

Reflections on the Psycho-social Distress within the International Merchant Navy Seafaring Community

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ABSTRACT The objective of this paper is to analyse texts mostly from the international scholarship on psycho-social distress that seafarers are faced within the international merchant navy. It is in the seafaring context that this paper explores some of the distressing situations which the seafarer is faced with in the workplace and the impact of this on their performance and personal wellbeing. Netography methodology was utilised as the primary source for data. In addition, primary data were sourced from maritime websites; maritime online newspapers; online journals; and social media. The secondary data was accessed from maritime books and maritime newspapers. The conclusion drawn was that distress; multiculturalism, cultural, language, gender diversity; lack of interaction with family and friends; loneliness; and fatigue all can have a negative impact on how seafarers cope in the merchant navy. The paper suggests access and intervention from the helping services profession such as social workers and psychologists to enhance seafarers coping capacity.

INTRODUCTION

The maritime sector is cited as one of the most stressful industry in the world (Dickinson 2011; Carotenuto et al. 2012). Stressful circumstances in the merchant navy have several root causes and it needs to be addressed at maritime schools. Horck (2006) highlights that maritime training institutes concentrate mainly on theoretical training of future seafarers, but often neglect to address the human factors which they will encounter at sea, such as cultural language and gender diversity. Maritime students might carry theoretical knowledge when they start their career in the merchant navy, but often without the understanding of how important multicultural familiarity is for a fulfilling seagoing career (Horck 2006, 2008). Diverse cultures, cultural languages and gender can all be ingredients for intolerance, conflict, bullying and harassment and in rare cases violence (Horck 2006, 2008; Dickinson 2011; Vikkelsø n.d.). These factors can manifest itself in seafarers feeling isolated, depressed, feel physical and mental illness and the

feeling that they do not have support amongst their co-workers (Dickinson 2011).

The focus of this paper is on the “person”, which in this case is the seafarer who is in distress. Distress can be broken down into two main categories. Firstly, it answers the question of what can cause seafarers to become distressed whilst working offshore with emphasis on culture, cultural language, and gender diversity. Secondly, it is the symptoms of stress that manifest itself in distress that is examined. Distress symptoms include isolation, depression, loneliness, mental and physical illnesses.

METHODOLOGY

For purposes of this paper a wide range of literature has been consulted and thematically categorised to reflect on the psycho-social distress that seafarers are faced within the international merchant navy. The literature sources are mainly international hence its ability to provide a global perspective on the psycho-social distress commonly experienced by seafarers. In addition, data was collected from international maritime newspapers and bulletins such as *Alert*, *Anchor*, *Seahealth*, and *The Telegraph*. Parts of this study are supported by data originating through the use of Netography¹ which helps to access seafarers using social media. In this respect, Facebook was used as an interviewing mechanism amongst seafarers working in the merchant navy.

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RESULTS

The result of the literature analysis has been grouped into nine categories that have a psycho-social effect amongst seafarers. These categories were derived from the literature by virtue of them being cited with greater frequency. Psycho-social factors such as distress, multiculturalism, cultural differences, language impediments, gender differences, lack of interaction with family and friends, loneliness and fatigue are known to be the primary factors that impact on the lives of the seafaring community. Each one of these is discussed in some depth.

Distress

Distress is defined as an occurrence when a person is exposed to a stressor of physical or environmental nature lasting a long period of time that makes it difficult to cope with. In the case of the seafarer stress is the catalysts for becoming dysfunctional (Carotenuto et al. 2012). Seafarers are vulnerable in their working environment since it is physically and emotionally demanding (Carotenuto et al. 2012). This results in ship owners and its management misconstruing stress as the seafarer's inability to cope with the work whilst in real fact the problem is caused by stressful working conditions.

Coping or the lack of coping mechanisms in the merchant navy has only been researched and taken seriously in recent years (International Transport Workers' Federation 1999, 2002, 2003; International Maritime Organization 2006; Horck 2006, 2008; Nautilus 2009, 2010, 2013; Carotenuto et al. 2012; Herwadkar 2014; Kristiansen n.d.; Vikkelsø n.d.; Diederichsen n.d.). Folkman et al. (1986) define coping as "the individuals attempt to manage the psychological demands" presented to them in their environment. They further argue that the lack of coping occurs when the demands placed on them exceeds the person's resources and ability to cope. The ability to cope can only occur if one can "regulate stressful emotions and regulate the environment causing the stress" (Folkman and Lazarus 1985, 1980). Seafaring environment is unique in that seafarers not only have to share confined living spaces with co-workers from diverse cultures, cultural languages and genders, they also have to work and socialise within the confines of the ship (Borovnik 2005). Since the mer-

chant navy employs a multicultural crew, working and socialising have its benefits and own set of challenges for the seafarers (Horck 2006).

