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Editorial

What Makes for a Contribution? Elaborating on Our Publication Expectations at *JBL*

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This editorial elaborates on the expectations for research destined for publication in the *Journal of Business Logistics* (*JBL*). We explore the dimensions of topical coverage, theory, methods, and research implications. The purpose of expounding these expectations is twofold: (1) to inform prospective authors on how to best position their work for submission, and (2) to initiate our reviewers and associate editors (AEs) of the expectations for the evaluation of research. By better illuminating our expectations, authors will have a better experience with the journal, associated with higher levels of success. Also, reviewers and AEs will be better prepared to express their opinions in a constructive fashion, helping to nurture more impactful papers. The editorial concludes by introducing the articles appearing in the current issue of the journal.

Keywords: research questions; theory; methods; research implications; impact

INTRODUCTION

Four years into our five-year term as *JBL* editors, we find ourselves on the receiving end of a wide assortment of questions: *What topics are appealing to the journal? What is the journal's acceptance rate? What is the manuscript processing time at the journal? What theory bases and methods are acceptable for the journal?* These are valid questions, and we are happy to oblige… [See our editorials and special topic forum (STF) calls for papers for topics that we are trying to attract to the journal; our acceptance rate is six percent; our turnaround time on first submissions averages 62 days; and we are open to diverse theory bases and methods to inform and vet research]. Yet, among the more pressing questions to answer—and one that calls for greater explanation—is the following*: What makes for a contribution at JBL?* This question gets at the heart of our reason for being. In essence, what are the collective expectations of the journal's reviewers, associate editors, editors, and the audience, at large, toward what it takes to warrant publication in the journal?

An appropriate place to start addressing this question is by revisiting the journal's stated purpose: "The mission of *JBL* is to be your journal of choice for original, high-quality, thought-provoking supply chain research that will make a valuable contribution to supply chain theory and practice. We encourage you to submit your best research that is: (1) theoretically grounded, (2) methodologically rigorous, (3) managerially relevant, and (4) written in a clear, concise, and compelling style." The mission speaks to the different dimensions in which a paper should merit publication consideration: topic, theory, method, and implications. What are the standards, then, by which a paper should be judged as sufficient across these dimensions? Must every paper approach a novel topic? Should it make a contribution to theory? Must it demonstrate state-of-the-art methods? Should it inform and/or change the way managers view their decisions and actions? Allow us to address each of these dimensions in turn.

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TOPICS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What fits under the umbrella of acceptable topics for consideration at JBL?

The journal's name implies that our focal business activity is logistics. In fact, we wish to remain among the most prominent journals worldwide in the field of logistics. We are keen to receive manuscripts that explore any topic of managerial interest across the scope of logistics activity. The reference to "managerial interest" is key here, as it suggests that matters of particular interest to engineers, lawyers, human resources professionals, medical practitioners, or any expertise outside the germane perimeters of logistics professionals are unlikely to be regarded as appropriate for *JBL*. Avid readers of *JBL* will recognize our focus on activity areas such as inventory, transportation, logistics customer service, reverse logistics, order processing, logistics outsourcing, information management, logistics innovation, and international commerce. Increasingly, we look to papers that address recent advents in logistics, like last-mile logistics (Esper et al. 2003; Boyer et al. 2009; Goldsby and Zinn 2016), crowdsourced logistics (Carbone et al. 2017; Castillo et al. 2018), closing the talent gap (Wieland et al., 2016; Zinn et al. 2018), humanitarian logistics (Fawcett and Waller 2015; Richardson et al. 2016), sustainability in logistics operations (Eroglu et al. 2016; Sanders et al. 2019), and technology overtures (Adams et al. 2014; Bell et al. 2014; Miller et al. 2017).

