

Embracing Serendipity: Insights on Career Development, Theory Building, and Academic Publishing

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ABSTRACT

Pursuing an academic career in operations and supply chain management presents many challenges, notably establishing a trajectory of impactful and original research. This interview features a compelling conversation between Professor Barbara Flynn, a distinguished scholar in the field, and Professors Kenyth Freitas and Renata Andreoni. Professor Flynn reflects on her unconventional path into academia, shares critical insights into what constitutes a successful research career, and discusses common pitfalls in academic publishing. By offering practical advice and strategic perspectives, the interview provides valuable guidance for early-career researchers aiming to develop high-quality scholarship and progress within the academic community.

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You have had a distinguished career as a researcher and editor in operations and supply chain management. Could you elaborate on your career trajectory and the initial steps that led you into this field? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: My journey into academia was somewhat unconventional. I initially majored in psychology at a liberal arts college to become an elementary school teacher. After earning my teaching certification, I spent five years teaching primary school. During my summers in Wisconsin, working temp jobs as a secretary in Milwaukee, I was exposed to business environments and developed an interest in the field. This experience, although seemingly unrelated to academia, provided me with valuable insights and skills that I later found helpful in my academic career.

Eventually, I pursued an MBA to shift careers. In my second year, a required operations course proved to be a turning point. I was drawn to its structure, problem-solving nature, and emphasis on optimization, qualities that resonated deeply with me, and this inspired me to pursue a PhD in operations management rather than psychology. A professor suggested Indiana University, and I was accepted. My first semester was tough; my liberal arts background had not prepared me for the quantitative rigor, especially among classmates with engineering backgrounds. However, my psychology training in scientific thinking and writing proved a strength when coursework shifted to research methods.

During my doctoral program, we chose between two specialization tracks: management science, which was heavily mathematical and frankly beyond my capabilities, and simulation, which aligned with my interest in computers and coding. I chose the latter and developed a simulation comparing group technology to traditional factory layouts. The results were unexpected and puzzling. Despite doubts about my coding skills, I spent weeks debugging without finding any issues. Eventually, I rewrote the program using different software and got the same results.

This moment marked a turning point. I realized the counterintuitive findings were correct. Further analysis revealed a sound explanation, significantly enhancing the originality and impact of my dissertation. The experience taught me the value of persistence and critical thinking. While I initially lacked confidence in my technical skills, the process deepened my understanding and provided a lasting sense of accomplishment. My psychology background instilled in me a strong foundation in research design and experimental methodologies, shaping my teaching approach.

In the early years of my research career, I focused on simulation modeling. A casual conversation with a management professor at Iowa State introduced me to total quality management, and he suggested surveying to explore its effectiveness. Although survey research was uncommon in our field then, my psychology background gave me the tools to design one. I quickly developed a survey and submitted an abstract to a conference. While the abstract was accepted, the survey produced very few usable responses.

At the conference, I presented the flawed study honestly, discussing what went wrong and how it could be improved. This openness caught the attention of Roger Schroeder, a leading scholar from the University of Minnesota who was in the audience, and this led to a 20-year partnership that produced some of my most impactful work. This experience underscores the power of honesty, learning from failure, and the importance of casual conversations and networking in shaping a research career.

Following this initial collaboration, Roger and I, along with my husband Jim (who specializes in management and strategy), Kim Bates, and Sadao Sakakibara, recognized a growing interest in survey research within the operations management community. We decided to organize a half-day workshop on survey methodology at a conference. We were uncertain about the attendance, given the limited use of surveys in the field at that time. However, the response was overwhelming, with attendees overflowing into the hallway. Consequently, we co-authored an article on conducting surveys in operations management, addressing the rationale, key considerations, and common pitfalls. This practical 'how-to' article (Flynn et al., 1990) became the most highly cited publication in the *Journal of Operations Management* for many years. This impactful publication originated from the rather unusual circumstance of presenting a flawed survey and openly discussing its limitations at a conference.

What distinguishes successful researchers from those who struggle to make a significant impact? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: A crucial aspect of impactful research is a genuine enjoyment of the process and a mindset open to intellectual exploration beyond traditional boundaries. Operations management research can often feel cyclical, adhering to established paradigms and frustrating those seeking innovation. However, influential

research often arises from challenging assumptions and pushing disciplinary limits while anchoring in the broader field. This highlights the need for passion in research, as it is this passion that drives us to explore beyond the boundaries and challenge the status quo.