Multiculturalism

Employing a multicultural crew allows companies to cut costs to increase their profit. To acquire higher profits, maritime companies employ crew from different continents and pay them lower wages (Horck 2006, 2008). Larsen (n.d.) argues that many vessels now commonly have many nationalities aboard. This puts an extra strain on communication and understanding of differences. The lack of understanding diversity on-board ships has far reaching consequences. Horck (2006) wrote extensively on multiculturalism in the merchant navy and specifically highlighted the importance of including cultural awareness training in maritime colleges. The lack of cultural understanding often leads to conflict and ultimately distress amongst seafarers (Horck 2006). Horck (2006) continues by suggesting that it is necessary to teach maritime students to respect "the unique identities of each individual," regardless of their culture, cultural language and gender. Furthermore, students must be taught to respect individual activities, practices and each individual's worldview (Horck 2006). Intolerance towards culture, language, and gender can lead to conflict within the merchant navy (Horck 2006).

Cultural Differences

Cultural intolerance occurs on different levels in the merchant navy. Given the fact that a multinational ship crew is characterised by differences in language, lifestyles, religion and culture it is not difficult to imagine that interpersonal conflicts will arise. Such conflicts are known to be one of the main reasons for stress manifesting itself among seafarers on ships (Bhargava 2013). Whilst this may be the case, not all ship's experience problems as most with a multicultural crew are very professional (Bhargava 2013). However professionalism does not mean that the crew has a cultural understanding (Bhargava 2013) and the result of the lack of cultural understanding leads to the failure to communicate efficiently and effectively (Bhargava 2013; Visan and Georgescu 2012). When working with crew made up of different cultural

backgrounds one finds that the dominant cultural group wants the 'other' groups to approach work according to their specifications and reality (Askehave 2014). The attitude that the "Other" has to learn from one's skills and conform to its solutions is found to be non-conducive to a healthy work environment (Askehave 2014; Larsen n.d.). Different cultures have different ways of perceiving and doing a job. By not taking this into consideration can lead to conflict amongst crew members (Larsen n.d.).

Language and Cultural Language Differences

When addressing language in the maritime context it must be highlighted that other than English, there are other languages spoken on-board the ship (Horck 2006; Pritchard 2011; Sea-Health 2013). In this respect the Standards of Training, Certification and Watch keeping (STCW) 2010 (amended) in the maritime sector stipulates that for an officer to receive a Certificate of Competence, he/she must be able to read, write and speak English (Sekimizu 2010). However, the ratings are not required to be able to read and write English well but are required to understand the commands given to them (Sekimizu 2010)². This creates a possible communication gap between Officers and Ratings. Furthermore, when you add second language English speakers to cultural diversity then miscommunication is likely to increase. Second language speakers can be misunderstood by their accents and pronunciation of English words (Pritchard 2011). Nevertheless, having a good command of English does not mean that cultural awareness is present (Horck 2006; Visan and Georgescu 2012).

Seafarers who cannot sufficiently communicate in English are often alienated from social life on-board the merchant navy ships (Pritchard 2011). Interaction between first language English speakers and second language English speakers often leads to impatience and annoyance (Hetherington et al. 2005).

Gender Diversity and Intolerance

Both male and female seafarers can become distressed when faced with gender discrimination (Fajardo 2011). Intolerance towards female seafarers can lead to a hostile working environ-

ment which make female seafarer's workplace very stressful (Horck 2008). The infamous incident of the female seafarer cadet Akhona Geveza from South Africa who committed suicide after reporting that she allegedly was raped by an officer is a case in point. Her death opened a 'can of worms' in the South African merchant navy training and maritime government institutions on gender diversity.

wa Africa (2010), a reporter for the newspaper *Sunday Times* stated that male and female seafarers of deceased Akhona Geveza's cohort shared the following information with her: "two male cadets were raped by senior officials while at sea"; "a female cadet terminated two pregnancies that followed her rape at sea"; "three female trainees were pregnant at the end of their 12-month training stint"; "a male cadet was sent home a month before finishing his program because he refused to have sex with a senior official"; and a "female cadet has a child with a married South African Maritime Safety Agency executive after he forced himself on her and threatened to cancel her contract if she told anyone".

