

Working off shore

An Anthropological Account of Labour at Sea

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Abstract

Based on four months of fieldwork on board an Anchor Handling Tug Supply Vessel [AHTSV] working within the Norwegian maritime offshore industry, this thesis explores how the workers relate to labour by focusing on what meaning they ascribe to different work-related tasks and issues on board. As a result of the particular context of an oil crisis that evolved throughout fieldwork, I aim to show that the crew first and foremost are concerned with the feeling of community that develop among them. Through an emphasis on the structural, bureaucratised organisation of the vessel as a backdrop, I want to show how the crew manoeuvre the field of tensions that arise from working under such particular conditions. I also emphasize that it is through meaning making processes that the crew experience and create autonomy and control over the labour situation. I demonstrate various social mechanisms on board that facilitate strong ties among the crew and their jobs and ties among each other as colleagues.

The emerging crisis, eventually culminating in a letter from the company with the message that fifty employees would lose their job, presented conflicting views on labour; on the one hand, the crew gave me insight on which tasks and activities they perceived with a high degree of autonomy, through their different attitudes to labour. On the other hand, when faced with crisis and potential dismissals in the company, the crew were confronted with their views on autonomy on board as their situation became highly uncertain.

Ultimately, I argue that labour, whilst undeniably related to questions of wage, benefits, personal qualities and so on, should also be studied in light of those processes of meaning the workers ascribe labour. I argue that by approaching these complex social arrangements that arise in the offshore labour organisation, one can better understand people's responses to both work-related insecurity and the value of labour.

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Positions on Board

1. Captain/Master
2. Deck Department
 - 2.1. Officers/Licenced
 - 2.1.1. Chief Officer/Chief Mate
 - 2.1.2. Second Officers/First Mate
 - 2.2. Deck Ratings/Unlicensed
 - 2.2.1. Bosun
 - 2.2.2. Able Seamen/AB
 - 2.2.3. AB Apprentice
3. Engineering Department
 - 3.1. Engineers/Licenced
 - 3.1.1. Chief Engineer
 - 3.1.2. Second Engineer
 - 3.1.3. Third Engineer
 - 3.2. Engine Ratings/Unlicensed
 - 3.2.1. Engine Cadet
 - 3.2.2. Motorman Apprentice
4. Electro-Technical Department
 - 4.1. Ship Electrician
5. Steward's Department
 - 5.1. Chief Steward

Glossary

- FPSO: A Floating Production Storage and Offloading (FPSO) installation is a floating facility, usually based on a (converted) oil tanker hull. It is equipped with hydrocarbon processing equipment for separation and treatment of crude oil, water and gases, arriving on board from sub-sea oil well via flexible pipelines.¹
- Jack-up rig: A jack-up rig, or a self-elevating unit, is a type of mobile platform that consists of a buoyant hull fitted with a number of movable legs, capable of raising its hull over the surface of the sea.
- Norwegian Maritime Cluster: The Norwegian Maritime industry is a complete cluster comprising leading shipping companies, equipment manufacturers, designers, service providers, universities, research and development centres and regulatory bodies. The Norwegian maritime industry accounted for 5.5 per cent of Norway's GDP in 2009. The Norwegian maritime industry is Norway's second largest export industry, after the oil and gas sector.²
- Chart/charterer: A shipper or a charterer may wish to hire a ship from a ship owner with a view of transporting certain quantity of commodities from port A to port B or he/she may wish to hire a ship for a certain period of time.
- AB: Able Bodied Seaman- Member of the deck crew.
- Manhole: A hole, usually with a cover, through which a person may enter a sewer, boiler, drain, tank or similar structure of the vessel.
- Dirty-mess: Also called 'Duty Mess'. A place where the seafarers can have coffee breaks, or breaks in general, without taking off dirty clothes.
- Barges: A long, large, usually flat bottomed boat for transporting freight that is generally unpowered, and towed or pushed by other craft.
- AHTSV: Anchor Handling tug Supply Vessel. Specially designed vessels for anchor handling and towing offshore platforms, barges and production modules/vessels.
- DP: Dynamic positioning. A computer controlled system to automatically maintain a vessel position and heading by using its own propellers and rudders.

¹ <http://www.bluewater.com/fleet-operations/what-is-an-fpso/>

² http://www.norway.gr/News_and_events/Business/The-Norwegian-maritime-industry/#.V3-ZHDddTRV

- HCS: Heading Control: Heading Control System with dynamic positioning function automatically controls a vessel's heading by controlling the rudders.
- Pile hammer: Mechanical device used to drive poles into soil to provide foundation support. In this case they create the foundation for windmills.
- NIS: Norwegian International Ship Register [Norsk Internasjonal Skipsregister].
- NOR: Norwegian Ordinary Ship Register [Norsk ordinært Skipsregister]

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1 Introduction – What Takes Place Offshore

This is a study of social labour organisation on an offshore supply ship, and how this organisation was affected by the oil crisis.

Before oil and gas, agriculture and fisheries were the dominant, and also familiar, trades in Norway. Most people will have a clear idea of what a farmer or a fisherman does for a living. Likewise, people have knowledge of where both fish and meat comes from, and the processes involved in such production. What takes place off shore, however, is an occupation most Norwegians have little knowledge about. Some clarification is therefore needed. When I write about the offshore industry in this study, it is through ethnographic material collected on board an anchor handling tug supply vessel. This type of vessel forms part of the Norwegian maritime industry, which consists of various branches within this sector. The offshore industry thus forms a branch under this broad industry and involves anchor handling tug supply vessels, construction vessels, supply vessels, seismic together with other offshore-related specially designed vessels and subsea activity.³ Within the Norwegian maritime industry, shipping owners, together with offshore activity, comprise the highest income-producing activities. By studying how the employees working in this isolated, but important, industry handle the recession off shore, I hope to contribute to the understanding of what life 'off shore' entails.

Contribution of This Study

The contribution of this study is therefore twofold. It aspires to capture a core theme of the current debate in Norway about the recession in the oil industry that is subsequently affecting the shipping industry. This is especially interesting since oil is of major macro-economic importance to the Norwegian society. Secondly, this thesis seeks to investigate

³ <http://www.708090.no/maritim-naering/hva-er-maritim-naering/>

how the employees working off shore socially organise labour. Lastly, this study contributes to the ongoing debate regarding labour as a research topic in social anthropology. It is hoped that this study will stimulate further investigations in this field.

Shipping and its Affiliation With Oil

The Norwegian society has a long maritime tradition (Berggreen, Christensen, & Kolltveit, 1989a, 1989b). As a consequence, much of the macro-economic success Norway has experienced can be viewed in relation to its activity at sea. Historically, Norway has been a leading figure in maritime development, as noted by then U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt in his appeal to 'look to Norway!' This phrase serves as a common denominator of how the Norwegian shipping industry was perceived nationally and internationally in the period of 1940-1970 (J. Bjørklund & Kolltveit, 1989, pp. 210-212). Retrospectively the period between 1950 and 1960 represents an affluent period in Norwegian shipping; a sense of control over the development, coherence between an expansion in transport-volume and access to new tonnage, and a feeling of 'mastering' the ships. The crew on board was mostly Norwegians and despite the profession being poorly paid, it had an inbuilt career-path (Bjørklund & Kolltveit, 1989, p. 310).

However, in the early 1960's very few people believed that Norway had the potential of becoming one of the world's leading oil nations. The geological survey of Norway even concluded in 1958 that 'the chances of finding coal, oil or sulphur on the continental shelf off the Norway coast can be discounted' (Lerøen, 2002, p. 15).

Nonetheless, during the time between August 1969 and New Year's Eve 1969, Norway successfully discovered oil, and in June 1972 the prime minister at the time, Trygve Bratteli, declared the start of production of the first offshore field in Norway (Lerøen, 2002, pp. 28-31). The strong national narrative of the 'oil-adventure' is still present today. Shipping, however, is still a major contributor to the Norwegian society, often directly connected to oil production, and the two industries of shipping and oil production make up two important pillars of Norwegian activities at sea.

The frequent connections between shipping and oil production mean that a significant amount of the Norwegian labour force is located off shore. In total, there are 32,000 employees working on board Norwegian vessels registered in NIS or NOR. More than 18,000

of these employees are Norwegian. However, these numbers include the whole maritime spectrum. In the offshore industry, on the other hand, the number of employees is 9,100 people.⁴ The *bounded* environment of the vessel makes for a highly interesting point of departure for understanding both how labour and meaning making practices in relation to the specific labour situation are organised. Due to such specific circumstances the vessel is a particularly interesting field for an anthropological analysis of labour. As already mentioned, this thesis takes the vessel as a contextual frame of study by making use of data collected from four months of fieldwork on board an anchor handling tug supply vessel: ‘a specially designed vessel for anchor handling and towing offshore platforms, barges and production modules/vessels’, located off shore.⁵

Historically the shipping industry has been sensitive to changes in the overall production of commodities and services; decline in production vastly affects the demand for services provided by the shipping industry (Nilsson, 1989, p. 335). As shipping, from the 1970s and onwards, was mostly dominated by transportation of cyclically sensitive products, such as energy and commodities utilised in energy-demanding production, international price fluctuations made the industry particularly sensitive. As the maritime offshore industry grew, intimately tied to oil production, shipping was equally affected by potential crisis, as was the oil-producing sector.

Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, a new oil crisis was on the rise. The Norwegian media coverage illustrates the severity of the situation by depicting the ‘oil-crisis’ as significantly worse than the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009. Since January 2014, at least 21 438 oil related jobs have disappeared and unemployment has become widespread.⁶ At the same time, the Minister of Petroleum and Energy, Tord Lien, together with several of the leading figures in oil service companies have implied that further downsizing-measurements will take place. Moreover, oil analyst Tore Gulbrandsøy predicted that 10,000 more oil-related jobs would disappear.⁷ There are complex relations behind the recent crisis. Among other explanations, oil analyst Aasulv Tveitereid points to the cost-efficient production of American shale oil causing a decline in prices, and secondly that OPEC will continue their strategy of production of oil into this pressured market.⁸ The advent of the crisis makes it

⁴ <http://www.708090.no/maritim-naering/18-000-norske-sjofolk-pa-norske-skip/>

⁵ <https://www.farstad.com/fleet/ahts-vessels>

⁶ <http://www.nrk.no/sorlandet/-oljekrisen-er-verre-enn-finanskrisen-1.12415316> 22/5.

⁷ <http://www.aftenbladet.no/energi/10000-flere-oljefeller-kan-forsvinne-3721255.html> 22/5

⁸ <http://e24.no/energi/analytiker-om-oljekrisen-vi-er-ikke-i-naerheten-av-bunnen/23475597>

especially interesting to investigate how such work-related insecurity is felt by a large group of employees. Oil analyst Thina Saltvedt has said this about the present crisis, ‘During the financial crisis, the finance minister could pull the golden card and pay his way out of the situation. Now, reorganisation is needed, and many more will feel it on their bodies’.⁹ As the quote indicates, this is a crisis that will ‘hit home’ for many people. Indeed, the increasing turmoil in the industry became a central theme of this study as the crisis intensified during the course of my fieldwork.

Research Questions

An emerging crisis in the offshore industry influenced the direction of this dissertation, as labour became a valid entry point to understand the larger system of subjective and structural conditions the employees associated themselves with. In this thesis, I attempt to dig into the daily life on board an offshore vessel at a time of an emergent crisis by analysing the locally situated work-life of a group of thirty-two men.

I ask the following research questions:

How is labour socially organised aboard an offshore supply/support ship?

What are the different attitudes to labour?

How is this social organisation affected by the crisis in the offshore industry?

By tapping into the daily lives of the crew, the focus in this thesis revolves, in many ways, around a set of contradictory elements: to be on board and comply with the job description whilst simultaneously being at risk of losing that very same job. Among the crew members, then, tensions between such conflicting roles arose as a response to the uncertainty of the work situation. Hence, I argue that the crew largely lacked opportunities to respond to these contradictions directly and openly to the company. This was especially challenging due to the geographical separation between the crew and onshore employees. Secondly, I also found that the crew thought of the onshore employees as management and consequently made a distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’. The organisation of the vessel was therefore a question of how the workers were organised. Of course, this was undeniably connected to

⁹ Translated from Norwegian: ‘Under finanskrisen kunne finansministeren dra gullkortet og betale seg ut av det. Her må det en omstilling til, og flere vil merke det på kroppen’. Retrieved from <http://www.nrk.no/sorlandet/-oljekrisen-er-verre-enn-finanskrisen-1.12415316> 22/5.

company policies but the crew nevertheless, when off shore, created their own ways of organising their four-week rotation.

An Anthropological Account of Labour at Sea

By approaching the vessel from an anthropological stance, I seek to extend a longstanding interest in the social organisation of labour among seafarers that originates back to a project initiated at the Work Research Institute in 1967. The project involved the Norwegian shipping industry in collaboration with the unions representing the workers and ship owners. The Ship Research Programme had two main objectives. Firstly, it started as a reaction to an industry they perceived to be locked for new development and, secondly, the project aimed to integrate the ongoing processes of democratization that had already taken place in industrial labour on shore (Quale, 2010, pp. 189-190). Experiments involved both relations between company and ship and changes in ship-technology, in organization- and collaboration on board and the educational- and professional conditions within shipping.¹⁰ The perspective promoted by the work research institute in the ship research programme was special, as it captured core elements of the Norwegian development through a holistic approach to the ship. The ship research programme achieved integrating an otherwise unfamiliar work environment into the public debate.

The perspectives used by the Work Research Institute are particularly useful to approaching labour organisation, as it allows one to holistically investigate a number of dimensions of the organisation of life at sea. This is particularly advantageous in comparison to contemporary research, which appears to be more preoccupied with particularistic elements of the shipping industry, or simply macro-economic trends as such. For instance, Reegård and Rogstad limit their research interest to the future of the Norwegian maritime trade and ask whether or not it will cease to exist before 2020 (Reegård & Rogstad, 2012). Kvinge and Ødegård set out to investigate public regulations of wage and work conditions with emphasis on differences in wages according to nationality (Kvinge & Ødegård, 2010). Aspøy Mogstad and Rogstad investigated the need for recruitment in the maritime industry (Aspøy Mogstad & Rogstad, 2013). The NIS¹¹ committee's research investigated how

¹⁰ http://www.afi-wri.no/modules/module_123/proxy.asp?D=2&C=403&I=3309

¹¹ Norwegian International Ship register

potential changes in the regulatory politics regarding existing limitations of movement in certain waters would impact the shipping industry (NIS-utvalget, 2014). A common denominator for these studies is that they investigate the direction of the maritime industry today and the alteration it has gone through, with a special emphasis on the Norwegian tradition at sea. However, these studies tend to have a narrow focus and, as highlighted above, a particularistic view on the shipping industry. Rather than approaching particularistic elements of the trade, I seek to extend the Work Research Institute's longstanding agenda of analysing the ship in a holistic manner, which allows for an anthropological account of labour at sea that better grasps the complex organisation of labour off shore.

Key Concepts – More Than Just a Pay Check

Three conceptual strands of theoretical reasoning guide my analytical account of labour at sea: first, I make use of Erving Goffman's notion of a 'total institution' as it stresses the very boundedness of the work environment as cut off from social ties on shore. Secondly, I stress the symbolic and subjective aspects of labour as important in practices of meaning making; third, I stress the relational value of labour.

To study the ship I suggest making use of Erving Goffman's concept of a total institution. First and foremost, this is based on his definition of a total institution as 'a place where equal individuals, often isolated from the rest of society for longer periods, live a closed, formally administrated life' (Goffman, 1961). This facilitates an analysis of the particularity of labour off shore through both a comparative analysis between Goffman's original understanding of the asylum as a total institution and the vessel as a total institution and, secondly, an analysis of how such characteristics affects the employees working off shore. More accurately, Goffman's concept is helpful due to its overarching emphasis on structural relations, in that it claims that a total institution establishes a clear erasure of boundaries from the rest of society (Goffman, 1961, pp. 1-17).

Similarly, I approach labour as not simply something that is a key feature of the Norwegian economy, but as a core dimension to human meaning making and a sense of self. The idea that work has a constitutive effect on our perception of identity has been accentuated as a traditional value for modern society, particularly that it expresses and cultivates value rather than something we do simply for cash (Beynon & Blackburn, 1972, pp. 1-6; Paulsen, 2014, p. 2). Referring to labour in terms of value is an attempt to demonstrate that when people take pride in their work, for example, it is based on some

assumption that work is itself something valuable. Scholars have had a long-term interest in the profound relationship between who we are and what we do for a living. Max Weber, in his classic account of the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism, theorised that there was a very fundamental relationship between internal sentiments and an orientation towards the world and the type of work that we do (Weber, 2002). Similarly, as an extension of his theory of alienation, Karl Marx introduced the concept of 'species-being' as people being able to realise themselves in the world around them by seeing themselves in a world they created (Tucker, 1978, p. 33n). I have accentuated meaning making as an important element of this thesis.

In particular, studying how such meaning is formed through labour makes the assumption that work has value beyond economic questions, as formulated by both Weber and Marx, an interesting analysis. Anthropologist David Graeber, in a more recent work, has been influenced by this Marxian approach to value (2013). Graeber especially views the connection between making meaning of production and production as people-making to be of central importance when studying value. Influenced by Marx and Engels and their notion of “production” as a social process that ultimately produce human-being (Graeber, 2013, p. 223), led Graeber to make a distinction between value strictly as a measurement, e.g. labour or items on the one hand, and values e.g. immeasurable ideas of what is ultimately important in life on the other (Graeber, 2013, p. 224). To Graeber, the different conceptualisations of value are dimensions of, or different rationalities, for understanding how meaning takes form. Surely, they coexist, as values are formed in what Graeber conceptualise as value, and value condition to a certain degree, a set of values in a given situation. In this thesis, value(s) represent both an economic motivation as well as subjective formulations of meaning ascribed to the labour situation voiced by the crewmembers.

Work as a Relational Praxis

Work, then, is not solely conducted and experienced through tasks and orders but is rather developed in the interplay between structure and agency. As such, I follow the Marxian tradition of labour as a relational praxis where work is studied as intrinsically connected to who we are as individuals. The perception employees themselves have of work is therefore crucial for a broader understanding of work as a relational praxis. For the

offshore workers described in this study, this relational character of labour was highlighted in their strong emphasis on 'togetherness'. The crew, despite different positions and responsibilities, were all on board together for the same period of time. This meant that, very often, they were all privy to the same flux of information, regardless of whether they were an engineer or a second officer. Such information dealt with instructions from the company ashore or from different charts and subcontractors.

As most of the information was received by e-mails or via VHF [very high frequency], news travelled quickly around the vessel. Additionally, as the vessel is such a technological workplace, information from the activities of the different departments was reported and shared on board. For example, much of what the crew members thought of as mundane activities on board required that the whole vessel was aware of such activities taking place. Routines the crew thought of as simple tasks needed to be reported throughout the vessel. For example, if the freshwater tank below deck needed to be cleaned by the able-bodied seamen working on deck, crew members from different departments were involved. Together with the able-bodied seamen, the chief officer would supervise, and the engineers would follow by VHF since they had to withhold from certain activities below deck whilst their colleagues worked. Inside the tank, one of them had to stand outside as 'tank-guard' for safety reasons. Furthermore the bridge was given notice via VHF before the men entered and, again, when they came out from the tank. Similarly, with respect to other work-related tasks on board, the crew communicated through VHF and maintained communication with each other.

