Editorial

Editorial: a call for activist and engaged research

In June 2021, the Danish Parliament made a statement stressing university rectors' responsibility to ensure that researchers present valid research. In the debate leading up to this resolution, a hefty debate in the parliament and beyond took place, naming specific researchers by name as well as research institutions within Social Sciences and Humanities at Danish universities that apparently execute social control to an extent that researchers are not allowed to draw conclusions on their data in an objective way. The claim is that (some) researchers politicise their research—primarily within gender, migration and postcolonial studies—and are activists rather than scientists. The Danish minister of research and the governing party supported the resolution, though emphasising that they had not mentioned names or specific institutions in it. The minister insists that, with the billions of DKK put into public research, it is the right of politicians to debate the outcome of this investment.

The resolution sent a shock wave through Danish universities, their management and faculty (see f.ex. the reaction from CBS colleagues on https://cbswire.dk/henrik-dahl-and-morten-messerschmidt-would-fail-their-exams-with-their-anecdotal-argumentation/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=10621%20Employees&utm_content=10621%20Employees+CID_1f58067e4c06ef05a65e2e5bc3190b12&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor). First of all, the rectors felt embarrassed about being asked to do something that is already their responsibility: securing research quality at their institutions by setting up systems of surveillance over research quality. Second, individual researchers see the resolution as a reduction of their freedom of research, including choice of topic and methodology, because apparently only those working under an objectivist ontology are welcome to participate in the public debate about social issues. Maybe this is not intended from the political side, but the outcome may be exactly that researchers are fearful of being mentioned by name in the parliament, which tends to be followed by—at times a very harsh—debate on social media. Needless to say, this will hamper the open public democratic debate. As a Danish citizen, I am obviously quite concerned about this situation, which brings forth memories of Humboldt's ideas of separating universities from politics (see f.ex. https://www.hu-berlin.de/en/about/history/standardseite?set_language=en). This separation is apparently still necessary if the social sciences and the humanities should fulfil their obligation and contribute to the public debate when politicians do not like what they hear.

So what does this has to do with IJLM? As an editor within the social sciences—namely logistics and supply chain management (SCM)—political control and interference of what we should study and with what ontology is dangerous, not only politically but also to its relevance for businesses and students because it would mean that we would have to erase interpretivism and social constructivism from our "toolbox", not to mention action-oriented research methods. This means that the *how* and *why* questions will have a hard time getting answers published in scientific journals. Further, such control may close the door for researching timely topics, such as sustainability and climate change (maybe this has already happened), and because logistics and SCM research has been always close to real issues of importance to business and society, we will have to be cautious about the political correctness of choice of topic and how we study it in the future.

IJLM has a long and proud history within the logistics and SCM discipline and has always been close to practice. The discipline seeks to contribute to practice, which is often named "business and society". We cannot do this without communicating our research findings to a

larger public, including business communities, but are we then politicising? Further, IJLM is owned by Emerald, a company that emphasises interest in the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainability Development Goals. One can argue that these goals merely focus on human rights, not politics. Although these goals focus on human rights, some of them also imply sharing resources with less-privileged people and countries; this means that to some extent, wealth must be redirected, and this falls in the realm of politics. However, are we politicising when we, for example, study gender issues in global supply chains and the impact of COVID-19 on food distribution in the Global South? I would answer "no" to both questions, as long as we are following the practices and conventions of doing solid research from whatever angle that creates new insights, including the division of the world's privileges. My claim is that studies that contribute to the democratic debates are necessary to develop both businesses and societies, as well as give our stakeholders a more solid view of where the world is going. Of course, IJLM cannot give stakeholders the whole picture, but we can contribute towards doing this. For Volume 32, No. 3, I am happy to announce that you can find quality research on topics such as sustainability in a broad understanding and connected to urban logistics, food chains in emergent economies and the role of new technologies, such as blockchains, in sustainability.

However, we need more research based on engaged scholarship (see van de Ven, 2018) and activist research (in this journal, see Touboulic and McCarthy, 2020) based on interpretivism or social constructivism, which allow us to dig deeper into logistics and SCM issues, as well as understand what these issues actually are. Touboulic and McCarthy (2020) call for activist research, where the "study objects" become real people who have a say about what is studied and how. About 10–15 years ago, I was quite optimistic regarding the increasing methodological pluralism of the discipline. In their five-year review of applied methodologies in logistics and SCM journals, Sachan and Datta (2005) reported that direct observations, such as case studies, were in progress and that research in general had become more interpretive. The same authors were in favour of applying qualitative, interpretative methods because these methods—well suited for answering the how and why questions—are also suitable for studying the impacts of successful SCM in practice. I concur with these authors, especially in present times, where the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that efficient global supply chains have their limitations. From a research point of view, it is easy to fall into a rational, objectivistic trap, where we look only at the aspects that can be measured objectively. As long as the supply chains work smoothly as a mechanical system, few will go behind the scenes to look at the more critical impacts of the global supply chains. New (1997), however, suggested that in our supply chain analyses, we should not only study economic efficiency but also the justice implications and that the purposes and theoretical approaches to the two types of studies will be different. With the recent focus on the concept of the triple bottom line (which can also be criticised, see, e.g. Montabon *et al.*, 2016), as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, we are reminded that economical optimisation is not the only factor that should be looked at in SCM. Recently, sustainability issues have gained considerable attention from researchers. The social aspects may deserve some more attention. For example, New (2015) pointed to so-called modern slavery as an outcome of efficient SCM that, on the one hand, develops CSR-based frameworks seeking to avoid such working conditions and, on the other hand, squeezes prices in the supply chain to an extent that makes enslavement a temptation for some.

Furthermore, the perspective of the *supply chain manager* is still under-researched. In 2002, Storey outlined the issues that the supply chain manager faces in practice. Here, I would like to highlight what he called "the emergent and socially constructed nature" (Storey, 2002, p. 15) of SCM processes. Despite a now more firm and commonly agreed upon understanding of the concept, it may still be in motion because of changes in technologies, geopolitics and climate. He further mentioned the potential problems of working in a supply

chain context, as well as the steady requirements for new capabilities to fulfil the tasks of, for example, the decisions on what type of relationships are suitable for internal and external stakeholders.

As an SCM researcher, I am quite proud of what the discipline has obtained in recent years. SCM is now a discipline that is listened to by both practitioners and politicians, most notably the US president Biden (https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/24/executive-order-on-americas-supply-chains/). This makes it more important than ever to look deeper into both the positive and less positive impacts that the recommendations emerging from research present to the world.

I realise that by writing this editorial, I reveal myself as an *activist editor* in claiming that all research is based on values, where values are standpoints on what is right and what is wrong, even if tacit. I realise that some will not like my position, but I do not see any alternative as SCM becomes ever more performative, blinding us to the consequences of the success of the discipline. Needless to say, research quality criteria still count in IJLM! We acknowledge that these are different for objectivist and subjectivist research.

Britta Gammelgaard

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Further reading

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