Moral (De)coupling
Moral Disengagement and
Supply Chain Management

David Eriksson

Faculty opponent is Professor
Gyöngyi Kovács
Hanken School of Economics
Marketing/Supply Chain Management and Social Responsibility,
Helsinki, Finland

Doctoral thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Textile Management at the University of Borås
to be publicly defended on Wednesday, December 10, 2014, at 1:00 p.m.,
in room M404, University of Borås, Allégatan 1, Borås
This research aims to fill an important gap in focusing on why individuals are able to take part in and/or support activities that have effects on economic, environmental, and social dimensions that are not consistent with their sense of right and wrong. The research focuses on the relationship between supply chain management and moral disengagement, and how this relation affects social responsibility.

After observing individuals avoiding responsibility for misconduct an explanatory concept, moral decoupling, was proposed. Moral decoupling considers moral responsibility a flow in the supply chain. Moral decoupling occurs when the flow is restricted. If moral decoupling occurs at an identifiable point it is called a moral decoupling point. The concept was developed by identifying and linking specific supply chain activities and structures with moral disengagement, a theory that explains the deactivation of self regulation.

Moral decoupling was able to suggest how to reduce moral disengagement and improve social responsibility. To validate the suggestions a literature review on social responsibility was conducted and identified sixteen elements of social responsibility in supply chain management. The suggestions based on moral disengagement were compared with elements of social responsibility and a large overlap was found. Lastly, suggestions on how to reduce moral disengagement and map moral responsibility in a supply network are proposed, links between elements of social responsibility are presented, and moral coupling is added as a complementary term to moral decoupling. A model explaining the relationship between ethical guidelines, moral responsibility, moral decoupling, and social responsibility is proposed.

In relation to current theoretical knowledge the thesis has contributed to the field of socially responsible supply chain management with an application of a new theoretical lens that gives one explanation as to why identified elements of social responsibility are important. The understanding of social responsibility has reached an increased explanatory depth following the identification of moral disengagement as a generative mechanism, subject to conditions in supply chain management. The research has also applied moral disengagement in a context not identified in earlier research, and shows some of the complexity of applying it to a real-world global context. The elements of social responsibility and moral (de)coupling help practitioners identify what they should focus on to increase social responsibility and also offer an explanation for ‘why?’. The findings can be used to construct supply chains that are less prone to misconduct and to identify where in the chain it is important to be aware of immoral behavior.

The value and originality of this research is centered on the application of a new theoretical lens for socially responsible supply chain management. It is the only identified research in the area which identifies mechanisms on a generative level that explains human behavior and conditions to which those mechanisms are subject. This is also in itself a novel application of moral disengagement in a new research context.