My work has benefited greatly from engaging with literature outside operations management. My background in psychology and management provided a strong theoretical foundation, particularly valuable during early empirical studies that required significant conceptual development. Given the field's limited theoretical base at the time, I frequently drew on established frameworks from psychology and strategic management, adapting them to operational contexts (Wu et al., 2010). While some applications were unconventional, they were often well-received for introducing deeper theoretical perspectives into a relatively underdeveloped area.

This highlights a delicate balance. How does one innovate and contribute novelty while still adhering to the established norms of the field? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: Indeed, navigating the balance between innovation and convention is a persistent challenge in academic publishing. In this context, the role of engaged editors is vital. While junior reviewers play an important developmental role, they may sometimes rigidly apply established methodologies, potentially dismissing novel contributions. Editors must be willing to intervene, applying their judgment to recognize the potential of unconventional work.

A powerful example is activity-based costing in accounting. Initially rejected for violating traditional principles, it was eventually published because an editor recognized its paradigm-shifting value, ultimately transforming the field. While not all research has such an impact, it is frustrating when promising work is rejected without sufficient editorial engagement.

Editorial vision is critical. Consider the story of a children's author in England whose manuscript aimed at the pre-teen demographic, was repeatedly rejected by many publishers. The feedback consistently cited its deviation from conventional themes for that age group. Ultimately, a small publisher allowed his twelve-year-old daughter to read the book despite initial reservations. Her enthusiastic response led to its publication. That book was *Harry Potter*, which has become one of the best-selling series globally, and this illustrates the importance of recognizing the unique potential of a manuscript, even if it deviates from established norms. The lesson is clear: editors must sometimes override consensus to champion original work, provided it remains grounded in scholarly discourse. Ultimately, the peer-review process should not be a simple vote; editors have the responsibility and perspective to guide the field forward through thoughtful, independent judgment.

What habits or mindsets do you recommend for aspiring researchers? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: Active engagement in peer review is crucial. Evaluating others' work provides a unique perspective on one's research, fostering critical and objective analysis. The experience of meticulously reviewing manuscripts, whether through formal written reviews or discussions with colleagues, is invaluable for learning and generating research ideas. Reviewing articles has been a rich source of inspiration for my research. While my career has been mainly at institutions without doctoral programs, limiting my PhD student mentoring, the insights I've gained from extensive reviewing have been significant.

Active participation in academic conferences is also important. Beyond attending presentations, engaging in substantive discussions with colleagues formally and informally yields valuable insights, research ideas, and collaborative opportunities. Given my experience in smaller academic units, I proactively sought interaction with a broader scholarly community. Accepting invitations to serve on international dissertation committees provided further learning and facilitated interactions with diverse researchers and perspectives. This cross-cultural exchange has dramatically enriched my intellectual development and understanding of the field.

What were the motivations behind your transition into editorial roles, specifically as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Supply Chain Management*? Furthermore, how has this experience as an editor shaped your perspective on the field? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: That is a genuinely insightful question. My progression into editorial roles was less of a deliberate decision and more of a natural evolution within academia. The typical trajectory often involves serving as a reviewer, followed by an appointment as an Associate Editor, and potentially leading to an Editor-in-Chief

position. Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of serving as editor for three distinguished journals: the *Quality Management Journal*, the *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, and the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*. Focusing on educational scholarship, the latter provided a different yet equally enriching experience.

I have always approached each endeavor with a commitment to learning, and my time as an editor has been exceptionally educational, particularly in refining my understanding of effective scholarly writing. Exposure to a diverse range of manuscripts provides invaluable insights into common pitfalls and, more importantly, illuminates the characteristics that distinguish genuinely impactful research. As you mentioned, one can often discern the quality of a paper upon initial reading. My editorial roles have thus been a continuous learning process.

Working with exceptional individuals made my tenure at the *Journal of Supply Chain Management* particularly rewarding. As part of a collaborative team of three editors, with some rotation among the other two positions, I gained profound insights into the operational mechanics of academic journals. The process of formulating journal policies was particularly engaging. While researchers may occasionally critique journal policies, I can attest to the considerable deliberation and thoughtful discussion that underpin their development. Furthermore, engaging with the relationship between editors and publishers exposed me to aspects of academic publishing I had not previously considered. While I cannot pinpoint a specific catalyst for my initial foray into editing, it was a positive and enriching experience for which I am grateful.