Professor Donald Bowersox espoused some 25 years ago that our field was experiencing a "Logistical Renaissance"—noting that more change had occurred in the previous decade (1985–1995) than ever before (Global Logistics Research Team at

Michigan State University, 1995). We can only ponder the response that Dr. Bowersox would have to our current circumstance—with logistics growing in strategic importance in business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) commerce. Logistics performance through the provision of seemingly unlimited assortments (even, customization of products/services), with ever-shortening—yet more reliable—lead times, distinguishes business winners from the rest of the crowd. Logistics performance is further challenged by swelling global uncertainty with trade pacts unraveling and trade wars breaking out. Further, logistics performance today faces scrutiny for its impacts on the physical environment and society at large. Clearly, our field is in need of answers that rigorous, valid research can illuminate for today's decision makers.

Despite our focus on logistics, the journal does sport a subtitle: "The Journal of Strategic Supply Chain Research." While our focus remains logistics, we are proud to be home to matters that examine the broader domain of supply chain management, incorporating functions central to multiorganizational business issues. We routinely publish examinations of cross-functional integration, supply chain collaboration, buyer–supplier relationships, operational excellence, and supply chain sustainability, among other topics. We find ourselves in the enviable position of a field with sufficient maturity and "mountains of knowledge" (per Mentzer and Kahn, 1995) that we can explore issues more deeply than ever before. Rather than limiting our analyses to "'A' leads to 'B'" assertions, we can look to factors and contexts like "C" and "D" that can alter or meaningfully influence an accepted version of reality. (We will underscore our enthusiasm for middle-range theory that can help to incorporate context in a subsequent section). The examination of boundary conditions on heretofore closely held explanations can prove particularly interesting (Goldsby and Autry 2011). In fact, a recurring cause for desk rejections at *JBL* is the presentation of research seeking to re-confirm extant common knowledge. Domains with mountains of knowledge, though, may serve as targets for meta-analysis, as we have seen with supply chain integration (Leuschner et al. 2014; Leuschner et al. 2013; Mackelprang et al. 2014), interorganizational trust (Wilding et al., 2012), environmental sustainability (Golicic and Smith 2013and logistics outsourcing (Leuschner et al. 2014).

As noted, the journal's special topic forums (STFs) offer insight as to topics calling for exploration—even *after* the STF closes. Titles of current and recent STFs include the following:

- The Physical Internet and the Internet of Things as a Paradigm Shift
- Blockchain: Applications and Strategies for Supply Chain Research and Practice
- Managing Extended Supply Chains
- Supply Chain Management for the Base of Pyramid
- Sustainable SCM and Supply Chain Performance
- Participating in the Wider Debate on Resilience
- Talent Management in SCM
- Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Logistics Employment
- The Digital Supply Chain: Challenges, Issues, Opportunities

These topics are not intended to be exhaustive by any means, but they do help to illustrate the cutting-edge topics on the minds of today's business professional. Again, our brethren in industry are in need of illumination—perhaps like never before. Let's strive to shed light on these issues and their opportunities! Let's provide them an informed "look" before they must "leap."

THEORY

What are our expectations for theory application?

Ah, theory! This is a common area of concern among our submitting authors and reviewers. Increasingly, our branch of business scholarship is embracing theory to position our research and explain findings, yet we are often criticized for not bringing forward theories of our own despite a positivist, empirical tradition (Carter 2011; Carter et al 2015; Stank et al. 2017). *So, what does JBL expect in the way of theory?*

