

The Indiscipline of the Supply Chain and Logistics Management Disciplines

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Business and public management literature are fraught with “paradigm wars” in which scholars debate the boundaries of the subfields of management studies. The rather porous boundary between supply chain management (SCM) and logistics management (LM) makes for fertile battlegrounds for such discussions—and rightly so.

The terms LM and SCM are often used interchangeably to describe activities central to the support of military operations and commercial activities. Despite that, there are often disagreements and confusion over how these concepts are related. Ambiguities abound, and our intent is to briefly discuss this conceptual divide.

In recent years, in both practitioner and academic literature, in business school programs, and in day-to-day conversations around the defense industrial complex, SCM seems a more prominent descriptor of the discipline than LM. However, in operational and tactical doctrine, LM is the predominant term.

In the 1997 *International Journal of Logistics Management* article, “Supply Chain Management: More Than a New Name for Logistics,” Ohio State University professors Martha Cooper, Douglas Lambert, and Janus Pagh describe SCM as, “the integration of business processes from end user through original suppliers that provides products, services and information that add value for customers.”

LM, on the other hand, is described in the same article as, “the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the efficient, cost-

effective flow of materials, in-process inventory, finished goods, and related information flow from point-of-origin to point-of-consumption for the purpose of conforming to customer requirements.”

A key conclusion by the authors is that the “integration of business processes” required in SCM goes well beyond the parameters of LM; hence, they conclude that LM must be subsumed within the disciplinary boundaries of SCM.

In a 2000 *European Journal of Purchasing and Supply Chain Management* article, Simon Croom, Pietro Romano, and Mihalis Giannakis reframe SCM within a wider, interdisciplinary scope that includes materiel, information technology, knowledge management, and human relationships. We would argue that by scoping SCM to this extreme, the definition approaches the exceedingly broad and varied discipline of management itself.

In a 2006 *International Journal of Operations Production* article, John Storey, Caroline Emberson, Janet Godsell, and Alan Harrison made a startling conclusion that the theory and practice of SCM was so big that they could find no evidence of any organization that actually managed or optimized an entire supply chain to the ideal of a fully-networked, integrated socio-technical system.

Given the generally accepted purpose of the discipline—to integrate all business processes both socially and technologically—SCM stands as a concept without complete proof of practice.

We assert that the same can be concluded about the holism desired in our military doctrine. Joint Pub-

lication 4-0, Joint Logistics, sees SCM and LM (in this case, referred to as “the joint logistics enterprise”) as a “multitiered matrix of key global logistics providers cooperatively structured to achieve a common purpose.”

Has any war or military operation historically demonstrated that such cooperation is even possible or explained how such accommodating structuration processes are achieved? To the contrary, we conclude that operational results tend to convey how unified action in logistics is perhaps a Utopian dream rather than a realizable discipline of professional practice.

We hope it is obvious that we purposefully poke at the edges of our profession that cross between the civilian and military communities of knowledge and research. We are attempting to begin a conversation about the conceptually ambiguous boundaries of our practice.

We intend to offer some explanation to leaders and students that a shared understanding of this vast and complex aspect of national security is limited. Our inability to clearly describe, define, and understand the business end of the Department of Defense could be very expensive, both in terms of readiness and the inefficient use of our resources.

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