The available access to information on board points to two things. Firstly, it demonstrates the importance of safety, as there are many dangerous scenarios that could occur on a ship, and it is of great importance that the crew coordinate its activities. Secondly, it shows the relational value of labour the crew experienced, as they were both physically together for long periods of time and that the work they did required considerable coordination between the crew members.

Massimiliano Mollona has suggested that labour has relational value in three ways: 'first, it is both produced by and productive of social relations; secondly, it involves the interrelation between material production and the reproduction of human beings; thirdly, it is relative to its location in space and time' (Mollona, 2009, p. 176). For the working lives of the men I want to describe in this study, the relational value of labour is largely a process of making the labour situation meaningful. As Mollona claims, '[...] and alienation emerges when one of these three relational dimensions is obfuscated' (Mollona, 2009, p. 176). The

focus on which social mechanisms promote alienation within a labour situation appears to be a current trend with scholars interested in the social dynamics of labour. For scholars Beynon and Blackburn (1972), alienation can be attached to the degree of control workers experience in their labour situation, and for others, such as James Carrier, the catalyst for understanding alienation revolves around the degree to which the separation from production is experienced among the workers (Carrier, 1992). As this thesis will demonstrate, certain work-related processes did contain elements that could be defined as alienation. Indeed, both in regard to the degree of separation, as formulated by Carrier, and, secondly, together with ideas of control among the workers as formulated by Beynon and Blackburn, alienation was a noticeable concern among the crew. This concern was, however, not made explicit by the crew members themselves. Surely, they voiced concerns regarding their labour situation. Mainly of these came to light at the early signs of recession. However, what was a topic among the crew members was not necessarily coupled to alienation, but rather a question of which activities the crew experienced as autonomous.

Structure of the Thesis

In this introduction I have presented the contextual setting for this thesis. Arguably, two questions have been lifted: *how is labour off shore organised?* And secondly, *how is such organisation affected by the oil crisis?* Additionally, I have presented the key concepts together with the theoretical framework for this thesis. I have emphasised the long, maritime tradition in Norway, and showed how shipping has become a vital part of offshore production of oil.

In chapter two I provide information on my methodological reflections together with an explanation and arguments for the choices I made with respect to my method during fieldwork. In chapter three I compare the vessel to Erving Goffman's concept of a total institution. Here, I highlight the similarities through a discussion of the structural organisation of the vessel.

Chapter four is a discussion of the strains of a total institution as I explore the various dimensions of social bonds and social relationships that form at sea. As such, this chapter seeks to expand the theoretical framework as articulated through Goffman.

Chapter five explores and discusses different attitudes to labour through a critical examination of various labour operations. In this chapter, I focus on the crew's relationship to

the company and the charterer on the one hand, and the social organisation of labour on the other. I do so through an analysis of autonomy and alienation.

In the final chapter, I turn my focus to the oil crisis and how the crew handled insecurity. Through a discussion of crisis as a pervasive context, I demonstrate how powerless the crew were when facing this crisis. I close my thesis with concluding remarks.

2 Methodological Reflections – Becoming a Part of the Crew

If my memory serves me right, I had my first encounter with the maritime industry in 2009 as I mustered on a vessel as a catering assistant. As a 'petroleum product' (Shever, 2013) myself, the possibility of combining my studies with occasional travels off shore procured my otherwise meagre income with some glimpse of sporadic prosperity. Since I was re-entering a somewhat recognisable field where I had prior experience, I was forced to reset my prior assumptions about working on a ship as well as the Norwegian landscape as a backdrop of this dissertation.

This thesis is based on four months of fieldwork on board an eighty-meter long, eighteen-meter wide anchor handler tug supply vessel [abbreviated AHTS]. This type of vessel is specially designed for anchor handling and towing offshore platforms, barges and production modules/vessels,¹² forming part of the Norwegian Maritime cluster. There were two shifts on board the vessel, respectively with a different work rotation of four weeks, overlapping each other. The two shifts consisted of sixteen crew members in different roles and positions. On board the different positions were: captain, chief officer, second officer, bosun, able-bodied seamen, deck apprentice, chief engineer, first engineer, second engineer, electrician, steward, machine apprentice and machine cadet.

My fieldwork was conducted from the 13th of January until the 4th of June of 2015. Initially I sent e-mails to different shipping companies asking permission to do fieldwork on one of their vessels. I included a detailed description of what potential fieldwork would entail for both the shipping company and their employees together with a preliminary research outline. As I had experience from working off shore myself, a topic I will address on a more thorough methodological level later in this chapter, I could enclose proper documentation allowing me official access on board.¹³ Eventually I got a positive reply from a shipping

¹² <https://www.farstad.com/fleet/ahts-vessels>

¹³ Health certificate, IMO (International Maritime Organisation) 60 course attendance.

company located along the west coast of Norway. I was granted permission to carry out my studies on one of their vessels. My communication with the company was through the HSEQ-manager,¹⁴ as this was the person responsible for the vessels in the fleet. In our e-mail correspondence, I made it clear that I did not have any preference for what type of construction or size of vessel, but I requested to be sent out on a vessel with a Norwegian or Scandinavian¹⁵ crew. The HSEQ-manager then forwarded my research proposal to all of the vessels within the NOR-fleet.¹⁶ As he received positive feedback from both shifts on one of the vessels, the decision about which vessel I eventually ended up on was made for me.

My work description on board as a catering assistant included cleaning and assisting the steward in the galley. I would do laundry, clean cabins, clean the hallways, and do the dishes after meals, in addition to other chores on board. Like the rest of the crew I too worked twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week.

I have both positive and negative experiences from my periodic life at sea: the positive was getting to know my co-workers; the negative were aspects of being the only woman on board as well as the general burdens of tough manual labour. My prior experience at sea was received well with the crew, as I could both relate to their stories and contribute with proper ones. The fact that I could share similar stories about earlier colleagues, anecdotes of past experiences and such, facilitated access with the crew members. Additionally, we shared a mutual understanding of labour off shore since I had myself laboured at sea. I could relate to their opinions and thoughts on a more profound level because of my knowledge of the maritime industry. Such thoughts often revolved around issues concerning management, domestic politics and general remarks on offshore labour. As a result of such close engagement with the crew members I was included, in many aspects, as a member of the crew as opposed to an anthropologist. However, on a more methodological level, my prior knowledge did force me to reflect on the data that I collected. To bridge the overlap between the common knowledge I shared with my informants, I chose, as a methodological approach, to commit to 'naive observation' (Frøystad, 2003, pp. 51-52). Naive observation, argues Frøystad, leads to moving from action to category rather than the opposite case (Frøystad, 2003, p. 51; Wadel, 1991, pp. 139-142). This is reflected through my data in that they stem from what actually took place on board and not through my foreknowledge of the field. In so doing, the foreknowledge I had of the shipping industry was

¹⁴ Health, Safety, Environment & Quality

¹⁵ A Scandinavian crew has the same wage agreement as Norwegians.

¹⁶ Norsk Ordinært skipsregister- by law requiring Norwegian/Scandinavian crew

contained, as I deliberately followed the crew's actions on board as the point of departure for analysis and not the knowledge I had prior to initiating fieldwork.

The second challenge I have to address is about the potential limitations of conducting fieldwork in a setting as familiar as one's own country. Signe Howell, a prominent voice on this topic, has asked 'whatever happened to the spirit of adventure?' (Howell, 2010) referring to the trend marked by more and more anthropologists taking on research projects that deal with 'clearly defined topics for investigations, that increasingly are located in the anthropologist's own country of residence, and that are multidisciplinary' (Howell, 2010, p. 189). I can only assume that my fieldwork would constitute a 'double challenge' in Howell's view as I did fieldwork in Norway and had prior knowledge of the shipping industry. However, to advocate for a loss of valid anthropological investigation simply by defending the dogmas of the classics is, in my estimation, a methodological fallacy. Whether picking rust on deck in the middle of the North Sea, watching sparks fly from the pressure of a machine, or spending nights on the bridge doing map corrections for the officers, these experiences did not in any way resemble anything remotely familiar to me. The ambition of valid anthropological research should not be established through arbitrary norms of proximity to the field, but rather on methodological apparatuses such as participant observation to obtain 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973).

Yet a methodological reflection involves an anthropologist reflecting upon his or her role in the field. Hence, naive observation formed a defence against accusations of a narrow data foundation. Additionally, to ensure veracity, it was important for me to attain insight beyond the working lives of my informants and I followed them in diverse social contexts on board that were not work-related.¹⁷ I added this as well as information about life on shore such as their marital statuses and pastimes activities because I wanted my data account to reflect, as far as possible, the person's social relations in the offshore industry. Secondly, as my time with the crew became more extensive, talk of children, wives, politics and so on was inevitable as it constituted vital parts of the crew members' lives. I do not have any data beyond the scope of the labour situation on board. However, I was able to obtain information regarding how they talked of home and life on shore, in turn giving me information of how they perceived their career at sea.

¹⁷ Not work-related are activities that take place after working hours. It includes watching movies together, playing cards or other activities that took place outside of one's private cabin. As such, the vessel is more than just a place of work.

My First Encounter in the Field

As I came on board the vessel in Germany it became clear to me that my presence was not expected. In fact, as the residing captain from the first shift I was to work with was on sick leave, the substituting captain had, as he told me, 'in the back of his head', heard 'something of someone coming on board', but this message had not been made official to the rest of the crew or, it would appear, to the captain himself. I remember these first hours of fieldwork as very stressful; would they oppose me staying on board?

My first encounter with the crew and the vessel was during crew change. The crew worked for four weeks at a time and rotated with another shift, equal in number and positions. During crew change both shifts were present on board. I participated with both work shifts throughout my fieldwork and the material in this thesis is therefore based on data collected from both shifts. In this thesis, I do not write about them as shift A or B. Rather, since both shifts experienced the same work-related conditions and, secondly, as my research questions were the same for both shifts, I refer to the two shifts as the crew. Additionally, I think that my presence with both shifts in many ways secured more ample and valid data.

The majority of the crew members know each other, some well and some not so well. The praxis of crew change is based on the delivery of information from one position to the replacing position e.g. from captain to captain, chief officer to chief officer and so on. The discussions they have are related to what work they do on board. The captain and chief engineer, both as heads of their respective departments, had the longest debriefings before disembarking the vessel. Nonetheless, apart from the apprentices, the remaining crew also exchange information. As a fresh fieldworker I had to set aside the assumptions I had on how fieldwork conventionally develops¹⁸ as I found myself on board a vessel where the crew did not demonstrate, openly at least, any sentiments to my presence. As the disembarking crew began to vacate the vessel, the level of stress diminished among the mustered crew, as they got comfortable on board: they settled into their cabins, and the majority changed clothes from jeans to more comfortable leisurewear.

¹⁸ I am aware of the methodological diversity of fieldwork, not to mention topic within the anthropological tradition but I nevertheless expected more 'fuzz', for lack of a better word, about my presence.

The Informants

This fieldwork is based on a continuous engagement with two shifts on board, sixteen men at a time working on a four week rotation. In age, the crew varied significantly. The apprentices on board were in their early twenties while other crew members were close to retirement, and a few had even passed the age of retirement.¹⁹ Geographically, the crew came from diverse areas although it was conspicuous how nearly every member of the crew, on both shifts, lived along the Norwegian coast in smaller places as opposed to bigger cities. Recruits to the maritime industry have traditionally been over represented by smaller places: rural areas, and places that already had familiarity and traditions of fishing and/or relations to the coast (J. G. Bjørklund & Jensen, 1989, pp. 67-72). The demography on board resonated well with this view of recruitment where a certain group of people [men] are more represented than other groups.

As my arrival on board the vessel felt somewhat as a crude commencement of what my fieldwork potentially would be, it turned out quite differently. The very same evening of my arrival, after the other shift had left the vessel, the remaining crew were less busy than whilst during crew change. I had already decided in advance that I would gather the whole crew to communicate the reason for my presence on board, what sort of information I was interested in, what my research questions were and so on. I feared that if I had shared that information to each member of the crew that the information I gave could suffer changes from one person to the next. A potential outcome of varied information, I feared, could lead to mistrust and confusion regarding my purpose on board. Nonetheless, despite my efforts to centralise the flux of information the crew did reveal puzzlement and doubts in the beginning.

The crew frequently commented, rather humorously, that I was studying them whilst simultaneously making innocent remarks that 'what happens on the vessel stays on the vessel'. One would normally laugh at such comments but at the same time I knew to take such warnings seriously as I was sure they contained elements of real concern. Again, as a fresh fieldworker, I viewed trust as an important contributor to the progression of my fieldwork in addition to the accessibility of data collection. A central feature of the method I applied on board concerned collaboration. As I stayed on board the vessel the whole period of time, collaboration became a word, which I later came to realise, had been my admission ticket to the vessel and its crew as a result of my active engagement with the men on board.

¹⁹ Which currently is at 60.

In the following section I will outline how I became part of the working and social environment of the vessel, and how this led to a blurring of the line between anthropologist and colleague.

In contrast to other studies where labour is of central interest, the demarcation between work and leisure off shore is not so clear. The vessel was, in this respect, both a place for work *and* leisure. In that way, fieldwork was never 'off', so to say, consequently affecting the relationship between the crew and me. In fact, I believe my fieldwork, in many ways, resembled a more 'classic' fieldwork as I was with my informants all the time except when they were on shore. In this way my fieldwork can be contextualised as a study of institutions, characterised by perpetual motion. The method of active social engagement with my informants led me to study life on board in relation to other contexts, expanding beyond the labour situation. Such contexts evolved around the relationship the crew members had with each other, the social environment on board and the daily conversations that very often dealt with issues outside the work situation, such as the beginning signs of crisis in the petrol industry and consequently how the crew related to that. I did so through constant data collection whilst on board. I documented work schedules, work routines, informal talks between crew members, and meetings on board; I documented complaints the men had about work as well as the joys they expressed. Engaging in their everyday life on board permitted me to take part in their 'life-worlds' (Wikan, 2012), as their life was not solely confined to the context of work off shore but stood in relation to external factors such as relations to friends and family on shore.

Interaction and, consequently, data collection was done through participating in the daily activities on board. Originally I had intended to conduct formal interviews with everyone but after two interviews on different occasions I decided it was not the best strategy for data collection. The reason why I did not find interviews proper for my fieldwork was twofold. Firstly, the formal setting of interviews did not resonate well with the informal environment on board and, secondly, the disparity between me as a young female researcher juxtaposed with the older male crew members became all the more prominent, as opposed to a more organic setting. When I conducted the two interviews it was in a closed room with a tape recorder.²⁰ I made an interview guide which I did not follow strictly but I nevertheless tried to stay within the topic of discussion, namely how the employees related to their work and subsequently how this relationship had changed given the specific situation the industry

²⁰ Besides the cabins, rooms were never closed on board.

was in at that moment. In addition, the aim was to discover how 'life narratives embody many kinds of knowledge' (Gullestad, 1996, p. 4), as this could lead to knowledge of how 'ordinary people', as formulated by Gullestad, relate to structural conditions (Gullestad, 1996, p. 3). I consider employment to be such a structural condition. However, the absence of interviews did not affect the overall data collection. In fact, by letting the surroundings and crew take charge, I was able to get access to the same material in its spontaneous, organic settings.

Life on Board – Life at Sea isn't for Everyone

A typical day for me on board started at eight o'clock in the morning eating breakfast with the crew. During the meals the crew sat together and communication was loose and sometimes detached from work and replaced by friendly and humorous remarks. I found that 'friendly bullying' was a vital part of life at sea, and that, as I integrated the social norms on board, I was more accepted by the crew. Towards the end of my fieldwork, my prior conceptions of 'ruggedness' and certain notions of 'masculinity' in the offshore industry were strengthened as the younger members of the crew took honour in my process of becoming, in their view, a tougher and more direct person after having spent that much time with such 'sailors'. The idea that 'life at sea' was not suitable for everyone was often and vividly shared with me, but very few could name which qualities were necessary to be at sea. The bosun told me of an electrician he had sailed with who was a vegetarian *and* abstained from alcohol. 'What's the point then?/ *ka e' vitsen da?*' I was told rhetorically. For the bosun such qualities were radically different from the general ambience of the vessel: the heavy breakfast with eggs and bacon, beef every Saturday and the stories and talks on board were very often centred around drinking histories. Certain ways of acting and thinking were, in other words, dominant on board. The men, despite differences in age, political views, life situation on shore, relationship status and more, formed a *social environment* (Tunstall, 1962, p. 131). Sociologist Jeremy Tunstall wrote a vivid account of the extreme occupation of fishermen in the 1960s. In his book, he emphasises how the high proportion of time spent at work influenced the fishermen deeply. Hence the proportion of time spent on board was crucial for how the crew interacted with each other, accentuating ideals of straightforwardness and a general characteristic that in many ways reflected how they did their on board work, namely hard, demanding, industrial labour.

After breakfast the crew dispersed to their respective departments. The steward worked in the galley, the machinists had their base one level below deck in the control room,

the able-bodied seamen²¹ gathered a level up from the machinists in the dirty mess²² and, ultimately, the officers were on the bridge. After breakfast I would move down to the able-bodied seamen who routinely would gather around a table in the dirty mess planning the activities for the day. Sometimes I would join them in their work for the whole day and sometimes I would participate for a period of time. From the dirty mess I would spend time with the engineers and from there move upwards to the bridge. Together with the engineers I participated in daily routines such as inspection rounds, maintenance of machines and would, in general, spend time discussing topics related to work and life on board.

Participation with crew in their daily life therefore forms the background for the data I have collected through fieldwork. The majority of my empirical findings have been revealed through informal talks with and among the crew members. As this dissertation focuses on labour, a topic of great concern among the crew on board, data collection was ever present as the crew spent much time discussing topics concerning work: insecurity felt about the recession, their relationship with the company, remarks, both positive and negative, about the burdens of work and so on.

As a participant observer I both listened and asked questions every day to every member of the crew, which very often took the form of informal talks in plenum. As the crew eventually became familiar with my routines I would occasionally be called out if they thought I was behind my schedule. I took this as an act of trust from my informants, but at the same time they were referring to the fact that if I was not with them I was not doing my job properly, and therefore ran the risk of mockery from the crew. One of the more persistent voices among the crew members, Mark, referred to my investigation on board as 'homework' and during a small period of time when I had changed my daily routine to accommodate the work-schedule of the crew members who worked during the night, I did not get up at what he regarded to be a decent hour. Throughout that week he would comment 'Trulte²³, you're late', or send me away to do my 'homework' in a paternalistic attitude. By participating in their daily routines I was able to collect data from every member of the vessel and, significantly, on the various contexts, situations and work tasks life on board a vessel entails.

²¹ Deck-workers

²² See word-list

²³ After some period at sea Mark started calling me 'Trulte'. This was not in any way offensive, as I found it a term of endearment. However, it points to how he viewed my presence on board as harmless and amusing i.e. demonstrating the gender bias on board.

Limitations and Challenges in the Field?

