



It's Okay Even If You Are a Spy: Issues in Researcher Positioning Within a Precarious Workplace

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Abstract

Purpose:

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the complexities associated with the trust-building process between participants and researcher in the context of a precarious work environment. Specifically, the paper seeks to discuss issues arising from the power dynamics, mistrust and tensions between different stakeholders in the research (i.e. employers, employees and the researcher), and the implications of such relationships for establishing rapport and trust with research participants.

Design:

This paper uses the case of the shipping industry and is based upon findings from two research projects. One project examined similarities and differences between the merchant vessel and Goffman's theoretical conceptualisation of 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961); the other focused on the increasing flexibility of labour in the global labour market, using the case of shipping. Both projects incorporated ethnographic research methods which included three voyages on board merchant vessels, as well as interviews and informal conversations with over 100 participants.

Findings:

The researcher encountered several obstacles throughout the projects, many of which related to the access to the restricted workplace setting of a cargo ship. However, this paper is based on her positioning in the field after permission to access the ship had been granted by the shipping company. It was often challenging to overcome participants' suspicions of the researcher as being sent by the company to spy on them. The researcher generally managed to overcome such suspicions in the course of her fieldwork by building relationships with participants over time. Nevertheless, these relationships were influenced by the complex power dynamics amongst the different stakeholders in the field. The challenges encountered in the field sites suggest that researchers should be open and fluid in the ways they present themselves in the field. The findings potentially offer useful insights for novice researchers whose research focuses on

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3 workplace settings characterised by precariousness of
4 employment and for those conducting shipboard research.
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6 **Originality/value:**

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8 The main contribution of this paper lies within its ability
9 to shed light on the often-delicate relationships between
10 different stakeholders in a research project, and the
11 influence of these relationships on a researcher's continuous
12 access to the field. The experiences described in this paper
13 are based on the global shipping industry, but they are also
14 relevant to other closed, isolated and/or restricted research
15 settings. Specifically, experiences described in this paper
16 are similar to those of researchers studying 'closed' research
17 environments that are not accessible to the general public;
18 this is particularly the case where a hierarchical work
19 structure controls to some extent the roles played by
20 different stakeholders within the precarious work environment,
21 potentially influencing the way someone from outside the
22 workplace approaches it. These include, for example,
23 government owned establishments such as prisons, mental
24 hospitals as well as privately owned closed business
25 organisations.
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29 **Introduction**

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31 This paper focuses on issues relating to access and rapport
32 within closed and restricted settings based on my experiences
33 in two research projects (2010-2018), which involved me
34 negotiating access to and sailing with three cargo vessels.
35 The paper aims to discuss issues relating to researchers'
36 positioning in the field with consideration of the
37 interactions and power dynamics between different
38 stakeholders. In this case, I claim that when the unique
39 relationships between researcher, employers and employees in a
40 closed, hierarchical and precarious [1] workplace that is part
41 of a commercial business organisation are formed, researchers
42 need to carefully navigate these power relationships, as these
43 ultimately shape their data collection in the field through
44 different stages.
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47 In both studies, the focus was on seafarers working on
48 merchant vessels. The first project was undertaken for a
49 period of three years, examining seafarers' experiences on
50 board merchant vessels through Goffman's theoretical
51 conceptualisation of 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961). The
52 second project was undertaken for a period of five years,
53 using the shipping industry as a case for examining precarious
54 employment practices in the global labour market, specifically
55 on the increasing flexibility of labour in the global labour
56 market, using the case of shipping. Ethnographic fieldwork was
57 conducted on board three cargo vessels, in what can be termed
58 'overt research' (Bryman, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson,
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1995), where both gatekeepers and participants were conversant with the research being conducted and informed consent forms were signed. Conversations and interviews were conducted in Hebrew, English and Russian. In all cases, the ships sailed to several countries along the Mediterranean Sea coast for periods ranging between 12-16 days. To maintain seafarers' anonymity, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Information about research participants can be seen in Figures 1-3.

Figure 1: Age groups of participants

Figure 2: Roles held by participants

Figure 3: Origin Countries of Participants

Ethnographies of Organisations

Collecting reliable and valid data requires people's trust, thereby enabling researchers to gain insight into their lives and experiences. The importance of gaining trust with participants is evident in social research, particularly in the context of ethnographic research (Alcadipani and Hodgson, 2009; Bryman, 2012; Goffman, 1961; Green et al., 2017; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) where ethnographers spend a considerable amount of time with participants. When it comes to conducting research on any group in an organisation, Goffman (1961, p. 7) notes how a good way to learn about members of organisations is 'to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject.' In this respect, gaining participants' trust often requires researchers to participate 'overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 1). In order to do this, however, researchers need, first and foremost, to gain access to the organisational setting within which they wish to conduct their study.