Shifting our focus slightly to theory, have you observed any evolution in how theoretical contributions are made in leading operations management journals? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: Yes, and I have observed a trend that concerns me: a perceived movement away from robust theoretical development. This shift is troubling, given my appreciation for theory and its foundational importance. While operations management, perhaps due to its historical training paradigms, has not always possessed the deeply ingrained theoretical traditions of some other disciplines, there has been a persistent misconception among some that a comprehensive literature review equates to theoretical grounding, and this was a recurring point of contention during my time as an editor.

For a period, our field experienced a positive trajectory toward more rigorous theoretical development, where theory was effectively employed to inform methodological choices, interpret findings, and fulfill its intended scholarly purpose. The editorial philosophies of individual journals can influence the emphasis placed on theory. Some editors genuinely value strong theoretical contributions, while others may prioritize different aspects. This issue is further exacerbated by some less experienced reviewers who may not fully appreciate the significance of robust theoretical frameworks. They might question the extensive development of theory in the initial sections of a manuscript, suggesting its truncation. This can be frustrating, as a well-articulated theoretical foundation is crucial for providing context, generating testable hypotheses, and ultimately contributing meaningfully to the field's understanding (Pagell et al., 2022).

Considering your editorial experience, do you perceive any specific challenges Brazilian researchers or those from emerging economies face when submitting to leading international journals? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: The formal editorial process is designed to be impartial regarding the authors' geographical origins. While the data collection location (e.g., Brazil) may indicate the authors' affiliations, the evaluation should ideally remain unbiased. However, my experience working with Brazilian researchers has occasionally revealed differences in writing style. While linguistic diversity is valuable, academic writing often demands a specific style that may differ from the more expressive and colorful language common in Brazilian Portuguese. I recall a student in one of my classes questioning the need for consistent terminology, explaining that their prior education emphasized linguistic variation as a sign of skillful writing. While this may be true in other contexts, academic discourse requires precise and consistent terminology. Therefore, adapting to the expected writing style is crucial.

It is important to note that the quality of research varies among individuals regardless of their nationality. As an editor, I have encountered numerous high-quality papers authored by Brazilian researchers that have been successfully published. However, a recurring theme applicable to researchers globally is the critical need to understand the target journal thoroughly. A significant error authors often make is submitting without a clear grasp

of the journal's scope, methodological preferences, and established norms. It is often evident that authors have not familiarized themselves with previously published articles in their target journal.

For example, the *Journal of Supply Chain Management* is explicitly empirical. Despite this clear focus, approximately 40% of the submitted manuscripts we received were modeling papers, leading to immediate desk rejections. This highlights the importance of adhering to the 'Instructions for Authors.' Investing time in understanding a journal's focus can significantly improve submission success rates. This principle applies equally to Brazilian and international researchers. Selecting the appropriate journal is a fundamental step.

What advice would you offer young scholars to advance their careers? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Barbara Bechler Flynn: The most crucial advice I can offer is to identify and pursue an area of research that excites you. I have encountered junior scholars who lack enthusiasm for their chosen topics, which inevitably hinders their progress and overall job satisfaction. One of the privileges of academia is the autonomy to select our research focus. Therefore, it is imperative to work on topics that ignite your passion. When you are genuinely interested in your research, the process becomes more enjoyable and fosters greater creativity in your thinking.

I often found myself balancing research with teaching responsibilities and institutional service, sometimes to the detriment of dedicated research time. However, I always viewed research as a reward to look forward to after addressing other obligations. Ideally, research should be approached with this intrinsic motivation. If a particular research area does not evoke this enthusiasm, it may be wise to explore alternative topics. Universities generally provide considerable latitude in research focus if it aligns with one's broader field. If you find yourself consistently disengaged with your area of specialization, it might indicate a misalignment. Thus, identifying a research area you are passionate about is crucial.

As I mentioned, cultivating a professional network by engaging with colleagues at other institutions and exchanging ideas is also exceptionally valuable. This interconnectedness is important for intellectual growth and career advancement.

Academic evaluation often encompasses research, teaching, and service. While service to one's institution is important, service to the broader profession is equally significant. Engaging in professional service, such as attending conferences and participating in academic organizations' committees, facilitates networking with scholars at other universities. These connections can prove invaluable for potential career transitions or when seeking external evaluations, such as letters of support during the tenure process. Furthermore, these interactions can spark new research collaborations and enrich teaching practices. Attending teaching-focused conference sessions is particularly beneficial for exploring innovative pedagogical approaches and enhancing student engagement. Therefore, actively participating in the broader academic community and nurturing professional relationships are critical for career development. Interestingly, despite not pre-selecting specific themes for this discussion, these key areas consistently emerge as central to my advice for young scholars.

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