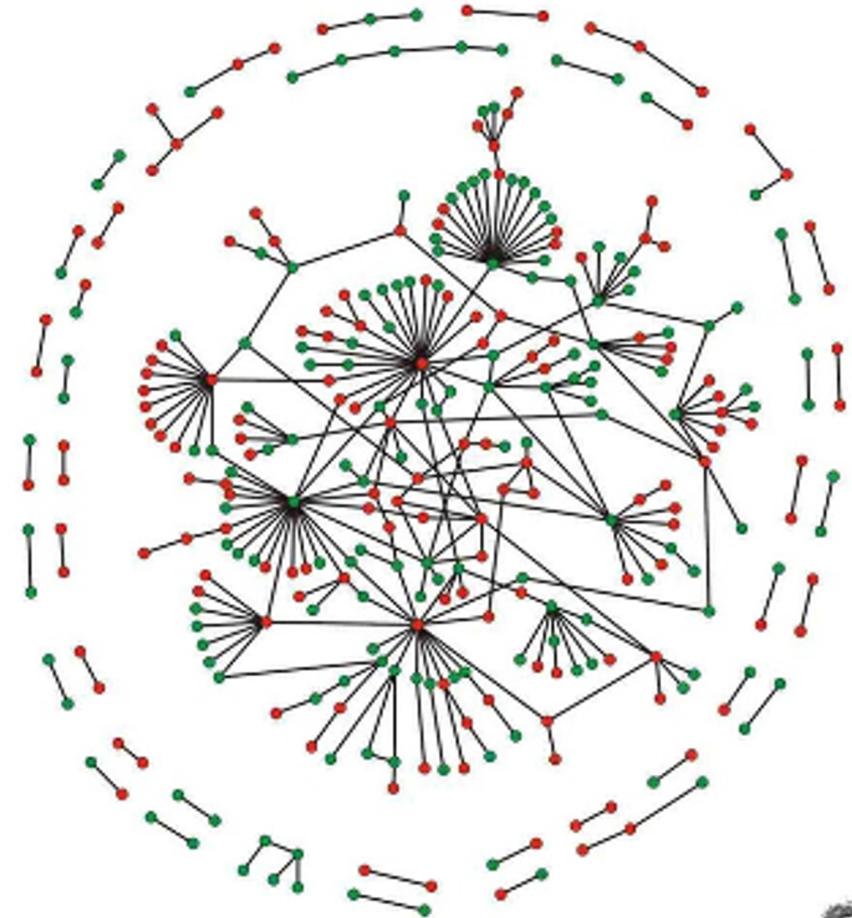
A perceived, involuntary separation from the academic field to which one aspires to belong, resulting from a perceived lack of agency in terms of one's engagement with the field.

Academic Integration: the opposite of academic isolation.



What academic field do you aspire to belong?

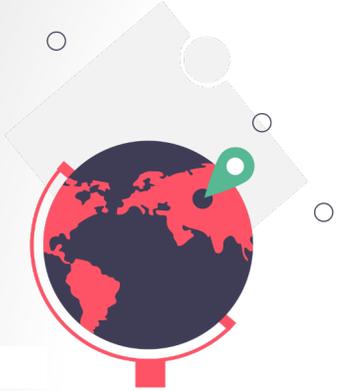
Are you able to identify your academic (research) field?



In relation to this field, how isolated are you?



Isolation dimensions



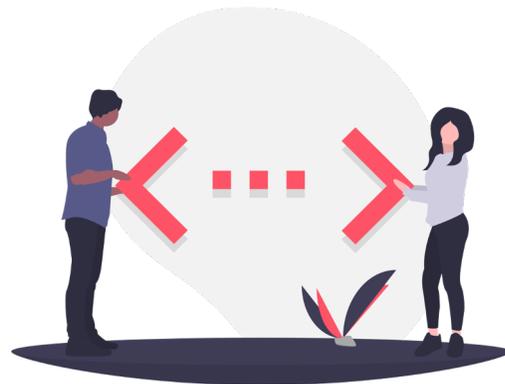
Geographic

Perceived physical distance from group and other actors in the field.

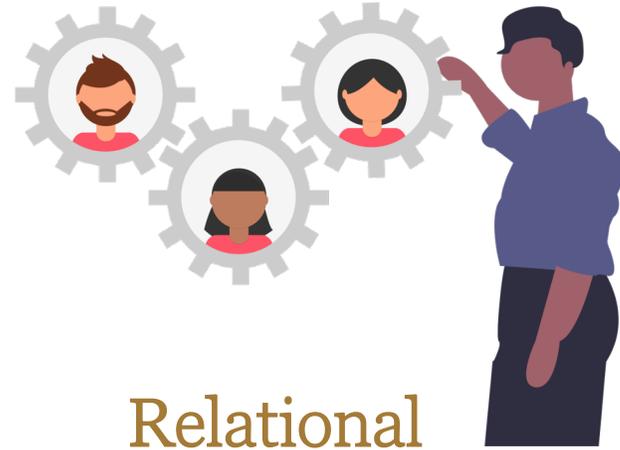
Isolation dimensions

Cultural

Perceived lack of understanding of the field's norms, values, and shared codes and understandings (e.g., language and history).