The challenges I met in the field were primarily concerns derived from interactions similar to the above-mentioned communication between Mark and myself. My own position as a young woman living in Oslo meant I had to work harder on various levels. It meant I had to demonstrate that I could manage the physical labour on deck and also challenge the [mis]conceptions many of the crew members had of me as a young woman in a male-dominated work sector. My distinct dialect, clearly marking that I came from a peripheral small town, far away from the centre of Norway, on the other hand, toned down the difference between them and I, as we had a common language. Coming from the west coast of Rogaland, I shared a geographical affinity with many of the crew members. The second officer John, who was a bit younger than me, often found my university background troublesome. On many occasions he would make a point of words I used in conversation; 'you're not at the university now' he said at times or, rather publicly, shared his understanding of me as a 'metropolitan' person whose daily life consisted in great part of going from café to café in Oslo. His comments did reveal a teasing tone and a small grin on his face whenever he made such conclusions but, nonetheless, humorous or not, they did contain some element of seriousness. The turning point came in one of our many conversations when he made a comment of how my eating habits probably consisted of fine dining at restaurants. On the contrary, I replied that I was prone to enjoy frozen pizzas.²⁴

Another challenge was the question of translation. Although this thesis is written in English, I have used many of the quotes from the crew in their original language, Norwegian. I have done this when I saw it necessary as the words and expressions made by the crew have a meaning beyond the actual word. I am aware that some meaning together with a more vivid picture of situations can be obscured in translation and have therefore explained much of the crew's articulations in English rather than simply translate them directly.

I have marked this segment of the chapter with a question mark. The reason for this is precisely because what I experienced as challenges and limitations in the field, being a young woman for instance, eventually became a methodological and analytical strength throughout my fieldwork. Internal conflicts regarding my role on board that periodically caused antagonism between how I was perceived on board and how I wanted my informants to

²⁴ We found out he was in fact far more sophisticated than I when it came to eating habits and was pleasantly surprised when he discovered my fondness for Grandiosa, the most popular brand of frozen pizzas in Norway.

perceive me did push me to articulate numerous times to myself the reason for my investigation. I was on board to observe, learn and understand the social organisation of labour off shore. As such, despite this industry being a gendered one, I have not included discussions about gender or perceptions of masculinity on board in this thesis. Hence, contributing in the galley, assisting the steward in his daily chores, serving coffee to the officers and more were the entry point available on board and, interestingly, fruitful in respect to the empirical findings of this study.

There was a particular incident on board that strengthened my relationship with the crew. Still in Germany, the vessel had a river pilot come on board to guide the vessel to port after returning from the offshore field where the vessel had worked. I was on the bridge with the officers as the river pilot came on board. He soon found out I was not a member of the crew, and appeared intrigued by my project. Nonetheless he assured me that it was impossible for me to obtain valid data, as the crew could never reveal their 'true self' while I was on board. Fascinated with the river pilot's ideas of the 'true self' of the crew, I continued questioning him. For him my presence, as a woman, forced the crew to act differently than they would otherwise. As the conversation continued the river pilot insisted the crew acted differently with a female presence on board, which caused a considerable amount of stress for me. That same day, once at port, the two German representatives working with the charterer had invited the crew to dinner. I was also invited but in light of the conversation I had with the river pilot I decided not to participate. As the crew discovered I was not going to dinner *and* the reason why, I was met with such collegial solidarity. Most of the crew insisted I come to dinner and disassociated themselves from the 'old-fashioned' way of thinking that the river pilot represented. The crew made a big commotion and collectively cheered me up and took me out which, to me, left me feeling like part of the crew. I had found my place on board.

Ethics

I follow Raymond Madden when he writes, 'Ethnography doesn't have an ethical element- ethnography is an ethical commitment from the very outset, and through all phases of ethnographic research and writing' (Madden, 2010, p. 34). Everyone who has participated in this study has been anonymised. Shortly after I came on board I was given the opportunity during a meeting to inform and consequently obtain oral consent from every member of the crew. I did offer to procure a consent form for those who thought that was more appropriate,

but the crew, unanimously, were comfortable without an official consent form. In addition to anonymising the crew, I have altered some of their positions on board together with quotes and opinions, *inter alia*, so that the possibility of recognition is more difficult. As this study reveals thoughts on both management and work policy, I have intentionally made an effort to disguise the crew members from the company. As I highlighted in the start of this chapter, the shipping company had knowledge of which vessel I was on and thus access to which employees that were working at that time. This crew was also aware of this. Methodically, I was concerned about whether or not this could affect how the crew talked and shared information with me. It was therefore all the more important to stress the anonymity of the crew in this study. Additionally, I stressed that the crew could, at any given time, decide to not partake in this study, let me know if they thought something should not be noted or written down by me and, lastly, tell me if they under any circumstances felt uncomfortable by my presence. When I voiced my concerns to the crew however, they made it clear to me that they did not have any problems with my intentions on board but they appreciated the dialogue. Ultimately, I am left with the utmost respect for my informants who not only let me participate in their working lives but also let me in as a friend.

3 Living Apart, Living Together

Introduction – The Ship as a Total Institution

In this chapter I will discuss and compare Erving Goffman's concept of a total institution to the offshore organisation of labour. As I mentioned in the introduction, the very bounded nature of offshore labour makes for a valid point of departure for understanding the characteristics of this particular labour situation. In the first section of this chapter I explain the theoretical foundation of a total institution as articulated by Erving Goffman. Secondly, I examine his theory and place it onto the study of the vessel as a total institution. This discussion focuses on certain elements of Goffman's theory, namely his focus on division of functions, identification and de-culturation as central features of a total institution. Other scholars have also studied the ship as a total institution, and they will also be represented in this chapter. Ultimately, I will raise some questions about Goffman's emphasis on the self-negating features of a total institution, demonstrating the dissimilarities between the vessel and Goffman's theory of a total institution.

When approaching the structure of social relationships at sea, the theories of Erving Goffman are helpful. He elaborated his theory of total institutions in his book *Asylums* from 1961. Here he defines a total institution as a place where equal individuals, often isolated from the rest of society for longer periods, live a closed, formally administrated life. A basic principle of social life in modern society, he claims, is that individuals sleep, have leisure time and work in different places with different people and under different authorities. A central feature of total institutions can therefore be characterised by the abolishment of the already mentioned spheres, namely the idea that people do certain activities in different places (Goffman, 1961, pp. 1-17).

The most compelling similarity to draw between the ship and a total institution is of its geographical character. The vessel is literally isolated for periods of time. During the two

months in the North Sea, the entire work period was spent on the same location without moving. Working on the bridge, on deck, or passing by a window, it was the same view for a considerable period of time. The idea of being 'alone at sea' has, implicitly, connotations of imprisonment. The ship 'traps' its crew members. During the stay in Germany, however, the ship alternated between being on location out at sea and at port. This reduced the sense of entrapment for many, a point made clear to me by the chief officer when he told me of a time when the vessel he worked on was anchored up beside the port without the possibility of getting off the ship. In situations such as this it was important for 'morale' among the crew to have an active welfare program on board. He then told me that 'the boys' were allowed to go out bowling one night by using the man-over-board-boat²⁵ to go to port and that on another occasion, whilst being at port, the seaman's priest came on board and invited the majority of the crew on shore, in this case Scotland. This was so important for the 'morale' on board, the chief officer emphasised, and without such activities 'you can easily feel like a prisoner on board'.

Another clear example of a total institution is the prison. With reference to the prison as a total institution one can ask: How can certain institutions resemble that of the prison when individuals in fact have broken no law? The ship can be viewed as a total institution in certain respects. Especially with regard to the administration, similarities with the organisation of the prison system are found. Members of the crew on board have a clear perception of what their purpose is, and what they are there for. Additionally they all know when and where to execute their work. The ship is divided into departments and positions. For instance, the engineers would form one department, and the bridge, deck and galley are the remaining ones. In addition they also have specific areas of work.

The engineers work in the control room, a small rectangular room one floor under the main deck where, as the name implies, the engineers have monitors that display the status of the equipment in the engine room. The officers are located on the bridge, the highest space on board and the able-bodied seamen, having the deck as their main area have what was called dirty mess as their space. The dirty mess was located just above the control room with access to the deck. The floor was covered with cardboard facilitating coming and going from the deck without damaging the floor underneath. As the name implies, this room was dirty. Here, the able-bodied seamen did not have to remove their overalls nor their shoes. A large sink

²⁵ The man-over-board-boat is a small rescue boat connected to the vessel. The boat is used for man overboard situations but can also be lowered from the vessel for other purposes. In the example given here, the crew used it recreationally to reach port.

was placed on the wall for them to wash their hands whenever they came in from the deck nearly always covered in either paint or oil grease, another reason for the cardboard on the floor.

During their breaks they would sit around a little table in the dirty mess with their overalls off their upper bodies, but always on in case they had to start working. That the able-bodied seamen were continuously 'on,' even if they were on break, was also the case for the other departments. They maintained their position throughout their shifts. The officers would never leave the bridge on shift. On many occasions, I spent a considerable amount of time on the bridge where the officers and I would sit on a sofa they had there. Hours would pass without them having to 'work'. Nevertheless, they completed their shift until they eventually were replaced. The divisions of functions on board together with the clear limitations of space resonate well with Goffman's emphasis on the formally administrated life as a condition for total institutions.

To Know One's Position

Another similarity to a total institution is the aspect of identification with other 'inmates', to paraphrase Goffman, i.e. other members of the crew. Hans Christian Sørhaug and Solveig Aamot (1980) have made a parallel between the ship and how military organisations isolate newly arrived cadets as a tactic to make them become a tight group (1980, p. 153). The process at sea, they highlight, begins the very day you muster. After you have mustered you begin to lose the right to decide for yourself. The sailors travel in a 'flock', from health stations to attain their health certificates, to passport registration, to vaccination offices and back again to the employee office. Once on board the crew hand over their documents to the captain. Responsibilities you have on shore e.g. getting up in the morning and traveling without an agent in charge of your itinerary dissolve at sea. If a member of the crew oversleeps or does not show up on time, someone will call their cabin or physically go up and knock on their door. According to Sørhaug and Aamot this disempowers the crew (Sørhaug & Aamot, 1980, pp. 153-154). Nonetheless, it is part of everyday life at sea; you are no longer called by your name but, rather, by position e.g. 'cook', 'captain', 'skipper' and so on.

At the time of the study written by Sørhaug and Aamot the rotation at sea was six months, but aboard this vessel, the rotation was four weeks. The crew called each other by their personal names with the exception of the steward, who consistently called the chief

officer 'chiefen'.²⁶ Nonetheless, as the very first passage of my field notes indicates, the level of identification with each other by the crew was still present: 'The recognition is striking, especially among the ones that travel together from the same airport. They travel in a flock, and they all seem to know that they are heading for the same destination. They don't know who I am yet but I can hear them talking together and they only talk about work'.

With regard to identity, it is clear that being as isolated as the crew members are for four weeks at a time has secondary effects on them. Goffman writes of de-culturalisation as a process (Goffman, 1961, p. 23), due to the secluded character of the total institution, which makes reintegration into society after having spent time away difficult. Sørhaug and Aamot found that returning ashore after a long period at sea was challenging for the sailors. One officer said, 'After having been at sea for a year, maybe two years at a time, I did not want to see people. I did not enjoy going to the shop or offices and I really had to pull myself together to go by bus or train. I just really lacked training in the most basic everyday things'²⁷ (Sørhaug & Aamot, 1980, pp. 148-149). As I already mentioned, there have been changes in the rotation system at sea, six months being qualitatively different from a four week rotation. Nonetheless, I found similar signs to those of Sørhaug and Aamot. I was told by crew members how returning ashore takes some time to get used to and that during the four weeks at sea, the body itself experience some changes. A second officer who, throughout the four weeks, had worked six hours shifts, made the following observation: returning home, he 'takes the job home with him.' 'It is too quiet to sleep', he says, and makes a point of waking up every four hours during the night for some days since at sea he would fill in a mandatory report in the ship's logbook every four hours. Just like the officer described by Sørhaug and Aamot who 'lacked training in basic, everyday things', the reaction of the second officer when returning on shore was not voluntary.

The deck apprentice made another observation. A month into fieldwork I began to struggle with getting up in the morning. I would put on my alarm but soon after it went off I would hit the snooze button and sleep longer. I told the apprentice about my newfound relationship with the snooze button, thinking he would find it amusing. On the contrary, this sparked a conversation as he could relate to what I had just said. He said that the body 'eventually gets tired' and that having to get up early every morning throughout a long period of time is tiresome. He stressed how 'in the beginning it's not a problem, but gradually you end up in snooze-mode and try to catch all the sleep you can'. This suggests that the crew in

²⁶ Which is the name of the position, chief officer, but said with a Norwegian ending.

²⁷ My translation

fact viewed time spent on board the ship as distinctive from time spent away and, secondly, that time spent on board has effects on the body itself, in turn supporting Goffman's emphasis that the total institution clearly establishes boundaries between the wider society and life within the institution. However, within the institution, i.e. the vessel, there are also boundaries that influence the crew in various aspects. The very social character of the vessel is an example of this. In effect, I found it more exciting to examine how the crew reflects on boundaries within the vessel.

The Totality of a *Social* Institution

If we accept the preconditions of a total institution, as set by Goffman, as a place where equal individuals, often isolated from the rest of society for longer periods live a closed, formally administrated life, it becomes clear that the notion of a total institution can bear resemblance to a variety of institutions. Building on his theories, many scholars have utilised the theoretical framework to describe social organisation of places where the separation, such as the one between leisure time and work, is not so clearly marked.

The ship is such a place. Aubert and Arner (1962) point to the characteristics provided by Goffman when they write, 'a total institution is set up with a specific purpose and blueprint. It is not a spontaneously grown social unit, like a family or a local community...' (Aubert & Arner, 1962, p. 14).

On the basis of the idea of a total institution, I suggest a more flexible definition of what constitutes such an institution. Instead of asking, as Aubert and Arnes do, 'What is a ship?', pointing to different associations one might have of ships: the Flying Dutchman, a hulk of iron, or a group of men living together? (Aubert & Arner, 1962, p. 1), I attempt to demonstrate how tensions that arise from working within a total institution alter reflections on togetherness on board. Aubert and Arner point out that a total institution is not a spontaneously grown social unit, but nevertheless it is social, and needs therefore to be analysed as such. The ship I got familiar with was neither the Flying Dutchman nor solely a hulk of iron. It was a place where sixteen men came together in spans of four weeks to work and to live side by side. The ship is thus both a place where crew members work *and* live together, where the structural organisation of the ship establishes a balance between the structural organisation on the one hand and sociality on the other that allows the crew members to form meaningful relations at sea.

The Old-School Insight

In accordance with Goffman's theory of a total institution, the crew live together whilst on board. This means that they spend a considerable amount of time working together, resonating well with the emphasis on a formally administrated life in a total institution. However, the crew does not always work. As they finish their shifts they are still situated on board the vessel.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork I developed relationships with all the members of the crew. I would spend my days working alongside them in the different departments. I especially made a strong connection with the bosun, Peter. He was one of the older guys on board whose personal features mirrored a lifetime at sea. Having started his career long before the industry implemented targeted goals of safety, his lungs had suffered from a hazardous working environment and he would often exhibit this through long coughs. His body was also marked by years of hard labour on deck: his knees especially were not as strong as they used to be, and when working while seated he would have to use his upper body to lift himself up. He was a member of the 'old school'- an insight I received only later from other crew members. Experience was first and foremost elaborated as an important feature among the older crew members. Furthermore, as oil was discovered as recently as the late 1960s (J. Bjørklund & Kolltveit, 1989, p. 307), members of the crew with high seniority on board were considered by many as contributors to the industry they knew today. 'The most important thing you need to know to work on a ship' Peter would say, 'is that you're not in a democracy. That's the way it is and the way it should be'. Years of experience at sea had given Peter an advantage when it came to forming relationships on board a ship.

After all his years at sea he only maintained contact with a couple of old colleagues. For me, as an outsider, I was puzzled by this politics of distance, but I soon learned that it was not only Peter that maintained a certain distance, but rather that this was done by nearly everyone on board.

The Switch

In one of my first conversations with the bosun, Peter, I was told, 'you have to have a switch inside of you to be a sailor'. He explained that before leaving home to begin a new shift off shore he feels nauseous and sleeps badly a couple of days before departing. Whilst traveling however, the switch turns on. He 'is on the job', he comments. Likewise, crossing

the gangway when going on leave, the switch turns off again. Peter's narrative of life at sea as incompatible with life on shore emerged as a salient issue in the field, and I sought to discover how sociality on board occurred despite such distinctions.

For Peter, distance was not synonymous with not getting along with his colleagues. On the contrary, most of the time spent on board was together with other members of the crew: during meals, leisure time, breaks and even whilst working the men would often be together, as pointed out by Peter himself in stressing community feeling as an important attribute amongst the able-bodied seamen working on deck. Gary, the steward on board, and also a senior, preferred the smaller vessels as he said they had 'soul'. In fact, on more than one occasion he would say that on smaller vessels the crew resembles a family. This romantic narrative of the vessel as a family stands in contrast to the organisation of the ship as a highly structured organisation with clear lines of authority which implies that everyone knows his or her place and therefore what to do e.g. the crew all know what their position, as well as what their work description is. Despite the clear difference between these two distinctive ways of working on a ship how, then, do the crew manage to create meaning at sea, some even with the experience that life at sea provides some of the same functions as that of a family? The formalised structure of the vessel does not altogether disappear as social bonds are formed at sea. Tensions regarding the social organisation of the vessel therefore arise. A more elaborate analysis of such tensions will ensue in the following chapter.

Besides the mere technical functions, the ship is additionally built to fulfil functions of a more personal character. At the same time as the crew are familiar with their functions on board, the ship also has to satisfy social needs amongst its crew members. Through the ship research program,²⁸ incentives to reduce isolation²⁹ were completed by altering the superstructure of the ship to accommodate every crew member with a personal cabin, all with the same standard, as well as joint recreation rooms, offices and an eating area. Further improvements have been made throughout the years. In addition, all of the cabins also had television, and the ship as a whole had [albeit somewhat limited] access to Internet. The recreation rooms likewise had large flat-screen television sets with DVD players. A little gym was located on the main deck in an effort to promote a healthy lifestyle on board. The ship, through these incentives, has made an effort to reintegrate the spheres Goffman claims to be abolished in a total institution.

²⁸ http://www.afi-wri.no/modules/module_123/proxy.asp?D=2&C=403&I=3309

²⁹ Loneliness was indeed a social problem off shore. Many worked alone and separated from co-workers.

The Self-Negating Features of a Total Institution

I have highlighted the similarities the ship shares with a total institution: isolation from the wider society, the institutionalised framework of the workspace, difficulties returning ashore and the potential for the ship to take on prison-like traits. A subject that has not been properly addressed, however, is what separates the ship from a total institution. Goffman's main argument can be found in his emphasis on the self-negating features of a total institution, as a result of processes of mortification (Goffman, 1961, pp. 47-51). Goffman raises three general issues with respect to this, 'the inmate's sense of personal inefficacy and the relation of his own desires to the ideal interests of the establishment' and, lastly, 'the relation between this symbolic-interaction framework for considering the fate of the self and the conventional psycho-physiological one centred on the concept of stress' (Goffman, 1961, p. 50). A common feature of the three general issues raised by Goffman is a focus on deprivation. In his first observation there is a clear reference to the question of autonomy. As individuals enter a total institution, the role they have in civil society is disrupted, as they lose control over their 'adult executive competence' (Ibid. 47). Consequently, the remaining two issues invert this power relationship to mirror much of the same powerlessness that takes place within a total institution as a question of the self. Critics have contested that this view not only disregards the therapeutic function of a mental institution but that it also portrays too homogenous image of it, and in turn accuse Goffman of a nihilistic study (Levinson & Gallagher, 1964, pp. 18-32).

