

“Even if you *are* a spy...”: Some challenges in researcher’s positioning aboard a cargo ship

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Abstract

Conducting fieldwork aboard a ship might sound like an exotic adventure, but it often involves many challenges that could impact on the collected data, on the participants, and on the researcher. This paper focuses on some of these challenges while conducting an ethnographic study of career development among seafarers in the global labor market aboard a cargo ship, as well as emotional, ethical and cultural concerns in the research project. Specifically, the main concern I will be covering is the issue of my positioning in the field as a ‘spy’.

As part of a research of employment and career development in the shipping industry, I spent twelve days aboard a cargo ship in The Mediterranean Sea, carrying out an ethnographic study. The cargo ship ‘Braavos’ (pseudonym) sailed to seven ports and had a crew of approximately 30 seafarers. During the fieldwork, I have recorded fourteen conversations and eight more conversations were documented in the research diary.

The demanding nature of the fieldwork started with a request by the shipping company prior to the fieldwork to share information from my voyage with them, which created ethical and practical considerations. Once I reached the ship, the main challenge I have encountered aboard was the difficult working environment, which included a very busy schedule that caused fatigue among the crew and myself. However, this challenge was exacerbated by the relationship with the company, which spilled over into the relationship with the seafarers. As a result, I had to overcome widely held preconceptions about my role as a company spy, a

preconception that was hard to contradict despite my having taken a range of measures, including specific explanations about my research project and provision of participant information sheets to the seafarers.

This fieldwork experience aboard the ship stood in contrast with my previous experience of conducting fieldwork aboard cargo ships. My expectations for easy access and enhanced rapport once I overcame the barrier of getting access to the ship were confronted from the beginning of my data collection. I learned that there are situations outside the researcher's control, for instance the company's involvement as the main gatekeeper of the field has led to my labeling as a 'spy', and this has complicated the ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, due to the isolated nature of the research field, I could not always receive immediate response for resolving the problems that I encountered. Nevertheless, I managed to overcome these challenges to some extent by spending time with the seafarers and conducting informal conversations.

To conclude, this experience had shaken my methodological perceptions about data collection, and in general the engrossing nature of the research field has left me wondering about additional ethnographic data collection on a ship. Moreover, this experience has led me to reconsider how far a researcher should go in order to gain rapport in the research field, the importance of presenting enough information about myself at the beginning of the fieldwork, and the diplomatic ways of dealing with different stakeholders that relate to the research without damaging neither the participants nor the future access to the research field. Despite the fact that this is an ongoing research, it is clear for now that naught could replace the richness, complexity and context of data collection in an immersive way, and despite the difficulties of encountering suspicious gatekeepers while conducting data collection aboard, I hope this method proves itself as worthwhile. This research might have broader implications, providing a case study for researchers conducting ethnographic research in isolated settings as well as ideas for coping with demanding gatekeepers.

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