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## Humanizing Research on Working Conditions in Supply Chains

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# HUMANIZING RESEARCH ON WORKING CONDITIONS IN SUPPLY CHAINS: BUILDING A PATH TO DECENT WORK

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Research on managing working conditions in the supply chain is currently conducted under the umbrella of “social” sustainability. In this introduction to the 2021 Emerging Discourse Incubator, “Managing Working Conditions in Supply Chains: Towards Decent Work,” we argue that the trajectory of this research may be insufficient for addressing decent work. This is due to four characteristics of the extant literature—buyer-centrism, product-centrism, techno-centrism, and social-centrism. As an alternative, we offer ways to ‘humanize’ research on working conditions in supply chains across four dimensions: *actors, issues, contexts, and methods*. Through humanization, supply chain research has the potential to make a significant scholarly impact as well as to contribute to the realization of decent work in supply chains. We use our proposed path forward as a lens to elaborate on the core contributions of the four invited papers in the Emerging Discourse Incubator.

*Keywords:* sustainability; social responsibility; diversity issues

## INTRODUCTION

Hardly a day goes by without a new report about vulnerable workers being exploited somewhere in the world while making the clothes we wear, producing the coffee we drink, or extracting the gold and other precious metals we use. The exploitation of workers does not only occur in weakly regulated environments, however. The COVID-19 virus has highlighted just how precarious and unsafe the working conditions of some workers are in developed countries too, whether in meat processing plants, agriculture, or logistic centers.

These workers are all embedded in supply chains of one kind or another—and we contend that those supply chains should be managed to ensure that such workers are afforded decent work. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), decent work

refers to “opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.” These are regarded as basic labor rights. Decent work for all is enshrined in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals as SDG 8, “Decent Work and Economic Growth” where the goal is to achieve full and productive employment, and decent work, for all women and men, by 2030.

To date, however, there has been relatively little research on how to achieve decent work in the supply chain management literature, and it is for this reason that the 2021 Emerging Discourse Incubator (EDI) is

focused on the topic of “Managing Working Conditions in Supply Chains: Towards Decent Work.” What research there has been on the topic has mainly been conducted under the umbrella of social sustainability (e.g., Bals & Tate, 2018; Huq, Chowdhury, & Klassen, 2016; Nakamba, Chan, & Sharmina, 2017; Soundararajan & Brammer, 2018; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). This is based on the growing understanding that working conditions in supply chains—or social sustainability—represent a major reputational threat, but that such social aspects are considerably more difficult to manage than the environmental aspects of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) (Villena, Wilhelm, & Xiao, forthcoming). Environmental dimensions can often be monitored and measured (e.g., the amount of environmental pollution), while working conditions and human rights issues are more complex to integrate effectively into formal systems of monitoring and control (e.g., Klassen & Vereecke, 2012). This might explain why SCM research has mainly focused on the environmental dimension of sustainability, while research on social sustainability is sparse by comparison (e.g., Nakamba, Chan, & Sharmina, 2017).

Working conditions are more than an additional sustainability metric that needs to be managed, however. Continuing on the current trajectory of SSCM research bears the risk of a “dehumanized” perspective on supply chains and their actors that, in our view, will likely be insufficient to progress toward genuinely decent work. In particular, we identify four characteristics of the current SSCM literature that might turn out to be counterproductive when attempting to study the “social” dimension of sustainability, namely: buyer-centrism, product-centrism, techno-centrism, and social-centrism. We explore these different characteristics before turning to what we believe would be a more effective approach to addressing decent work in SCM research. We call this a “humanizing” research agenda because, in contrast to much of the current SSCM literature, it puts the humanity of workers—their status as human beings in need of decent work—at the heart of future research efforts in the field. To inspire new directions in research on working conditions in supply chains in this EDI, we set out what this would look like in terms of the actors, issues, contexts, and methods that would need to be humanized and elaborate on how we can effectively move from where we are now to where we would need to be to achieve a more humanized research agenda for decent work in SCM. We also introduce the four invited papers that appear in this issue to launch the EDI and explain how each of them addresses one or more of these four characteristics of our humanized research agenda.

