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THE ROLE OF SUPPLY CHAINS IN THE GLOBAL BUSINESS OF FORCED LABOUR

GENEVIEVE LEBARON
University of Sheffield

Supply chains are fundamental to whether decent work flourishes or not. Not only do supply chain dynamics shape employment practices and working conditions, but they also influence business models and capabilities which structure opportunities for decent work. As scholars and policymakers race to strengthen labor standards in supply chains and confront barriers to their effective implementation, management scholars can both benefit from and advance an understanding of the role of supply chains in giving rise to indecent work, especially the business practices commonly described as forced labor and modern slavery. To help realize this potential, this article draws from my research on the business of forced labor to emphasize three points. First, there are clear and discernible patterns with respect to the root causes of forced labor in supply chains. Second, forced labor in supply chains cannot be understood in isolation of broader dynamics of work and employment, since low-waged workers tend to move in and out of conditions of forced labor in relatively short periods of time. Third, on-the-ground studies of the effectiveness of buyer-centric governance programs reveal serious gaps between corporate social responsibility standards and business practices when it comes to indicators most relevant to forced labor. I conclude with a discussion of future directions in this research agenda and highlight the potential for business scholars to make a contribution.

Keywords: *modern slavery; forced labor; private governance; corporate social responsibility; decent work*

INTRODUCTION

Achieving decent work for all is an aspiration enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. But this is a major and accelerating challenge given research suggesting that decent work is shrinking across several sectors and parts of the world (Anner, 2020; ILO, 2019). Low-waged and insecure work is widespread today; the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that "the majority of the 3.3 billion people employed globally in 2018 had inadequate economic security, material well-being and equality of opportunity," over 700 million lived in "extreme or moderate poverty despite having employment," and most jobs are insecure and informal (ILO, 2019; see also ILO, 2020). And these statistics predate the economic upheaval wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic that has triggered mass unemployment for some workers while heightening vulnerability to labor exploitation for others.

The way supply chains are designed and managed is fundamental to the question of whether decent work flourishes or not. Not only do supply chains shape employment and working conditions in crucial ways, but they influence the business models and management practices that pattern dynamics of labor exploitation (Barrientos, 2019; Crane, 2013; LeBaron & Gore, 2020). Supply chains permeate distributions

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of wealth and opportunity across the global economy, as scholars have recently sought to capture through concepts like "global wealth chains" (Seabrooke & Wigan, 2017) and "global poverty chains" (Selwyn, 2019). We need to understand better how—as they facilitate international trade, transform the dynamics of migration and migrant work (Gordon, 2017; Soundararajan, Khan, & Tarba, 2018), and shape business models (Allain et al., 2013)—global supply chains give rise to decent and indecent work. We also need stronger evidence to identify which forms of governance can best detect, prevent, and address indecent work and promote fair, equitable labor standards and worker rights (see Editors' introduction, Reinecke & Donaghey, 2020, this volume).

As decent work moves up the scholarly agenda of business and supply chain scholars, there is considerable value in understanding indecent forms of work and how, when, why, and with what consequences they are used by contemporary businesses. As a contribution to this wider project, in this article, I explore the role of supply chains in facilitating one indecent type of work widely deployed by business today: forced labor. Forced labor encompasses a variety of practices that use coercion to extract involuntary labor from people, severely curtailing their freedom; it includes slavery, debt bondage, and human trafficking (ILO, 1930; ILO, Walk Free Foundation, & IOM, 2017). While reliable statistics on the prevalence of forced labor are hard to come by (Brunner, 2015; Mügge, 2017), the data that do exist suggest that forced labor is alarmingly common (cf. LeBaron & Gore, 2020; McGrath, 2013; Phillips, 2013). Forced labor has been well-documented across a variety of product supply chains including those that create garments, footwear, food, and electronics, as well as within labor supply chains linked to agriculture, construction, and hospitality (Allain et al., 2013; Gordon, 2017; LeBaron, 2018b). A labor supply chain "consists of the sequence of employment relationships that a worker goes through in order to be deployed in a productive capacity" (Allain et al, 2013: 42). Although forced labor was made illegal in most countries following formal abolition of slavery during the 19th century and is widely condemned given the human suffering and unfreedom it entails, it remains a widespread business practice deployed by enterprises in both wealthy and lower income countries (Crane, LeBaorn, et al., 2019; Crane, Soundararajan, et al., 2019).

Despite the clear relevance of supply chains to the problem of forced labor, to date, very little research has been conducted on the business of forced labor (Caruana et al., 2020; LeBaron & Crane, 2018; Phung & Crane, 2018). By the business of forced labor, I refer to the rationales, cost and revenue structures, and employment relationships and dynamics that businesses use to perpetrate and make money from forced labor (see: Allain et al., 2013; Crane, 2013; LeBaron, 2018a; LeBaron & Crane, 2018). As I've argued elsewhere with Andrew Crane, "where the business of forced labor has been investigated, scholars have tended to focus on the role, power and regulation of MNCs; the evolving nature of global production and trade practices; and the dynamics of global corporate supply chains that deliver 'slavery-tainted' goods to wealthy Western consumers" (2013: 26). What is missing is an in-depth understanding of the businesses perpetrating forced labor, the role of forced labor within these enterprises, and how forced labor intersects with labor standards and worker rights more broadly within a business' operation. Understanding these dynamics and how they differ across businesses will go a long way toward illuminating the patterns surrounding forced labor, such as why it is used by some businesses and not others, and in some industries and portions of supply chains more than others.