Further, Goffman claims that patients within a total institution suffer from abandonment, loss of rights and depersonalisation (Goffman, 1961, pp. 66-67). Identity and the internal feelings of the self are the point of departure for Goffman, and consequently also what critics have highlighted as its weakness. It is an overall negative account that underscores the loss of freedom as a condition of a total institution. The crew I got familiar with did not show any signs of deprivation as described by Goffman. Quite the contrary, through joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, 1949), the crew asserted identity on board. The apprentice received humorous remarks on his lacking ability to grow a beard. Meanwhile, one of the engineers, who had the beard, was hassled about his beginning bald-spot. Someone always seemed to be the butt of someone's joke on board which consequently worked as a sort of social glue for the men. Laughing together, and of each other, was a common activity on board. Through the social organization of labour, self-negating aspects as formulated by Goffman, was removed.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have compared certain features of a total institution to how the vessel is organised. I have emphasised certain similarities the vessel shares with Goffman's notion of a total institution. First and foremost, the vessel resembles a total institution in that it is a place where equal individuals, often isolated from the rest of society for longer periods, live a closed, formally administrated life. Through such formal organisation, the crew experienced a high degree of predictability to their roles as employees on board.

Other scholars, such as Sørhaug and Aamot, and Aubert and Arner, have also stressed that a similarity to Goffman's notion of a total institution can be found in the more structural organisation of ships, as the formalised structures are so clearly present on the ship. As one lower-ranking officer stated; 'There are two types of captains, dictatorial and democratic ones, where a balance between the two types is ideal'. Implicitly his comment points to the hierarchical organisation on board, the captain representing the highest position and how that position affects the wider organisation. Hence, structure on board reflects the ranks of position. For instance, the chief officer would, quite hesitantly, do a job that did not correspond to his position. Just before ending their shift, he would ask the cadet if he had written the daily progress report,³⁰ as this was not the responsibility of the chief officer. Further, he made a point that he did not relieve the second officer, but the captain. These situations strengthen the view of the ship as a total institution since the crew organises their life at sea around work-related tasks 'and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds', as pointed out by Goffman (Goffman, 1961, p. 5).

Nevertheless, because of Goffman's emphasis on the self-negating features of a total institution, together with the tensions that arise as the crew balance the structural organisation with living together, the comparison to a total institution lacks momentum. In concluding this chapter, however, I return to sociologist Jeremy Tunstall who, in his ethnographic account of fishermen, proposed that instead of calling a trawler a total institution, 'perhaps one should refer to trawling as a total occupation' (Tunstall, 1962, p. 12). Likewise, this is an accurate description of the offshore employees as well. Goffman's overall focus on loss of freedom begs the question of whether or not the vessel should be studied as a total institution. It is especially interesting in light of the social bonds that forms among the crew members. The need to include the tensions that arise as a result of such social bonds when dealing with the

³⁰ This is a mandatory report sent to the chart with details including position of the vessel as well as other information.

conditions imposed by a total institution will also be part of the following chapter, specifically through an analysis of social relations on board.

4 The Strains of a Total Institution

Introduction

In this chapter I will account for various strategies that seemed to soften up the structural conditions of a total institution, as explained in the previous chapter. Building on the empirical data collected from the crew, I argue for a nuanced view on the theoretical framework of a total institution, since it neglects to capture how social relationships are formed at sea. More specifically, I argue that certain tensions arise on board as a result of the highly specialised organisation off shore. Through a discussion of trust, notions of equality and the observed balance between nearness and distance the crew demonstrated, I want to show how social relations on board was characterised by negotiation among the crew members.

Trust is a Bridge Between Strangers

Richard Sennet (2001) has emphasised how trust is important in creating lasting relationships, but that the structures of certain institutions obstruct the possibility for doing so.³¹ He is particularly concerned with how long-term goals may be pursued within an economy dedicated to short-term goals. In today's economy, characterised by flexible labour and where an ideology of no long-term objective is promoted, trust, loyalty and mutual commitment are undermined (Sennett, 2001, p. 30). Flexibility characterises the offshore industry as well; the high number in turnovers and, as will be demonstrated in the last chapter, the fear of unemployment as a result of recession, are examples of the flexible labour organisation off shore. This form of labour organisation arguably promotes the undermining of trust, loyalty and mutual commitment, in a manner resembling Sennet's description. The day-to-day situation on board, however, in which every member of the crew has specialised

³¹ His ethnographic data is primarily focused on flexible labor and the uncertainty that follows as a result.

jobs, seems to add nuance to the view on trust. I found some similarity to sociologist Émile Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity (Hughes, Sharrock, & Martin, 2003) in how the crew reflected on trust. Mechanical solidarity, as formulated by Durkheim, is found in societies that are held together by the likeness of its members and organised on utilitarian principles simply as an aggregation of individuals (Hughes, Sharrock, & Martin, 2003, p. 163).

Based on a mutual understanding of trust, principles of likeness were a dominant feature of the organisation of labour. During a conversation with the officers, trust was referred to as an implicit part of the labour organisation. I had wondered whether or not the hierarchical structure of the vessel prevented lower-ranking crew from, say, waking up a superior during the night shift. The officers responded that this was not the case on board as your position was implicitly coupled to trust. 'You would only work during the night if you are trusted', one of them said. Additionally, the officers thought of rank on board as secondary. 'There is little distance on board', another replied. Hence, trust was both inseparable from its connection to work but at the same time a premise for sociality on board through its articulation of likeness. However, as trust was formed through labour, it could easily be withdrawn if one did not comply with the labour norms.

Whilst working on a different vessel, the chief engineer told me how an officer made a call to the control room to make sure the manhole³² was closed. The engineer in charge at that time then waited for the approximate time he thought it would take, before calling the bridge back and telling them it had been closed, when he had in fact not even moved. Orders were given to the able-bodied seamen to enter as the manhole had been closed. When they entered they found the room in full leakage. 'Oh hell, and you're supposed to trust these people', he sighed. In implementing trust as a contributing factor in creating relationships, the situation above, as described by the chief engineer, is illustrative of trust as a bridge between the crew members- they know each other first and foremost professionally, and trust is therefore crucial for maintaining social relations on board.

Trust is evidently not only a question of personal character, whether a person is pleasant or not, but rather an indication of whether or not the organisation is a functional one. Despite working in a highly hierarchical organisation, the function of trust reveals a sense of equality of peers as well. Halvard Vike, Hilde Lidén and Marianne Lien have argued for a twofold separation of equality: equality as a premise of interaction, and equality as a mutual

³² See word-list

understanding of rules (Vike, Lidén, & Lien, 2001, pp. 16-17). The former is indicative of the experience that one is 'in the same boat' as an employee, or characterised as 'sameness', while the latter can be viewed in relationship to the more institutionalised rules found on board, and thus characterised as 'equality'. As two rationalities for interaction they constitute a field of tension when they are present simultaneously in a work-situation. They are never fully alone from each other, but at the same time conflicting views of being together may arise. The balance between these two is thus relevant for understanding how the crew relates to their work. It implies a tension between the individual and the social group very similar to what has been written about by Marianne Gullestad (1996). Through her accentuation of 'ro og fred', peace and quiet, as a value, in that it controls sentiments and the consequential absence of conflict (Gullestad, 1989), the premise of 'sameness' can alleviate tension between the strains immanent in a total institution, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the formally structured organisation and sentiments of autonomy. The distinction between a notion of 'sameness' and 'equality' thus points to a tension in the social relationships formed at sea in an environment that resembles a total institution.

Real Bastards/Promoting the Chain of Hierarchy

Breaks were often an arena for stories where tensions related to sameness and equality were told. The crew would share experiences from other vessels. The dirty-mess was especially a place where stories were shared since both the engineers and deck workers would gather there. The bosun, Peter, had worked under captains that were 'real bastards', he told his colleagues. One risked the lives of his deck workers just to prove a point. The men listening to him all nodded their heads. He does not need to explain how the captain in question actually jeopardised the life of the crew on deck. It is just understood. For Peter it is important that the officers have respect for the job their workers do on deck. More so, Peter claims he can tell a difference between officers that have not gone up the ship's ranks e.g. started on deck and advanced from there. The relationship between the captain and the remaining crew has the potential to displace the perception that they are all in the 'same boat', and that they are in fact equal. Internal to these perceptions is a need that people often have to feel alike, to think that they 'fit together', a point made by Marianne Gullestad (2001, p. 35). In this way similarities are highlighted and dissimilarities are kept away (Ibid. 35). When the captain behaves in a way that promotes the chain of hierarchy, it contrasts with the sense of equality on board and is felt negatively among the lower-ranking employees. Sameness and

equality have an implicitly positive meaning and its contrasts are, as Gullestad writes, inequality, hierarchy, difference and diversity, the last being the only word with positive connotations (Ibid.36).

The Social Standard of the Vessel – Getting the Job Done

When the crew is on board all the crew members are continuously together for four weeks. There is nowhere to hide. They cannot escape each other. The principles one has for organising oneself then, cannot escape the formal organisation of the vessel. I found that the crew had internalised the rhythm of the vessel to such a degree that they had developed strategies to co-exist within such a specialised work environment. Accordingly they were situated in a carefully designed organisation, where the balance between nearness and distance is pivotal. Ronald, an officer, noted: 'Sailors on Big Brother³³ would be the most unexciting show you can imagine. Even if we hate each other we'd still get the job done'. Ronald, with almost eighteen years of experience at sea, had this balance all figured out. In other words, potential conflicts or personal dislikes were prevented from appearing as a result of the specialised labour situation together with their understanding of their purpose on board in terms similar to Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity. As Ronald's observation points to, to comply with the social rules of the ship is not the same as popularity, but rather an issue of maintaining the social contract the job was based on, principally mutual trust that all members comply with the job description. Trust on board therefore indicated that a common agreement of responsibilities, e.g. every member of the crew did what they were supposed to do, was present in the labour organisation and consequently repressed potential conflict.

However, in addition to the importance of 'getting the job done', as many crew members highlighted, relationships that exceeded the boundaries of labour were formed as a result of the crew spending so much time together. Surely, I was told by the electrician once that he would readily accept a lower salary, rather than being on a ship without a good social life. Faced with these two rationalities of how to organise life at sea, a premise of an idea of a social contract on the one hand, and the desire to nurture social relationship with colleagues, tensions arise. More accurately, how is it possible to nurture relationships whilst at the same

³³ Big Brother is a reality show where people live together for a long time. When Ronald used Big Brother as a contrast to the ship, it was his way of saying that, unlike Big Brother, drama and conflict was not a prominent feature among sailors.

time maintaining distance? I argue that trust forms a vital part in the social organisation on board and, further, enable the crew to create relationships through an alternation between nearness and distance.

The job description is not, however, entirely fixed on board. The crew, as already demonstrated, may know both their position on board and how to execute their job satisfactory, but *when* to do it may vary. John, a second officer, described his thoughts on how to obtain a sense of autonomy on board. When we talked he would use the word *romslighet*, a Norwegian word referring to generosity. It has a double meaning though, as both an indication of space and spaciousness but also as a term for generosity and/or flexibility; the word when translated literally mean 'to give room to'. The idea of *romslighet* was, for him, a strategy that defied the locked mechanism of the workspace. His perception was that the men themselves could structure their shifts without affecting the quality of the work. In such a manner, *romslighet* could potentially remove some of the tensions imposed by the structure of the wider organisation.

Formally the men on board work for twelve hours. Regardless of the formal organisation, the crew experienced large periods of idleness on their shifts. The majority of the crew members would, because of the type of operation the vessel was involved in, refer to the job as monotonous and uneventful. Therefore it was all the more important for John, an officer on board, to experience a degree of autonomy whilst working. This was done through *deciding* when to stop working. Around six o'clock, John would, together with the majority of the crew, stop working for the day. He would stay on the bridge, maintaining the position of the vessel, but the workday was seen as terminated. Indeed, when the ship is not on operation, it is mostly maintenance that was done. John argued that, 'those things can always be postponed'. He had been on ships where the captain would have them scrub tanks until nine o'clock simply because the job description stated that they should work twelve hour shifts. During the two months in the North Sea on heading control,³⁴ the able-bodied seamen worked together with the officers on navigational watch. When doing so they would split their watch into two, thereby restructuring it to accommodate their own rhythms to three hour turns on the bridge, instead of six hours. This, John underlines, 'does not really matter because *folk trår til når det trengs*- the people are here when it is necessary'.

³⁴ One of the two operations the vessel was involved in during my fieldwork. A more elaborate description of both will be presented in the forthcoming chapter.

Politics of Distance

Sitting down in the recreation room by myself one night, Peter invited me to eat with him. Dinner is at five o'clock PM and around nine PM many come down for a late-night snack. We sit down together and eat crab and bread. He cuts his piece of bread in two and gives me the other half. As we sit there and eat, Peter tells me how he never allows colleagues to get too close. Before I initiated my fieldwork, the vessel had been registered as a NIS³⁵ vessel. This meant that a large portion of the crew was from the Philippines and Peter worked well together with them. Signing on again after four weeks off, he reacted to the number of Norwegians coming on board with him. As it turns out, the vessel had been reflagged during his time off and the Filipino crew had been replaced with Norwegians. Peter, who considered the Filipino crew as friends, was saddened when he realised he would not meet them again but also disappointed that this happened without him knowing.

Apart from the more personal reaction to the crew change as the loss of friends, this example illustrates a common characteristic on board a ship, namely the high amount of turnover of staff. During the period of my fieldwork the vessel experienced eleven changes of staff. The first shift had two different captains signing on from one rotation to another. The chief engineer was replaced, and so was the second engineer. The third engineer changed two times. A new machine apprentice came on after a month and the deck experienced four replacements during the course of my fieldwork. Impressively, and in accordance with the description of fishermen written by Jeremy Tunstall (1962), the new crew members fall into place very quickly. They all know what to do, as the specialised jobs are the same. Much like the ethnographic data presented by Tunstall (Ibid. 133-134), the social set-up from vessel to vessel is unchanged so that when new crew members come on board they all seem to know what to do. The people you work with might change but the work you do is the same. The roles, created by the specific work they do, construct how they interact with each other since there is no 'unexpected physiological challenge', to paraphrase Jeremy Tunstall (Ibid. 133). Understandably then, when Peter led a politic of distance it was with these tensions in mind.

Peter was by no means the only one who experienced the balance between nearness and distance as a means of maintaining social relations on board. Gary, the steward, who had accentuated the family-like features of small vessels, was confronted with how delicate the relationships forged at sea are when one of the younger officers asked him in the mess hall if

³⁵ Norsk internasjonalt skipsregister, which translates to Norwegian International Ship register.

Gary had seen him waving at the mall during their period off. Gary, observably bothered, said that he had in fact seen him but decided not to wave back. The two men live in the same small city and the chance of running into each other is always present. Whilst working, the officer and the steward seemingly had a good relationship. Spencer, the officer, despite his young age, carried himself much like a grown-up. He would always converse in a respectful manner without making too many jokes, unlike others on the shift. After meals he would always applaud the steward and make small talk with him afterwards. I was therefore surprised to hear that Gary had not greeted his colleague on shore, considering how they interacted off shore. When the officer was told that his colleague had in fact seen him he did not confront Gary in any way. Later that same day, Gary explained to me that he spends enough time with his colleagues on board, and that he does not need to see them outside of work. Balance between nearness and distance is constantly under negotiation by the crew members. Togetherness and the subsequent regulation of it is hard work, as has been stressed by Inger Haugen and Lisbet Holtedahl (1982) in their study of togetherness as a subjective condition. Regulating togetherness on board is personal and based on different assumptions among the crew; some are like Gary and others like Peter. Nonetheless, togetherness is, first and foremost, although implicitly, based on the similarity of the sailors in their period off shore.

Practicality as Organisational Control

The ship as an organisation is available to its members. Familiarisation rounds of the vessel are mandatory for new crew members coming on board. The round starts on the bridge and from there move downwards. An important aspect of this process is to locate emergency exits and life-saving equipment such as breathing masks in case of fire, fire extinguishers and such. Besides the safety elements of this round,³⁶ it also clearly has the character of turning the vessel into something familiar for the men on board. In fact, among the members with long seniority on board, a sense of ownership towards the ship was felt. In this manner the ship emerges as a place of accessibility. The crew knows the vessel and how to live on board it during their work period but they also have to navigate through the vessel creating distinctions. A separation between public and private is one such strategy.

³⁶ The members on board have positions with respect to safety and are therefore required to know what safety measures are available on board and that is in fact part of their position.

Both the crews, A and B, were very social. In addition to working together they would also spend time together outside of work hours. Watching television and films, playing cards or poker or simply passing time together were frequent activities on board. The cabins were thought of by the crew as primarily a place to sleep and have some time alone. Not once during fieldwork did I witness members of the crew spending time together inside someone else's cabin. I was told that the cabins were private. Whilst the crew did spend much time together outside of work hours, they rarely managed to escape the notion of 'work': conversations conventionally dealt with what occurred on a day-to-day basis, the job whilst working, or what had been going on at the port when the vessel was at port and so on.

Massimiliano Mollona, in his essay on organisational control as a cultural practice (2007), attempts to demonstrate how conceiving culture as solely a set of values that are complementary to enduring social structures, conceal the complexity and dynamism of culture (Ibid. 328). Mollona argues that the organisation's members are denied agency through this theoretical approach to culture as complementary to enduring structures. How then, can elements of control replace such a rigid view of the organisation as preserving structures? Mollona offers a new insight to the study of organisations where attention is on action, a conceptual and empirical shift from managerial to organisational control practices and thereafter on organisational members beyond the ranks of management (Ibid. 310). This focus opens the possibility of understanding organisational members through observation, control and the cultural significance of day-to-day activities, and not solely on the dynamics between management and the consequent relationship between symbolic meaning and change.

The empirical data supporting his view stems from the coerced relationship between two departments in a steel plant, the hot and cold respectively. However, in furthering his argument of relating the actual structures of the workspace and viewing them in relation to the employees' own practices understood as ordered meaningful activities, one can begin to outline organisational control as a cultural practice. In contrast to the comparison between two departments as analysed by Mollona I found that the men on board shared a sense of organisational control through established codes and norms. In accordance with Shelly Ortner the emphasis is on the practical within culture as she writes, 'From this vantage point culture as symbolic system is never a reified set of values, beliefs, and assumptions but always a result of practical activity' (Ortner, 1984). Much like the description of how the smelters Phil and Dave, described in Mollona's ethnographic material, communicate through nods and

hand signals without having to interact with words, so too is the ship developed around what Mollona posits to be a form of '*tacit knowledge*' (Mollona, 2007, pp. 314-316).

The thought of work as an 'inescapable' topic, as previously described, was also present whenever meals were consumed and it appeared as tacit knowledge. Here, the hierarchical division of labour clearly dictated the social organisation of seating arrangements. The mess hall had two long tables separated with a little space between them. Each table had chairs for twelve individuals. The first dinner I experienced revealed invisible rules when it came to seating arrangements. The captain would sit furthest away from the wall. Facing him was the chief engineer. Sitting next to them was the chief officer and first engineer. The bosun would sit on the third chair from the wall with his back against the recreation room. Another, also working on deck, would sit with one chair between them, his back against the wall. The bosun accordingly admitted that if anyone sat on his chair he would 'scowl' at him.

The Invisible Rules of Seating

Despite some saying that there were invisible rules to follow, most of the crew on board said the opposite, pointing to a 'no-rules-here-mentality'. During a meal, without putting much thought into it, I sat on the seat of one of the guys on deck, Bob. As he entered the mess hall with his plate of spaghetti, I asked if I was in his seat. He shrugged and laughed it away. 'There are no set places on board, on other ships, maybe, but not here'. He went on to sit at the first engineer's seat. As Bob was about to start enjoying his lunch, the engineer entered. The atmosphere turned somewhat awkward. I found myself eating faster and not going for a second serving. Bob also seemed to finish quite hastily. The whole thing ended with Bob and I finishing the meal and the engineer sitting in a different seat than normal.