## **SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT APPROACH: ENOUGH FOR TACKLING DECENT WORK?**

Sustainable supply chain management has developed into a mainstream area of research. In their seminal essay, Pagell & Shevchenko (2014) have identified several issues in SSCM research that currently limit our perspectives to studying how to manage unsustainable supply chains—as opposed to how to make supply chains truly sustainable. Without reiterating their critique, we point out some additional issues that we see as limiting for making progress towards decent work in supply chains.

### **Buyer-centrism**

Supply chain management research is typically carried out from the perspective of a (Western) buyer whose primary motivation is to shield itself from sustainability-related reputational risks. As a result, most researchers tend to focus on those top-down management approaches that seek to ‘disseminate’ labor standards in supply chains through codes of conduct whose compliance is more or less rigidly monitored by buyers (Villena & Gioia, 2018; Wilhelm et al., 2016). Such a buyer-centric view often neglects the perspectives and interests of other stakeholders, including regulatory agencies, supplier firms, and the workers themselves. In the context of labor conditions, this is particularly problematic as these codes of conduct are rarely designed with the participation of workers or their representative communities or organizations. As a result, these codes rarely aim at a real improvement of workers’ safety and well-being, but rather seek to minimize “sustainability risks” (e.g., Giannakis & Papadopoulos, 2016; Hofmann et al., 2014) in supply chains.

### **Product-centrism**

Supply chains are stylized as the flow of material from raw materials to end product. As a result, labor is often treated as an “input factor” in production that ought to be “managed” to obtain productivity improvements. There is even less interest in workers employed in suppliers’ facilities, as long as their management fulfills legal employment requirements (i.e., no underage workers and in possession of work permits). SSCM scholars rarely take an interest in how labor enters product supply chains, including the origin of workers, their employment history, recruitment patterns, and their (often restricted) mobility. Neglecting the design of what we might then refer to as labor supply chains, namely “the sequence of employment relationships that a worker goes through in order to be deployed in a productive capacity,” (Crane et al., 2019: 93) can be dangerous, however, as these can

limit the opportunities for decent work and restrict workers' workplace autonomy in ways that are impossible to address through social compliance audits later (LeBaron, 2021 in this issue). The centering of attention on flows of products rather than flows of labor, even within SSCM research, therefore limits the prospects of researchers to address decent work genuinely.

### **Techno-centrism**

Environmental sustainability is tightly interwoven with manufacturing and is often addressed in SSCM research and practice in a technocratic way. While the technocratic approach might still work for the design of safe workplaces for manufacturing workers, we believe that it is limited with regards to improving working conditions more generally in supply chains. Ensuring fair pay, workplace equality, worker participation, and freedom in supplier factories, farms, mines, logistic and service settings requires a more in-depth investigation of the socio-cultural settings where work in supply chains takes place. This includes factors such as embedded norms of gender, race, class, and caste discrimination in the workplace, relations of power between workers and supervisors, cultural attitudes towards child labor, and a whole host of other socio-cultural factors. Understanding and influencing these socio-cultural settings and their role in preventing or facilitating decent work requires going beyond an overly narrow focus on manufacturing processes and their technocratic management.

### **Social-centrism**

Decent work is concerned with the essential humanity of people in the workplace and their inalienable rights as human beings; they are not merely another "social" issue on the shop floor. Therefore, rather than label workers and their rights social sustainability, we suggest that researchers in this field should be explicit and might better call them human rights, labor rights, working conditions, or labor conditions as is more common in policy discourses and disciplines outside of management. In addition to re-centering the human, this has two important additional benefits. First, being explicit and aligning with dominant discourses elsewhere might enable important insights from supply chain research to have a wider reach and impact across disciplines and policy arenas. Second, it also reduces the potential for SSCM researchers to simply duplicate research done in areas outside of SCM by dint of merely using a different label.

We argue that these four characteristics of the SSCM literature, when applied to the study on working conditions in supply chains, can easily lead to a "dehumanized" perspective on workers and their workplace conditions. This, in turn, can lead to incomplete

theorizing and unsuccessful practical applications. This dehumanized approach makes it much more challenging to produce research that helps realize decent work. Therefore, we call on supply chain researchers to humanize research on decent work in supply chains in terms of *actors, issues, contexts, and methods*.