Much of the interdisciplinary literature analyzing modern slavery tends to overlook and provide superficial analysis of business, depicting modern slavery as an individualized form of human rights abuse that appears randomly within the economy (Bales, 2015; Kara, 2008). In this view, it is individuals rather than organizations, management systems, or supply chain structures that give rise to forced labor. However, there is a small but growing body of research cutting across the social sciences that is beginning to bring the business of forced labor and its role in supply chains into clearer view (Crane, 2013; Gold et al., 2015; LeBaron, 2020; LeBaron & Gore, 2020; New, 2015; Phillips, 2013; Phung & Crane, 2018).

In this article, I discuss some of the main features of the emerging research agenda on the business of forced labor and highlight opportunities for supply chain management (SCM) scholars to make a theoretical and empirical contribution. I mobilize recent research on the dynamics of forced labor in supply chains, including data from my own research, to advance three arguments. First, there are clear and discernible patterns with respect to the root causes of forced labor in supply chains. Second, forced labor in supply chains cannot be understood in isolation of broader dynamics of work and employment, since low-waged workers tend to move in and out of conditions of forced labor in relatively short periods of time. Third, on-the-ground studies of the effectiveness of buyer-led supply chain governance programs reveal serious gaps between corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards and business practices when it comes to indicators most relevant to forced labor. I conclude with a discussion of future directions in this research

agenda, emphasizing the importance of rigorous research methodology and ethics.

BEYOND BAD APPLES: WHY SUPPLY CHAINS ARE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS OF FORCED LABOR

Forced labor is an endemic part of contemporary supply chains. Across many sectors, workers have become systematically vulnerable to forced labor as producers and intermediaries have turned to it as a strategy to navigate supply chain pressures (Crane, LeBaorn, et al., 2019; Crane, Soundararajan, et al., 2019; LeBaron, 2020; Phillips, 2013). The relatively small field of researchers who have conducted research on the business of contemporary forced labor to date—which is largely comprised of political scientists, lawyers, development studies scholars, and other social scientists, but only rarely scholars located within business and management—have emphasized that supply chain dynamics and the effectiveness of buyer-led governance initiatives are crucial in shaping whether or not businesses use forced labor (Allain et al., 2013; Crane, 2013; Phillips & Sakamoto, 2012). Owing at least in part to the paucity of SCM and management scholarship more generally focused on forced labor (Caruana et al., 2020; Soundararajan, Wilhelm & Crane, 2020), the supply chain dynamics surrounding forced labor have received little serious scholarly attention with slavery "typically viewed as an obsolete form of premodern labor practice that has been superseded by more legitimate and humane practices" (Crane, 2013: 49).

The omission of serious analysis of business is unsurprising given the long-standing tendency in both scholarship and policy to portray forced labor as something that happens in the shadows of the economy, perpetrated by rogue criminals. In the "neo-abolitionist" literature that has emerged over the last two decades to shine a light on modern slavery, the emphasis is on individual-level (e.g., greed, immorality), cultural (e.g., patriarchy), and historic (e.g., persistence of historic slave systems) causes and criminal justice solutions (Bowe, 2008; Skinner, 2008; Bales, 1999; Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2017; see also LeBaron & Pliley, 2021, for overview of this literature, and O'Connell Davidson, 2015 for a critique of neo-abolitionism). Economic and business lenses on the problem are rare and substantive analysis of the business of forced labor is scarce, notwithstanding frequent mention of the "immense profits" (Kara, 2017) thought to be produced through forced labor, or vague references to economic forces such as "poverty" and "globalisation" (Bales, 1999). Indeed, the overwhelming emphasis within dominant accounts of modern slavery is on noneconomic forms of causality (see Rioux, LeBaron & Verovšek, 2019) and the forms of individualized coercion that ensnare victims within forced labor and preclude their exit from forced labor (Stringer & Simmons, 2015).

Accounts of forced labor commonly give the impression that it can be understood and resolved without an in-depth understandings of, or changes to, prevailing supply chain practices. Where the presence of business actors—ranging from lead firms at the top of supply chains to recruiters and intermediaries who operate within them—is noted, these tend to appear as individual "bad apples" and "unscrupulous agents" who have infiltrated otherwise pristine (e.g., ethical, sustainable, equitable) supply chains (LeBaron, 2020). Not only does this give the impression that forced labor occurs arbitrarily within businesses and supply chains, but it also reinforces the centrality of criminal justice interventions by creating the impression that it is individual criminals rather than organizational or supply chain structures that give rise to forced labor (see also: LeBaron & Crane, 2018).

VIEWING FORCED LABOR THROUGH A SUPPLY CHAIN LENS

The literature investigating the business of forced labor and the role of supply chains in facilitating it is at an early stage. Nevertheless, key insights are beginning to emerge, and this section discusses three takeaways from research so far: forced labor is not randomly occurring within supply chains but is traceable to root causes; forced labor is a porous category in the context of business and supply chains, meaning that it is challenging to isolate because workers can move in and out of forced labor and more minor forms of exploitation in relatively short periods of time; and buyer-led governance is largely failing to create worksites that are free of forced labor.