Isolation dimensions



Relational

Perceived lack of social connections with other actors in the field.

Isolation dimensions

Technical

Perceived lack of skills of the field-relevant methods and techniques to conduct rigorous and publishable research in journals valued by the field.



Isolation dimensions



Geographic

Perceived physical distance from group and other actors in the field.

Cultural

Perceived lack of understanding of the field's norms, values, and shared codes and understandings (e.g., language and history).



Relational

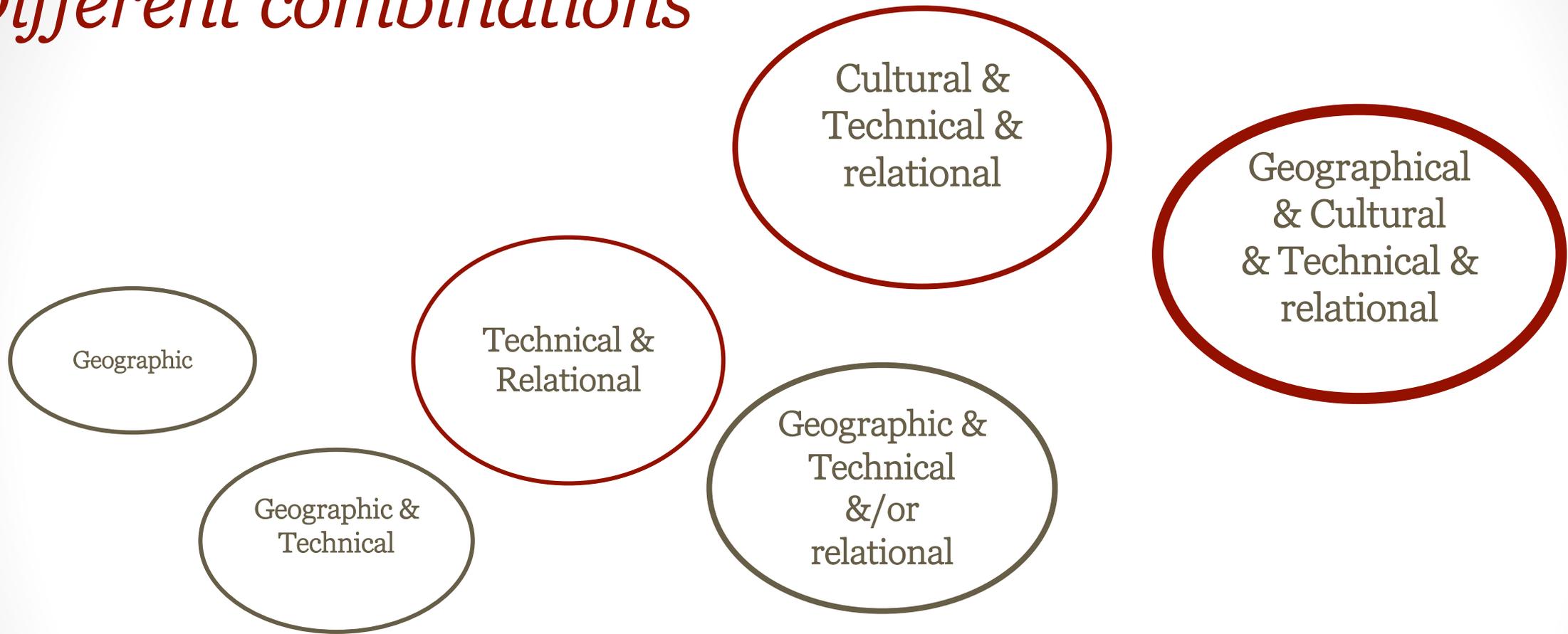
Perceived lack of social connections with other actors in the field.

Technical

Perceived lack of skills of the field-relevant methods and techniques to conduct rigorous and publishable research in journals valued by the field.



Different combinations



Low

Perceived Isolation intensity

High

Individual reflection

- Reflect on your level of isolation for each dimension:
geographic isolation,
cultural isolation,
relational isolation
and technical isolation.

Use the QR code or the link on the chat to record your answer.



Group discussion – Breakout Rooms

Scenario 1: Jenny C.

