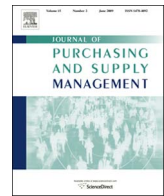




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## Breaking the mold: Research process innovations in purchasing and supply management

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### 1. Introduction

The field of purchasing and supply management (PSM) continues to gain in importance as part of the heightened focus on supply chain efficiency and effectiveness (Park et al., 2016), inter-organizational collaboration for competitive advantage (Soosay and Hyland, 2015) and to tackle society's 'wicked issues' (Williams, 2002: 104). Research stakeholders' expectations are however increasingly focused on research's direct and immediate relevance to, and impact on, practice. To address more practical, broader and often 'messier' problems, PSM scholars are increasingly involved in interdisciplinary projects using diverse theoretical frameworks, and methodologies and techniques developed in other fields. Scholars have argued for the need for interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research in PSM (Dubois and Araujo, 2007; Tazelaar, 2007; Sanders and Wagner, 2011) and others go further still in calling for transdisciplinary research (Ramadier, 2004; Wickson et al., 2006). Alongside these pressures for research with greater impact on policy and practice, the need for thought leadership (or blue sky research) is still recognized in some quarters, and value placed on academic/theoretical impact.

The Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management (JPSM) has

always had an inclusive approach, welcoming diversity in researchers' perspectives, methodologies and data collection and analysis techniques. Nevertheless, certain methodological approaches tend to predominate, in particular case-based qualitative and survey-based quantitative studies. This tendency does have advantages, notably specialisation – helping to gradually increase competence and standards. The benefits arising from increasing specialisation and consequent rises in quality are tempered by potential negative outcomes in the form of tightly constrained 'tramline thinking'. The risk is that, as a research community develops ever higher standards and stronger norms, scope of inquiry is reduced, and assumptions are not challenged. Rising pressures to publish and to produce quick practical solutions are likely to reinforce such thinking and reduce appetite for risk taking within the academic community. Clearly, more rigorous research is desirable. But research published in JPSM has to demonstrate significance and originality, as well as rigor (Knight and Tate, 2016). Well-established, rigorous modes of research are widely and effectively used to deliver original and significant findings. They are however not sufficient if PSM scholars are to deliver the challenging agendas called for in recent academic reviews (e.g. Spina et al., 2013; Van Weele and van Raaij, 2014) and by businesses, government and other key stakeholders. For

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the PSM research community as a whole, learning and innovation in the approach to research are essential.

The aim of this special issue is to promote and support such learning and innovation about novel research perspectives, methodologies and techniques (collectively termed ‘novel methods’ hereafter). Novel can mean new to (or very rarely used in) PSM research or it could concern non-traditional perspectives in business scholarship more broadly. Alternatively, it may refer to new combinations of established methods. In essence, scholars are urged to learn from others and import new ideas to PSM research (as illustrated in Fig. 1).

The initial intention was to publish a set of empirical papers reporting research studies that were in some way novel in terms of research process. The call for papers covered all aspects of the research process from philosophical stance to detailed techniques for data collection and analysis. The special issue has evolved to now include both articles with an empirical focus and contributions with a methodological focus. Together, these articles provide new perspectives on some methodologies that are well-established in PSM, import some methods established in other fields, and present some very recent methodological innovations. They cover the use of quantitative and qualitative data, in one case in combination, and primary and secondary data.

There are six research notes, published in JPSM’s Notes and Debates category (Knight and Tate, 2016), selected and developed to complement the empirical contributions. Experts discuss a particular methodology that can help develop research in PSM (see Table 1). They challenge current research practices and norms, and address some of the questions prospective adopters of these novel methods would face. The notes describe how these quantitative and qualitative methods might address new and interesting research questions in PSM. The notes also serve as a teaching resource for researchers, explaining why these methods are appropriate, and providing practical advice on their use.