Root Causes of Forced Labor

It has long been commonplace within both policy and academic discourse to describe forced labor as a hidden crime, which occurs spontaneously in the economy. But in recent years, scholars have begun to challenge this prevailing narrative, demonstrating that there are clear and discernible patterns with respect to factors that give rise to forced labor in supply chains (Crane, 2013; LeBaron, 2018b; LeBaron et al., 2018).

With my co-authors, I have developed a typology to capture these patterns, which we describe as the "root causes" of forced labor in supply chains (LeBaron et al., 2018). We argue that "rather than a simple consequence of greed or the moral shortcomings of individuals, forced labor in global supply chains is a

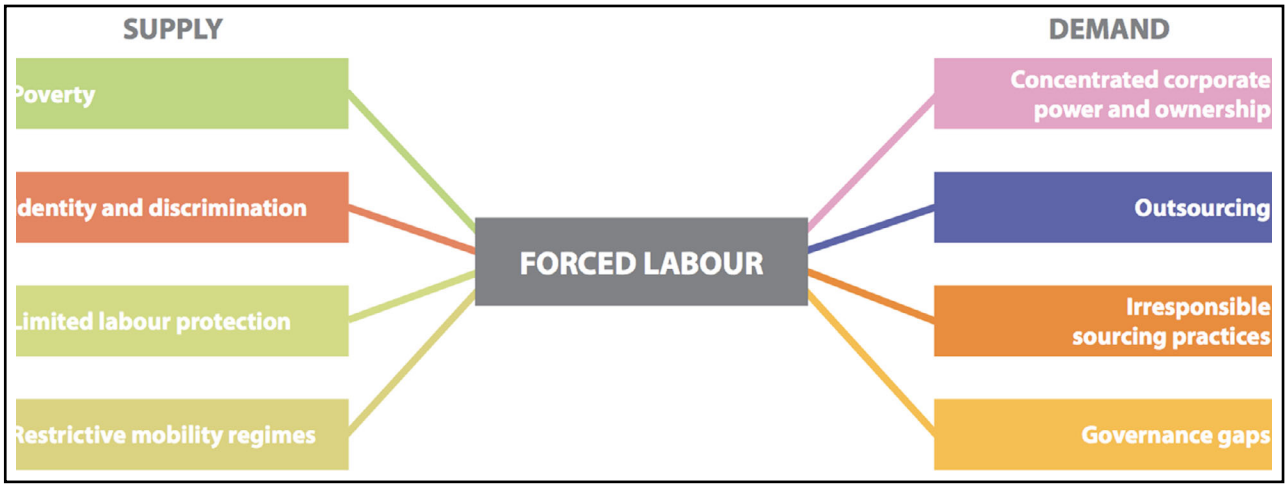
structural phenomenon that results when predictable, system-wide dynamics intersect to create a supply of highly exploitable workers and a business demand for their labor" (7). In other words, there are predictable and pinpointable patterns with respect to the dynamics that create a pool of workers who are vulnerable to exploitation in supply chains, as well as that create business demand to use forced labor. Our typology (see Figure 1) captures four key dynamics that shape supply and four key dynamics that drive demand, drawing on empirical evidence and research from several sectors and regions of the world.

On the supply side, we highlight the importance of poverty, identity, and discrimination (such as on the basis of gender, race, caste, migration status), limited labor protections, and restrictive mobility regimes as political economic factors that create a supply of people vulnerable to forced labor. Research indicates these dynamics are circular; for instance, people enter into indecent (e.g., risky, dangerous, or poorly remunerated) work because they are poor, and these forms of work make them vulnerable to forced labor in supply chains, wherein their exploitation then reinforces their inability to escape poverty (Phillips, 2015; Phillips & Sakamoto, 2012). The root causes of forced labor overlap and are mutually reinforcing. For instance, there is an abundance of research that demonstrates women, nonwhite and indigenous people are substantially more likely to be poor (see LeBaron et al., 2018: 26), and discrimination compounds with poverty to increase vulnerability. Root causes coalesce to create vulnerability to forced labor in supply chains, curtailing the structural and individual power of workers and their ability to turn down dangerous, risky, and exploitative work.

On the demand side, we highlight the importance of concentrated corporate power and ownership, outsourcing (along both product and labor supply chains), irresponsible sourcing practices, and governance gaps as key factors that create a stable and predictable business demand for forced labor across many supply chains. As value across many supply chains has become increasingly unevenly distributed and concentrated among actors at the top, with thin margins for suppliers and a declining labor share (LeBaron et al., 2018: 41–43; see also Sung, Owen & Li, 2019), some businesses have responded to interlocking commercial pressures by introducing business models configured directly around forced labor (Crane, 2013; LeBaron, 2018a). Others have turned to strategies like greater informal labor subcontracting, which can open the door to forced labor (Crane, LeBaorn, et al., 2019; Crane, Soundararajan, et al., 2019) long before workers even enter the worksite, such as through recruitment fees paid in home countries (Gordon, 2017). The key point is that forced labor does not occur randomly in supply chains. Rather, both the prevalence and distribution of forced labor can be traced to root causes that trigger predictable demand among the actors and organizations who exploit forced labor.

