A THEORY-BASED EXAMINATION OF ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER CO-AUTHORSHIP IN TOP SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT JOURNALS OVER A TEN YEAR SPAN

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ABSTRACT

We isolated co-authorship frequency in 12 top-ranked supply chain management (SCM) academic journals to assess patterns across a ten year horizon. We found that dual authorship tapered off over time, consistent with sensemaking theory which explains that academics and practitioners collaborate more in the early stages of the emergence of the SCM phenomenon. A more fine-grain categorization of article topics might reveal subtle differences between those who are involved in co-authored published research with practitioners at different points of time.

Keywords: supply chain, academic practitioner divide, sensemaking

INTRODUCTION

Supply chain management (SCM) has emerged as an independent discipline over the last few decades. How did SCM become an independent concept and discipline? We suggest that one component of this was through a process of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking theory posits that we engage novel aspects of our environment by assimilating the new and inconsistent information into a new concept. For example, new information in organizations may have sparked a question about the usefulness of traditional systems of purchasing and distributing goods and services, leading to a new conceptualization of the phenomenon, in this case, the inception of a process called SCM.

Sensemaking efforts are more productive with multiple points of view. In the SCM arena, as with other business-oriented situations, two parties, academe and practitioners, are both eager to understand what’s going on. Together, these two exchange ideas, new data, and potential new understandings of cause and effect. This sensemaking process results in a new concept, SCM. Academics participate in this dialogue primarily to gain insight from “on the ground” observations. Academics will use this sensemaking opportunity to develop new theoretical models of the supply function. These insights may be disseminated in academic journals. The articles may be co-authored with both an academic partner and a practitioner partner, because they have together worked to yield the insights presented in the paper. Over time, however, the SCM concept is solidified, and the sensemaking process concludes. Since the field has accepted these interpretations published in the paper, the concept and definition of SCM has begun to be accepted universally. Academics next pursue research that tests and extends their new theories,
but this component of the academic investigation is less likely to need practitioner input. So, we expect to see less co-authorship over time as the sensemaking leads to a coherent definition of the new phenomenon, SCM. We next elaborate in more detail the underlying rationales for our expected result. We then provide some preliminary evidence to support the predicted trend.

THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Sensemaking Theory

Various parties engage in rich conversations and interactions when a new phenomenon appears to be emerging (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This process is called sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is an iterative process between parties inundated with new information to contribute their different points of view to come to the best, and most accepted, definition of a new concept.

Sensemaking can be applied to new concepts appearing on management academics’ horizon. New concepts traditionally come from field data which doesn’t fit with historical interpretations of the environment, putting practitioners on the front lines of a waterfall of new information. Thus, sensemaking starts with practitioners (e.g., Gibson et al., 2005), who are the first to notice a change. Consequently, it is here that features of an integrated supply process begin to emerge. Academics soon join the practitioners in wrestling with this changed environment. The partnering of academics and practitioners in this evolution is critical for adding a wide range of perspectives as well as the grist required to be successful in the sensemaking process. In a rough conceptualization, practitioners provide the raw information, while academics draw on existing theories and models to interpret this information. Academics join practitioners to model networks and causal relationships, attaching theoretical explanations for the phenomenon.

Sensemaking and SCM

We now turn to a specific instance of sensemaking in business: SCM. The SCM concept is a relatively new domain in our understanding and modeling of business processes. During this timeframe, the earlier time is most likely spent conceptualizing SCM via sensemaking, starting with practitioner observations that the environment is changing with more complexity and dynamism. For example, the purchasing manager begins to notice that more input components are available in foreign markets. The globalization of sourcing may first have been approached on an ad hoc individual basis, but eventually, as the globalization trend expanded, the issue becomes salient as a fundamental shift in the purchasing domain, requiring new skill sets. Academics, as discussed earlier, are similarly engaged in sensemaking with the practitioner, participating in creating a robust conceptualization of SCM. The academics’ interest in this process is primarily to contribute to theory. The cooperative projects during sensemaking lead to publications that are authored jointly by academics and practitioners.