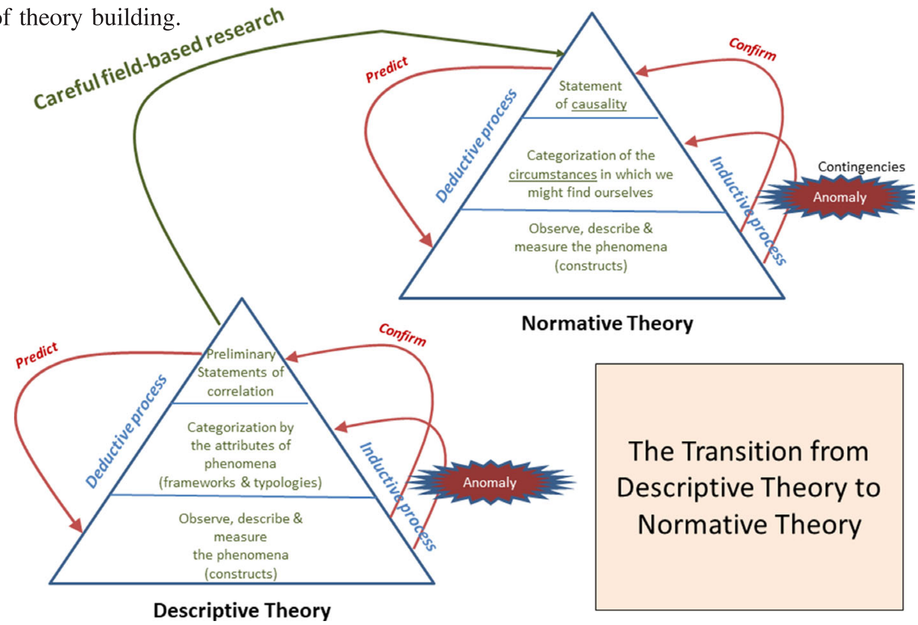
Let us be clear about this: *Not every paper appearing in the journal can advance theory—nor are we looking for that.* Some papers excel in demonstrating a new method or illustrating a key management insight. Unfortunately, too often we see the reviewer reaction to a paper along the lines of: "I do not like the theory you use"—without a clear suggestion of a better explanation for the premise under study or, even, the appropriateness of a theory-based explanation to a given thesis.

When theory *is* central to the paper's thesis, it should be clear as to the current state of understanding on the phenomenon under study. What do we hold dear and what remains unknown? We often direct people to a paper by Carlile and Christensen (2005) that describes two distinct cycles of theory building and associated applications of theory: descriptive theory and normative theory. Figure 1 below illustrates the phases of each theory cycle as well as the transition occurring from descriptive to normative theory. In both cycles, we see the sequence of knowledge accumulation from observation to schema to correlation (in the descriptive phase) and causality (in the normative phase). Carlile and Christensen also point to the power of anomalies to challenge our status quo understanding of phenomena in each cycle. Many topics we see in logistics and supply chain are poised for examination of anomalies. Thus, researchers should be clear as to where a given paper exists in the cycles of theory. In essence, what is required to advance our understanding? Further, are we seeking to generate theory, test theory, or to elaborate theory? The purpose that a theory lends to the research will help to define the nature of the contribution potential as well as the *means* that should be undertaken to approach the contribution potential.

Fawcett and Waller (2011) iterate rich opportunities for contributions of theory to explain supply chain phenomena:

- Demonstrate how a new variable changes our understanding of the focal phenomena.
- Look for paradoxical inconsistencies in reported findings about a common phenomenon.
- Challenge the appropriateness of our methodological tools (or shift the inductive/deductive/inductive emphasis).
- Examine inflection points in dynamic phenomena.
- Employ different theoretical lenses.

Figure 1: The cycles of theory building.



Source: Carlile and Christensen (2005).

Theory need not provide explanations of "typical influences" on "average effects"—which is the domain of the so-called grand theories (GTs) (e.g., Transaction Cost, Resource-Based View, Information Processing Theory). Frequently, we see (and welcome) the application of middle-range theory (MRT), per Craighead et al. (2016), Stank et al. (2017), and Pellathy et al. (2018). MRT, popularized in the social sciences by Merton (1968), incorporates specificity to a subset of phenomena operating within a given domain. In essence, we ask: What might work for whom under what conditions? In the language of Carlile and Christensen (2005), research informed with MRT helps to address anomalies we might encounter, approaching causality under distinct circumstances.

Further, we see great potential for practice-level theory (PLT) and reduced reliance on grand theory for our examinations. Garver (2019) offers an excellent comparison of these three different levels of theorizing in Figure 2. He asserts that practitioners need (and receive) more concrete and specific level of theory development and testing than those afforded by GTs and MRTs. PLT "takes the specificity of both causal relationships and context to a more concrete level with the intent to guide SCM/L practitioners in decision making" (p. 31). The paper goes on to illustrate the methodological considerations associated with theorizing at the concrete level of the practitioner. On that note, we proceed to a discussion of methods.