Failure to understand and address root causes is a key part of why efforts to address forced labor in supply chains have had limited success to date (LeBaron, Pliley & Blight, 2021). But that situation may be changing. The typology of root causes presented in this section was recently adopted and expanded within an ILO, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations

FIGURE 1
Typology of Root Causes of Forced Labor in Supply Chains.Reproduced from LeBaron et al. (2018): 8. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Children's Fund (UNICEF) report outlining action to end forced labor, child labor, and human trafficking in supply chains toward meeting Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 (ILO, OECD, IOM, & UNICEF, 2019). That report notes that "child labour, forced labour and human trafficking are a whole-of-supply-chain problem" (2019: 16) and that "governments, business, the financial sector and civil society must take strong action to address the root causes and determinants of these human rights violations" (2019: 1). In order to address root causes, however, there is a need for further research into how root causes manifest across different types of supply chains, as I discuss below.

Forced Labor as a Porous Category in Supply Chains

Another key takeaway from the emerging literature on the business of forced labor is that forced labor is a porous category (LeBaron, 2018a; LeBaron, 2020; see also Fudge & Strauss, 2014; Phillips, 2013; Mezzadri, 2017). More often than not, workers in forced labor are not locked up by shadowy criminal agents. Forced labor manifests in supply chains in less dramatic ways than is typically captured in media headlines—through the signing of a contract in a language the worker doesn't understand, or when a family emergency or health issue causes a worker to need to take out a loan with a usurious interest rate from their employer (LeBaron, 2021a; LeBaron, 2021b). Forced labor is not a rigid category, but rather is a porous and fluid one that workers often move in and out of in relatively short periods of time.

This was clear in my recent Global Business of Forced Labour Project, a study funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council between 2016–2019, which collected new data on the patterns and prevalence of forced labor within tea and cocoa supply chains that feed United Kingdom, United States, and European markets (see LeBaron, 2018a for an overview of data and methods). The main goal of the project was to systematically map and compare the business of forced labor and supply chain dynamics surrounding it. I wanted to understand the patterns that surround forced labor in tea and cocoa supply chains, including how organizational attributes (e.g., firm size, ethical certification status, destination market) impacted labor standards. Some key components of the dataset I collected are the following: interviews and a digital survey with over 1,200 tea and cocoa workers across 22 tea plantations in India and 74 cocoa communities in Ghana and over a hundred interviews with business, government, and civil society actors.

One of the key findings that emerged from my research is that forced labor in tea and cocoa supply chains is happening in the context of widespread labor abuse, where forced labor is incredibly difficult to isolate. Every single worker in our study reported some form of labor abuse or unfair treatment—ranging from unlawful wage deductions to sexual harassment by managers to verbal abuse—and we found that working for a business where these more minor forms of abuse are endemic is a key factor that makes workers vulnerable to forced labor.

Across both sectors, wages were incredibly low. We found that tea workers were taking home a daily wage as low as 25% of the poverty line amount and cocoa workers were taking home around 30% of the poverty line (a fraction of minimum wage). Over 55% of cocoa workers had no savings, and around 60% of tea workers had no savings. At the same time, we found that most of the measures of unfair treatment and indicators for forced labor we included within each industry were very widespread. For instance, in the tea industry, 40% of the workers interviewed had experienced unfair deductions from their wages—such as charges for electricity that was never provided. The workers at the base of tea and cocoa supply chains, in other words, are in indecent work that reinforces poverty rather than alleviates it.

Of course, this isn't to suggest that all of these workers are in situations of forced labor. A lot of the treatment they reported is routinized, everyday exploitation that doesn't quite meet the ILO definition's two key dimensions of forced labor (involuntariness and exacted under the menace of penalty). But in practice, we found that forced labor is very hard to isolate from exploitation more broadly and that workers move in between forced labor and more minor forms of abuse in relatively short periods of time. This happens in supply chains where poverty and underpayment by employers come together to increase vulnerability to forced labor, such as through debt bondage as workers are forced to take on high interest debts to cover basic needs like food and health care. We found that it often takes just one contingency such as a tea worker having a heart attack (which medics we interviewed linked to their labor conditions), or a cocoa worker needing more food to sustain a growing family to push a worker from exploitation over the line into forced labor. In the context of having no savings, chronic wage theft, and underpayment below minimum wage, workers cope with emergencies by borrowing money from whomever will lend it to them. This was often a manager or employer charging a usurious interest rate, and as such, these contingencies frequently pushed workers into debt bondage.

Modern slavery scholars and policy actors who define forced labor in binary terms give the impression that it is easy to draw a clear-cut line around

victims of forced labor and those who confront more minor forms of exploitation. This is misleading. It is similarly misleading to portray people as helpless victims who end up in exploitative situations due to physical coercion and confinement by perpetrators. My research makes clear that no matter how challenging their conditions are, workers always have agency. Further, it underscores that the singular focus on physical coercion is misleading since workers frequently end up in forced labor situations due to nonphysical forms of coercion, including debt and credit relations and the prospect of destitution and famine.