These norms of work-related hierarchy extend beyond seating arrangements at meal times. After lunch the crew would sit down in the recreation room for a while. In the smoking room there were two sofas, and one chair where the steward would sit. The galley and mess hall was his responsibility, his work area. Whenever he had some extra time on his hands, or during both the ten and three o'clock breaks, he would sit in his chair drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. After this particular lunch however, the chief engineer was sitting there. When the steward entered, the chief engineer got up immediately. From the outside it would appear ridiculous: there were two sofas and a chair and the crew members were just standing there. It was not until the chief left that the steward sat down in 'his' chair. Order had again

been restored. It was conspicuous just how quickly the steward sat down after the chief engineer had left the room.

This demonstrates how seating arrangements have meaning beyond habits and preference among the workers. It is part of a constitutive pattern among the crew on board. Seating arrangements can be studied as an abstract control concept, an extension of hierarchy itself, through the defined object that in this particular observation are the seats themselves. It promotes collective action that enables for mutuality *through* exclusion. It maintains the balance between structure and social life on board the ship. Maurice Bloch defines cultural knowledge 'as that which needs to be known in order to operate reasonably efficiently in a specific human environment' (Bloch, 1991, p. 183). On board, then, a degree of control is found in the separation between private and public spaces on the ship that the crew themselves make.

Previously in this chapter I have emphasised the balance between nearness and distance among the crew members. Gary, who did not greet his colleague ashore and Peter, who adhered to a politics of distance would, in Goffman's terms, suggest that the crew experiences a radical different life whenever outside of the total institution.

That both Peter and Gary had ideas of social life on board that they did not take home with them begs the question of whether that is because the self is different off shore than what it is on shore. Sarah Tracy challenges the well-known dichotomy of the self as potentially divided in two, in her study of cruise ship staff (2000). Although cruise ship staff experience a completely different workspace than the vessel I studied, some similarities can be noticed, such as isolation on the job, and the dilemma of how to regulate togetherness on board. Tracy writes, 'analyses are often reduced to simple dichotomies between real *self-fake* and internal *feeling-expressed* emotion' (Tracy, 2000, p. 92), with a clear reference to Goffman's accentuation that a total institution is challenging overall for one's self conception.

Gary was not the only one who maintained a certain distance from colleagues when he was off the vessel. The cadet and motor apprentice also shared many of the same thoughts as Gary. Both of them lived within walking distance from each other on shore. On board they spent their working days as well as leisure time together, the latter consisting in great part of watching films together with other crew members. At home however, they would rarely see each other. Much like the steward and the officer, they would run into each other but, as opposed to the former pair, would greet each other. But they would not spend time together.

Since her pioneering study of emotional labour performed by Delta flight attendants, Arlie Hochschild (1983) has argued for a separation between the real self and the self we portray to others when engaging in emotional labour. For obvious reasons, the crew on board will not resonate with the characteristics of emotional labour as put forward by Hochschild, but the crew nevertheless seems to operate with some of the same limitations as portrayed by Hochschild in her study. For the crew, these limitations deal with different ideas of togetherness and not around limitations of the self. Despite the fact that that the crew make a separation between the life they lead at home and the four weeks at sea and, secondly, that there is a hesitation towards being too available to their colleagues, it does not give support to the claim of two different selves as formulated by both Hochschild and Goffman. In addition, a one-sided focus on the limitations of the self neglects to grasp the diversity found among the crew on board. That they maintain a certain distance is not the same as concealing a 'real self'. Rather, as a practice this needs to be viewed together with ideas of trust and concepts of sameness and equality found on board as rationalities for interaction, thereby contrasting with the emphasis of the self in a total institution as portrayed by Goffman.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this chapter has been twofold. Firstly, it is an attempt to deconstruct the ship as a total institution by demonstrating how the boundaries between the formalised structure and the social organisation exceed the boundaries set by Goffman in his description of a total institution as a formally administrated organisation and, in respect to the ship, an institution supposedly organised around work like tasks and justified by those tasks (1983). Emphasis has been placed on the strains inherent in the organisational structure through ethnographic material of how members of the organisation challenge the above-mentioned structure through sociality on board.

Secondly, I have emphasised how scholars who research total institutions have neglected to examine tensions that result from the relationship between structure and autonomy within the institutions themselves. Acknowledging this tension may thus contribute to revive the concept of total institution as a topic for anthropological analysis. On board, and among the crew, this tension concerns a balance between nearness and distance and distinctions between private and public domains. Together, these oppositions help guide social interaction. In particular this is executed through a mutual understanding of trust on board.

I was told the distance between positions on board is small and that the vessel was to a limited sense hierarchical. Unanimously the crew agreed with this. However it was striking how the bridge was always in the centre of these observations. The crew would say that the distance between deck and bridge, or between the machine and bridge was small, but never that the distance between the machine and deck was small. The bridge thus holds a certain position on board, rather naturalised through the gaze of the ship as a total institution and therefore unrecognisable for most of the crew. It appears as part of the balance between 'equality' and 'sameness', where the former is institutionalised and the latter is socially defined. Given the examples above, there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is done on board, and it can appear as the bridge thus challenges the notion of 'equality' since the institutionalised framework goes unnoticed by the crew, and by the personality of some captains that promote hierarchy such as the one from Peter's story.

In such a manner, the characteristics of total institutions frame sociality on board and in turn work with the crew, as opposed to against them, in forming relationships. *Romslighet*, as was important for the second officer, contrasts with the notion of the vessel as a highly hierarchical space whilst the maintenance of distance among colleagues prevents them from getting too close.

In conclusion, the formalised structure on board the ship enables for relationships that develop in the interplay between structure and autonomy, between working in a highly hierarchical organisation and having the autonomy to create their own rhythms and relationships.

5 The value of labour/autonomous labour

'They Move us Around like Cattle'

During the operation in Germany, the vessel alternated between port and the windmill field. After one waiting period at port, the vessel was ordered out again to the windmill field by the charterer. News travelled quickly to the different departments on board, and very soon the vessel came to life again. The sound of the engines was heard throughout the vessel as the men on deck worked quickly to remove the gangway connecting the vessel to port. Soon after, the river pilot came on board and the vessel started moving. On that particular day there was quite a lot of traffic on the outskirts of the pier. A ferry was getting ready for departure and altogether about seven or eight vessels were passing by. Due to these circumstances, the captain appeared stressed as the river pilot rushed the vessel out. The captain ordered the other officers to opposite ends of the bridge to keep an eye out as we passed through the pier. The stress level increased as the captain said to the rest, [*dette er et tulleopplegg*], translated to 'this is a ridiculous arrangement', while cursing out loud. I was told later that same day that the captain's behaviour was a response to the lack of control he had felt as the river pilot ordered the vessel to move. As the port became more and more distant, and after the river pilot had left the vessel, the vessel received an email from the charterer. It read, 'Your services are no longer required'.

As the vessel turned around and made its way back to port, one of the officers was particularly bothered. 'They move us around like cattle', he said. It was especially the sentence 'your services are no longer required' that the crew highlighted as we talked about the sudden change of plans. Later that day, however, in conversation with the motorman apprentice, I was told that the email had in fact been more detailed. Due to bad weather reports the charterer had ordered the vessel back to port. Nonetheless, the lengthy conversations among the crew members regarding the unsuccessful travel to the field did not include the weather forecast. During dinner that afternoon, the crew was still talking about what had happened. In front of everyone, the captain demonstrated his point of view. 'That's

why they pay us; to go out, to go back, to go out, to go back', he remarked humorously. The following night the vessel was ordered, once again, to depart from the port.

Introduction

In this chapter I want to offer some insight to how labour is organised on board and explore the various attitudes towards labour that I found amongst the crew members. The overarching topic in this chapter revolves around the specific labour tasks the crew was involved with. On the one hand, such tasks dealt with maintenance: cleaning the interior and exterior of the vessel, picking rust, welding, painting, safety rounds and other odd jobs. It was especially with the deck workers and engineers that maintenance was a dominant task. On the other hand, however, the vessel was chartered by, in this study, two different companies, and this caused some tensions on board when it came to the organisation of labour. As noted by the captain, it was the charterer who decided what, when and, often, how to carry out work-related tasks.

Hence, in contrast to the previous chapter, where the concept of a total institution was viewed in relation to how togetherness and social relationships was formed, this chapter seeks to examine how the labour organisation is influenced by the presence of the charterer. Additionally, in this chapter I want to include the presence of the onshore company. I found that the company was present in the formalised, bureaucratic organisation of labour through communication from the company to the vessel and vice versa. Moreover, this is particularly interesting since both the charterer and the onshore company are not physically on board but nonetheless have such a great impact on how the crew organise their working day. Referring to the charterer and the onshore company in this chapter, I write about external demands. I found that to be fitting as my informants often revealed conflicting thoughts towards both.

The first section of this chapter is a discussion of the external demands connected to work organisation on board, that the crew encounter, and subsequently a discussion of autonomy. I will elaborate on this discussion by pointing to processes experienced by the crew where they felt they had little to no control over both decisions that structured their work on a day-to-day basis and in addition, what forms of resistance against such external demands were articulated on board. In the second section I wish to highlight the different perspectives the crew had of labour, building my argument primarily on their own definition of meaningful labour on board. Following that, I will discuss how perceptions of meaningful labour and ideas of valuable labour contrast the formalised structure of the vessel and

highlight the crew's attitudes on labour on board through a discussion of *empty labour* (Paulsen, 2014). I will comment on how idleness and breaks on board functioned as an arena for both voicing complaints and expressing joy connected to work.

The Charterer

I will briefly explain the type of work the vessel was hired to do in both these locations, and from there illustrate how the relationship between the vessel and its contractors, the charterer, generated tensions between the crew and their sense of autonomy in the labour process. The majority of the crew was unaware of what the vessel had been hired to do from month to month. There are webpages³⁷ available with an oversight of both contracts and vessels, but very few crew members made use of this information. When the crew came on board after four weeks off they would meet a familiar place, returning to the vessel they already knew. However, returning off shore was also unfamiliar for many of the crew members, as contractors from different companies hired the vessel, from one rotation to the next, ordering different operations. In addition to performing the mandatory qualifications of each position on board, e.g. second officer or steward, and the proceeding skills they had accumulated through both formal education and experience at sea, different contractors and therefore different labour situations took place during my fieldwork, with specific labour tasks.

Work aboard a ship is complex. One reason was the flexible nature of the shipping industry. One month the vessel could be located in harsh weather in the North Sea whereas the succeeding month the vessel could be at port along the French coastline. Flexibility³⁸ had implications for the crew's attitude to work. Concretely, they made a separation between working *for* the ship and working *for* a contractor. I will return to the thoughts the crew had of working *for* the ship. Suffice it to say, however, that they experienced different motivations under the two labour regimes. A central comparison for these different attitudes

³⁷ One I frequently used was Westshore Shipbrokes AS. It contains information about available contracts, which vessels are available, together with information on position, the specifics of the vessel and so on.

³⁸ Gregory Bateson (1972) is frequently cited on his concept of flexibility. In this study, however, flexibility as a concept is related to different processes than depicted by the Batesonian definition. Especially, it differs as Bateson defines flexibility as "uncommitted potentiality for change" (Bateson, 1972, p. 505). To my estimation, such view portrays flexibility as an overall positive potentiality much to the contrary image voiced by my informants. The flexible nature of the offshore industry was perceived as a challenging and uncertain. Very often coupled to ideas of profitability e.g. outsourcing labour to foreigners and heavily affected by macro-economic factors. As such, flexibility was seen as a process that promoted the negative, uncertain features of the industry.

can be viewed together with the question asked by Richard Sennet, 'How can mutual loyalty and commitment be sustained by institutions that are continually being torn apart and reorganised?' (Sennett, 2001, p. 17). As the crew faced different work situations from one rotation to the next, loyalty and commitment were primarily found between the crew members and not to the charterer. Whenever the crew members discussed the specifics of the job, they would refer to it as 'operation' and the company in charge was called, without exceptions, 'the chart'. The crew used the English word, not the Norwegian when talking about the chart. As my fieldwork unfolded, I participated in two different operations under two different charts. The first two months were spent in German waters and the following two in the North Sea.

In Germany, the vessel had been hired to assist in the building of a windmill park for the two first months, and then to do a rig move, starting out from a British port, before *heading control*, after the rig had been successfully moved to the proper location. The company in charge of the windmill project was subsidised by the German state, which had set out to invest large sums in renewable energy. On location in German waters the extent of this investment became apparent: rows on rows of soon to be windmills in a vast quadrangular area with no land in sight and multiple vessels involved in building the park. The central element of the operation revolved around a jack-up³⁹ rig in charge of beating a base construction of what would eventually become the base for a windmill about thirty meters below sea level, leaving about half of the top above sea level. The actual windmill would later be positioned on this top. To do this they utilised a hydraulic *paile hammer* and when the bottom of the windmill was placed on location, the hammer was put on top of the windmill-bottom and the operation commenced. It was a time-consuming operation that, on average, took close to six hours to complete. The underwater sonic pressure caused by pile driving had negative, potentially fatal consequences for nearby marine life, and German state authorities had therefore prohibited pile driving in German waters, if measurements minimising sound pressure were not implemented.

As a result, new technology in soundproofing *had been elaborated* in the shape of what my informants called a *bubble curtain*, and it was for the purpose of soundproofing the vessel had been chartered. The operation was to place a hose, filled with finely drilled holes, and weighed down by chains in the shape of an ellipsis around the jack-up rig before commencing the piling. Then, by using eleven compressors on deck they would continuously

³⁹ Self-elevating mobile platform, see wordlist

pump air through the hose, creating a sound isolating bubble curtain around the area of the base construction. The second operation started out from a British port where the vessel, in collaboration with a second vessel, was connected to the rig they had been chartered to move by using the powerful winches on deck. Heading control consisted of maintaining the position of the rig whilst other vessels were involved in underwater operations connecting it to pipelines. The rig was a '*floating production, storage and offloading*' installation.⁴⁰

I will not go into detail on the specifics of the two operations. However, I aim to demonstrate how the crew members experienced a sense of loss of control in relation to the chart.

The hierarchical structure on board increases when multiple vessels are involved in an operation. What this implies for the workers on board is a far more elaborate mode of communication than otherwise required, although working for and together with other vessels and for different companies and projects seemed to be the normal work description and not an exception.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it became apparent that for the employees on board, this form of labour organisation challenged the feeling of autonomy of the crew. During the operation in Germany a sense of autonomy was especially challenged for the deck workers, whereas during the second operation in the North Sea, the officers experienced similar tendencies.

During the two months in German waters, two German representatives in charge of the *bubble curtain* were on board. As they were in charge of the equipment on deck, they had the authority to give orders to the deck workers. Orders from the charterer would normally go through the German representatives to the bridge with notice to start laying out the *bubble curtain* around the jack-up rig. The German representatives would then, via VHF, instruct the movement of the vessel to the officers on watch. The deck workers would assist out on deck, but they rarely handled the equipment. As one of the German representative told me in front of the deck workers, 'why should others watch my equipment? If something happens, there's nothing we can do about it'. Mark, who had been listening to our conversation, tried to confront the representative. 'If there's a leakage, we [deck workers] can...'. He only managed to get in a couple of words before the German interrupted him, 'we never have leakages,' he answered. The conversation between the two men continued for about fifteen minutes, mainly revolving around the equipment on deck and ended as Mark said, rather sarcastically, 'you know more about this than me'. As the representative left, the other deck workers were

⁴⁰ See word-list

⁴¹ Vessels working within the petrol segment are almost always chartered in for operations. The extent of the operations, however, varies.

alone in the dirty-mess and came up with a nickname for him. Behind his back they referred to him as 'Adolf'.

Working for a charterer therefore seemed to imply that there were different considerations in respect to the day-to-day organisation of labour. Especially this was manifested through a fine-meshed structure where orders were taken, as with this particular operation, from the company that chartered them. The men on board met in the hallways, in the dirty-mess or in the galley questioning each other: 'have you heard anything', 'what's the latest news', while at the same time being collectively aware that they had no control over the decision-making. Orders came from the chart via e-mail or by maritime communication using VHF from the vessel in charge directly to the bridge. Or, as during the operation in Germany, orders came via the German representatives. Such orders would often centre on commands regarding the vessel's position. During the operation in the North Sea, the vessel had to maintain the position of the FPSO, 'floating production storage and offloading rig', which, the officers on the bridge felt, prevented them from doing other more sought-after tasks. This was especially felt among the officers since the operation on the North Sea, *heading control*, meant that the officers steered the vessel using dynamic positioning system.⁴² The sought-after task for the officers was anchor handling related operations. The main difference between the two operations, I was told, was that during anchor handling they normally steered the vessel manually. They regarded this type of labour as far more demanding of them. As one officer so tellingly highlighted when he talked of anchor handling, 'more action'. The lack of 'action' was a frequent topic on the bridge. Many of the officers could spend their entire watch on the bridge without doing anything but maintain the position to the FPSO and wait for orders from the charterer. During *heading control* these were some of the conflicting interests the officers revealed regarding both the type of operation and their relation to the chart.

The same operation prevented the able-bodied seamen from moving around freely on deck since a powerful wire connected the winches to the FPSO. They also felt a similar tension. Located in a *double bind* (Bateson, 1972), the attitude towards the chart did not reflect displeasure for the job they were hired to do, but rather that they felt a disconnection with *how* the work was organised. Additionally, working for a charterer was a considerable part of working in the shipping industry. As such, without charterers there would be no contracts for the vessels either.

⁴² See word-list

Big Fish/Small Fish

One officer on board used a comparison between a big fish and a small fish to explain the vessel's position in the operation. 'Boats are not prioritised, they don't mean anything, we are small fish', referring to the major oil companies that hire them. The vessel's function was reduced to a tool for the chart, which affected how the crew perceived of themselves in relationship with the chart. My argument is that the crew on board found themselves somehow trapped within a chain of supply that, for many of them, affect how they view their own labour as potentially replaceable by the chart. This view stems from the imbalance the crew members felt took place whenever working for a contractor. Both in Germany and the North Sea, the type of work the vessel had been hired to do depended on certain weather conditions. In Germany it was measurements of wave periods that controlled whether or not the vessel could work, and in the North Sea, weather was also decisive in which position the vessel maintained in relation to the FPSO. Faced with such specific labour conditions meant that, very often, tasks and messages from the chart were revoked, changed or cancelled.

A common reaction from the crew members in such situations was to critique how the charterer ran the operation. Again, the metaphor of the vessel as a tool for the chart was raised among many crew members. On many occasions the officers tried to contact the chart by VHF without them answering, which led the crew to gossip about the persons in charge of the operations in a derogatory manner. In a conversation with Ronald, the second officer, the communication the officers had with the chart made visible the tensions inherent in the chain of command of the labour organisation. 'We only tell the chart the absolute minimum', he proclaimed one afternoon on the bridge. The context for this conversation was that during the night the German representatives had requested that the vessel move the *bubble curtain* as they thought it lay crooked. This request took some hours to complete. The next morning, however, in the mandatory *daily progress report* the vessel sent out to the chart, this information was omitted. In fact, for the officers, such actions were not out of the ordinary. As they had little control over the flux of incoming information, from company and charterer respectively, being in charge over the information that came from the vessel on the other hand, was controllable.