METHODS

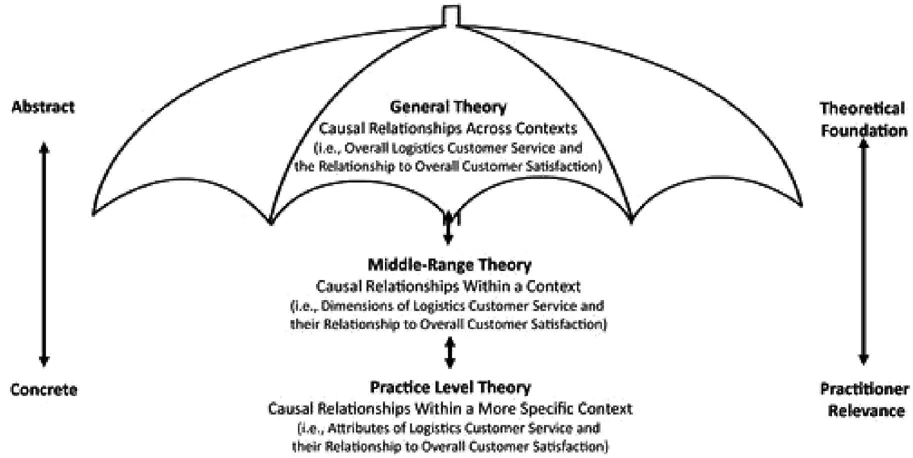
What methods are acceptable and what is expected of those methods?

In the area of methods, we have been quite clear about our expectation for the application of state-of-the-art methods with the advent of the methods review in the journal. (For a complete exposition of the logic, rationale, and procedure of the methods review, please see Goldsby and Zinn 2018). Yet, we must reiterate that we are open to diverse methods at *JBL*. The key is to ensure that the method(s) applied is/are appropriate for the research question at hand. In light of the incredibly broad set of problems that we tackle in Logistics and Supply Chain Management, it can be argued that our assortment of applicable methods is wider than any other business discipline. Regardless of the method chosen, however, we expect the method(s) to be applied appropriately, following the contemporary standards for sound execution. We will rarely serve as the source of new methods, but we expect to see demonstrations of the most contemporary approaches to valid assessment—in keeping with our positivist traditions.

Our invited thought leadership articles are good sources of what to expect when submitting and reviewing papers on different methods. These include works by Kelton (2016) on simulation; Goldsby et al. (2013) on moderation analysis; Calantone et al. (2017) on moderated mediation analysis; Griffis, Bell and Closs (2012) on metaheuristics; Goldsby and Autry (2011) on replication and meta-analysis; Knemeyer and Naylor (2011) on behavioral experiments; Schoenherr et al. (2015) on survey data analysis; Bendoly (2016) on data visualization; and a collection of authors on secondary and corporate data sources (e.g., Rabinovich and Cheon 2011; Cantor 2016; Cotteleer and Wan 2016). A go-to paper for the execution and review of conceptual, qualitative, and survey research continues to be the "Trail Guide" article by Fawcett et al. (2014), as we routinely issue this paper to prospective authors and recipients of desk rejection decisions.

Particular attention is directed to survey methods as they face heightened levels of scrutiny today. This is especially poignant at *JBL* since we have a long heritage of informing our research and testing our hypotheses via survey data (Goldsby and Zinn

Figure 2: Comparing General Theory, Middle-Range Theory, and Practice-Level Theory.



Source: Garver (2019).

2018). Suffice it to say, we remain open to surveys. That said, we seek demonstrations of sample qualification and justification, thorough assessments of nonresponse bias, common methods variance, and endogeneity. Further, some research problems likely call for multiple informants or inputs on a focal phenomenon when it is complex, involving different business functions, parties (e.g., buyer/supplier), or perspectives. Increasingly, surveys are part of a multimethod analysis, serving as one part of a larger investigation or as a method of triangulation. Succinctly, we remain open to surveys, but the standards for their acceptable use are rising across multiple dimensions.