There are supply chain causes of these sorts of dynamics: both forced labor and more minor forms of exploitation are fundamentally rooted in and shaped by commercial conditions attached to supply chains. We found that producers within both tea and cocoa supply chains sought to use forced labor and exploitation to reduce their costs of doing business and generate revenue in the context of rising production costs, aggressive sourcing (typically substantially below the costs of production), and stagnant and falling prices (LeBaron, 2018a). In these contexts, far from an ingenious strategy by criminal entrepreneurs to amass huge profits, forced labor is merely a practice that producers invoke to balance the books and stay afloat in cutthroat, competitive supply chains.

The Ineffectiveness of Buyer-Centric Governance

Given research tracing forced labor to core commercial dynamics within supply chains, it won't come as a surprise that there is little evidence confirming the effectiveness of buyer-centric supply chain governance programs in preventing and addressing forced labor on the ground. By contrast, there is a growing body of evidence that reveals serious gaps between corporate social responsibility standards and business practices when it comes to indicators most relevant to forced labor (Barrientos, 2019; Bartley, 2018; Martin-Ortega, 2018).

In my study of cocoa and tea supply chains, I found that in spite of twenty years of CSR programs, ethical certification schemes, and social auditing, forced labor continues to thrive on worksites covered by buyer-centric governance. To take the example of the ethical certification schemes in the tea industry, I included within my sample worksites covered by Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance, which set standards around workers' wages and living conditions; for instance, around availability of water, minimum wage, and prohibition of forced labor. However, I found these standards were frequently violated by employers. Workers on ethically certified worksites reported similar patterns of coercion, threats, verbal abuse, intimidation, and underpayment as we discovered on noncertified plantations. They reported physical violence and sexual violence just as they did on noncertified plantations, as well as punitive and retributory actions by management for their involvement in unions, strikes, or other collective action. In brief, my research found very little difference between labor practices on ethically certified and noncertified tea plantations, and that it is definitely not the case that certification leads to worksites free from forced labor and exploitation.

The reasons that ethical certification falls short differs across sector, scheme, and geography (cf. Bartley, 2018; LeBaron, 2020; LeBaron & Lister, 2021). But in the context of my research on the tea supply chain, there are four clear reasons that ethical certification schemes are failing to detect, address, and prevent forced labor. These are that: (1) Ethical certification schemes often create loopholes around the most vulnerable workers in supply chains (e.g., day laborers or hired labor of smallholder farmers), which means they tend to exclude workers with high vulnerability to forced labor; (2) Producers are unable to afford the financial cost of meeting certification standards; (3) Audit fraud and deception is rampant, and problems are frequently hidden; and (4) Weak and limited verification systems, which creates a permissive environment for all of the above.

Although ethical certification is touted by companies in Modern Slavery statements as a solution to the problem of forced labor in supply chains, and certification logos often induce consumers to pay higher prices, the reality is certification is falling short when it comes to creating decent worksites—workplaces in which workers are guaranteed minimum wage and are protected from sexual violence, abuse, debt bondage, and other illegal practices by employers. As is illustrated by my study of tea plantations, ethical certification schemes are creating misleading impressions of labor standards within supply chains and can give consumers completely unwarranted sense that they are purchasing ethically (see also: Bartley, 2018; Oya Schafer, & Skalidou, 2018; van der Ven, Rothacker, & Cashore, 2018).

Briefly put, the insights that are beginning to emerge from recent research on the business of forced labor challenge conventional wisdom that: forced labor occurs randomly and anomalously within the economy, traceable to individual greed; is easy to isolate and pinpoint and typically involves physical coercion and restraint; and that buyer-driven governance is effectively eradicating forced labor from supply chains. Rather, the relatively small amount of deep, empirical research that has been carried out on the business of forced labor underscores the urgent need for further and deeper investigation of the role of supply chains in giving rise to forced labor and shaping its prevalence and distribution. In this context, business

scholarship—and especially SCM—could play an important role in advancing research.

AGENDA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Business scholarship on forced labor and labor exploitation is at an early stage of development. Yet, there have been some notable contributions from SCM scholars to the literature thus far (Gold, Trautrims, & Trodd, 2015; New, 2015; Stevenson & Cole, 2018; see Caruana et al., 2020 for an overview). Future research could build on this nascent body of work as well as research on the global business of forced labor from across the social sciences. Indeed, SCM scholars have a unique contribution to play, given that they are experts in the precise dynamics that have been identified as crucial determinants of the patterns of forced labor within the contemporary global economy. In this section, I discuss future directions in the research agenda to understand the role of supply chains within the global business of forced labor and highlight the potential for supply chain scholars to contribute, focusing on topics, methods, and ethics.

Topics and Data

Supply chains scholars could draw on central supply chain management concepts to progress research on forced labor, as is summarized in Table 1.

In order to make a meaningful contribution to the emerging interdisciplinary literature on forced labor in supply chains, it would be advantageous if supply chain scholars could mobilize their expertise in the management of goods and services within supply chains, from raw materials to logistics to sale and consumption, is especially vital to building a nuanced picture of the supply chain dynamics surrounding forced labor. Researchers—especially SCM experts—can creatively deploy and repurpose the methodologies they regularly use toward researching supply chains to understand their role in the business of forced labor.

