

Sociological Aspects of Seafarers' Life and Work and Management Styles in Shipping

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Abstract

This scientific paper provides a systematic analysis of sociological relationships in the area of seafaring as well as management styles in maritime shipping industry, with particular emphasis on the specific features involved in the vocation of a seafarer. The research was carried out on a sample of seafarers attending training courses at Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split. Separation from family, friends and familiar environment represents one of the essential features of the seafarers' life that are discussed in the paper. Another important sociological factor of the seafarers' specific profession is their workplace, i.e. the ship.

Keywords: Maritime affairs; Sociological aspects of seafaring; Seafarers; Management in maritime shipping industry

Introduction

As this paper's authors have learned from experience, contacts with seafarers and their participation in the internet forums, it appears that seafarers reluctantly take comments on the specific ways of their life and work which are made by people who do not come from their walk of life. Their attitude gave an impulse to this research. The results have been produced through surveying the seafarers and analysing their statements posted on online discussion sites where they share their experience. The research sample consists of the seafarers attending additional training programs at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split, the so-called Special education and training programme for seafarers [1].

It is assumed that the seafarer's vocation is determined by particular features of their lives and workplaces which have additional socio-psychological implications for their work and private life, and in reverse, for the management processes in maritime shipping where managers should be aware that they deal with people whose way of life is specific and atypical, who are detached from their families, friends and homeland, and who work under specific conditions – onboard vessels. These aspects are well illustrated in Branko Turčić's book "Živi, mrtvi i pomorci" [2].

The purpose of this study has been to make a scientific contribution to a better understanding of the socio-psychological aspects of seafarers' life and work, and to point out the specific management styles in maritime shipping industry. Most of the scientists exploring these issues wonder about the motives that encourage seafarers to sign on and opt for a career which brings them, as a proverb says, "blood, sweat and tears" [3]. Why do these people decide to spend most of their lives away from home?

The explanation lies perhaps in the notable Latin phrase "Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse" – "To sail is necessary; to live is not necessary". Or maybe the motive could be summarised in a statement of a seafarer who says: "It is all about being in love with the sea and the job!" but then adds: "High earning could be another reason, though!"

In this era of globalisation and severe economic crisis, these reasons should be complemented by unemployment and difficulties in finding jobs, in particular the ones that can provide reasonable earning and safety.

It should be noted at this point that some laymen consider a

seafarer's life an easy one.

Before engaging in controversies over seafarer's professional motives and life quality, we should consider the following: if an average working life at sea amounts to 30 years, how much time does a seafarer spend with his family? Probably around half the time, i.e. up to 15 years. In order to obtain accurate information, a number of various factors affecting the end result should be taken into consideration.

During the assumed 15-year detachment from their families, most of seafarers have children. Due to the specific working conditions of their fathers, children grow up and turn into strangers as their fathers do not have a chance to get to know them. Their fathers are simply not able to be there when they smile or cry or have birthdays.

The authors of this paper assume that the seafarer's profession has not been sufficiently examined from the psycho-sociological point of view. Likewise, negative sociological implications of their careers for their narrower (and wider) communities have not been sufficiently analysed, e.g. the correlation between marriages and divorces, physical and psychical problems resulting from constant adjustments to living at sea and at home, sociological issues caused by emigration (given the fact that many seafarers work for foreign employers). In addition, the characteristics and specific features of seafaring have not been fully recognised and defined with regard to other professions, both from the standpoint of the very performer of the working process (the seafarer) and from the point of view of the organiser and director of the onboard working process – the manager, i.e. the master. Moreover, the differences in earning, complexity, workload and other aspects of various onboard professions from the management level (master and other officers) to the executive positions may have not been sufficiently explored. Also, it would be interesting, under today's circumstances, to further examine the validity of the assumption that seafaring professions are more dangerous than the shore-based ones, i.e. to find

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out what risks are involved in seafarers' professions today. There are undoubtedly a number of other particular and interesting aspects of seafarers' life and work in relation to other, shore-based jobs. All these aspects require answers and better understanding of these professions and vocations.

