

What role for metaphor in innovating for sustainable supply chains?

Type of paper – Work in Progress

Purpose – It is now widely accepted that innovation is essential for sustainable supply chains (OECD, 2012; Cagliano et al., 2016; Pagell and Wu, 2009) and the topic of ‘sustainable supply chain innovation’ (SSCI) is increasingly explored (Neutzling et al., 2018; Tebaldi et al, 2018; Gao, 2017; Leon-Bravo et al., 2016). At the same time, metaphors help us to understand something complex and abstract (such as sustainability) in terms of something more tangible and familiar (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1986), and have been shown in wider literature to be multi-faceted tools that support creativity, problem-solving and innovation potential (Sanchez Ruiz, 2013; Helkkula and Pihlstrom, 2010; Teichart et al., 2006). However, there are currently no studies that explore how metaphor can be harnessed for SSCI. This paper therefore seeks to explore this intersection as a first step towards defining and provoking a broader research agenda. This study specifically asks: *what are the current and dominant ‘issues’ in extant SSCI literature and what role might metaphor play in addressing these issues?*

Design/Methodology/Approach – The study adopts Mayring’s (2003) process framework for systematic literature review, with a focus on the output of the thematic analysis to facilitate conceptual integration in line with the research questions. A relevant sample of English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles was constructed from two key word searches (in Title/Keyword/Abstract) across leading academic databases (EBSCO, Emerald Insight, Web of Science and Scopus)- “innovation” AND “sustainable supply chain”, and “innovation” AND “metaphor.”

Findings – Preliminary findings suggest that it is helpful to distinguish between two categories of concern at the intersection of metaphor and SSCI: 1. Metaphors OF (sustainable) innovation (how we metaphorically conceptualise ‘innovation’ within SSCI and the implications for improving innovation outputs); 2. Metaphors FOR (sustainable) innovation (how we actively choose and employ metaphors as creative tools that facilitate a particular innovation process within SSCI). Collectively, these categories support a more holistic perspective of the relationship between metaphor and SSCI – the former (metaphors OF), facilitates exploration and refinement of the conceptualisation of SSCI on the basis that some metaphors of innovation may de-emphasise conditions which wider literature has shown to be necessary for SSCI; while the latter (metaphors FOR) facilitates more practical considerations of the manifestation and management of the innovation process around, for example, developing new ‘sustainable’ products. With regards to the latter, and following Teichart et al. (2006), it is proposed that metaphor may play an internal and external role for a focal company approaching SSCI: internally, it may facilitate the disruption of mental models towards multi-dimensional (TBL) performance drivers; externally, it may facilitate communication among multiple stakeholders towards more effective collaborative relationships for SSCI implementation.

Practical Implications – The work should encourage managers’ critical reflection on the implications of the metaphors OF innovation that frame current approaches, while also offering suggestion of the benefit of metaphor as a creative tool FOR stimulating SSCI in practice.

Originality/Value – This is the first effort to explicitly propose and explore metaphor as a conceptual and practical tool for facilitating innovation within SSC theory and practice.

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