As Table 1 suggests, there is already rich research in the SCM domain on different supply chain properties that could fruitfully be leveraged to study the dynamics of forced labor. With regard to structural properties of supply chains, researchers could use their expertise for mapping complex and geographically dispersed supply chains to better understand how supply chains need to be designed to minimize the risk of forced labor. Using sophisticated methods from supply network research, efforts could focus on how the presence of intermediaries or "network brokers" could either increase the risk for forced labor, or help provide more oversight over vulnerable supply chains members. Furthermore, SCM scholars can draw on a rich body of knowledge on interfirm relationships between buyer and suppliers. Relevant topics that could be explored here is whether the presence of overly dominant buyers or captive suppliers increases the risk of forced labor in supply chains, or whether collaborative relations with suppliers are effective to reduce this risk. More research is also needed on the role of supply chain actor characteristics; for example, does the risk of forced labor increase when supply chains are led by multinational, as opposed to domestic firms with less stakeholder exposure? Does the involvement of smaller suppliers with less stakeholder exposure increase the risk of forced labor?

While there is a burgeoning field of behavioral SCM scholarship (cf. Kaufmann, Wagner, & Carter, 2017), it rarely if ever captures workers in supplier facilities. As a result, issues around the identity of workers and the composition of the workforce have been largely neglected. SCM scholars could draw on recent research in neighboring disciplines on how to make operations manufacturing more inclusive (e.g., Narayanan & Terris, 2020), and apply these insights to the studies of forced labor in supply chains.

Closely related to this is the study of labor supply chains—as opposed to product supply chains—as a novel area of research for SCM. The way workers are recruited and find employment in suppliers' factories impacts the risks of forced labor, thus, the study of labor supply chains deserves more attention by SCM scholars. The vast majority of research on labor standards in global supply chains focuses on worksites along the product supply chain. But the making of many goods also involves labor supply chains (Allain et al., 2013). A labor supply chain is comprised of the employment relationships that a worker passes through in order to arrive on a worksite. They can involve multiple layers of contracting and intermediaries, where agencies, recruiters, labor providers, or other intermediaries are involved in the supply of workers to producers. Again, with their rich tradition of supply chain mapping and analyses techniques, SCM scholars should be well equipped for this.

Finally, the governance of "sustainability" in supply chains through certifications and codes and conduct is a very well-established area of research in SCM. The top-down nature of these buyer-centric form of governance, often supported through audits, has increasingly come under scrutiny, however (Crane, LeBaorn, et al., 2019; Crane, Soundararajan, et al., 2019). Buyer-led form of governance might be particularly ineffective for addressing forced labor in supply chains. Thus, instead of continuing the current trajectory SCM scholars might be better advised to take a broader perspective on supply chain governance models for (preventing) forced labor.

TABLE 1

New Directions in a Research Agenda on the Role of Supply Chains in the Business of Forced Labor

Supply Chain Property	Indicative SCM Concepts Relevant for Studying Forced Labor	Example of Key Questions	Illustrative Data
Structure	Length of supply chain (i.e., vertical complexity) and number of suppliers in each tier (i.e., horizontal complexity) (e.g., Choi & Hong, 2002) Geographic dispersion among members within the supply chain/network (i.e., spatial complexity) (e.g., Romano, 2009; Sharma et al., 2020)	• Is forced labor more common in complex supply chains compared to short supply chains? • Does occurrence of forced labor increase with geographic distance between lead firm and other supply chain actors? • Is forced labor more common in global supply chains compared to domestic supply chains?	Data on: the prevalence and distribution of forced labor at different tiers of production and along labor supply chains; how this links to root causes.
Interfirm relationships	(A)symmetry of power and dependency (e.g., Cox et al., 2001; Hoejmose et al., 2013; Marshall et al., 2019) Sourcing practices and contractual arrangements (e.g., Foerstl et al., 2015; Pagell et al., 2010; Villena, 2019; Walker et al., 2012) Relational quality, length of relationship between actors (e.g., Touboulic & Walker, 2015; Vachon & Klassen, 2006)	• Is forced labor more prevalent in supply chains characterized by dominant buyers and captive suppliers? • Which sourcing practices give rise to forced labor? • Which commercial practices guard against forced labor? • Can long-term, collaborative relationships between buyers and supplier shield against forced labor?	Data on: value distribution along the supply chain; distribution of power, risk, accountability, and reward, including commercial pressures; structure and enforcement of governance initiatives along the chain.
Organizational and actor attributes	Size and stakeholder exposure (e.g., Gualandris et al., 2015; Parmigiani et al., 2011) Actor roles (buyer, producers or intermediaries) (e.g., Soundararajan & Brammer, 2018; Wilhelm et al., 2016)	• How is forced labor distributed along supply chains led by large multinational enterprises vs. small domestic firms? • How does the presence of intermediaries shape the prevalence and severity of forced labor?	Data on: how, when, and why forced labor is deployed as part of a business model; role of each actor within business model; financial data including wages, credit, and loans, margins; attributes including informality, size, geographic distribution; attributes of other actors within supply chain including investors and lead firms.