Impact of the Global Crisis on the Position and the Vocation of Seafarers – Sociological Aspect

This chapter discusses the impact of the global crisis on the position and the vocation of seafarers from the sociological point of view.

Uncertainty and unpredictability of the sea voyage, waiting for the news from the far seas, and constant re-adjustment to the shore life upon returning home, represent some of the sociological elements of the seafarers' life and work that have been essential throughout the history of their profession.

Over the past few decades it has been noticed that it has been increasingly harder for the seafarers to sign on for appropriate onboard positions. This makes their stay ashore longer, creates a strong feeling of uncertainty and threatens the existence of seafarers' families. The problem has been particularly affecting the area of lower-ranked positions where the cheap labour from the developing, mainly Eastern countries, has flooded the market and cut the labour cost. This results in freezing the pay rates and other benefits at the existing levels or, in worst cases, in reducing the pay rates and lay-offs. The number of Croatian shippers has been decreasing and the seafarers and the authorised recruitment agencies have been increasingly looking for jobs onboard foreign vessels, which is not news any more [4].

Seafarers who cannot sign on are obliged to pay taxes as they have not managed to spend the "required number of days at sea". Although the idea of including Croatian seafarers into health insurance and pension scheme was generally good and sound as it was aimed at providing certain stability and protection for the seafarers and their families, the implementation of the system has revealed a number of drawbacks and shortcomings of the state administration whose bureaucratic approach further aggravates the already difficult seafarers' position. Shipowners have been organised at the global level for a long time; therefore, the response of the seafarers' unions has to be global [5]. Small and disharmonised unions lose their fights against multinational companies and shipowners whose only goal is profit. Companies tend to regard seafarers as operational cost, just like fuel or amortisation. However, a Croatian trained and skilled seafarer represents an asset rather than cost [6].

There have been an increasing number of vessels "escaping" from national registers into the so-called cheap registers. Unfortunately, this occasionally occurs in some Croatian shippers which, upon entering a vessel into such a register, tend to employ cheaper personnel (e.g. Filipinos) [7].

Sociological View on the Seafarer's Identity

What determines an adult from the emotional standpoint? In addition to general socio-psychological characteristics that define and affect a person's identity and personality, the identity is largely shaped by family, profession and living environment. These elements apply to the seafarer's identity as well, but there are important distinctions regarding his family and specific way of life [8].

The essential issue with regard to seafarers and their families is the seafarer's affirmation as a husband and as a father. It is well known that

the affirmation of seafarers as husbands and fathers on a daily basis does not exist. Separation from family, resulting from the nature of seafarers' workplaces, reduces the possibility of their full affirmation as fathers and husbands. A seafarer's family role as a father and husband can be considered as minor, given his frequent absences. At the same time, his shore-based family has to adapt to his absence and organise a family life without essential roles of father and husband. Still, when the seafarer is at home, i.e. when he is not at sea, his "family visits" are not sufficient to provide him a well-deserved role of a husband and a father, i.e. a role of an essential family member [9].

As a seafarer is not able to fully accomplish his identity and the deserved family function, he in a way attempts to find and build his identity in his profession and safe positioning among crewmembers [10].

Under these conditions, seafarers are compelled to rely on mediators who represent their closest community. The direct mediators between them and their employer (company) are the superior officers. Seafarers can rarely get a chance to address to the employer directly; it is more likely that they spend a long period of time, even their entire working life, without meeting their employer or company owner personally. The vessel's master is entitled to mediate in the economic matters between the staff and employer, which is another specific feature of seafaring.

Shore-based mediators include officials employed by certain organisations or companies who perform administration tasks on behalf of seafarers. In addition to these officials, there are individuals and institutions outside the ship and company environment that may have an important function as mediators between seafarers and their families and homeland. These include social services, church, charities and unions [11].

Numerous contacts with foreigners add a multinational aspect to seafaring. This aspect is much more emphasised than in other professions. In these circumstances, a seafarer expresses his identity and acts as a representative of his nation and the society he comes from. Nation is an important element of a seafarer's identity [12].