## 2. The need for novel methods in PSM research

There is a multitude of reasons for bringing new research perspectives, methodologies and techniques to PSM research, but there are two overarching opportunities, underpinned by two key drivers. In terms of opportunities, first, novel methods can help us explore established topics in new ways. Second, a wider repertoire of methods helps us undertake research focusing on new themes relevant to addressing society’s profound challenges (Markard et al., 2012; Ferraro et al., 2015) and aligned with highly dynamic contexts. The first driver of change is *concern*. For engaged PSM researchers (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006), research process learning and innovation are motivated, at least in part, by a concern for relevance and impact within our increasingly challenging environment. A second important driver for many researchers is *curiosity*; interesting research is motivating in its own right. We seek to address interesting questions (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011) and produce interesting, original findings (Bartunek et al., 2006; Davis, 1971).

The case for broadening the repertoire of research perspectives, methodologies and techniques deployed in PSM research lies in understanding some of the critical changes we face and associated demands on research process. Consider the following examples, and fields from which PSM researchers might have much (more) to learn.

- *Shifting priorities* – PSM’s roots lie in maximising economic benefit and assumptions of rational decision-making. Perspectives which served us well previously may not do so in settings where social and environmental objectives genuinely compete with profit incentives. In this issue, Pinnington, Meehan & Scanlon<sup>1</sup> show the usefulness

of grounded theory for exploring contested views of value. *What might we learn from sociology?*

- *Blurring boundaries* – It is well recognized that PSM functional, disciplinary and professional boundaries are blurring as PSM experts work as advisors, or in cross-functional and/or interorganizational teams (e.g. Zheng et al., 2007; Kaufman and Wagner, 2017, forthcoming). More dynamic and integrated settings characterized by more negotiation and collaboration highlight the need for methodologies which offer a processual and longitudinal perspective. *What might we learn from organization studies?*
- *The data revolution* – There is an unprecedented rate of data generation (e.g. due to the emergence of global supply chains, geographically dispersed production or material acquisition sites). Increasingly, companies are focused on capitalizing on big data and predictive analytics. The value of data to the business is intrinsically linked to cost savings or increased efficiency through improvements in a process (e.g. procurement- Frost, 2014, Handfield, 2016), or system behavior. *What might we learn from data analytics? How can we use existing or new datasets and modelling methods to gain better understanding?*

Such developments are pushing researchers to adopt approaches which are more processual, longitudinal (Van Weele and van Raaij, 2014), multi-level (Choi and Wacker, 2011), and pluralistic (Quarshie et al., 2016). Researchers are under pressure to scale up, scale out and speed up their research both for these newer domains and themes, and in better established topics.

Most of the empirical contributions in this special issue use novel methods to investigate established PSM topics. They deploy novel methodologies and data collection and analysis techniques rather than novel research perspectives or philosophies. Some of the novel methods presented in relation to established topics are however also highly relevant to new themes, and some contributions allude to shifting perspectives and values among PSM researchers. They demonstrate a range of benefits, all of which can be related to the development of the PSM field or research policy, or both.

## 3. Empirical articles in this special issue

Table 2 provides an overview of the empirical articles included in this special issue. It is a diverse set in terms of the focal topics, as well as the novel methods deployed. The papers and linkages among the papers are discussed below.

Van der Valk, Sumo, Dul & Schroeder present one of the first applications of a new methodology, ‘necessary condition analysis’ – an approach which helps us formally test the everyday notion of whether a factor is necessary in achieving an outcome. Previous methods all assess sufficiency. This contribution highlights how new methods provide new ways of looking at old problems. Necessary condition analysis can provide new insights where prior research has provided conflicting or equivocal evidence.

Chen, Su & Ro also investigate an established area of buyer-seller relationships, but extend Van der Valk et al.’s dyadic view by examining gaps between what the supplier thinks the buyer’s perspective is and what buyer’s perspective really is. They collect data from both sides of the relational exchange, and use a scenario-based experiment with mirrored vignettes. Eckerd’s Notes and Debates contribution reviews the place of experimental methods in PSM research. She concludes by recommending that experiments are best used in combination, with several experiments and/or with other methods. Matopoulos, Bell and Aktas review modelling research and reach a similar conclusion. Experimental and modelling techniques have much to offer in developing PSM knowledge, but the strong emphasis on relevance to practice in this Journal means they are best combined with other techniques.

Several of the papers demonstrate ways in which researchers can

<sup>1</sup> All citations without year of publication refer to contributions in this special issue.

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