## **WORKING CONDITIONS IN SUPPLY CHAINS: A HUMANIZING RESEARCH AGENDA**

### **Humanizing Actors**

The first strand in our approach focuses on incorporating a more comprehensive range of actors beyond the usual suspects in SSCM research. The current buyer-centrism in SSCM leads to a situation where workers are not afforded sufficient importance. Extant SSCM research is still overly focused on shareholders and buyer firms and the quest to discover "best practices" that enhance business performance. The primacy of economic aims over others has been repeatedly criticized by SSCM researchers in recent years (e.g., Matthews et al., 2016; Montabon, Pagell, & Wu, 2016) but seems nevertheless deep-rooted in our research questions and theorizing. Managers and researchers should openly acknowledge that ensuring decent work can result in tensions between efficiency rationales and social objectives (e.g., Pullman, Longoni & Luzzini, 2018; Xiao et al., 2019). Paying fair wages, reducing excessive overtime, and investing in safe workplaces cost money. While some research has pointed out that workers' well-being can, directly and indirectly, benefit buyer firms through higher (mostly operational) performance (e.g., Pagell & Gobeli, 2009), worker benefit needs to be the end, not the means to another end. Thus, there is a moral (and increasingly also legal) obligation of companies to ensure decent work in their supply chains. Research questions motivated by a "does it pay to be social?"-logic distract from the fact that workers are legitimate stakeholders of the firm and their rights for decent work should be given equal weight with other company aims. Fundamentally, the focus of research on working conditions in supply chains should be about workers, their rights, and their well-being.

Supply chain managers should acknowledge that workers are not simply a resource to be managed but hold agency and should be given a more active role in the governance of supply chains. A more humanized governance of supply chains would grant workers democratic participation (Reinecke & Donaghy, 2021), for example, through rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021 in this issue). In the world of practice, innovative worker-led approaches to ensuring decent work

have emerged in recent years, but these have been largely absent so far from SSCM research (Reinecke & Donaghy, 2021). For example, the “Fair Food” program was launched by a migrant farmworker community in Florida’s tomato agriculture, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), in 1993. The CIW managed to enlist companies like Walmart to commit to buying only from growers who follow fair labor standards and pay an extra penny a pound, which goes directly to the pickers. Today, the CIW is internationally recognized for pioneering the design and development of a worker-led, market-enforced approach to protecting human and labor rights in global supply chains (Greenhouse, 2014; Rosile et al., 2021). Such initiatives provide ample scope for SSCM researchers to consider a more humanized approach to governing working conditions in supply chains.

Beyond the workers themselves, we also suggest including a stronger focus on other actors involved in the broader field around supply chains. Actors from civil society (unions and NGOs), worker organizations, and (inter)governmental bodies are likely (or at least have greater potential) to take the humanity of workers seriously. Supply chain operations are not just shaped by buyers and suppliers, but they are shaped by these field-level actors, too. Ignoring them and their influences may lead to incomplete or inappropriate solutions. New research could also take greater account of more complex, multi-stakeholder collaborations to address decent work within the context of SSCM. While collaboration between stakeholders, including firms, suppliers, government, academia, and civil society, is gradually on the rise, their effectiveness has been increasingly questioned in the literature (Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). Therefore, we encourage researchers to dig deeper into the dynamics of effective collaboration for decent work in SSCM. Researchers can build on existing work in this area on cross-sector collaborations with NGOs and other “nontraditional supply chain actors” (e.g., Gualandris & Klassen, 2018; Moshtari & Vanpoucke, forthcoming; Rodríguez et al., 2016; Seepma, van Donk, & de Blok, forthcoming). The emerging roles of governments in managing social conduct in supply chains and the dynamics of collaboration between governments and business and nonbusiness actors (Kourula et al., 2019) are also possible avenues for future research.

Finally, intermediaries within the supply chain are another mostly overlooked actor that could help realize the potential for decent work. For example, Soundararajan, Khan, and Tarba (2018) found that sourcing agents can help bridge boundaries between Western buyers and emerging country suppliers. Returning to our point above about product-centrism and the overlooked role of labor supply chains,