Results Produced by the Research on the Sociological Aspects of Seafarers' Life and Work

The research was carried out on a random sample of 77 seafarers who attended the Special education and training programme for seafarers at Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split during the academic year 2011/2012. Here it is necessary to point out the specific nature of the survey as the latter was conducted while the groups of seafarers enrolled in the training programme were ashore, i.e. not at sea. They came and went and returned to classes after sea-time periods, so that it was hard to obtain a relevant number of respondents. As a result, a total of 77 seafarers were surveyed [13,14].

A standard questionnaire containing ten questions was used for the purpose of surveying. Questions can be grouped into two sets: questions 1-6 refer to personal problems of seafarers as individuals. Their goal was to find out the ways that the seafarers express their identity with regard to their families and friends, i.e. to explore the implications of seafaring for their personal lives. Questions 7-10 deal with working environment (interaction with colleagues, superiors, attitude towards working onboard and alike, with a special focus on management styles in maritime shipping industry).

The goal of the research was to find out seafarers views on their

sociological position within their families, friends and working environment.

Regarding the satisfaction with their profession (Table 1), the respondents provided the following answers: 20 of them were satisfied with their work, while 22 were not satisfied. 35 respondents asserted that seafaring and living on seafaring could be better.

Considering their affirmation as fathers (Table 2.1), 29 respondents stated that they were fully affirmed as fathers, whereas 45 respondents stated that they were but partially affirmed. Three respondents felt that they could not achieve affirmation as fathers at all, while two respondents said they were single and had no children.

The other part of the second question referred to the affirmation of seafarers as husbands (Table 2.2). 38 respondents claimed that they were entirely affirmed as husbands, 37 respondents felt that they were partially affirmed, whereas only two seafarers asserted that they could not achieve affirmation as husbands at all. Two respondents said they were single.

Regarding the feeling of alienation (Table 3), 63 respondents stated that they felt alienated from their families. 21 respondents asserted they were alienated from friends, while 11 respondents felt alienated from colleagues at work. 11 respondents said they were alienated from their homeland and 11 more felt alienated from all other categories. Only one respondent claimed not to be alienated from any one.

When it came to lack of social affirmation due to their specific jobs (Table 4), the seafarers managed in various ways. 15 respondents sought help from friends, whereas only three of the surveyed seafarers sought help and advice from a priest. Two respondents stated they sought help from maritime associations, while the vast majority – 45 respondents – stated they sought help from the corporate intermediary. An optional

a)	Satisfied	20
b)	Dissatisfied	22
c)	It could be better	35

Table 1: Question 1: With regard to seafaring I am.

As a father:		
a)	I am fully affirmed as a father	29
b)	I am partially affirmed as a father	45
c)	I am not affirmed as a father at all	3
d)	Single	2

Table 2.1: Question 2.1: How do specific working conditions affect my affirmation as a father and a husband?

As a husband:		
a)	I am fully affirmed as a husband	38
b)	I am partially affirmed as a husband	37
c)	I am not affirmed as a husband at all	2
d)	Single	2

Table 2.2: Question 2.2: How do specific working conditions affect my affirmation as a father and a husband?

a)	From family	63
b)	From friends	21
c)	From colleagues	11
d)	From someone else (homeland, all, no one)	23

Table 3: Question 3: Does seafaring profession make you feel alienated?

a)	Friends	15
b)	Priest	3
c)	Maritime associations	2
d)	Corporate intermediary	45
e)	Someone else (the internet, wife)	16

Table 4: Question 4: In case of lack of social affirmation due to my vocation, I seek help from.

a)	Good	17
b)	Lonely	7
c)	Non-creative	2
d)	Performing duties mechanically	52
e)	Other: Creative	2

Table 5: Question 5: Formality of relationships onboard your vessel makes you feel.

a)	Deck, Engine Room, Galley	44
b)	Waiting for return home	39
c)	Work and pleasant socialising with colleagues	6
d)	Other	2

Table 6: Question 6: Life and work onboard your vessel are reduced to.

a)	Patriarchal – authoritative	12
b)	Coaching	59
c)	Democratic	4
d)	Other: - Bureaucratic	3

Table 7.1: Question 7.1: The master's management style.

response was seeking help from someone else: 11 respondents claimed that they did not seek help from anyone; one respondent stated that he used the internet to help him become socially affirmed, while 4 respondents sought help from their wives.