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Supply Chain Property	Indicative SCM Concepts Relevant for Studying Forced Labor	Example of Key Questions	Illustrative Data
Composition of workforce	Gender, migration status, race (including ethnicity, indigeneity), level of education, family structure and number of dependents, class (including level of savings), disabilities (e.g., Narayanan & Terris, 2020).	• Which types of supply chain workers are most vulnerable to forced labor across sectors? • Can supply chains be organized so that they do not seek out vulnerable and exploitable workforces?	Data on: demographic information for supply chain workforces, including those in forced labor and exploitation; patterns of how actors seek to profit from and exploit worker vulnerability; why workers are unable to exit.
Governance	Effectiveness of buyer-centric governance initiatives (i.e., certifications and supplier code of conduct) (e.g., Emmelhainz & Adams, 1999; Grimm et al., 2016; Wilding et al., 2012).	• What are the alternatives to buyer-led governance? • Which forms of supply chain governance are most effective in addressing forced labor? • How effective is ethical certification as a tool to create worksites free of forced labor in supply chains?	Data on: effectiveness of governance initiatives as tools to detect, address, and prevent forced labor; effectiveness of alternative forms of governance including state and worker-led alternatives to CSR.

As SCM scholars' interest in the topic of forced labor expands, it is imperative that scholars draw from and intersect with the social science research that already exists on these topics. They can no doubt learn a lot from this research in terms of sensitivity around ethics and best practices with respect to research design (LeBaron, 2018b). Further, reviewing the interdisciplinary social sciences literature on forced labor concentrated within disciplines like Political Science, Sociology, Law, Geography, and Development Studies is a good starting place to inform debate within SCM about what a proper business contribution to interdisciplinary scholarly effort to investigate forced labor should look like and how scholars could best add to these debates from an SCM perspective.

Advancing Research

Researching forced labor in supply chains is notoriously difficult and fraught with conceptual, practical, political, and methodological problems (LeBaron, 2018b). Because forced labor is illegal, and because governments and businesses are often resistant to granting access to their workforces, the data outlined above are not easy to access. But that is not a reason to adopt low evidentiary standards or to rely on poor quality or anecdotal secondary data. As several studies cited within this article make clear, it is possibleand highly important for both scholarly and normative reasons—to collect accurate and rigorous information about the business of forced labor. Here, I will highlight three key considerations for methods to advance research on the role of supply chains in the business of forced labor, drawing on my recent edited book that assembles expert scholars from a variety of disciplines to reflect on the challenges and best practices in researching forced labor in the global economy (LeBaron, 2018a).

First, it is important to be aware of the biases built into different sources of information; because of these, most deep empirical research on the business of forced labor gathers data from multiple sources. For instance, much of the information obtained from companies contains self-reported information, which can introduce bias because companies may narrate their practices in a misleadingly optimistic light and are hesitant to disclose information that could be damaging in reputational or liability terms. Thus, if a researcher is using company modern slavery statements as a lens into risk of forced labor in supply chains, they could mistakenly conclude that the risk is

minimal since companies report extensive measures like social auditing, ethical certification, and supplier codes of conduct to mitigate against this. However, if they were to include additional direct and indirect sources of data—such as information from victims of forced labor themselves, recruiters and other intermediaries, suppliers, labor inspectors, or auditors—the researcher would likely assemble a very different picture, as other supply chain actors shared information from their own vantage point. Triangulating across and combining multiple sources of information is critical to advancing research in this area, since all data sources on the business of forced labor will be imperfect.

Second, research on the role of supply chains in the business of forced labor should include both product and labor supply chains. While labor supply chains are often overlooked within research on forced labor, previous research indicates that they are crucial to understanding how, when, and why forced labor manifests within supply chains (Crane, LeBaorn, et al., 2019; Crane, Soundararajan, et al., 2019). Methods must therefore be developed to conduct research along both product and labor supply chains.

Third, not all researchers will have the time, resources, mobility, and interest to collect new primary data on forced labor, and in such cases, there is still important research to be done. There is a substantial and expanding pool of high-quality secondary data that researchers could draw on to enhance our understandings of the role of supply chains in the global business of forced labor. For instance, the United Nations Delta 8.7 website—a "global knowledge platform exploring what workers to eradicate forced labor, modern slavery, human trafficking, and child labor, an aim set out in Target 8.7 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals" (United Nations, 2020)—contains data dashboards for dozens of countries, which include several types of data ranging from national prevalence data on different forms of exploitation to data on government efforts to eradicate exploitation and forced labor through policy. Similarly, the United States Department of Labor's Office of Child Labor, Forced Labour, and Human Trafficking has published several studies of forced labor in supply chains, across multiple industries and parts of the world. As well, disclosure statements made by companies in response to tax and financial regulation and labor-related disclosure and transparency legislation (e.g., 2015 UK Modern Slavery Act) are an important and growing source of secondary data.