recruitment agencies, and labor brokers are important supply chain intermediaries. While they have been the subject of extensive research in labor and migration studies (e.g., Guevarra, 2009; Kemp & Raijman, 2014), the role of intermediaries in connecting labor supply chains with product supply chains has been largely overlooked in SSCM research. Global union federations (Fichter, Helfen, & Sydow, 2011) and managers of supplier factories are other important intermediaries in the context of decent work in supply chains that deserve more attention. While research in industrial relations has a long history of studying the relationship between factory managers and workers (e.g., Edwards, 1987; Frenkel, 2001), SSCM research has so far shown limited interest in the role of decision-makers in suppliers’ factories in the context of decent work. Prior studies have assigned operations managers a key role in driving environmental technologies investments (e.g., Klassen & Whybark, 1999). Still, similar inquiries are yet to be carried out for decent work. Future research could explore the role of different types of supply chain intermediaries and their contracting relationships with other supply chain actors in enabling or restricting decent work. We also need a better understanding of the triangular interaction between these intermediaries, lead firms, and suppliers/sub-suppliers and research that evaluates the effectiveness of different modes of interaction and contracting on decent work.

### **Humanizing Issues**

Research on social sustainability tends to focus either very broadly on working conditions or a few specific tangible issues like wages and working hours. This means that a range of important issues, central to the notion of decent work, remain relatively overlooked in SCM research. This includes challenging topics like forced labor and modern slavery (Gold, Trautrim, & Trodd, 2015; LeBaron, 2021 in this issue; New, 2015), collective bargaining (Cairola, 2015; Kuruvilla & Li, 2021 in this issue; Mendonça & Adăscăliței, 2020), and worker voice (Pike, 2020) as well as a range of overlooked every day, often intangible, workers’ issues in supply chains. Our guest authors have highlighted how SCM research can contribute to some of these topics.

Additionally, one timely topic that is currently under-researched in SCM is social inequality<sup>1</sup>. Depending on the industry and type of production involved, the power and resource holders are often men and dominant groups in that particular context.

<sup>1</sup>By social inequality we mean “uneven distribution in the endowment and/or access to financial and non-financial resources in a society, which manifests in differential abilities and opportunities to engage in value creation, appropriation, and distribution” (Bapuji, Ertug, & Shaw, 2020: 64).

Marginalized actors such as women and migrant workers represent a large proportion of the workforce in global supply chains but are usually more vulnerable to exploitative working practices. For example, research has highlighted how the feminization of the workforce in garment supply chains (due to the need for a submissive workforce that can sustain fast-fashion business models) leads to routine gender-based exploitation, including harassment, abuse, unpaid labor, and discrimination (Ayaz, Ashraf & Hopper, 2019). Gender also shapes the frameworks and tools used for governing working conditions in supply chains. For example, McCarthy, Soundararajan, and Taylor (forthcoming) argue that one of the reasons why we continue to observe substandard working conditions in supply chains is because of the lack of attention paid to the interplay of men, masculinities, and supply chain structures and practices—irrespective of the fact that powerholders in supply chains are predominantly men, especially in developing economies. Research on other forms of, often invisible, inequalities, like caste, class, race, tribe, and religion in supply chains is similarly limited.

While research on inequalities in organizations, in general, is increasing (Amis, Mair & Munir, 2020; Bapuji, Ertug, & Shaw, 2020), we know little about how supply chain practices specifically, like sourcing and auditing, can reinforce or change such inequalities (Maertens & Swinnen, 2012; McCarthy & Moon, 2018). Outside the labor context, it is encouraging to see that SCM researchers are increasingly incorporating issues around inequalities in their inquiries when they call for studies on empowering women through business model innovation to alleviate poverty (Plambeck & Ramdas, 2020) or investigate gender differences in ordering behavior (De Vericourt et al., 2013), and buyer's attitude on sourcing from ethnic minority suppliers (Blount & Li, forthcoming). Within the field of responsible operations management (Lee & Tang, 2018; Deshpande & Swaminathan, 2020), scholars have also started to embark on this endeavor by studying the integration of workers with disabilities in production (Narayanan & Terris, 2020). SCM researchers could extend this line of research to study and design supply chain interventions for decent work with the active participation of marginalized supply chain actors in mind.

