Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pursup

Editorial

Quality and integrity in purchasing and supply management research

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1. Introduction

The Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management (JPSM) continues to develop and prosper. It enjoys the support of a strong and diverse community of researchers, contributing as authors, reviewers and editors. Manuscripts are increasingly submitted by scholars who have not previously published in JPSM, and its geographic scope is diversifying. More manuscripts are being submitted that address novel topics or report on novel methodologies. The quality and number of submissions are rising, as is the 'value-add' of the review and revision process. This is good news, and we thank all those who help make this happen.

In our third year as Co-Editors-in-Chief, alongside the many strengths and positive developments, we note rising concerns about certain practices in academic publishing, which have a significant but not necessarily evident negative impact on the integrity and quality of some of the research in the field of purchasing and supply management (PSM) and related fields, notably supply chain management (SCM) and operations management (OM). In the article following this editorial, Erik Van Raaij sets out concerns about the inappropriate re-use of survey data, based on compelling evidence. The issues he raises are relevant across all forms of empirical inquiry, and are pertinent to anyone who has, will or may re-use qualitative or quantitative data. It is time for the PSM community to take a proactive approach to promote and assure integrity in publishing. The Notes & Debates article in this issue by Van Raaij has prompted us to write this Editorial and revisit policies and guidelines to better support integrity in publishing PSM research.

This editorial addresses quality and integrity in publishing PSM/OM/SCM research findings. It is motivated by serious and rising concerns about the prevalence of questionable and unacceptable research practices. The widening range of methodologies used and blended in PSM research, the increasingly stringent demands of publishing productivity and standards, and recognition that problems in one area (a sub-field, a journal, a research team) will spillover into other areas, lend an urgency to the issue. We note that standards are shifting; some practices once considered acceptable are now seen as unethical (or inappropriate). We are also mindful that rising pressures and incentives to publish might encourage questionable and unacceptable research practices. How can we raise standards without encouraging formulaic research which might stifle creativity and innovation (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013) or discourage interdisciplinary research? How can we discourage opportunistic, unethical behavior in journal publishing, spot it early when it does occur, and yet still preserve the highly-valued aspects of academic publishing which rely on trust and integrity?

The objectives of this editorial are to describe the observed quality and integrity challenges; to establish JPSM policy and requirements in relation to research integrity; to encourage open discussion of these issues within the broader Operations and Supply Chain Management (OSCM) community. The editors of the Journal of Supply Chain Management support us in this endeavor and our hope is that editors of other journals in the field will also make their policies and guidelines more explicit so that there are similar standards and approaches to integrity across the OSCM sub-disciplines.

2. Context

The rise in pressure on academic institutions to perform better in rankings and government-led evaluations has inevitably created rising pressure on academics to 'publish or perish' (Harzing, 2010). More recently, increasing attention is also being paid to citation metrics. These developments are beneficial; they encourage more and better research to better serve those who are funding it, and business and society at large. There is greater visibility of research performance for all stakeholders and a culture of continuous improvement. But there is also a downside which is becoming increasingly apparent, and which makes it ever more challenging to ensure rigor and integrity throughout the publication process.

In a review of the 2014 UK national research evaluation exercise, Lord Stern found that the evaluation process led to instances of gaming, with unrepresentative submissions to evaluation panels, and exceptional salary increases for some academics whose outputs are particularly strong against the metrics (Stern, 2016: 12–13). Changes to the metrics used to evaluate academic performance discourage riskier, 'blue sky' research, and encourage authors to focus on more 'popular' topics that are more likely to get cited (Sen et al., 2006). Academics now experience an employment setting with strong incentives to publish more articles in highly-ranked journals (McKinnon, 2017), driven by

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pursup.2018.06.001

Available online 19 July 2018
1478-4092/ © 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

tenure, promotion, bonuses, status considerations and the threat of sanctions if they fail to do so (e.g. transfer to teaching track with greater loads, reduced remuneration or conditions, job loss). These factors, combined with a university culture of high levels of autonomy, create a fertile breeding ground for research 'malpractice' at all stages in the research process, including the publication of findings.

The PSM profession is governed by ethical principles and practices (see for example, https://www.instituteforsupplymanagement.org and www.CIPS.org). As academics in PSM, we are also obligated to hold ourselves to a high standard and maintain professional integrity. There are some guidelines to help govern research behavior. For example, many universities have implemented stringent ethical approval processes for new research studies. However, there are few (if any) universities that have explicit ethical standards for disseminating findings. Currently we rely on publishers' ethical guidelines but these are not widely discussed and are necessarily generic. More work is needed to articulate standards and disseminate the appropriate ethical principles and guidelines throughout our community.

3. Malpractice in publishing research

The OSCM/PSM community should be concerned about research malpractice. In the context of publishing in academic journals, the term malpractice refers to both clear-cut instances of fabrication, falsification and plagiarism and to 'questionable practices' (Grant et al., 2018) through which the authors mislead the reader by implication, by inconsistency or by omission. The Van Raaij article provides evidence that there are authors engaging in practices which can be considered improper or negligent, or worse. Two cases were analyzed and reported in detail by Van Raaij, but there are several other sets of papers for which initial analyses indicate similar forms of malpractice.