Female Student, Chinese, 25yo, BA in Engineering, Master in Statistics, in her 3rd year PhD in Australia, very specific topic and methodology, supervisor understands her methodology but does not know much about topic. She has a generous scholarship from her country. She feels isolated.

Scenario 2: Aron P.

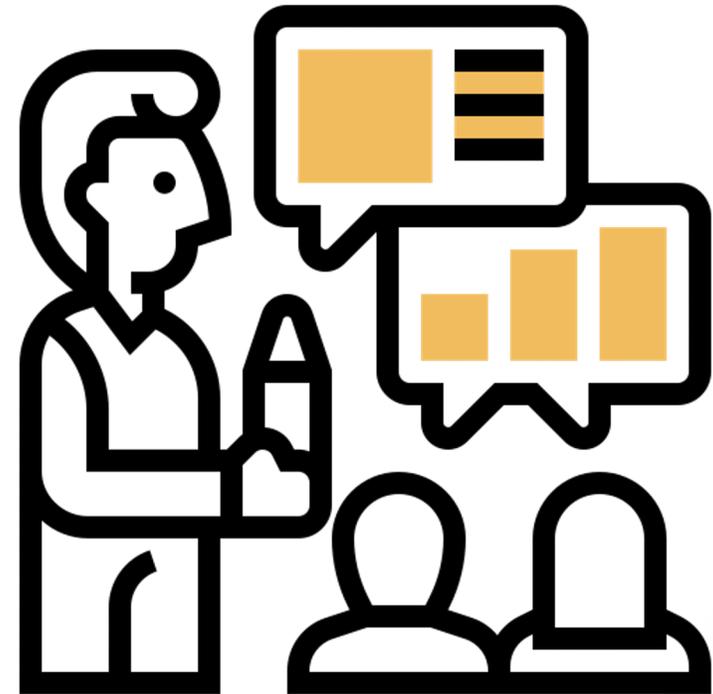
Male Student, Australian, 27 yo, BA in Arts, Masters in Communications, Year 1 in Marketing PhD program. He wants to use qualitative methods and do research in Consumer Culture, but faculty and colleagues in the department are mostly in the fields of Consumer Behaviour and Marketing Strategy. Has no funding for conferences until confirmation. He feels isolated.

Questions:

Which dimensions of isolation affect the student?
What challenges might these dimensions bring to the student?

Debrief: Time to share your insights

Now it is time to present the key points discussed in your breakout room



Integrating through academic bricolage

Academic bricolage: making do with the resources around you to work around the constraints imposed by your position and change the boundaries what is possible



Integrating through academic bricolage

Type of bricolage	How it fosters integration
Intellectual: disassembling and reassembling past experiences in to understand and respond to new situations	Gives you intellectual autonomy and productive
Network: combining network and relations at hand	Develop socio-cultural bonds
Communication: using your communicative resources creatively	Develops your visibility in your research community

Intellectual bricolage → Autonomy

“My adviser encouraged me to take other **qualitative methods courses in the Sociology department**, and later I **approached an established academic at a conference to ask if I could take his course**. He was agreeable, and so I drove 2+ hours, each way, through the Canadian winter, to [the university he works] for a semester. It was wonderful!” (Katie)

“Through my PhD, I gradually **learned the structuration of marketing research by attending events from a new marketing tribe every year** - attending their conferences (CCT, TCR, ACR, AMS, EMAC) and associated **workshops and trainings**” (Alex)

“By participating in the **reading group**, I have **expansive discussions**, they provide a more complete perspective.... it allows me to compensate for not attending the annual conferences” (Tyler)

Network bricolage → Socio-cultural bonds

“I’ve started to choose who I would work with, and so I chose collaborative co-authors willing to invest time in projects. I picked them in London so we can work from the same place.” (Alex)

“I’m trying to work with one of the new Professors that recently joined my university. He is already from marketing, does interpretive research and I’m very interested on his research topic and that also suits my research project” (Ana)

“I had previously had an invitation from [established academic] to come spend a semester at [the university he works], and I felt like that would help me acquire some skills that may help me better integrate the CCT community.” (Emma)

“At the beginning, these activities were focused only on paper scrutinizing. Later, we have extended our activities by including some methodological cycles, and by engaging in some group projects and submissions. With this diversification, I started to feel that it’s like I was engaging in a virtual lab research!” (Alya)

Communication bricolage → Visibility

“I keep attending conferences – as many a year as I can afford (money and timewise). I feel like being seen and seeing people is important. Presenting my work and commenting on other people’s work recharges me, brings excitement back to the job, makes me feel connected, engaged, like I am part of something” (Gabriela)

“Our group facilitates gaining international reputation through top publications, the local academic community won't have a choice but eventually accept the merit of this type of research” (Julia)

“[The scrutinizers] makes me feel like I’m participating more in the field, even when I don’t attend the annual conference, because someone can be there representing our work and engaging the field with it.” (Tyler)

How have you worked to integrate so far?