Further, at the core of humanizing issues is recognizing humans within the context of supply chains influencing and being influenced by decisions and practices. This agenda falls within broad boundaries of the behavioral movement in supply chains and operations management (Croson et al., 2013; Gion & Pisano, 2008), which challenges the mechanistic homo economicus view of organizations and individuals and emphasizes the importance of social,

cognitive, and behavioral factors shaping supply chain decisions and practices. Research inspired by this movement starts at the microlevel “to better understand behavior—ultimately enabling [supply chains and] operations management to make better recommendations of how to design and improve processes and supply chains” (Croson et al., 2013, p. 5). Soundararajan and Brammer (2018), for example, studied how sub-suppliers' perceptions of the procedural fairness of intermediary demands of labor standards shaped their responses. They found that the framing of labor standards by intermediaries played an important role in influencing the sub-supplier perception of procedural fairness and behavior. Accordingly, we argue that the supply chain factors shaping working conditions or the impact of measures to improve working conditions cannot be fully predicted or elucidated without understanding the underlying social or behavioral factors.

Within the realm of social or behavioral factors shaping supply chain decisions and practices, a focus on emotions could add significant value to research on working conditions in supply chains. Emotions shape behavior (Fogel et al., 1992). With social psychology and sociology as a foundation, there is a growing and robust stream of research on emotions in organizations (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018) and operations (Altman et al., forthcoming; Urda & Loch, 2013) that could provide the basis for new insights into working conditions in supply chains. Some topics to consider are the connection between supply chain practices and worker emotions, emotions behind decisions related to decent work in supply chains, and auditing practices to capture worker emotions. Within the realm of emotions, research can also focus on resistance. Research has pointed out that workers sometimes resist poor working conditions (Anner, 2015; Prieto-Carron, 2008), but this is not always the case. Due to their socioeconomic vulnerability and cultural reasons, many workers may see poor working conditions as a norm and may even resist changes such as reducing overtime work (e.g., Xiao et al., 2019). Thus, supply chain research on such resistance and its implications for supply chain governance of decent work is a fertile ground for future research.

### **Humanizing Contexts**

Supply chains span different contexts, including those that are geographical, cultural, institutional, and organizational. Actors and institutions across these contextual boundaries influence and are influenced by supply chain decisions and practices. So, a humanizing research agenda for research on decent work in supply chains cannot be complete without a thorough

understanding of these contexts within which supply chains operate.

With respect to contexts, the focus of SCM research on working conditions is gradually shifting to developing economies (e.g., Huq, Chowdhury & Klassen, 2016). While this is encouraging, research tends to consider developing economies as epitomes of poor working conditions. However, some scholars also point out that severe worker exploitation, like forced labor and trafficking, is prevalent in developed countries like the US and UK (e.g., Crane et al., 2019). So, despite extant SCM research on issues like ergonomics and worker safety in developed economies (e.g., Canto et al., 2009; Longoni et al., 2013; Miller & Saldanha, 2016; Pagell et al., 2015), there is a need for more research on indecent work too in such contexts. Industrial relations scholars have argued that subcontracting and the fragmentation of supply chain structures play a large role in circumventing strong institutions in advanced economies (e.g., Lillie, 2012). We need more investigations from SCM scholars to understand the interplay between supply chain structures and institutions for decent work.

Indecent work often takes place in informal organizational contexts, and it would be worth exploring the boundaries between formality and informality from an SCM perspective. For example, informal sub-suppliers refer to sub-suppliers not formally approved by buyers as a result of unauthorized subcontracting practices that prevail in many industries. Such informal sub-suppliers are often directly or indirectly embedded in supply chains and may offer opportunities for innovation, cost reduction, and flexibility. However, due to their unauthorized status, they also present various reputational risks to lead firms (LeBaron, 2014). SCM scholars have developed sophisticated supply chain mapping and tracing tools, but researching informal supplier networks might pose unique challenges due to data access problems. It is not impossible, however, as the recent study of Caro et al. (forthcoming) on unauthorized subcontracting demonstrates. The authors show that price pressures and “state dependence” (i.e., the status of an order carrying over to the next one) are critical drivers for unauthorized subcontracting by suppliers. However, we still know very little about the implications of informality for decent work in supply chains. How can lead firms embrace informality while at the same time, ensure decent work? Likewise, issues such as modern slavery inevitably bring SCM face to face with illegal practices rather than those simply viewed as unethical or undesirable by some. When do informal contexts become illegal, and what are the implications for SCM? How do SCM practices have to evolve to deal with such illegality? Therefore, further research can explore how working conditions are governed in

the formal, informal, and illegal contexts of multitier supply chains and how such contexts can be effectively integrated into SCM systems to ensure decent work.