A former female cadet said:

When we arrived on the vessel, there were 10 women, and we were told that the captain is our god; he can marry you, baptise you and even bury you without anybody's permission. We were told that the sea is no man's land and that what happens at sea, stays at sea. (wa Africa 2010).

Sexual harassment is not only aimed at female seafarers, some male seafarers become vulnerable when they do not fit into the hegemonic male category (Fajardo 2011). During an interview a Filipino seafarer shared his feelings of being snubbed by male seafarers. He stated that he is reserved by nature and avoids conflict amongst his fellow crew members. His demure nature led to him being labelled as 'gay' and he was snubbed socially. Similarly, intolerance towards female seafarers leads to a hostile work environment. This is evident through long discussions on Facebook with female seafarers. A female officer joined a particular female seafarers' social media group and wrote about her ordeal as a junior officer:

"I reported to my crewing manager on my first trip to sea that the Bosun³ was trying to do things to me and he said it serves you right for being a woman at sea and if I was your father I would never have let you go to sea"

Captain Babs Beuse, a social media participant said that there are three types of men working on board a ship: ⁴

1. Those who tell you at the first chance that they have no problem with female seafarers working on ships. However, they have a problem with female seafarers. They will push and mob you as much as they can, but always argue it had nothing to do with the fact that you are a woman as long as you are able to do your duties.
2. Those who tell you that in their opinion women should not work on ships. It will take some time to convince them that you are not one of those girly-girls, but when they see that you are a good worker they will finally accept you.
3. Those that do not make any remarks towards your sex. They ignore the fact that you are female (no matter what they secretly think) and behave professionally and treat you like everybody else. Unfortunately, there are only a few of them around.

In an environment where you work, live and socialise with co-workers from many different cultures, language, and genders it does not allow you reprieve from a situation where you are taxed emotionally and physically (Raunek 2012).

Lack of Social Interaction, Loneliness and Isolation

A lengthy separation from loved ones, the reduction of crew and a fast turnover time in harbours leave seafarers with little or no time to go ashore to unwind and to cultivate a social life away from work (Carotenuto et al. 2012; International Transport Workers' Federation 2002). On board the ship the seafarer becomes both physically and mentally isolated. Physically by the limitations of the ship and mentally by the little contact to the outside world (Jensen 2002). Companies that value the wellbeing of their crew install TV, DVD players and provide internet access in the cabins. As seafarers become more comfortable with the internet, TV and video in their cabins, they retreat to their cabins after their shifts instead of socialising with other crew members (Kristiansen n.d). Officers are at higher risk of becoming lonely and isolated as they are subjected to the pressures of owners, port operators, other authorities and the perception that one must not socialise with the 'boss' (Carter

2005). A seafarer relayed to the researcher an experience at a time when a fishing trip was organised for the seafarers. The agent rented three fishing boats but only 12 seafarers showed interest to go out. That meant that they were four men per boat. However, nobody wanted to share the boat with the Captain, so the seafarer went with the Captain and the Agent, the fourth person decided to join one of the other boats, rather than spending time with the Captain. The seafarers avoided spending time socially with the Captain, thus isolating him from any social interaction with the other officers.

Herwadkar (2014) discussed the pro and cons of having social media and serving alcohol on board the ship. When ships became 'dry', by implementing zero alcohol policies, socialising at the bar was obviated (Herwadkar 2014). Social interaction was further reduced with internet access, as seafarers retreated into their cabins rather than socialising (Herwadkar 2014). Conflict also increased when the bandwidth became overloaded by too many seafarers using Skype or downloading movies (Herwadkar 2014). Although communication with family become easier - family conflict, crises at home and the constant need to cyber manage family also places a strain on the seafarers (Kristiansen n.d). Frequent communication does not substitute physical presence needed when homebound problems arise (Carotenuto et al. 2012). Home-sickness and loneliness are always present regardless of internet access (Carotenuto et al. 2012).