Business researchers may also consider how they could repurpose their existing sources of information toward analyzing the business of forced labor. For instance, many business scholars conduct research using industry databases like Factset and Panjiva. But while these sorts of databases are accessible to business and management researchers, who are often well-trained in their use and whose business schools can afford to pay their high subscription fees, they are often more challenging to access for other researchers in the social sciences. This gives business scholars a unique advantage and role, since they can access sensitive financial and corporate ownership data that is challenging for other researchers to find and understand. Business scholars could use these databases to model nuanced pictures of supply chains, the actors within them, and their relationships to each other, for instance, and then match these up to existing on-the-ground studies of forced labor conducted by other social science researchers.

There is no shortage of analysis that could be done by using and combining different types of secondary data. In this way, researchers can begin to build a picture of how root causes differ across national contexts and sectors and deepen understandings of the global business of forced labor by looking at this data from different vantage points and new angles. Thus, not all research methods to advance this agenda need to be field-based; in fact, there is considerable and hugely important work to be done from the comfort of one's desk.

Ethics

As research to understand the role of supply chains within the global business of forced labor advances, it is imperative that ethical considerations remain front and center. Multiple interlocking ethical challenges surround research in this area; most importantly, ensuring no harm is done vulnerable actors, particularly where they participate in research. Of all of the actors within this research agenda, workers have the most to lose through participating in research on the business of forced labor. Not only are they giving up time and potentially losing income to speak to researchers, they could also lose their job or face physical violence or retaliation from their employer or government for speaking out and sharing their stories (see chapters by Chan, 2018; Howard, 2018; Okyere, 2018). Where victims of forced labor or workers who may be experiencing exploitation are going to be consulted as sources of information within research design, it is vital that researchers carefully consider ethical consequences and build rigorous, approved ethics protocols at the outset of every project.

Researchers should be well-trained in working with vulnerable populations, have in-depth knowledge of local culture and contexts, and have carefully planned out how to approach, invite, interview, and record keep with research participants in a way that: upholds their safety; treats participants with respect; allows for

meaningful discussion about risks and potential harm; creates opportunities to give and withdraw consent; and anonymizes sensitive information. As well, they should have carefully considered the ethics around reporting criminal activity that may be uncovered in their research to the authorities and have a plan in place to minimize risks and potential harm for research participants and research teams including themselves.

Finally, researchers must carefully consider the ethics of what could happen following the publication of their data (Crane, 2019). For instance, if they published a study of forced labor on a certain worksite or region, and if buyers stopped sourcing from that company as a result, would the workers paradoxically be worse off without the income from working in that factory or field—however insufficient and toilsome it may be—if there is capital flight and no other work available? Of course, researchers cannot control what is done with their research once it is published, but they do make choices that shape the landscape of possibilities, such as whether or not to anonymize company names or to disclose information that could damage research participants.

Ethical considerations may also shape the methods and topics that researchers select, so these three areas should be seen as interlocking rather than distinct (see chapters by Howard, 2018; LeBaron & Crane, 2018; Pliley, 2018; Quirk, 2018). SCM scholars have the capacity and opportunity to make unique contributions to advancing research on the role of supply chains in the business of forced labor and can learn from the research that has already been conducted in disciplines where the literature on these topics is already well-established.

CONCLUSION

Growing interest in the global business of forced labor is a positive phenomenon. Forced labor remains one of the greatest obstacles to achieving decent work in supply chains, so there is considerable merit and value in understanding it better. Recent scholarship from across the social sciences has underscored how vital a role supply chains play, so it is crucial that these are investigated more seriously and deeply than they have been so far. The limited research that has been done to date has revealed many assumptions made about the business of forced labor to be inaccurate and partial; yet, we are a long way off from having a comprehensive understanding of how the business of forced labor operates across different types of supply chains, and of the dynamics that give rise to or eliminate it. Business scholars are perfectly positioned to make a contribution to advancing this research through: a focus on topics most closely aligned with their disciplinary focus and expertise; connecting to and building from the existing research on the business of forced labor from across the social sciences; developing rigorous research methods; and upholding meticulous ethics.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is on file with the author.

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Genevieve LeBaron (Ph.D., York University (Toronto)) is a Professor of Politics at University of Sheffield. She is also Co-Chair of Yale University's Modern Slavery Working Group. She serves on the UK Parliament's Modern Slavery and the Supply Chain Advisory Group and the reference group for United Nations Delta 8.7. She was elected to the College of the Royal Society of Canada in 2020. Her research focuses on labor rights and standards in the global economy and the governance of supply chains, which is the subject of her most recent book, Combatting Modern Slavery: Why Labour Governance is Failing and What We Can Do About It (LeBaron, 2020). Genevieve's field research has investigated business models of forced labor in agricultural, garment, construction, and retail supply chains across India, China, Ghana, the UK, and the US. She has analyzed the effectiveness of government and industry efforts to combat forced labor, including through Fairtrade certification, ethical auditing, and home state regulation. She has published on these topics in leading academic journals and is author or editor of four books, published by Polity, Oxford University Press, and Cambridge University Press. In addition to her academic work, Genevieve writes regularly for the media and has had bylines in The Guardian, Salon, and openDemocracy. Her recent media appearances include CBC Ideas, Radio France, BBC, and Whose Century Is It?, and her research has been profiled in The New York Times, The Financial Times, The Independent, The Guardian, and The Washington Post, among other outlets.