External Demands

The chart is an example of external demands where the autonomy of the crew is challenged, as they have little or no power to influence the decisions made. Other external demands are embedded in the labour structure. The shipping company, although geographically distant from the vessel, had developed detailed instructions concerning tasks on board. Such instructions were limited to specific work tasks the crew had to complete, without management⁴³ interference in how the task had been executed. Formalised work tasks were standardised in the whole fleet in a software program named Star Information System (SIS),⁴⁴ which offered the offshore industry modules ranging from maintenance to safety issues. These instructions were sent by e-mail to the bridge on a weekly, sometimes more frequent, basis and from the bridge the officers distributed the tasks to the different departments on board. These were placed in plastic slots. The STAR-jobs, as the crew called them, varied both in quantity and scale and the crew had a flexible relationship to them. They tried to incorporate the tasks into their daily rhythm rather than doing them all at once. Despite the crew's flexible relationship to the STAR-jobs, these nevertheless structured labour on board and thus had the potential to set off conflict when viewed in relation to the question of autonomy.

In addition to the overarching theme of organisation of work as mentioned above, the question of autonomy was a recurring topic of discussion and frustration among the crew, especially in situations that challenged the experience and competence the crew claimed to possess. Towards the end of my fieldwork, such a situation took place. The chief officer was ordered by the company to make the deck workers sign a paper of competence to use an angle grinder. Rather than provoke a reaction from the deck workers, to which this permission paper affected, they did not react at all. As I talked to the chief officer about whether or not he thought this was important, he confessed that he viewed it as a 'way [for the company] to cover their own ass'. Additionally, he told me that the deck workers were aware of this and that he did not feel uncomfortable telling his colleagues to sign the paper.

⁴³ I am aware that the term management is ambiguous, as the labour organisation on board is built on a hierarchical understanding of positions and responsibility. When I write of management then, it is reflective of the shipping company and the employees on shore, who work at the company office. Despite the hierarchical organisation off shore I never witnessed any member of the crew talk about their colleagues, regardless of them outranking them, as management.

⁴⁴ <http://www.sismarine.com> 1/3

However, it was apparent that the disregard for the permission paper I encountered among the crew members clearly signalled that they did not take it seriously.

In addition, the crew were subjected to register events on board through RUH⁴⁵ schemes. The general perception among the crew was that these schemes were a 'show for the gallery' to show to potential charts. The idea behind the RUH schemes, I was told, was to demonstrate the vessel's commitment to safety through constant reports regarding safety issues. The problem, however, as the crew saw it, was that they felt they had to invent problems to comply with the RUH system. This provoked the crew immensely as they felt it de-skilled them as employees. During a VMU⁴⁶ meeting on the bridge the reports, written on small pamphlet-like sheets, were read out loud by the officers. In total there were three⁴⁷ reports during this particular meeting. The first event had taken place in the gym when one of the crew members had lost a used packet of snuff on the treadmill. This was a rather minor offence. The extent to which the crew felt obligated to deliver RUH schemes is illustrative in this specific case. During one of my many informal talks with the crew they complained about the RUHs, as they felt obligated to 'create' events to put on the RUH card. On their last rotation they had only managed to write one, and had consequently been told by management on shore to write more. Hence, the snuff on the treadmill was an incident the crew thought could fit well as a RUH incident. The officer had to read out loud from the card: 'There has been an observation of a used packet of snuff in the gymnasium ... this is unsanitary and might affect the well-being on board'. The officer reading was obviously uncomfortable and made an attempt to ridicule the cards by mumbling comments whilst reading.

Obviously there are differences in the subjects addressed in the RUH cards. The incident with the snuff did not provoke thoughts of de-skilling among the crew. Rather, it was an example of the level of coercion these cards represented for the crew, as they would not have written this report willingly. The next incident is an example of the *former*, namely the sense of de-skilling these cards activated. Helen Sampson and Bin Wu (2003) view de-skilling together with benefits the industry have achieved. Examples they highlight are 'less work, more leisure time, less stress, and increased safety' (Sampson & Wu, 2003, p. 151). In this, however, they see the potential for automation and application of technology as an enabling contribution for (Ibid. 151). The aforementioned external demands e.g. the chart, STAR-jobs and, ultimately, RUH-schemes all point to processes Sampson and Wu could

⁴⁵ Registrert uønsket hendelse- registered unwanted event

⁴⁶ Verne-og miljø utvalg, which translates to Safety and Environment Board.

⁴⁷ I don't mention the third in this section. It was a request to re-organize and re-decorate the gym.

characterize as potential de-skilling-processes in that they depend on technological aid; communication with the on shore company and chart and the formalized organization of work tasks. However, de-skilling may very well be connected to a subjective experience regarding labour and not solely a result of automation and technology. The next incident is an example of how the subjective experience of own labour, when confronted with such formalized organisation, can generate a feeling of de-skilling. As the officer finished reading the card regarding the misplaced snuff, the next card was about the organisation of labour on deck. An observation had been written concerning misplaced equipment on deck. Again, every member of the crew participated in these meetings,⁴⁸ and as the officer finished reading the card, the bosun said out loud that he did not agree with the description of an unorganised deck as portrayed in the RUH. He was clearly offended over the observation.

What appeared to be the problem for the bosun was the lack of solidarity the others demonstrated as the observation was read. Indeed, they did show sympathy for the bosun, and collectively showed that they did not think of him as an unorganised bosun. However, the emphasis was that these cards are part of the work organisation on board. The officer stuttered to the rest that 'we have to write *something* on these cards'. By referring to the demands set by the company the officer tried to trivialise the function of the RUHs. However, for the bosun, he felt this observation would 'stick' to his name. The captain interrupted after some time as the wording among the crew had centred around the bosun and his position on deck. Erik Henningsen⁴⁹ has argued that the principle of equality has been perceived as a 'natural' condition of what is comprehended, he argues, as the dominant social order of the Norwegian society (Henningsen, 2001, p. 126). As the situation became tense, the captain intervened. He did so through an emphasis on such a principle of equality. He intended to remove the personal focus on the bosun whilst simultaneously contending the importance of a well-organised, secure organisation of the vessel for every member of on board. The principle of 'equality as peers' the crew followed, as shown in the previous chapter, was challenged when the company became present in the work organisation, through RUHs.

After the meeting the crew members dispersed and I found the bosun sitting in the recreational room near the mess hall with the second engineer. He was furious. When he got up during the meeting to defend himself against such 'utter nonsense', as he put it, the other,

⁴⁸ Exceptions were made, however, for members who worked during the night and were sleeping at the time of the meeting.

⁴⁹ While the object for Henningsen's work is athletes and public figures, he leads his argumentation along the lines of values of equality and personal qualities that other seek.

younger, officer replied that 'they have to write something [on the RUHS]'. In other words, the same logic as with the snuff incident was decisive for the RUH reporting regarding misplaced equipment as well. They had to fill out such cards. For the bosun, however, this observation was severe since every card got recorded and was sent to the company. His reaction indicated that he felt suspicious of poor management, and given the protocol system, this observation would stick to his name.

Alienation and the Labour Process

An overarching theme through the many issues raised by the crew on board was the question of how the crew organised work on a day-to-day basis. This included personal and collective strategies submitting to the formalised tasks on board, including mandatory tasks such as inspection rounds, weekly samples of fuel and water in the machinery and weekly cleaning routines of the vessel.

There were many similarities between the two shifts that worked on the boat during my fieldwork. Both shifts experienced the same work description, both in Germany and in the North Sea. Additionally, both shifts had the same routines and tasks that consequently, and not so surprisingly, made the two shifts share much of the same ideas and thoughts on labour organisation and shared attitudes of labour off shore.

Beynon and Blackburn (1972) have argued that, given the little degree of control workers exercise over decisions, their position can be seen as one which embodies alienation (Beynon & Blackburn, 1972, p. 5). Whereas Beynon and Blackburn couples degree of control directly with the question of alienation, Carrier attends to alienation as the degree of people's separation from the processes, relations and objects of production (Carrier, 1992, p. 539). It is my contention, nevertheless, that more discussion is needed in order to make explicit my assumption concerning the multifaceted processes of labour, especially under the specific conditions of offshore labour. In the aforementioned example of external demands, then, how is alienation experienced among the crew? It is not merely a question of control or separation from the labour process. Rather, it should be viewed through the friction that arises between autonomy on the one hand, and dependency [to the charterer and company] on the other.

I suggest that control and proper strategies to obtain a sense of autonomy, both personal and collective, should be studied together. By viewing the three conditions articulated by Carrier, namely the separation from processes, relations and objects of production, as relational to one another, the study of alienation becomes more fruitful.

What this implies is an emphasis with regard to value. Anthropologist David Graeber understands values as the way 'in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality- even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor's imagination' (Graeber, 2001, p. xii). It is, in other words, through how the crew members relate their position vis-à-vis the three conditions Carrier proposes, that we can begin to analyse whether alienation is an outcome. I also follow David Graeber's reading of Marilyn Strathern (1988) in that the phrases 'making visible' and 'giving value' are used more or less interchangeably (Graeber, 2001, p. 40). Value thus becomes synonymous with meaning: 'giving value to something is a matter of defining it by placing in some broader set of conceptual categories' (Ibid. 40).

The crew, as mentioned, varied both in age and experience. Nonetheless, they did seem to share certain views on labour. Mainly, they shared an understanding of what they perceived as valuable labour. Their thoughts, despite some differences, revolved around the already mentioned distinction between working *for* the ship and working *for* contractors. Whereas working for the charterer, doing STAR jobs and writing RUHs were examples of external demands, the views the crew had of valuable labour were coupled to working *for* the ship. The altered job description whilst working under orders from the chart, and management surveillance through the standardised STAR jobs and potential de-skilling of labour through the RUHs strengthens the assumption that there is a connection between relational value and labour. I found that a sense of control promoted autonomy, while the absence of control over the work process equally diminished the belief in self-competence and experience among the crew members.

Freedom From Work Through Work

How did labour obtain relational value among the crew members, and did this affect their sense of autonomy? Following the suggestion of relational value as made by Massimiliano Mollona, it is clear that the manner in which the crew reacted towards external demands on board could, in Mollona's views, exhibit a sense of alienation. External demands, such as the charterer and company, tap into the crew's social relations as well as the 'inter-relation between material production and the reproduction of human beings'

(Mollona, 2009, p. 176).⁵⁰ As argued by Mollona, alienation emerges 'when one [of] these three relational dimensions is obfuscated' (Ibid. 176). Nonetheless, the crew found ways, as the example with the angle grinder shows, to put their own meaning to certain orders. Instead of arguing for such a clear-cut definition of alienation, I want to show how the crew, through other tasks, reclaimed some of the control and autonomy they expressed to have lost under the order of the charterer and company.

Perceptions of work among the crew members varied. However, it was evident that they shared a common understanding of work as piecemeal tasks that concurred with certain activities where the crew experienced a high degree of autonomy through deciding how to work. In the following section I will demonstrate different strategies that were pursued by the crew to allocate meaning to the labour situation through empirical examples from Peter, Martin and Bob. Even if the strategies they portrayed were personal, they had in common that they all were arranged around autonomous tasks.

With respect to the question of alienation, Beynon and Blackburn supplemented their view of embodied alienation with a warning not to overstate the limits of the worker's freedom (Beynon & Blackburn, 1972, p. 5). Despite constraints within the work situation, such constraints may very well vary in both intensity and can, according to Beynon and Blackburn, never be total (Ibid. 5). The question of value (Graeber, 2001) i.e. meaningful actions, was a counter measurement against what the crew experienced as limitations in how they evaluated their own value within the work structure. In other words, the application of how the crew subjectively created meaning was an important element both in constructing ownership to their own labour input as well as restraining the degree of alienation.

Evaluating Labour

During the operation in Germany the vessel alternated between port and off shore at the windmill field, due to the very specific weather conditions that the operation required, namely that the wave period did not exceed five seconds. The periods spent at port varied in length. On some occasions the vessel barely made it in before receiving notice from the chart of good weather reports and thus setting the course for the field again. On other occasions the vessel waited, at the most, a week at port. After one such waiting period I found myself

⁵⁰ This is quite similar to how Marx writes of species-beings.

wondering exactly how the crew experienced such idle periods and whether it affected their perceptions of work.

The workday, for those on the day shift, would normally start after breakfast. At around eight o'clock AM the crew dispersed to their respective departments. The able-bodied seamen would start their day with coffee down in the dirty-mess, if time allowed them to do so. Normally, I found them sitting around their table, making plans for the day. Both bosuns⁵¹, Peter and Martin had thoughts on what constituted valuable labour on board. Both of them organised labour on the basis of what they viewed as meaningful labour. Martin was explicit when he first introduced me to his idea of meaningful labour, when he initiated a conversation about how he enjoyed his position as bosun on board. When in port he confessed, 'there's little work to be done', but he made a point of distinguishing between meaningful and meaningless work. He did not, for example, see the use in 'inventing' tasks for the sole purpose of keeping the crew busy. For that reason he said he would never send his colleagues to the storage only to check its content: 'it's pointless', he said, shrugging his shoulders whilst sitting comfortably in his chair. His colleague, Bob, also sitting in the dirty mess, commented that he enjoyed 'finding work for himself'. On slow days when the remainder of the crew enjoyed the idleness on board I found Bob in various parts of the vessel, self-employed, waxing the floor in the ship's hospital, dusting or doing other everyday activities. Peter, on the other hand, did not use the word meaningful when talking about the day-to-day organisation of work. He would, however, emphasise the importance of 'doing a good job', 'not to do something you'll later be ashamed of', and, ultimately, his idea of 'making a ship'.

Peter was not as preoccupied as Bob with upholding a busy schedule but nonetheless he prided himself in doing a 'proper job'. For the able-bodied seamen the workday would normally start around eight thirty PM, and maintenance was a central part of their work on a day-to-day basis. Cleaning was an activity that took place frequently. As Peter, the young apprentice Phil and I finished our coffee, we put on our overalls, helmet and protective footwear and headed out on deck. Peter fetched buckets and industrial soap for us to clean the deck and Phil and I cleaned while Peter was in charge of the hose. We started cleaning just below the bridge and made our way down to the main deck. Phil rather enjoyed this type of maintenance, 'you can see it gets clean', he professed with a strict grip around his broom. 'Sometimes we have to clean places where it's already clean, or places where you don't even

⁵¹ They worked on an opposite rotation. Nevertheless, I found similarities in how they organised labour.

see the difference'. As we moved from one deck to the next, the deck really transformed. The green and white paint had bright reflections as the sun appeared from behind the clouds. At ten o'clock we left our equipment out on deck and went once again for coffee in the dirty mess. In the company of two other able-bodied seamen and the engineers we took a sought after break.

The Strategic Element of Pauses

The functions of pauses are often formulated in relation to relaxation. Snow and Brisset (1986) state that pauses have different functions:

'The most far-reaching consequence of pauses is that they are essential in establishing a rhythm in one's personal and social existence. The fact that rhythm is ubiquitous in all life forms may belie its importance. At the very least we feel that pausing provides the contrast, emphasis, and energy that aid in developing and sustaining meaning in any area' (Snow & Brisset, 1986, p. 12).

Apart from the daily meals aboard, two breaks were especially important. The entire crew took breaks at ten and three o'clock PM.⁵² As Snow and Brisset argue, these breaks had a rhythmic function insofar as it clearly marked a time to sit down and they were repeated every day. Also, it was a time where the crew could contemplate their work in a more subjective manner. Often, it was during the breaks that the crew reflected over work. As the breaks had been more or less institutionalised on board, they did form part of the workday, and therefore enmeshed in the labour structure. However, the breaks were more than just a legitimate reason to stop working. On many occasions they stretched out in time and on other occasions the crew sat down for breaks at other hours. As such, I found that the crew engaged in empty labour during idle periods on board. As a definition, I follow Roland Paulsen's articulation that "empty labour is everything you do at work that is not your work" (Paulsen, 2014, p. 5). However, as has been made clear in the previous chapters, the separation between work and leisure on board is not so clear-cut as in other jobs. Additionally, even when working I have emphasised that

⁵² The only times the crew did not sit down at these hours were when they were doing specific labour tasks that could not be interrupted. For example, if they were in the middle of moving the vessel, finishing tasks that took more time than expected or complying with orders from the charterer.

the crew experienced idle periods but nevertheless maintained positions. Therefore I argue that a discussion of empty labour is fruitful with respect to routines valued by the crew. Working *for* the ship constituted labour where the crew could decide the pace and rhythm of work and, as a result, such tasks often ended in lengthy breaks. Hence, certain routines, e.g. rust picking, painting, maintenance, odd jobs, represented a different labour regime for the crew. Mainly, it represented labour where the crew, although working, could decide to not work.

During breaks, the crew talked about whatever came into their heads: gossip about work, small talk, hobbies and so on. Nevertheless, the status of the oil industry was a recurring topic during their breaks. The crew talked about the decline in the petrol industry and their feelings towards the policies in the industry. 'It should be as in Brazil and Australia, fixed by law that work on the Norwegian continental shelf has to be performed by Norwegians', one of the engineers sitting in the dirty-mess mumbled from across the table. 'We might be expensive, but so what', Peter contested whilst adding that 'we have to have enough to live'. With this comment he revived an argument I had already heard in January from the crew. The crew members were convinced that if there was a count of the hours they worked that the result would reveal that they were in fact not that expensive. The conversation turned to Statoil⁵³ and the belief the crew members shared that it was they who initially started the process of disposing of the Norwegian maritime work force. 'Just imagine, Statoil being the first [to promote foreign workers]', another engineer said. This sparked a vivid discussion of 'carrots'⁵⁴ being offered from the Ship Owners Association and hidden envelopes finding new owners. There was consensus among the crew that the constant re-flagging of fleets lead to equal actions by other companies.

Discussions such as the one described above were not out of the ordinary. Quite the contrary, they were told, retold and shared amongst the crew, and clearly marked a distinct separation between 'us' and 'them'. This did not only refer to the company, i.e. management, but to the industry as a whole. As time passed the chief engineer, having misplaced his keys to a storage room, interrupted the crew members. As Peter handed them to him, he got up from his chair, clearly signalling that the men should head out on deck again. It took about three additional hours to complete cleaning the deck after the break but the deck was indeed noticeable cleaner and the fresh air was revitalising. After this, the deck workers did not

⁵³ Statoil is the biggest Norwegian oil-and gas company. The Norwegian state is the capital shareholder.

⁵⁴ Suggesting corruption.

find additional tasks for the day. I asked the young apprentice, Phil, what he thought his working hours consisted of, and his answer resonated well with the emphasis on autonomy as piecemeal tasks where the crew themselves decided how and when to work:

'I get up at eight and get off at five. We finish at five. We do have routines. You get up at around eight, it's standard. Then you sit in the dirty-mess till about eight thirty and talk nonsense. Then you would go out [on deck] and, yes. We do have routines on the cranes, routines on this and that, things we would check. We go around the vessel and see to [it] that everything is in order. If we're not working [an operation] we drink a lot of coffee'.

The clear separation between working [operation] and having time to drink coffee, points to two things. Firstly, it strengthens the view shared by the crew of working for the chart as something different than doing routines. Especially, as Phil stresses routines when talking about what his working hours primarily consists of, the focus is on the crew and how the crew organise labour. Secondly, it points to the value found in empty labour. Drinking coffee whilst "on the clock" is a result of the crew's ability to appropriate time through specific labour tasks. Respectively, this takes place as a result of subjective processes where the crew feel they have the power to decide what to do on board. More importantly, this power enables for recreation during the working hours through visions of "making a ship" and meaningful labour. As the crew comply with the social norms regarding how to organize labour, they stand freely to choose to stop working as well. Paulsen writes of time appropriation as coupled to acts of workplace resistance (Paulsen, 2014, pp. 50-51). Moreover, Paulsen compare time appropriation to a broader understanding of sabotage echoing Pierre Dubois' thoughts as "sabotage primarily means working slowly and lowering the quality of what is produced" (Dubois, 1979, p. 103). Although the crew have opportunities to not work whilst working, the concept of empty labour strictly as a means of sabotage is not entirely fitting. Empty labour represented time where the crew could subjectively contemplate and create autonomy in the labour situation.