With regard to formal shipboard relationships (Table 5), 17 respondents felt good, 7 lonely, while 2 respondents felt the lack of creativity. The vast majority of respondents, a total of 52, performed their professional duties in a mechanical way, and only 2 respondents felt creative.

When asked what the living and working onboard their vessels looked like (Table 6), the majority of 44 respondents stated that the life and work were reduced to "deck, engine room, and galley" while 39 respondents asserted that the life and work onboard their vessels were reduced to "waiting for return home". 6 respondents stated that living and working onboard their ships were "work and pleasant socialising with colleagues" whereas 2 respondents opted for the category "Other", but not providing any details.

Question 7: I would define the management style of the master and other superiors as...

The seventh question is divided into two parts – referring to management style of the vessel's master and management style of other superiors on board.

As for the management style of their masters (Table 7.1), 12 respondents felt that the master's style is authoritative towards his subordinates, whereas 59 respondents considered his style as coaching and advisory. Four respondents stated that their masters had a democratic management style, while three respondents defined the master's style as bureaucratic.

Regarding the management style of other superiors onboard their vessels (Table 7.2), the seafarers responded as follows: 6 of them declared that the management style of other superiors was authoritative, the majority of 49 respondents found the style coaching and advisory, 18 respondents defined their superiors' management style as democratic, while 4 respondents opted for the category "Other", i.e. declared that the management style was bureaucratic.

The eighth question referred to the features of the management style of the masters and other superiors on board, and was also divided into two parts.

Question 8: Circle the features of the management style of your master and other superiors on board, which define his/their management style best.

a. Master:

Rational, seeking advice, persistent, problem solving, brusque, analytical, structured, prudent, authoritative, providing stability, visionary, passionate, creative, flexible, inspiring, innovative, courageous, imaginative, experimenting, independent – 78

The first part of the eighth question (Question 8.a.) referred to the characteristics of the master as a manager. The vast majority of the respondents – a total of 78 – defined their masters in a very positive way.

b. Other superiors:

Rational, seeking advice, persistent, problem solving, brusque, analytical, structured, prudent, authoritative, providing stability, visionary, passionate, creative, flexible, inspiring, innovative, courageous, imaginative, experimenting, independent – 76

The other part of the eighth question (see Question 8.b.) referred to

a)	Patriarchal – authoritative	6
b)	Coaching	49
c)	Democratic	18
d)	Other: Bureaucratic	4

Table 7.2: Question 7.2: Management style of other superiors on board.

a)	I am satisfied with the master's management style	49
b)	I am partly satisfied with the master's management style	29
c)	I am not satisfied with the master's management style	0

Table 8.1: Question 8.1: Master.

a)	I am satisfied with the management style of other superiors on board	48
b)	I am partly satisfied with the management style of other superiors on board	17
c)	I am not satisfied with the management style of other superiors on board	2

Table 8.2: Question 8.2: Other superiors.

a)	The master should make decisions himself	38
b)	The master should convince the staff that his decision is good, but should make decisions himself	17
c)	The master should give a group of crewmembers an opportunity to bring their ideas forward and ask questions prior to making his own decision	12
d)	The master should suggest a draft of the decision which can be changed afterwards	0
e)	The master should familiarise the staff with the problem and listen to their suggestions, before making decision	13
f)	The master should set the limits within which a group of crewmembers can make decisions	3
g)	The master should set the limits within which a group of crewmembers can act and make decisions independently	0
h)	Other	0

Table 9.1: Question 9.1: Master.

a)	Other superiors should make decisions themselves	5
b)	Other superiors should convince the staff that their decisions are good, but should make decisions themselves	23
c)	Other superiors should give a group of crewmembers an opportunity to bring their ideas forward and ask questions prior to making their own decisions	11
d)	Other superiors should suggest a draft of the decision which can be changed afterwards	1
e)	Other superiors should familiarise the staff with the problem and listen to their suggestions, before making decision	37
f)	Other superiors should set the limits within which a group of crewmembers can make decisions	1
g)	Other superiors should set the limits within which a group of crewmembers can act and make decisions independently	0
h)	Other	0

Table 9.2: Question 9.2: Other superiors.