The latter timeframe, once sensemaking has wound down, is spent refining, testing, and implementing this reconceptualization. At this point, the two parties part ways. The practitioner puts organizational responses to the SCM concept into practice in terms of new vocabulary, job descriptions, educational opportunities and organizational systems. Further, the practitioner may need to address the issues raised by SCM through changing skill sets within the company. The company may need deep skills including familiarity with other geographic regions,
understanding critical differences in cultural and social mores, needing more linguistic capabilities, and more sophisticated computerized systems to quickly and efficiently process the diverse foreign choices. For the academic, the latter timeframe will also involve changes to the organization, with journals dedicated to SCM, specific SCM departments and faculty, and offering degrees in SCM. The individual academic, however, focuses more on testing the theories that were proposed earlier with respect to SCM (Hughes et al., 2009). The motivation for the academic is to engage in theory testing projects for publication. Theory testing involves sophisticated research methodologies that may not require practitioner input beyond data questions. Thus, without the need for sensemaking any longer, the academic may not include the practitioner in the technically structured theory testing projects published in prestigious journals.

Proposal Development

Academic publications are a key outlet for universities to stimulate thought, encourage dialogue and share research insights. These published articles are screened by objective editors and reviewers with similar standards. To generate publishable theory building academic articles, however, most successful academics must engage in deep dialogue and complex causal questioning about interpretations with practitioners—i.e., sensemaking. The practitioner, via sensemaking, becomes a full collaborator with co-authorship status. Thus, articles co-authored by academics and practitioners are conservative but tangible evidence of sensemaking collaboration (Wagner, 2009). The academic, but not the practitioner, move on to rigorous theory testing projects resulting in academic publications. Therefore, our investigation should reveal a pattern of high collaboration between the two worlds early in SCM development and less collaboration once SCM is defined. This pattern would document a trend of declining frequency of co-authorship over time in academic journals.

Proposition 1: Academics and practitioners are more likely to partner in exploring SCM issues earlier in the development of the concept than later in the development of the concept.

METHODOLOGY

To examine our proposition, we needed to identify all academic-practitioner co-authorship articles in a set of journals across a ten year span. We used a three step process to identify SCM academic journals. First, we used the most inclusive and established definition of SCM developed by the primary industry voice of the SCM field, the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals (CSCMP). A year-long effort by both the academic and practice communities (Council of Logistics Management, 2003) produced the following SCM definition:

Supply chain management encompasses the planning and management of all activities involved in sourcing and procurement, conversion, and all logistics management activities. Importantly, it also includes coordination and collaboration with channel partners, which can be suppliers, intermediaries, third party service providers, and customers. In essence, supply chain management integrates supply and demand management within and across companies (www.cscmp.org).

Second, we were interested in journals whose primary focus is SCM. Using the CSCMP definition, we restricted our journal selection to those focused on any of the key words or phrases
highlighted in the first sentence of the definition: *sourcing and procurement, conversion, logistics management*. Journals in the second part of the definition (not shown), such as marketing, finance, information technology, fall outside of the primary scope of SCM and thus are not considered in our analysis.


We identified each journal article from 2001 to 2010 resulting in a total of 4,036 articles. Articles that were not subject to the blind review process (i.e., editorial essays, etc.) were omitted because they are usually commentary pieces rather than cutting-edge research. For each author of each paper, we recorded the author’s employment affiliation as academic or practitioner. We coded an author as academic when affiliated with an institution of higher education. Non-academic authors were classified as practitioners. Academic-practitioner co-authorship is the percent of academic-practitioner co-authored papers out of the total number of articles published for each year. For instance, given 200 academic-practitioner co-authored papers in year X in all 12 journals, out of a total of 2000 papers published in that year, the metric for year X would be 200/2000, or 10%.

**RESULTS**

Figure 1 represents the percentage of academic-practitioner co-authored papers over ten years. A rough examination of the data presents a picture of a declining slope. Specifically, the percentage of co-authored papers in all ten journals decreases over time, supporting Proposition 1.
CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS


We believe that fundamentally SCM is an interdisciplinary applied science requiring the contribution of both academics and practitioners. Therefore academics cannot make any headway to generate and disseminate new knowledge without substantive partnering with practitioners. In light of this, our findings are concerning because the data demonstrate less engagement with practitioners as time goes on and this isolation may weaken the relevance of their research.

Our research provides tentative support for the application of sensemaking theory to help explain why academe has not been more engaged with practitioners recently. This is only a preliminary glance at some data and substantial work needs to be done to understand the underpinning of trend. The more we investigate the impact of these partnerships, the more we can understand the effects of pressures for reduced practitioner engagement with academics as the SCM concept coalesces.

REFERENCES