A general attitude among the crew was that labour was not measured in how busy or overworked they were, but rather that the work they did was well executed. Work that was based on an idea of meaningful labour, including Peter's thoughts on 'good work' were dominant attitudes when it came to thoughts on valuable labour. As Carrier emphasised, a

degree of control is found here in that it values the amount of collective knowledge the men have of the vessel (Carrier, 1992, p. 549), thus rendering them capable of assessing, on their own, which jobs to prioritise. In this manner, Peter's vision of 'making a ship' is realised.

Through specific routines, the crew manage to create their own rhythms on board reinforcing their conception of themselves as valuable for the industry. A common feature for the routines highlighted by the crew was found in their emphasis on working *for* the ship, which involved tasks where the crew decided both the pace of labour together with how to best execute given tasks. General maintenance resonated well with the attitude the crew demonstrated. In a report issued by the University of Bergen⁵⁵ regarding the working environment on Norwegian vessels, Bente Moen found both positive and negative conditions that the crew emphasised to achieve work inclusion. She found that sailors experienced, to a higher degree than the general population, that they had a clear role in their work and knew what to do. Further, Moen concludes, the sailors thought they received sufficient training to execute their jobs. They experience support from their superiors and colleagues and they are content with their opportunities to influence decisions. In addition, they responded that they experience smaller demands with respect to work intensity than the general population. This indicates that the sailors have achieved a well-functioning solidarity and teamwork on board, and that *daily routines seem to work well* (my emphasis) (Moen, 2003, p. 27). The negative findings, on the other hand, indicate that they experience working life as less predictable than colleagues on shore. The study revealed a high degree of poor climate within the company, leading the researcher to conclude that the *sailors separated between life on board on the one hand, and the relationship they have with the company on the other* (own emphasis) (Ibid. 27). Empty labour was therefore more of a strategy that defied the locked mechanisms brought forward by the charterer and company policies. As such, rather than resist work, the crew were actually strengthening its position vis-à-vis themselves as capable and competent workers.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has addressed how labour is organised on board the vessel. It has subsequently been an analysis of the different attitudes to labour as portrayed by the crew. The application of subjectivity toward the labour situation was essential when examining

⁵⁵ This report is part of a larger series that primarily focuses on an inclusive workplace.

how the crew managed their feeling towards what is essentially the core of this chapter, their evaluation of own value within the work structure. Through ethnographic material I have showed how the workers reacted under two different labour situations through their accentuation of working *for* the ship and working *for* the charterer [and company]. The focus of this chapter has therefore dealt with some of the conflicts that take place under the two labour regimes, the charterer and company, and the day-to-day organisation of labour respectively.

I opened this chapter with an example of the e-mail from the charterer that read, 'your services are no longer required'. The following reaction from the crew tellingly revealed some of the conflicts the crew encountered under such working conditions. More accurately, the reactions opened up questions regarding control and autonomy. Hence, this chapter has analysed the organisation of labour through a critical examination of particular labour contexts.

I have argued that working for a contractor [and company] promoted alienation from the labour process. Especially, under the influence of the theoretical framework of Carrier and Beynon and Blackburn, alienation occurs as a result of both the lack of control over the labour process and the degree of separation from processes, relations and objects of production. When the crew were subjected to orders given by the charterer, the hierarchical organisation on board shifted as the crew felt they lacked power to influence decisions. As it was the charterer who, ultimately, dictated the activities related to operation, one member of the crew compared the vessel to a tool when explaining the relationship between ship and charterer. Additionally, as pointed out by the captain as he said, 'that's why they pay us' further strengthened the idea that the crew saw their relationship with the charterer as an uneven one.

Secondly, by examining the impact of STAR-jobs and RUH's on the organisation of labour, I found that despite the geographical distance between vessel and the company ashore, the company is very much present through a formalisation of mandatory tasks on board. The jobs that were registered in the STAR-system had the potential to set off conflict as they could challenge the competence of the crew. However, the crew did not respond with frustration to such tasks as the example with the angle grinder showed. Rather, they linked the STAR-jobs to management policy regarding safety-concerns.

The RUH-forms, on the other hand, did manage to create tensions in regard to the organization of labour on board. The incident with the snuff, despite it being a minor offence, was illustrative of the extent to which the crew had to comply with management polices. The

other incident, however, regarding the misplaced equipment, challenged the principles of equality on board. It did so through management presence. External demands, as manifested through the emphasis on working *for* a contractor, involved processes of de-skilling. However, a sense of de-skilling was not entirely a result of automation of labour as argued by Sampson and Wu (2003). Rather, it was a potential outcome of processes revolving questions of autonomy and control over the labour situation.

This is not to say that the crew were without opportunities to create a sense of control on their own. A central question in this chapter was, 'how can mutual commitment and loyalty be sustained by institutions that are continually being torn apart and reorganized' (Sennett, 2001). The ethnographic material in this chapter has especially highlighted the distinction the crew made of working *for* the ship as a vital part of promoting mutual commitment and loyalty on board. However, my findings suggest that such bonds take place between and among the crewmembers and do not extend to management. Tactics of resistance against charterer and company was collectively carried out through omitting information or responding with lack of interest to certain tasks.

In extension to tactics of resistance, I highlighted relational value of labour as formulated by Mollona to better comprehend how sociality had been incorporated to the structural organization of labour. Martin's emphasis on meaningful labour and Peter's vision of making a ship were examples of how the crew, through relational practices, carried out their idea of working for the ship, consequently creating a sense of control through a sense of freedom from work through work itself. Activities the crew highlighted as autonomous were routines; cleaning, maintenance, inspection rounds and so on.

Additionally, through a discussion of empty labour, I found that the crew appropriated both work and time as a strategy for obtaining autonomy on board. During routine-labour, the crew could structure time according to what they prioritized as important tasks. Further, breaks became an arena where the crew evaluated their value within the labour structure. When called out on deck by the Germans during the ten o'clock break, one of the deckworkers said out loud, 'they've [the Germans] have been with us long enough to know this is our coffee break'. They turned down the volume of the VHF and ignored the message.

By examining the different attitudes to labour revealed by the crew, I found that some tasks, primarily where the crew experienced a high degree of power to decide, diminished deskilling processes that arose as a result of the formalized organization of labour offshore. Conclusively, as opposed to routines being 'self-destructive' as highlighted by among others Adam Smith and Karl Marx (Sennet, 2001) I found routines to be of value among the crew.

They had the potential to reduce conflict as they represented tasks where the crew obtained both a sense of control and autonomy over an otherwise formalized labour organization. As such, routines were a telling example of the fundamental value it had both for social praxis and self-understanding on board.

6 The Secure Insecurity

Introduction

In May 2015, the crew received the dreaded message from the company. Due to the difficult offshore market situation the company had decided to dismiss fifty seamen. The crew received the letter very close to the end of the onshore working day on a Friday, which sparked confusion among the crew members as they could not contact the employees located on shore until the following Monday. Throughout my fieldwork, from January until the beginning of June, the spreading consequences of the recession had become more and more visible. Coming on board in January meant I could follow the nascent crisis of the petrol industry through the employees and their reflections on how this affected them personally and as a group. In January, media coverage of the situation began to circulate around the vessel as the crew members had access to the internet. Shipping companies reported forthcoming dismissals, there was to be a restructuring of the workforce, vessels were put in lay up and so on. News of this character was discussed on a daily basis on board. In May 2015, the Norwegian Shipping Association predicted 42 vessels in lay up entering 2016, a number which has in reality reached 111 by April of 2016.⁵⁶ The shipping company Siem dismissed 152 workers *due to ending* contracts in Brazil.⁵⁷ Møkster, also a shipping company, fired 70 employees⁵⁸ and the shipping company DOF reported 20 dismissals.⁵⁹ In addition, Statoil came forward in the media pointing to the rates of the spot market as unsustainable.⁶⁰ While the crew were on board they read and followed news of the oil crisis and, understandably, it was present throughout their whole rotation. When the notice of dismissals came in May, the majority of the crew members were not surprised.

⁵⁶ <http://maritime.no/opplagsregisteret/> 18/3

⁵⁷ <http://maritime.no/nyheter/siem-har-sagt-opp-152-i-brasil/?ga=1.170660960.1137926252.1458211957> 18/3

⁵⁸ <http://maritime.no/nyheter/simon-mokster-sier-opp/> 18/3

⁵⁹ <http://offshore.no/sak/255140-20-har-fatt-permitterings-varsel-i-dof-subsea> 18/3

⁶⁰ <http://maritime.no/nyheter/statoil-ratene-i-spot-markedet-ikke-baerekraftige/> 18/3

The beginning signs of recession had an impact on the lives of the people in this study as they began to fear for their jobs. Work-related precariousness was therefore a topic among my informants. The present issue regarding crisis led the crew to contemplate over their labour situation in new ways. What grew out of such doubts and work-related insecurities were strategies each crewmember took use of to reduce both doubts and insecurity.

In this chapter I will examine how the recession affected the crew members and how they acted and adapted to the potential outcome, that of losing their jobs. As I showed in chapter four, the relationship between the crew and external demands from both company and charterer, influenced and shaped certain perceptions of labour on board. Such perceptions were embedded in distinctions the crew constructed where the positive, sought-after qualities of labour were the tasks characterised by a high degree of autonomy where the crew felt they decided the pace and progress of tasks on board, some routines being of such character. Routines that were created by company or the charterer, however, were thought to have the opposite effect. In this chapter, I direct my focus on the overarching concern regarding the crisis in the oil industry and subsequently how the residing crew sought to handle the consequences of this. In this chapter I will elaborate on some the tensions that arose as a result of the beginning recession in the oil industry. I will do so first and foremost through a discussion building on the theoretical framework of crisis as formulated by Henrik Vigh (Henrik Vigh, 2008). Here, Vigh argues that crisis can be studied as a condition rather than as a temporal fragmentation. Additionally, it is through a focus on crisis as a condition that the related concept of 'chronicity' occurs. That is, according to Vihg, an experience of crisis as a constant (Henrik Vigh, 2008, pp. 9-10). As this chapter will demonstrate, the crew does not conceive the crisis in the oil industry as periodic or as something that will pass. Rather, because of a long tradition of fluctuations in the industry, crisis has become emblematic of the shipping industry. Analysing crisis then, *as* context instead of *in* context was fruitful (Henrik Vigh, 2006, p. 152). The process of 'normalisation', where crisis becomes a frame of action (Henrik Vigh, 2008, p. 11), is a common point of departure to understanding the crew's reactions and responses to recession. Additionally, and in accordance with Vigh, such reactions and responses are not separated from agency for the individuals facing crisis but should rather be studied as possibilities in lieu of capacity (Henrik Vigh, 2008, pp. 10-11). This viewpoint renders possible a deeper understanding of crisis as 'pervasive contexts rather than singular events' (Henrik Vigh, 2008, p. 8). Arguably, it is through the crew's pragmatic

and normative approach to their work situation, that crisis as context results in detachment from labour.

Secondly, through a discussion emphasising the paradoxical conditions of labour as articulated by Jarzabkowski and Lê (2015), I will demonstrate how humour stimulates detachment by creating an arena which, on the one hand, eases the concerns and disgruntlement on board and, as a result, increases the process of detachment among the crew. Jarzabkowski and Lê suggest that 'paradox will most likely be experienced in people's everyday interactions around work tasks, as it manifests through contradiction in their roles and activities' (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2015, pp. 3-4). The paradox on board the vessel was located in the focus the crew demonstrated as they sought to execute their job satisfactorily, whilst at the same time as they were all subjected to potential dismissals. It was, in many ways, regardless of the crisis, a 'business as usual' approach to labour on board.

Business as Usual

Lars had this 'business as usual' approach to his work situation. He came on board from one rotation to the next as chief engineer. He brought with him a new initiative that quickly seemed to rub off on the other crew members below deck. He was a very 'hands-on' person; circulating around the vessel on his leisure time, on the bridge, the galley and dirty-mess, making conversation with the other men and attempting to create a good working environment. I was somewhat puzzled by his apparent optimism, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, it was not decided whether or not he would continue on rotation on the vessel and, secondly, the overall situation regarding the decline in oil rates and talks of dismissals in the company did not seem to affect his morale.

As it turned out, this was a conscious strategy for Lars. I asked him on several occasions how he managed to place himself so actively in the role of a superior when his situation was so uncertain. Indeed, after he came on board, he spent much time organising orders for the machine and he took on new projects. Lars organised the engineers to weld a new handle for a ladder that had been bothering them for some time. The small ladder was without a handle and, together with the narrow hallways below deck, climbing the ladder whilst working could potentially cause an accident. The crew had mentioned the lack of a handle for some time (from before I initiated fieldwork), and when Lars came on board he organised its repair. Returning to the question of strategy, Lars revealed sentiments towards the remaining crew as important: 'I can't come on board and affect the others [engineers]

even though my situation is uncertain'. What Lars conveyed was that he would not take away the spark or the joy of work, and especially not among the younger members, he conveyed.

Lars told me that the cadet had confessed to Lars that, upon finishing his apprenticeship, he felt that different shipping companies were 'fighting' over him and that even now, despite the recession, he had contact with people from human resources employed in the onshore company with the promise that he was 'looked out for'. Lars summed it up towards the end of our conversation, 'there is no such thing as a gentleman's agreement'. The maritime market, as he saw it, required flexibility, a change that he did not think would sit well with the younger generation that were accustomed to 'the best': Internet access, rotations of four weeks and preferably working in the North Sea. This aside, what Lars did upon arriving on a new vessel was to take a day or two to figure out what was good and bad on board, what worked and what did not. Being on board became a project for him. 'Time goes like that', he said while instantaneously snapping his fingers to make the point. There is a normative dimension to what Lars was telling me. Such dimension was especially visible in how he reflected on his talk with the cadet. The question of how to handle the recession was out of their hands so to say, and Lars was especially suspicious to management. On board the ship, two dominant approaches to the crisis emerged. The first approach revolved around a pragmatic narrative formulated by the crew, and the second approach was a more normative one.

A Pragmatic Approach to Crisis: Bad Times

As the title of this chapter indicates, a paradox of labour exceeds the practical aspects of labour, e.g. the tasks the crew need to manage on a daily basis, to become an integrated aspect of labour off shore itself. The following description of how many members of the crew handled the recession is an example of the more pragmatic approach to crisis. The majority of the crew had experienced times of recession throughout their careers and in their understanding of the maritime industry, I was told, it had a long history of insecure elements: reflagging of vessels, foreign workers replacing Norwegians and a sensibility towards fluctuations on the market. The fear of losing employment was therefore present during my fieldwork. More interesting however, was how all members of the crew experienced insecurity as an inbuilt element in their professional careers. Every member of the crew had thoughts on the recession, and whilst many of them had actual experience that stemmed from a long career at sea, I found that the younger crew members had internalised the insecure

element of the shipping industry as an integral part of their working lives. They referred to it as '*bad times*'.

'*Bad times*' was how the crew, verbally, responded to the spiralling situation in the shipping industry, and many of them had experienced a poor labour market before. The chief officer was one with such experience. He had ended his formal education in 2003 and had to work in a delivery service on shore for some time before being hired in a shipping company due to '*bad times*' in the oil industry in that period. The captain had a similar experience. He finished his apprenticeship in 2003 and found himself without job opportunities 'due to the last oil-crisis, as he put it. He worked on shore, transporting salmon for about a year, before he was offered work off shore. In fact, almost every member of the crew had, to some extent, experienced hardships in their working career. The younger members of the crew had not been exposed to dismissals but nonetheless reflected upon it as if they in fact had. Even the younger members of the crew who had no experience had an inbuilt understanding of the industry as fundamentally vulnerable to change. The apprentice, who was about to finish his apprenticeship after having sailed for two years, had a clear perception of *bad times*, despite the fact that he himself had not been subjected to such circumstances. 'That's the way it has always been in this industry', he told me, convincingly. Others responded on the same note, as if it was to be expected. They all knew, by news coverage or by friends or family, that the shipping industry is highly susceptible to macroeconomic factors.

A Normative Approach to Crisis: Through Ups and Downs

The past experiences of the crew members had undeniably affected their views on their position as offshore employees as inherently susceptible to external circumstances e.g. recession, reflagging and so on. Other members of the crew, mainly the older and more experienced ones, had more extensive experiences of recession. The older members of the crew often formulated an approach to crisis through normative formulations. One of my very first conversations with Mark revolved around the subject of insecurity. After almost forty years at sea he reacted in a defensive manner when questioned on how he experienced the offshore labour market. I recall his direct way of articulating his thoughts on his own position on board, giving me the impression that he wanted to 'get ahead' of the company and the potential situation of being fired. He did so by emphasising that this was to be expected in such times, 'it was definitely a possibility'. Mark did not specifically talk about actual persons from management when we discussed the 'ups and downs' of the offshore maritime market.

Rather, he based his assumptions about management on prior experience. The evading tactic Mark demonstrated as he talked of management as an abstract category share similarities with the *politics of distance* the crew led on board, as demonstrated in chapter three. A different dimension of such politics, however, was how insecurity did not enable a relationship based on mutuality as it did amongst the crew members. On the contrary, insecurity of the labour situation was used as a tactic to separate the crew from management. As such the element of insecurity obtained a collective character on board. The crew were in the same situation, in the same boat, every member potentially at risk of being fired.

The management had sent a letter to the vessel about economic measures to tackle the recession that pointed, towards the end of the letter, to the interests of the shareholders. 'Who are the shareholders?!', one officer commented. 'We know it's the company, the owners, but they write shareholders so that we'll think they're doing all they can for us', he continued. The use of shareholders in letters was interpreted by many crew members as a strategy the company ashore used intentionally to shove the responsibility of employment over to someone else. As the company was listed on the stock exchange and therefore answered to external investors in the company, the crew interpreted letters referring to shareholders as a sign of cowardice. Recession, *bad times*, consequently affected the relationship with management and the sense of security the crew had on board.

For Mark, his assumptions on management were formed many years ago when employed in a different company he and his colleagues were, from one day to the next, replaced by foreign workers when the company where he was employed decided to reflag a substantial part of the fleet. Without having been informed of the decision or given some time to adjust or to start looking for another job, they were dismissed. Mark, together with other bosuns had made a proposal to the company that they could continue working, as the company had decided to maintain the Norwegian officers on board. In Mark's word, management bluntly shot down their proposal. Moreover, when talking about management, Mark explicitly mentioned the director of the shipping company by name as the person responsible for him losing his job. According to Mark, the ship owner said he could find 'new employees under whichever stone he turned'. Another crew member, also a senior, shared similar experience to that of Mark. As he had sailed his whole professional life and was now a few years from retirement, he too had lost his job on several occasions due to both reflagging and recession. The two dimensions, pragmatic and normative, approaches to crisis were often highlighted at the same time by the crewmembers. Some, primarily the older and more experienced members of the crew, related the situation tightly together to decisions

made by management. At the same time, *bad times* was a familiar context for the crew. Particularly, amongst the younger crewmembers, such an approach had been internalized. As a result, conflicting views on how to handle the recession became apparent. The crew varied between these two approaches when faced with crisis. On the one hand, they revealed frustration and powerlessness towards the company and, on the other hand, they expressed relief over having been chartered, and therefore working, in such a poor market. In the following I will continue to discuss how the crew handled the recession through a focus on the crew's responses to the situation.