It is interesting to find out that the management styles of masters and other shipboard superiors are considered as rather democratic, which is exactly what the onboard employees expect (Questions 7-9).

The research also produced interesting findings about positive trends of using modern media (in particular the internet) and of joining various seafarers' associations such as unions and associations engaged in solidarity. In this way the seafarers jointly attempt to point out and deal with the issues related to their profession. The modern media such as the internet and mobile phones enable the seafarers to communicate with their families and friends ashore more frequently and easier than ever before.

Seaman's Profession and Maritime Shipping Today—Psycho-Sociological Implications

Seaman's life is hard and getting harder. In addition to separation from their families and friends, seafarers are increasingly busy catching up with newest maritime technologies applied onboard their vessels, at terminals, in cargo handling operations and shore support. On the other hand, the responsibility and workload of seafarers is increasing due to new regulations on the protection of marine environment of the coastal countries.

An average crew has been reduced from 36 members to only 18 members per ship. This, of course, varies with the shipping company and the type of cargo. Naturally, large tankers of 300 meters in length are still manned "regularly" with 30 crewmembers or more. Shippers tend to minimise the crew, but the safety of vessels carrying dangerous cargoes, workload of the crew on such ships, amplified duties aimed at daily maintaining the high level of safety on such vessels, as well as frequent inspections of port authorities, remain the priorities that cannot be jeopardised by downsizing.

As an example, a container ship operated by MSC, sailing on the route Europe-China-Europe, has about sixty ports of call over a six-month period. In most cases the seafarers have no time to go ashore to change the environment, relax and "escape" from the onboard routine. This is yet another indicator of the working (over)load of the crew who usually perform duties at least 12 hours a day, depending on the company. Many of the shipping companies, however, do not observe the ever stricter regulations on worktime and workload of crewmembers.

Furthermore, there is always a feeling of anxiety with regard to signing on for the same employer again as the labour market is very unsteady due to the availability of cheaper labour force from the developing countries. As in all economy sectors, employers are increasingly demanding and tend to decrease rates of pay in order to ensure more profit for the company. Moreover, there is a constant fear of getting injured, due to piracy, entering the war zones, or being exposed to daily risks at sea (fire, flooding, collision, grounding, etc.).

The prevailing sentiment across the seafaring population is that they have always been on their own (Horvat, 1997) and that their profession has always been hard both for them and for their families. The implementation of their social rights in Croatia is a special problem. Entering the health and pension insurance and filing a tax return have become compulsory since 1st January 2008. The so-called 183-day-rule (binding a seafarer to pay the full amount of taxes in the Republic of Croatia if he/she spends less than 183 days at sea, abroad, per year) has been designed in such a way that the days spent travelling or at school are added to the days spent at sea. Yet, in these times of recession and unemployment, the rule has become almost absurd.

In reality, seafarers find employment through authorised recruitment agencies in Croatia and abroad; in most cases, they pay insurance premiums and take care of their pension security themselves, they pay for most of medical services themselves, they pay the full amount of the annual tax unless they spend a minimum of 183 days abroad; in return, there are no benefits provided by the state, not even an unemployment compensation.

The number of seafarers in Croatia and worldwide is decreasing. According to official reports of the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure, there are 25,000 seafarers in Croatia. Their number is reduced each year, despite state subsidies granted to pupils and students enrolling maritime high schools and faculties, which is understandable under today's circumstances. The price of separation from family is too high, job descriptions are demanding, work is not steady and the future is uncertain. Given all the implications, the profession becomes less cost-effective and pay rates become less attractive. "I am a father too, and I would not be happy if my child chose to work in maritime affairs because I am well familiar with the sacrifice involved", says a seafarer.