Increasingly, we are witnessing more nonpositivistic research approaches and qualitative methods. This has proven a particular challenge for our reviewers to assess validity, with competing schools of thought as to the standards for qualitative inquiry. (Be on the lookout for an invited thought leadership article at *JBL* that addresses this concern). For the time being, we can look to the guidance of Barratt et al. (2011), Gammelgaard and Flint (2012), da Mota Pedrosa et al. (2012), Narasimhan (2014), and a host of other works in our peer publications for guidance. This general line of advice applies for an array of methods (e.g., Bachrach and Bendoly (2011), Eckerd and Bendoly (2011) and Rungtusanatham et al. (2011) on behavioral experiments).

Our takeaway in terms of methods: regardless of the method (s) chosen, make sure that you demonstrate the state of the art in application. While researchers in other fields may not appreciate the research problem or the theories employed in your research, they should recognize that the work was executed in accordance with modern standards of validity and rigor toward what the paper seeks to achieve. These are our expectations for methods.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

How impactful must the implications be to fellow researchers and practitioners?

The final dimension of contribution should arguably be the first: the implications of the research. A piece of research should never be an end in its own right. Rather, the research should inform and motivate subsequent investigations and the practice of business. We expect that research should add to the mountain of knowledge, as previously indicated, yet the expedition up that mountain should be a worthwhile one for fellow researchers—and those in industry. Previous editorials (Goldsby and Zinn 2016; Zinn and Goldsby 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; Goldsby et al. 2019) iterate our expectations in this realm.

We have a significant opportunity and substantial responsibility to inform not only peer academics, but those charged with leading and managing today's supply chains—supply chains that are undergoing monumental change, yes, but also facing intense scrutiny and duress. The sense of duty to inform practice through collaboration with industry in uncovering critical problems and then bringing rigorous thought and analysis to these problems is in our DNA. The heritage of the journal, itself, reflects these values. *JBL* is owned and managed by CSCMP, the world's foremost professional organization for supply chain management. The vast majority of the organization's membership consists of industry practitioners, not academics. Succinctly, we have an obligation to provide news that the practitioner can use, illuminating the benefits and risks associated with actions toward problems they face now and into the future.

So, what is the standard, then, for meaningful contribution through implications? First of all, the aspects of academic and managerial importance are not mutually exclusive, as pointed out by Craighead et al. (2019) in our lead article to this issue. They encourage us to AIM high in our pursuits to achieve *both* rigor and relevance. Specifically, Craighead et al. (2019) encourage our research to be actionable (informing change), insightful (bringing forth new knowledge), and measurable (quantitatively assessed). We agree that research can simultaneously advance the causes of academic scholarship (i.e., theory) and practice. From time to time, there will be papers focused on theory, academic literature, and methods that will find interest only among fellow researchers. These works should be instrumental toward conducting more informed, valid, and influential work subsequently. The balance of papers, then, must address managerial implications substantively in order to merit publication potential.

One recently accepted manuscript exhibited enhanced research implications when the authors reached out to industry experts to collect their input on the research findings. It helped to enrich the paper by enlightening the reader to the managerial import of the research and better informing future research. In essence, we are describing consistent and recurrent involvement with practitioners throughout the cycle of research: from problem identification to the formulation and execution of the research, and finally in the reporting of demonstrated results in the research.[1] In fact, paper submissions that look to only garner interest among fellow academics represent among the most common reasons for desk projection at *JBL*. While the standard is not precise or easily quantified, readers should be assured that a piece of research relates to the experiences of today's practitioner and has significant potential to influence their decisions and actions. Research that only has appeal to other researchers (academic exercises) will not find a warm reception at the *JBL* editorial desk and will be noted as deficient if it reaches reviewers.