Missing Family and Friends

One of the challenges seafarers face is being away from their family and friends for long periods at a time (Raunek 2014). Seafarers at sea often miss their loved ones birthdays, family events, weddings, Christmas, funerals, and milestones achieved by their children (Raunek 2014). Raunek (2013) speaks about how homebound stress influences a seafarer's work resulting in the inability to focus on work when bothered by family or personal issues. The inability to attend to family crises at home induces stress and worry, which affects the quality of work amongst the seafarer. It becomes extremely difficult to work when being physically on the ship but mentally back home (Raunek 2013). Home stressors are known to lead to frustration, anxiety and insomnia (Raunek 2013).

Herwadkar (2014) shared his experience of family tragedy whilst working at sea:

"My father passed away while I was sailing... I still remember that dreadful email from my brother. ... Needless to say, I was devastated... The port was still a good nine days off. ... The initial feeling of sorrow was soon overcome by an intense feeling of frustration at being so helpless. What could one do from such a distance? ... The reassurance of your physical presence simply cannot be substituted by a phone call."

Von Dreele (2010) states that seafaring is unique in the sense that seafarers live in the same environment in which they work. After a long day 'at work' seafarers do not have the luxury to return home and spend time with their family (Von Dreele 2010). In an environment where one works 12 hours a day for seven days a week, for the duration of the contract, there are no weekends to enable them to de-stress and relax with loved ones (Von Dreele 2010).

A social media participant sent the following heartfelt message, on a question asked about how one copes when a loved one died when at sea.⁵ Question asked: "How did you/ or do you think you'll handle a personal crisis, such as death/ illness of spouse or other significant other whilst at sea. If you have had this experience can you describe what emotional effect it had on you?"

"I guess I have managed to carry on and use work to control the emotions, but in time the sleepless [ness] and the never ending flow of thoughts and misery it is hard. Self-harm or dark thoughts, loneliness, frustration take their toll, but if you are lucky enough to have kids, grandkids and family etc. who is part of your life, it is possible to negate the negative and remain positive, but it is hard work. Fortunately, I have been able to hold myself together but unfortunately many friends and fellow seafarers haven't been so lucky. Being able to reach out for help is not easy but is essential, on a good job where your shipmates are your friends it's not as hard. When I had to help my shipmates in similar circumstances, it is hard not to walk away as memories start to haunt but the feelings that I had when I have been helping overcome that".

Home bound stressors can influence sleep patterns whilst at sea. If seafarers work stress

are added to the conundrum, fatigue becomes problematic (Carotenuto et al. 2012).

Fatigue

Fatigue is cited in most merchant marine literature as not only as the main cause of maritime accidents but also the main cause for the decline of the emotional well-being of seafarers (Carotenuto et al. 2012). Despite Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) policies, this is still a great concern that needs to be addressed at entry level training of seafarers. Fatigue not only threatens the safety of the ship, but also the mental safety of the seafarer (Ottosen 2012; Carter 2005; International Transport Workers' Federation 2012; Raunek 2012). The International Transport Workers' Federation (2012) listed symptoms of fatigue, which affects seafarers physically and mentally; inability to stay awake; clumsiness; headaches and giddiness; loss of appetite; insomnia; moodiness; needless worrying; poor judgements; slow responses; and difficulty concentrating. When asked in an online survey the question 'as a seafarer, what single thing would improve your quality of life at sea?' the participant replied: *"I would have to say shorter shifts – I find exhaustion is a real problem after a couple of weeks at sea"*.

DISCUSSION

The literature review suggests that seafarers are potentially at risk of suffering from distress emanating from a multitude of social, psychological and physical factors. In many instances one distressing factor cascades into another resulting in a snowball effect which leads to other challenges. For example, lack of interaction on-board ship, loneliness and isolation could enhance the extent to which seafarers yearn to be with family and friends. Similarly cultural differences may impact on the extent to which seafarers are feeling isolated from one another affecting the level of interaction which perpetuates loneliness on board the ship. Combinations of all of these factors are known to cause distress for the seafarer.

Feelings of distress can impact negatively on the seafarer's ability to perform his/her job efficiently. In this respect, the lack of interest in work; lack of motivation; short temper; careless mistakes while doing work; tendency to take

short cuts to finish work; frustration; lack of seriousness towards one's duties and on-board safety and tendency to blame juniors or colleagues for mistakes are some of the most prominent distress symptoms that seafarers display. Alcohol and drug abuse appears to be the most prominent response to feelings of distress resulting in reactive mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and somatisation. The severity of such serious mental health problems is known to result in cases of suicide on-board the merchant marine. It is known that suicide in the merchant marine is the second highest in high risk occupations. Suicide amongst seafarers are linked to an extreme lack of social interaction among the crew, with 'silent' mealtimes used purely for 'refuelling' before crew members disappeared into their cabins. Suicides are often linked to marital problems and other family problems, work related problems, confusion, psychiatric or physical illness, social isolation, and other personal problems.