Solidarity is the key word in maritime affairs – solidarity among the seamen and the crews of ships flying various flags. Without it, there would be much more sea accidents. Seafarers are aware of that and are always ready to render assistance, not asking for the reward. The Seafarers' Union of Croatia has founded the Solidarity Fund aiming to assist the seafarers having health issues and other problems at sea and at home. This type of assistance cannot solve problems but it can reduce their harmful effects.

Solidarity of other people towards the seafarers is another story. Other people consider them as wealthy individuals and rarely admit that there are two sides to a coin. In practice, the money a seafarer earns is supposed to cover the expenses of all family members throughout the year. All the above mentioned duties must be paid, in addition to permanent education and training for acquiring additional competences and certificates required by new regulations, corporate policies, international standards and conventions. The sacrifice arising from being separated from their families and friends is huge and a simple calculation shows that a seafarer never makes a fortune – in most cases he or she works hard for an average pay.

Each person experiences and deal with challenge in a different way. Fortunately, seafarers are predominantly strong and independent individuals, otherwise they could not survive in their severe professional environment. However, it means a lot to the seafarers to have someone to talk to and reduce the feeling of isolation, particularly with regard to modern multinational and multicultural crews. Linguistic, cultural and religious constraints are huge and hard to overcome; hence, seafarers tend to form small circles of relationships and have few people to communicate with on a regular basis. Today, it is hard to find a crew consisting of people having only one nationality. Most of the crews are multinational, with seafarers coming from all over the world. These multi-linguistic and cross-cultural gaps are hard to bridge even though the seafarers are considered as citizens of the world.

Communication technologies have greatly contributed to the feeling of being better connected with home, family and friends. Permanent contacts with home via the internet, mobile or satellite phones have important positive effects and help seafarers to cope with risks and challenges more efficiently. However, personal and human touch is irreplaceable. Hence the role of the Apostleship of the Sea is essential. Seaman's clubs, organised by the Catholic Church across the world, are meeting places where seafarers are able to satisfy their natural need of talking and socialising with people who can understand them. Hard situations and dreadful scenes that a seafarer experiences throughout his working life would be enough to fill a number of average lifetimes. This is very hard to endure and to cope with from the psychological standpoint. The shore-based community does not have enough understanding as most of other people do not have such experience, so that both the seafarer and his family take the consequences.

At the annual meeting of the Apostleship of the Sea, Captain Mladen Russo discussed the issue of Somali pirates, presenting arguments and interesting details. It is clear that the media address the issue from the Western point of view but, again, there is another side of the coin. It is tragic that the seafarers are victims of the unbearable situation as they are neither its cause nor the solution. It is probably not necessary to describe the feelings of an innocent man spending months in prison under inhuman conditions, fearing for his life constantly and looking at a machine gun in the attacker's hands as the only sign of civilisation. Arming a merchant vessel with weapons and escort is not a solution to this situation as the vessel thus becomes a military target and, besides, arms and escort are not there to protect seafarers but to protect cargo and corporate assets.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the socio-psychological aspects of the seafarers' life, work and social ties, it can be concluded that their profession involves exceptionally complex relationships. The complexity of their vocation arises primarily from the special features of their workplace – the vessel. All other socio-psychological relations towards life, work and relationships within their professional and private life stem from that aspect.

The workplace (vessel) and the work (seafaring) are important factors affecting the seafarers and separating them from their normal working and living environment. Separation and alienation are mainly manifested in repeated absences from family, friends and living environment.

The main goal of this paper has been to gather seafarers' personal views and professional experience through direct contacts (interviews), online discussion boards and research. It can be concluded that seafaring has its particular features (advantages and drawbacks) with regard to other professions. Taking into consideration all that has been said above, it may be asserted that to be a seafarer means to love this profession and the sea, despite all the complexities involved.

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