Think about the scenarios we used in the breakout rooms.

Which tactics do you think apply best to the scenarios discussed earlier?

Could any of these tactics help mitigate your isolation?

Think for a couple of minutes and then share your answers in the chat (or raise your Zoom hand to speak!).



Some individual integration strategies that have worked:

Within field approach

Tactics	Description
Intellectual: Optimizing resources	Making use of field resources available (e.g., information, training, funding, etc.) in a creative way Identifying and assembling essential resources to the field (posting alerts on social media, identifying key papers, etc.)
Network: Extending engagement within the field	Extend engagement within the field through partnerships and mentorships to thrive in the field
Communication: Increasing personal visibility	Targeting journals of high visibility in the field and regularly attending events organized by established academics.

Some individual integration strategies that have worked:

Across field approach

Tactics	Description
Intellectual : Mapping external resources	Identify potential research areas collaborators, and other resources from areas of extra-field (e.g., management and social sciences)
Network : Establishing cross-field conversations	Voluntarily interacting with other areas of marketing and social sciences and trying to adapt one's research projects to become interdisciplinary
Communication: Broadening exposure to other fields	Reaching more diverse audiences by participating in general conferences and other events beyond the field.

Some collective integration strategies that have worked:

“The group is a more durable way of fighting isolation.

*By attending conferences, going to workshops, hosting events and visiting professors,
I feel more connected to other actors in the field, but the bridges....are built temporarily” (Jason)*

Reading groups	Members meet regularly to discuss recent publications from the research community
Feedback groups	One member shares something in each meeting (a paper, outline, study design, syllabus, grant proposal, preliminary data or mere seed of an idea) and receives comments from the other members)
Shut up and write groups	Members meet to write their own research at the same time. This can also be a place to share writing tips and resources

Some collective integration strategies that have worked:

Writing retreats	A group of researchers meets up in the same place to live together for several days. The time spent working is focused on writing a paper. The time off-work is mixture of free time on your own and moments to share and connect.
Collective publishing group	A network of academics commits to working on publishing together a number of projects. Members rotate in the leading role.
Review circles	Each member submits one article to the group and reviews the article of another member. These groups are typically organized by your institution or leaders of small research communities.

Keep in mind that groups must be managed to persist

Some important matters to consider:

1. Focus
2. Size
3. Frequency and length of meetings
4. Meeting structure
5. Meeting spaces (online and offline)
6. Roles
7. Rules for membership
8. Expected commitment
9. Creating a safe space - building trust

Action Plan to Foster Integration

STEP 1:

SPECIFY YOUR ACADEMIC ISOLATION

STEP 2:

INDIVIDUAL INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

STEP 3:

COLLECTIVE INTEGRATION STRATEGIES



Concluding remarks

- Isolation is serious and can result in many mental health issues (e.g. depression, lack of motivation)
- Academic isolation has many dimensions
- Lack of perceived agency is a key driver of academic isolation
- Be strategic about mitigating isolation
- There are several tactics (individual, cross-field, collective) that can be employed to mitigate isolation.

Some resources to help you develop collective strategies:

Arbor A. [Making a Thesis or Dissertation Support Group Work for You](#). Rackham School of Graduate Studies University of Michigan.

Belkhir, M., Brouard, M., Brunk, K. H., Dalmoro, M., Ferreira, M. C., Figueiredo, B., Huff A., Scaraboto D., Sibai O., & Smith A. N. (2019), Isolation in Globalizing Academic Fields: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Early Career Researchers. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Volume 18, No 2, pp. 261-285. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2017.0329>

Lee and Golde “[Starting an Effective Dissertation Writing Group](#)” Hume Writing Center Graduate Student Workshop. Stanford University.

Siders et al. (2021) “[How to beat isolation? Academic feedback groups fit the bill, and promote growth as scholars and humans](#)” *Nature*

Stanford’s Hume Center Academic (2016) [Writing Group Dissertation writing groups - feedback and motivation](#). <http://gradlogic.org/>

Stanford’s Hume Center Academic (2016) [Dissertation accelerators - Writing groups for productivity and support](#). <http://gradlogic.org/>

Feedback about the workshop

Feel free to connect with us:

Marcia Christina Ferreira: marcia.christina.ferreira@brunel.ac.uk

Bernardo Figueiredo: bernardo.figueiredo@rmit.edu.au

Daiane Scaraboto: dscaraboto@unimelb.edu.au