Some colleagues may consider some of the 18 problematic practices outlined by Van Raaij to be acceptable. After all, 1) authors are not *required* to disclose when their data were collected, and old data can provide relevant, significant new insights; 2) standards are rising, so that what was considered acceptable 10 years ago might now be regarded as inappropriate or unethical; 3) rigid adherence to some standards is not pragmatic in terms of use of resources and could obstruct the development of valuable knowledge. Several of the practices identified by Van Raaij fall into the ethical gray zone of practices which are regarded by many as undesirable but also accepted by many. Our common goal should be to reduce this ethical gray zone, to identify and deal with instances of research based on unacceptable practices, and to promote good practice to minimize or eliminate the occurrence of questionable research practices.

Bad science by design, ignorance or carelessness can unknowingly be propagated by other academics. Apart from problems arising from untrustworthy colleagues and unreliable knowledge, there is also concern regarding the reputational impact on the field. In many ways, malpractice distorts and undermines the academy which relies to a significant extant on trust. The consequences of misconduct (flagrant, or subtle; intentional, or not) vary in severity.

4. Drivers and mechanisms for undermining quality and integrity

The possible drivers and mechanisms that undermine quality and integrity are considered next, focusing on the problematic practices identified by Van Raaij. There is no direct insight into authors' choices and actions in the two cases analyzed, and it is important to consider the wider system in which individual authors work. Anand et al.'s (2004) model of the processes by which corruption comes to be accepted and is perpetuated within organizations such as Enron provides a useful framework to analyze how problematic publishing practices can become prevalent in the academic system.

Anand et al. (2004) identified six rationalization tactics and three socialization processes, which are facilitated by euphemistic language and the phenomena of group attractiveness and social cocoon. Euphemistic language enables individuals engaging in malpractice "to describe their acts in ways that make them appear inoffensive" (Anand et al., 2004: 47, citing Ashforth and Anand, 2003). In their model, these tactics and processes are mutually reinforcing and lead to ongoing organizational corruption. The left-hand column of Table 1 lists Anand et al.'s rationalization tactics. The right-hand column shows possible examples from academic life, which we have derived from various sources, from the literature and from informal conversations in academic settings. Similar to Grant et al.'s (2018) analysis, this is a more reflective approach rather than a presentation of formal empirical data on academic malfeasance.

One area that needs specific attention is that of denial – denial of responsibility, or injury, or victim. Inappropriate use of data is not restricted to the high profile scandals, nor does it occur only in other disciplines. The prevalence of data reuse, the difficulties of ensuring data reuse is entirely legitimate, and the pressure to publish more articles in more highly ranked journals are likely to encourage denial. Current measures to promote integrity or counter malpractice may be ineffective or even counter-productive, since public declarations regarding the fact that these issues are deeply engrained and widespread can encourage covert use (Schwab and Starbuck, 2017: 133). Clear evidence on the problem is one way to reduce the prospect of denial.

Denial of a victim is also of concern. The immediate victims of the forms of malpractice linked to inappropriate data reuse are those reading the published work. They are misled about the quality of the research process, and the validity and value of the findings. A sub-set of the readers will go on to use the publication in their own work, either as managers seeking to adopt evidence-based management, or as researchers. The value and validity of the work of these researchers will in turn be undermined, as they deploy the previous findings in their research design and/or in interpreting their results. As Van Raaij highlights, this would be especially problematic in meta-analyses, a form of research we can expect to see more of in our field as it matures (Foerstl et al., 2016). It is incumbent on all those involved in the process to be vigilant.

Anand et al.'s (2004) three socialization processes (co-optation, incrementalism and compromise) also resonate with malpractice in academic publishing, especially in considering how early career academics might experience working in a highly productive, high pressure research group.

- In *co-optation* (p.44): "rewards are used to induce attitude change towards unethical behaviors." The rewards, a publication or even a promotion, may induce researchers to resolve any ambiguity by better suiting their self-interest.
- With *incrementalism* (p.45), newcomers are induced to perform some relatively minor form of malpractice, which they rationalize in some way. Once a new 'norm' is developed, they are subsequently induced to participate in some more serious form of malpractice.
- *Compromise* (p.45) implies that individuals 'back into' corruption through attempts (often in good faith) to resolve pressing dilemmas, role conflicts, and other intractable problems.

The significant rewards for meeting, and the potentially traumatic consequences of failure to meet, publication targets, and the competing demands of teaching, service and research, are clearly aligned with co-optation and compromise. Van Raaij's hierarchy of problematic practices also shows a relationship between incrementalism and the academic setting. A junior academic well-versed in research methods is unlikely to move directly to the practices involving false claims and lies. However, these practices might seem necessary to a researcher who is under severe pressure to publish and who has previously adopted the 'inconsistency' practices. Furthermore, inconsistencies across publications may be the result of the socialization process of compromise, when a 'better' model, or 'better' story is developed later, and pressure

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