Psycho-social distress amongst seafarers is further heightened by the fact that they work and live in the same environment. There is a fine line that separates work from leisure time given the fact that they share the same environment. Non like other off shore work where the worker returns home daily, on board ship work does not help to make such a distinction. Hence, the seafarer does not detach himself fully from the work environment which compounds psycho-social distress.

In the training of seafarers much emphasis is placed on developing hard skills in preparation of fulfilling work related activities and optimizing productivity. The acquisition of hard skills is directly related to formal work performance to the exclusion of soft skills which has a strong psycho-social component within an informal context. It is the inability of seafarers to mediate soft skills in their working cum living environment that places them at risk of psycho-social distress. This psycho-social distress has a domino effect resulting in seafarers becoming mal-adjusted impacting negatively on their work performance which cascades into further psycho-social distress. Hence the seafarer becomes intertwined into a vicious cycle of psycho-social distress. Coping capacities amongst seafarers can perhaps be optimized by exposing them to acquire soft skills in order to cope with psycho-social distress. Exposure to the acquisition of

soft skills during the training of maritime workers can help seafarers to cope with psycho-social distress.

CONCLUSION

This paper only touches on a few causes and results of distress in the merchant marine. There are a multitude of other causes of distress within the seafaring community that cannot be dealt with within the scope of this paper. From the few that have been focussed on, suggests that psycho-social distresses can influence and be influenced at the same time. It also has a snow-ball effect with one psychosocial factor affecting another. This chain reaction within and between psycho-social factors creates a complex network of distress which the seafarer has to deal with hence making the life of a seafarer a very complex one. The work environment on a merchant navy may appear to some extent routine and simplistic in nature but the person that drives it is a complex being that is bombarded by a myriad number of negative psycho-social factors within a common environment in which he lives and works at the same time. It is the inability to deal with negative psycho-social factors that places the seafarer at risk. It is not only the seafarer that is at risk, the entire crew on-board as each one is dependent on the other for the efficient management of the ship and its safety.

Given the fact that the seafaring environment is both a place of work and residence detached from significant others (family and friends) for long periods of time, it is not surprising that they will either experience a sense of marginalisation and alienation. On board ships, they will interact and engage with fellow colleagues originating from different parts of the globe with no real assurance that they will sustain this once their journey is complete. Hence real investment in relationship building can hardly be considered a priority accept for purposes of work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the fact that the seafaring community are at risk of being challenged by various psycho-social behaviour problems, a need exists for persons from the helping profession to form part of their community of workers. These persons from the helping profession such as

psychologists and social workers are best placed to deal with emerging psychosocial distresses whilst on board ships. The services of the helping profession needs also be extended on shore through maritime centres to brief and debrief the seafarer's psychosocial concerns and behaviour. The psychological and emotional health of seafarers needs to be considered as part of the ships human resource management programme with the on ship management structure with the captain at the helm, being responsible for the psychosocial health of its members. Failure to do so, places the seafarer at risk of developing psychosocial pathological problems which comes at a cost to their well-being.

NOTES

- 1 Netography is a term coined by Ofcom (2008) and described as a research tool mostly used by utilising the internet as a whole to gain access to participants.
- 2 Under the STCW 2010 Convention, all officers in charge of a watch (navigational or engineering) must have a good command of spoken and written English. Senior officers with functions at a managerial level must also speak and write English, since this is a requirement at the previous level of responsibility. Ratings forming part of a navigational watch are required to be able to comply with helm orders issued in English. Crew members assisting passengers during emergency situations should be able to communicate safety-related issues in English or in the language spoken by the passengers and other personnel on board. In these days amongst multi-national and multi-lingual crews, the importance of sharing a common language cannot be underestimated (Sekimizu 2010).
- 3 Bosun and Boatswain are used interchangeably. Bosuns' duties are to supervise work on the deck.
- 4 For social group anonymity only participant name will be used, with permission
- 5 Question asked: "How did you/ or do you think you'll handle a personal crisis, such as death/ illness of spouse or other significant other whilst at sea. If you have had this experience can you describe what emotional affect it had on you?"

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