CLOSING

To close, let us return to the original question: *What makes for a contribution?* When we posed this question to our editorial review board and associate editors, there was general agreement that a given paper need not excel across *all four* dimensions of topic, theory, method, and managerial implications in order to merit "contribution." However, it was asserted that there are expectations across *each* dimension that warrant "necessary, but not sufficient" qualifications. We agree with these assertions while also believing that some papers are intended to excel in one or more areas. For instance, a nascent topic for which the world may have little experience thus far (e.g., blockchain, crowdsourcing, physical Internet) may still offer meaningful contribution even if it lacks theory elaboration or methodological confirmation akin to a contemporary topic with firmer foundations and routine observation in practice. Authors of cutting-edge research must assume the responsibility of elucidating the contribution clearly while owning up to the limitations in light of lacking foundation. Reviewers, then, must be willing to entertain that contribution can be achieved in this manner—in essence providing the foundation for future investigations.

Therefore, the guidance offered in this editorial is intended to not only inform prospective authors and submissions to the journal, but also to open the minds of our reviewers and associate editors in terms of what we expect of work approaching publication consideration at *JBL*. The journal's acceptance rate is about six percent. We would like for it to be higher! It is our hope that this editorial helps to prepare stronger submissions against these expectations as well as to help shape the expectations of our own reviewer and associate editor bases. We echo the sentiments of Carter and Ellram (2010) who asked their reviewers to be gardeners as well as gatekeepers—to not only be evaluative of the presented work but to be developmental toward it, even nurturing. The best reviews are those that employ the lead end of the pencil more than the eraser. Writers of constructive reviews should take pride in their role in the creative process with the authors. To both sets of constituents (authors and reviewers), we extend our long-standing commitment to avail ourselves to your questions and concerns. If in doubt, ask an editor.

As indicated at the outset, this advice comes four years into our five-year term as editors. On that note, we are pleased to introduce the next editor team to the journal: Professors Beth Davis-Sramek and Glenn Richey of Auburn University will assume the co-editor roles on October 1, 2020. Congratulations to Beth and Glenn upon accepting this honor and the responsibilities that come with it! Beth and Glenn have been active, extensive contributors to the journal for many years, and we are pleased to work with them in the coming year to ensure that the journal enjoys a smooth transition. In the meantime, we will dedicate a future editorial to the next co-editors so that they can express their own expectations for the journal moving forward.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CURRENT ISSUE

In this issue, we open with a thought leadership piece by Craighead, Ketchen, and Darby (2019) referenced earlier. The framework and argumentation of the article align with the premise of this editorial—the pursuit of research that seeks to achieve impact in terms of theory and practice. The authors direct us to AIM higher through research that is actionable, insightful, and measurable while offering guidance on the means for conducting impactful research.

Next, Nguyen et al. (2019) help us to understand what consumers are seeking in their delivery options for online purchases. The authors employ mental accounting theory to inform an analysis of both price and nonprice factors. Cluster analysis illuminates distinct segments among shoppers. This analysis shows that despite the pursuit of convenience and a host of other factors, shoppers are still very price sensitive to the provisioning of the goods they purchase online. This article helps to shed light on what online retailers should offer their customers and features future research opportunities for academics.

Muir at al. (2019) extend the conversation of shopper experience through their examination of reverse logistics for consumer returns. Specifically, they offer a comparison of cross-channel and same-channel returns options through a discrete-event simulation based on the returns policies and operations of a U.S. retailer. A unique feature of the analysis is the incorporation of nonstationarity in demand that allows for seasonality to factor into the longitudinal analysis of inventory effectiveness. The research carries implications for designing logistics systems that simultaneously meet the expectations of shoppers and the business's needs for profitability.

We close out the issue by remaining in the retail world, but this time examining how to make radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology more effective in the field. Rao et al. (2019) bring forward a data science approach to address this problem. Leveraging data collected in laboratory and in field settings, the article exhibits data mining methods that help to predict RFID tag characteristics that are likely to succeed in the field. The research conducted in the apparel retail industry helps to address a specific real-world problem facing a promising technology

[1]Input from industry in the execution the research is contingent on the nature of the research. Industry is nurturing world-class competence in areas such as data science and analytics, for instance.

while demonstrating the merits of applying machine learning techniques to worthwhile research problems in logistics and supply chain management.

Enjoy the issue!

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