Finally, it is also important to note that global geographies of international trade are constantly evolving, with a significant amount of international trade now happening between developing economies and/or led by developing economies (Horner & Murphy, 2018). The stakeholders of these supply chains differ when compared to those led by developed-country ones. They can, therefore, challenge our current understanding of standards of working conditions, governance frameworks, and the way that working conditions are managed and thus require further attention. SCM scholars could investigate how the design and governance of supply chains led by developing economy firms differ from the supply chains led by advanced economies firms that we commonly study and derive implications for decent work.

### **Humanizing Methods**

A humanizing research agenda requires methods that can capture supply chain actors' agency and social relations and enable an in-depth understanding of supply chain issues and contexts. Some of these methods are readily available, and new tools can also be developed to advance the theory and practice of decent work in supply chains. Due to the often-illegal nature of human rights violations such as human trafficking, data might not be readily available, posing considerable methodological, ethical, and even safety challenges for researchers who seek to study this topic (LeBaron, 2018; 2021 in this issue). Future research will need to offer novel solutions to these challenges or refine our existing methods—both quantitative and qualitative—to better accommodate a humanized research agenda and the specific problems of worker traceability in complex supply chains.

In terms of qualitative research on working conditions in the supply chain literature, case study research dominates. While case study research can be useful to unravel important insights at the firm or dyad level, it is arguably less helpful in comprehending individual or contextual nuances or critically engaging with focal issues (Touboulic, McCarthy, & Matthews, 2020), especially as supply chains traverse a range of contexts and include a wide range of actors and issues. Understanding such nuances is important to develop robust insights on factors shaping working conditions and develop measures that can ensure decent work in supply chains. For this purpose, ethnographic methods can be instrumental. Ethnography enables an in-depth understanding of social relations, experiences, power, and nuances of the focal issues (Watson, 2011). For example, it is hard to

understand complex issues like gender through case studies, leading to a risk of drawing simple conclusions. Gender is contextually embedded and reproduced through everyday practices. The socio-cultural-economic nuances of gender issues in supply chains have been brought out by ethnographic research (e.g., McCarthy & Moon, 2018; Ramamurthy, 2004). Similarly, ethnography has been useful in unraveling complex power relations in supply chains and the role of novel embedded actors like labor contractors (DeNeve, 2014) and sourcing agents (Soundararajan, Khan, & Tarba, 2018). There is also a space for conducting innovative field experiments to capture the impacts of interventions aimed at enhancing decent work (see Hasle & Vang, 2021 in this issue).

When it comes to quantitative research, much current work on working conditions in supply chains has drawn on audit data to measure improvements in working conditions at suppliers' sites. However, the snap-shot nature of this data is fraught with problems, and suppliers have learned how to "trick and cheat" auditors. Researchers should make efforts to tap into alternative data sources such as union density or worker telephone hotlines to obtain more accurate insights on workers' actual conditions in supply chains. Still, as LeBaron (2021 in this issue) and Kuruvilla & Li (2021 in this issue) warn in their invited contributions, each data source suffers from imperfections, highlighting the importance of triangulating across and combining multiple sources of data.

We would also suggest researchers consider full-cycle research designs (Fine & Elsbach, 2000; Ranganathan, 2018), which operates on logic that "initial qualitative data can richly describe real-world issues that are worth studying and generate theory and hypotheses close to the field or immediate experiences of informants; quantitative data can then complement the qualitative data by corroborating the key theoretical ideas." (Ranganathan & Shivaram, forthcoming, p. 14). For example, Ranganathan (2018), uses a full-cycle research design to understand how to retain women workers in garment factories in India. The study finds the importance of trainers' identity and the content of the training. The study's findings give importance to the local nuances and results in both novel and important insights.