The Presence of the Crisis

A Norwegian ship-owner said the following in an interview with a local newspaper in 2015: 'There has been a higher focus on increasing production and capacity than on what this [increase of production] actually cost. The costs have reached a level which you won't actually believe is true'. He then goes on to say that what is actually taking place now is a power struggle where the oil companies are taking the opportunity to press the suppliers. 'We and other companies made large investments during last year and did not foresee the recession. Both within shipping and rigs there are long traditions of building one's own market to death'.⁶¹

The crew embraced the emphasis on the 'long tradition of building one's own market to death', and, subsequently, the result was the implicit understanding of the shipping industry as highly susceptible to market influence. Explicitly, however, this meant that they could all potentially be subject to dismissals. 'Eventually we're all just red numbers. If having us on board doesn't pay off, we're all replaceable. I know that now'. This reflection was shared by one of the older engineers and strengthens the assumption of insecurity as engrained in the industry. The striking image of the accounting book filled with red and therefore unprofitable numbers as a metaphor for the crew was effectively telling, as it gave a clear picture of the distance many of the crew felt to the company and the crew's value of labour. In extension of the previous chapter where I focused on labour organisation on board and how industrial development reflects the increasingly capitalist control of the labour process, and working knowledge through the standardisation of the times and spaces of production (Mollona, 2009, pp. 40-41), the aforementioned metaphor amplifies the question

⁶¹ <http://www.h-avis.no/haugesund/karmoy/nyheter/2016-blir-verre-enn-2015/s/5-62-10219?null>
My translation.

of control to also be of personal character. In light of the recession, people formerly working on other vessels replaced former crew members, on account of the company downsizing the workforce. As I met Toby, a young officer, he stood with the employment papers left behind on the bridge from the men who had been replaced, with a troubled look. Distressed over management's absence of awareness of the collegial bonds that form at sea, he commented that management on shore did not take into consideration the fact that the crew become accustomed to each other. Moving around crew members from one rotation to the next then, caused many crew members a feeling of sadness, as they had lost good colleagues. Furthermore, it meant that it could also 'happen to you'.

'It's All the More Important to do a Good Job in These Times'

As the ship owner quoted above highlighted, oil companies lowered the rates for the suppliers, which effectively nuanced the aforementioned distance from the company many of the crew members spoke of. In a strong resemblance to what Richard Sennet has called a 'mask of cooperativeness', (Sennett, 2001, p. 139) the crew shared a common conception that the fault was not entirely placed with management. The crew demonstrated such cooperativeness through the articulation of gratitude. They were, many of them said, rather lucky considering the circumstances. They were, despite everything, still working when so many vessels had been put in lay up and many seamen had already been dismissed from service. The second officer, John, voiced his shared interests with management the highest. John had accentuated two concepts he valued highly in terms of offshore organisation of labour. Firstly, he valued that the crew, on many occasions, could decide themselves how to organise the working day. They did so through a common understanding of '*romslighet*', which permitted that the crew could influence how they organised and structured their watches. Of course, John emphasised, this meant that there was a common understanding among the crew members that if something on board needed to be done, the crew would be there for each other. As he said, 'the people are here when it is necessary'. The two concepts of labour that John explained and valued required that the overall crew shared the same mind-set on collaboration on board. As an extension to his ideas of '*romslighet*' and '*folk trår til når det trengs*',⁶² the current situation required new constellations of collaboration. 'When the industry is booming and everything is well', he said, 'we would get so upset if they denied us

⁶² The people are here when it is necessary.

things we thought we needed on board'. Implicitly, what John is pointing to is coupled to profitability, analogous to the 'we're all red numbers' metaphor. 'Before [the current situation] it was us versus them', he concluded. However, given the different circumstances, e.g. the recession, John said that they had to collaborate with the company. 'We have communism on board now', he said, reinforcing the communal idea of working together. A general conception among the men was that they had to do an even better job given the circumstances, as the introductory quote to this section points to.

Whilst the other crew members depicted some degree of willingness to cooperate with the company, they differed from the image of 'communism on board' as portrayed by John. They did, however, demonstrate a set of common interests (Lysgaard, 1963, pp. 37-38) with management, insofar as they acknowledged the correlation between their continued employment and that the shipping company did well. Notwithstanding common interest, as depicted by Lysgaard, tensions between the crew and management were entrenched in the work structure and not necessarily based on malicious actions from the employees (Lysgaard, 1963, p. 39). Such tensions were particularly expressed due to the geographical distance between the vessel and the company. 'They watch their jobs, we watch our job', I was told by Peter on one occasion.

Making Meaning of Recession

In discussion with Ronald, an officer on the bridge, it became apparent how sudden the extended effects of the drop in oil prices and the ensuing effect this had on the market as a whole, became a factor that the crew had to relate to. At the turn of the month November/December 2014 the vessel earned 15 million NOK, the day-rate being 800,000 NOK. In January 2015, the vessel was chartered at a day-rate of 150,000 NOK. Ronald revealed that if I had questioned him about his thoughts on his work situation in 2014 he would go 'yippee!'- he literally lifted his hands over his head to express the sense of security and contentment he had felt. 'Now', he said, 'it's different'. Ronald was, as he himself stressed, a 'worst-case-scenario-man', and stated that whilst off duty he would read up on news following the recession, investigating which contracts were about to end and follow the geo-political landscape of oil, namely sanctions against Russia, which prohibited activities such as oil exploration and oil extraction in deep water, oil exploration and extraction in the

Arctic and, lastly, shale oil projects in Russia.⁶³ Secondly, Ronald followed news regarding the corruption scandal in Petrobras,⁶⁴ Brazil's national oil company, which he considered to be the main catalyst sparking the decline in oil rates. Both of these situations involved vessels being sent back to Norway, as was the case for vessels working in Brazil, or contracts being terminated, as was happening due to the sanctions against Russia. Indeed, CEO of Havila Shipping, Njål Sævik, has pointed to both these examples, sanctions against Russia and the corruption scandal in Brazil respectively, as triggering elements of the recession.⁶⁵

The question of trust, as addressed in chapter three, emerges yet again. In chapter three I emphasised how the crew implement trust as a contributing factor to the foundation of their professional relationships. Richard Sennet also emphasised trust as an important contributor to lasting relationships, but that the structures of certain institutions obstruct such foundations (Sennett, 2001, p. 30). It is precisely due to the flexible nature of the offshore industry that trust, loyalty and mutual commitment were undermined in the relationship between employees and management when the crisis in the workplace unfolded.

After the crew received the notice of dismissals from the company ashore, their spirit dropped considerably. The captain circulated around the vessel with a printed version of the letter, making sure to attend to every member of the crew. As both the deck-workers and engineers normally sat in the dirty-mess, the captain sat down with them there. He made an open invitation to his office if anyone felt the need to talk, whilst making sure every member of the crew all knew that he did not know about this message beforehand. The electrician rushed to print out a list of every electrician working for the company to compare seniority, whilst one of the deck workers said he was in 'shock'. He became painfully aware, as he put it, that he only had three years seniority with the company. Although the working day was not over for the crew, they stopped working. 'It's raining' I was told by some of the deck-workers. Others pointed to the weather, 'it's too cold outside'.

However, the following day, the majority of the crew had digested the news and the crew acted as if nothing had happened. This was not entirely true as many did make comments pointing to the insecure situation they were in. The electrician would say, 'if it goes bad, it *really* goes straight to hell'. He had already started calculating the loss of income to his mortgage and concluded that he could not afford to be unemployed. Although many of

⁶³ <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/utenrikssaker/Eksportkontroll/sanksjoner-og-tiltak1/sanksjoner-russland/id2008497/>

⁶⁴ <http://e24.no/utenriks/brasil/dnbs-brasil-sjef-naa-ramler-alt-ut-av-skapet/23644340>

⁶⁵ <http://www.smp.no/naeringsliv/2016/01/04/Offshore-bransjen-har-opplevd-et-tøft-år-men-ser-framover-11988888.ece>

the crewmembers made similar comments, the most striking activity on board related to humour. The engineers and deck-workers would continuously make jokes about the equipment on board. 'How much do you think we'll get for the shackles out on deck?' was one comment that was repeated among the crew. Others would comment on different equipment. 'Let's sell everything on board and see how far it'll get us' the crew joked. Or, whenever somebody used disposable cups for coffee, the crew would make comments. 'Do you not know about the bad times?' they would say ironically. Through humour, the crew responded to the crisis and managed to escape the seriousness of the situation. I therefore found the approach to Jarzabkowski and Lê (2015) fruitful as they have examined humour as a means for socially constructing responses to paradoxes (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2015, p. 3). As already mentioned in this chapter, I found a paradox in the 'business as usual-mentality' on board. As a result of the crisis and the feeling of powerlessness the crew felt with regard to their jobs, humour became a stress-reliever for the crew, keeping the crisis at a safer distance. Simultaneously, the crew used humour to negotiate and navigate their responses to the crisis (Lynch, 2010, p. 128). On many occasions, humorous remarks were made about management. One observation made by the crew was about the re-decorating of the offices that was being done on shore. To that, the second officer made a comment. 'You don't see anyone being let go there, do you?' he said to much amusement from his colleagues.

Jokes about the burdens of work that took place among the workers was in such a manner a way of beating off the exigencies of work and in turn assert personal identity as opposed to anonymity. In times of crisis, it was primarily a group identity that was highlighted. Again, the crew accentuated a value of sameness on board in that they could all potentially be dismissed. Jokes and subsequent joking relations (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, 1949), appeared as a strategy to construct control at a time when the matter of control was so clearly out of their hands. Making jokes regarding the situation was part of how they dealt with the contradictory set of objectives at work. Humour thus became a strategy the crew used to collectively create a contrast to the insecurity they felt.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have attempted to understand how the crew related to the macro-economic factors affecting the oil industry, finally culminating in a notice of dismissals. Hence, in this chapter I have attempted to link the social organization that took place on board to a broader frame of action, namely the impact the crisis had on the workers. In light

of the many conversations I had with the crew regarding the recession, it became apparent that the crew did not perceive the emerging crisis as a surprise. On the contrary, the crew depicted work-related insecurity as rather emblematic for the industry. As a result, I followed the theoretical framework formulated by Henrik Vigh in viewing crisis as a pervasive context rather than as a singular event. This is not to say that the crew experienced the industry as a continual state of crisis. Nevertheless, the crew talked about crisis as an ever-present possibility, as an in-built element of the industry. In such a way, a process of normalisation, as accentuated by Vigh, was present in the crew's thoughts of the industry.

Especially, such thoughts were manifested through different approaches to the crisis. Some crewmembers emphasised *bad times* as part of the business whilst others pointed to more personal felt reactions as a response to the situation. When Lars commented that there was 'no such thing as a gentleman's-agreement', he incorporated management in his reasoning of the crisis. Likewise, the past experience of Mark had influenced his thoughts of the industry and, consequently, his thoughts on the on-going crisis. The two responses to the crisis were not totally separated, however, and I found that the crew often varied between the two. On the one hand, the crew were powerless as they faced dismissals whilst, on the other hand, expressing contentment to even be working in such a poor market. Consequently, the crew embraced a market-logic approach to the crisis. The problem was, as many saw it, the market. For the crew, the dilemma between collaborating with the company and the 'we're all red numbers' metaphor effectively nuanced their relationship with management.

Nonetheless, there were tensions regarding how to handle the recession. The descriptive quote made by Peter as he commented, 'they watch their jobs, we watch ours', led me to question whether or not the presence of the crisis provoked processes of detachment from labour. Especially, this was a concern since the crew responded with such blatancy to the situation. It was, after all, to be expected was the impression I was left with by the crew.

Through a theoretical discussion of humour, I examined how the crew make use of it to create a contrast to the uncertainty of their situation. Humour both seemed to stimulate a sense of community on board as it clearly marked out the differences between management and the crew. Also, as a stress-reliever, humour reduced much of the paradox of labouring under times of crisis, namely as a method of creating responses to uncertainty. In respect to management, humour subverted or challenged the status quo (Lynch, 2010, pp. 149-151, 155). The jokes made about 'bad times' together with comments on how management re-decorated the offices, created social affinity among the crew and worked as a defence strategy against an uncertain future.

7 Concluding Remarks – 'We Have to Show We're Worth It'

In concluding this thesis, I will now summarize the central theme and arguments presented. I will comment on what has been the main emphasis of this thesis, the social organization offshore and how the recession affected such organization. As pointed out in the introduction, the Norwegian society has a long maritime tradition. As a result, much of the macro-economic success Norway has achieved can be viewed in relation to activities at sea. However, as the shipping industry grew intimate ties with offshore oil production, they became equally susceptible to the 'ups and downs' of a sensitive market. Nevertheless, located offshore we find a substantial part of the Norwegian labour force. The number of employees working on Norwegian vessels are 32 000. More than 18 000 of these employees are Norwegian. Located offshore, this number is 9100. In other words, the Norwegian shipping industry is not only important for the Norwegian economic growth. For many people, it represents their livelihood.

The fieldwork that resulted in this thesis took place in a rather particular period for the shipping industry. From the very beginning of my fieldwork, the industry was subjected to macro-economic factors; decline in oil rates, geopolitical decisions affecting the industry resulting in a poor market where suppliers could press down the rates. This consequently made an impact on the structural organization of the industry as a whole. As oil-analyst Thina Saltvedt so illustrative put it; 'now, reorganization is needed and many more will feel it [the crisis] on their bodies'. This thesis is situated in the context in which the workers experienced, handled, and was affected by the above-mentioned factors. In light of such factors, I therefore sought to examine how labour is socially organized aboard an offshore supply/support vessel and, secondly, what were the different attitudes to labour. Lastly, I examined how such social organization was affected by the crisis in the offshore industry.

In chapter three, I analysed the ship as a total institution through a comparative view with the theoretical framework as articulated by Erving Goffman. I found many similarities.

A part from the geographical character of the vessel, I also pointed to how the vessel is organized around a fixed set of tasks and purpose, resonating well with Goffman's description of a total institution. As the crew are on board, they live together for a period of time, and therefore the vessel is also a social place. However, I have argued that the crew first and foremost relate to each other through their professional roles on board the vessel and that they themselves make a clear distinction between life at sea and life at home. As Peter commented, 'you have to have a switch inside of you to be sailor', suggested that a career at sea was differently organized than a career on shore. Nonetheless, despite the similarities the vessel share to a total institution, I found certain characteristics incomparable. These revolved, shortly summarized, around the self-negating features Goffman has claimed to be present within a total institution. Rather than studying the vessel as a total institution, I followed Jeremy Tunstall in his description of trawling as a total occupation.

Therefore, in a related argument, I sought to expand the concept of a total institution by pointing to the social organization on board the vessel in chapter four. The crew did not demonstrate such self-negating features as a result of the confined nature of working offshore. Quite the opposite, when on board some members of the crew mentioned the vessel in terms of family and Gary, the steward, even highlighted that he enjoyed working on smaller vessel as he thought they had more 'soul'. This is not to say that the crew was not affected by the structural organization of the vessel that is, after all, a highly hierarchical work place. The hierarchical structure of the vessel was prominent through how the crew negotiated the balance between nearness and distance to each other. Through a politics of distance, a negotiation of social bonds took place to maintain a balance between letting people come to close. Since there are so many uncertain elements in the shipping industry, the crew had adopted an approach to social relationships that took place in the interplay between the hierarchical structure of the vessel whilst simultaneously being autonomous to create their own rhythms and relationships. Analysing the vessel within the theoretical framework of a total institution then, I have argued, brings to light its very limitations. Especially, I found that the crew, through a mutual understanding of trust, challenged the boundaries set by Goffman in his description of a total institution as a formally administrated organization.

On the one hand, I found the social organization of the vessel both to promote the structural organization of the vessel as a highly specialized work environment, whilst on the other, certain social mechanisms diminished it. In this thesis, I have characterized such mechanisms as the strains of a total institution.

In chapter five, I further analysed the organization of the vessel, albeit here I focused on how the crew organized labour. Here, I demonstrated the different attitudes the crew had to labour. A key argument in this chapter revolved around the relationship between external demands, e.g. the charterer and company ashore, and how this relationship created tensions for the crew. In the crew's search for meaning, they developed individual strategies for reclaiming a sense of autonomy in the labour process. A distinction between working *for* the ship and working *for* a contractor was made by many crewmembers as a result of the powerlessness they experienced by demands set by the charterer and company. Through empirical examples I have accentuated some strategies the crew made use of to regain a sense of the control over the labour situation. Respectively, such strategies were individual but had in common that they involved work where the crew experienced a high degree of autonomy. Routine work was accordingly of such character. During routinely tasks on board the vessel, the crew decided both the rhythm and pace of the given tasks. As such, special labour situations took place on board where the crew, through work, achieved a sense of control. Peter's vision of 'making a ship' was realized through an emphasis on the crew's collective knowledge and their ability to evaluate and prioritize to competently decide which tasks on board needed to be done. Similarly, through his emphasis on meaningful labour, the bosun Martin valued tasks where he decided how to work.

Regardless of whether or not the crew were busy, or had to 'work', they maintained their positions throughout their shifts as explained in chapter three. This was related to the organization of offshore labour. A related point, however, is that although the crew were at work, they were not always working. Through personal strategies then, of what work was perceived as valuable, the crew achieved to create meaning. Consequently, the notion of empty labour was a fitting description to meaning-making among the crew. I have highlighted breaks as an arena where the crew contemplated over their labour situation.

In May 2015 notice of dismissals reached the vessel. The crew was not surprised, as many had actually been expecting such news. Hence, the last chapter of this thesis sought to examine how an emerging crisis in the workplace affected the social organization offshore. Much to my surprise, I found that the crew had internalized 'crisis' as an in-built element of the offshore industry. The crew talked of *bad times* as a part of, as opposed to a particular context, of the industry. This led me to argue that, for the crew, the crisis in the offshore industry did not resonate well with the general media coverage, comparing the crisis to the finance crisis of 2008. Recession, I was told by many, was a part of the industry. However,

that is not to say that the crew did not react to the situation. Surely, they did. I have especially focused on what I thought to be a normative and pragmatic approach to crisis. The first approach I found to be more present with the older members of the crew as they had experienced similar situations, which had affected how they related to labour offshore. The pragmatic approach was visible through a ‘business as usual-approach’ and the internalized thought of insecurity as intrinsically connected to the offshore industry.

Conclusively, I want to re-open the debate of de-skilling that I briefly tapped into in chapter five. This thesis has shown that despite external factors such as an emerging oil crisis, demands made by charterer and company that affected the crew’s attitudes to labour together with the highly bureaucratic and structural conditions that is characteristic of the offshore industry, the crew created social mechanisms that appeared to reduce tensions that arose as a result of the particularity of the industry. I found that de-skilling was not so much a question of technology and automation of labour but rather related to questions of control and autonomy in the labour process. In the last chapter I therefore asked whether the impact of a crisis promoted a sense of detachment from the labour process for the crewmembers. While I found that some of the crew argued for a collaboration with the company, such as John did through his reflection of ‘communism on board’, the majority did reveal conflicting views of their own position within the company. In the aftermath of the dismissal notice, the crew reacted with humour. This, I argued, shows the powerlessness the crew felt towards the situation as employees. It is therefore through the social organization of labour that the crewmembers achieved to create not only meaning of the labour situation but also a sense of control over both decisions and themselves.

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All references in this thesis are reported.
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