## **INTRODUCING THE INVITED PAPERS**

Having elaborated on our proposed humanizing agenda for research on working conditions in supply chains, we now turn to introduce the four invited papers that feature in this issue of *Journal of Supply Chain Management* to mark the launch of our EDI. The authors were invited to contribute to the EDI because they all have made significant and influential

contributions to different facets of our understanding of the nature and challenges of transitioning toward decent work in supply chains. However, the bulk of their work has not been published in dedicated supply chain management journals. As a result, many supply chain management researchers may be unfamiliar with their work and with the important contributions that have already been made in this space. We, therefore, aimed to capture some of these insights and bring them more firmly into the ambit of supply chain management research. In this way, we hope to achieve a number of goals: (i) to alert supply chain researchers to at least some of the key debates that have already been advanced in relation to working conditions in supply chains; (ii) to explore where some of the main challenges or gaps are with respect to this research; (iii) to uncover where supply chain management research, in particular, can make a unique and important contribution to these debates; (iv) offer some exemplars of the humanizing approach that we propose in this paper; and (v) provide a platform for greater interdisciplinary research between supply chain management and other management subdisciplines as well as social science disciplines beyond management.

The article by Reinecke and Donaghy (2021) is an excellent example of research that humanizes actors by foregrounding workers as the key actor in governing working conditions in supply chains. While, clearly, the interests of workers are one of the main considerations in attempts to improve working conditions through buyer-led supply chain initiatives focused on codes of conduct and social audit, workers themselves have rarely been involved in the initiatives. Reinecke and Donaghy (2021), in contrast, put workers front and center and explore supply chain governance through the lens of democratic worker participation. This leads them to propose the concept of worker-driven supply chain governance as a key focus for future research in supply chain management that addresses the challenge of decent work. With such worker-driven forms of governance beginning to proliferate across the globe (including the illustrative cases that Reinecke and Donaghy discuss in the article), the practical design and implementation of such initiatives also represent what we refer to as a humanized issue that demands further research attention.

The article by Kuruvilla and Li (2021 in this issue) is even more explicit in calling attention to what we would regard as humanized issues that have been largely overlooked by supply chain scholars—specifically, freedom of association and collective bargaining. Despite being regarded as core labor rights included in most labor standards and codes of conduct as well as the ILO's definition of decent work, freedom of association and collective bargaining have rarely been



at the heart of supply chain management research. Kuruvilla and Li (2021 in this issue) argue that the presence of freedom of association and collective bargaining in many contexts are in general associated with advancements in decent work, making them in some respects an obvious focus for humanized research. However, they remain a thorny issue in supply chain management given antipathy to unions in many contexts, the lack of attention to the issue in social auditing, and poor enforcement from buyers, among other issues. Kuruvilla and Li, therefore, set out a powerful argument why supply chain management scholars can and should address freedom of association and collective bargaining in their research and propose some intriguing areas of potential research in order to accomplish this.

The article by LeBaron (2021 in this issue) also addresses a humanized issue central to decent work that has, to date, been somewhat underexplored in supply chain management research—forced labor. As with Kuruvilla and Li (2021 in this issue), LeBaron (2021 in this issue) tackles an issue that has been widely researched outside of supply chain management, but again, she also seeks to give a sense of how far this extant research has already come, and where the specific questions for supply chain management researchers reside. Toward this end, she builds on central supply chain concepts—such as supply chain complexity or power asymmetry and dependence in the buyer-supplier relation—and shows how they could be fruitfully applied to research on forced labor in supply chains. LeBaron also points toward what we refer to as humanized contexts and humanized methods. Concerning contexts, she identifies informal and illegal contexts as critical for supply chain research into forced labor. In terms of methods, she outlines a swathe of essential considerations in researching this complex and sensitive issue.

Finally, the article by Hasle and Vang (2021 in this issue) puts humanized methods front and center and discusses the role of “intervention research” in advancing decent work. Hasle and Vang summarize the insights from some of their recent work designing and evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions intended to simultaneously improve factory productivity and improve working conditions among apparel industry suppliers in Bangladesh and Myanmar. They demonstrate that, surprisingly, even interventions that appear to deliver win-win outcomes have limited uptake among suppliers. This, as we outline above, confirms the need to move supply chain management research on decent work away from purely technical factors to encapsulate a broader range of social and institutional factors that help explain how humans—both workers and managers—actually behave.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, supply chain research on working conditions is at a crossroads. Without a commitment to humanization, the insights that emerge run the risk of being criticized and undervalued both by scholars of other disciplines as well as by policymakers. So, we call on supply chain researchers to humanize actors, issues, contexts, and methods—for the sake of worker welfare. We hope that our EDI, and the invited articles published in this issue, will help shift the gears on SCM research toward this end. After all, research on working conditions in supply chains is about humans, not mere resources.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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