The issue of access to research data has been a well-covered topic in ethnographic studies (Bryman, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Lumsden, 2009; Warden, 2013). Brannick and Coghlan (2007) define access in two 'stages', whereas primary access generally means obtaining permission to get into the organisation to undertake research, while secondary access refers to building relationships to gain access to people and information within the organisation. Secondary access is 'not just about opening doors', but about the 'researcher gaining the acceptance, credibility, and trust of organisational members' (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016, p. 545). Challenges to access are described as the 'most acute' during the initial attempts to enter a research field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 54). The problems of access are not fully resolved once the researcher has gained entry to the setting, however.

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3 Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 79) emphasise how
4 'negotiation of access is therefore likely to be a recurrent
5 preoccupation for the ethnographer'. Ethnographic research in
6 business organisations can present unique access issues since
7 these are often considered 'closed' research settings (Bryman,
8 2012, p. 433) where access is generally limited to outsiders.
9 In this respect, gaining the trust of members in a business
10 organisation characterised by precarious working conditions
11 can present additional challenges for researchers, as
12 described throughout the paper. Some of the challenges
13 encountered prior to and during data collection are presented,
14 with special emphasis on the distinctiveness of gaining access
15 to participants in the shipping industry. This paper
16 contributes to the field of organisational ethnography by
17 presenting an example of the often-delicate relationships
18 between different stakeholders in an organisation, and the
19 influence of these relationships on a researcher's continuous
20 access to the field.
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25 **The global shipping industry**

26 The global shipping industry, perhaps more than any other,
27 has been greatly influenced by growing cost-saving strategies
28 over the years. The drive to reduce labour costs and
29 additional processes relating to globalisation have created a
30 strongly precarious work environment for seafarers with
31 minimal regulations of work conditions (Alderton et al., 2004;
32 Baum-Talmor, 2018; Gekara et al., 2013). Seafarers' employment
33 generally involves short-term voyage-based contracts, and
34 subsequent employment may not necessarily be with the same
35 company and/or on board the same ship. At the end of any
36 contract, they generally become unemployed (Leong, 2012), and
37 they lack many social benefits such as pension schemes,
38 medical insurance or life insurance (Dutt, 2015; Sampson,
39 2013). Often seafarers are forced to wait long periods of time
40 between contracts (Baum-Talmor, 2018; Sampson, 2013); even
41 when they have a contract, they may experience a constant fear
42 of job loss, as the renewal of their contract is not
43 guaranteed. The nature of employment in the global shipping
44 industry reflects the growing use of precarious working
45 arrangements among contemporary business organisations (Beck,
46 2000; Kalleberg, 2009; Vosko, 2010).
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51 Ships have been compared to and have been found to bear
52 similarity to 'total institutions' (TIs) in some respects,
53 even though they clearly differ from TIs in others (Baum-
54 Talmor, 2018; Davies, 1989; Gerstenberger, 1996; Goffman,
55 1961). On the one hand, the ship is a place of residence and
56 work, where seafarers as 'like-situated individuals' (Goffman,
57 1961, p. 11) are physically isolated from the shore and other
58 people for extended periods of time (Baum-Talmor, 2018;
59 Davies, 1989). On the other hand, the ship cannot be
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3 considered a TI in its entirety, and as some critiques of the
4 concept claim that TIs are never entirely cut off from the
5 outside world (Gill et al., 2018; Moran, 2016). In this
6 respect, the cargo ship can be considered a 'moving world' or
7 as Michel Foucault calls it, a 'heterotopia par excellence'
8 (Faubion, 1998, p. 185) which is strongly linked to the
9 surrounding world. Taking into account the precariousness of
10 employment in shipping as noted above, it is possible to look
11 on the research field from a similar perspective taken by
12 Geppert and Pastuh (2017) who studied the retail industry, and
13 applied the concept of TIs to the analysis of employment
14 practices 'which have been labelled as 'precarious' or
15 'abusive' in the context of a 'normal' business organisation'
16 (Geppert and Pastuh, 2017, p. 256).
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19 Within the context of the research upon which this paper is
20 based, there are complex power relations between the company
21 personnel ashore and the crews on board the ship worth
22 considering. This research found that seafarers' perceptions
23 of the company's employment practices were overwhelmingly
24 negative, and they reported financial difficulties between
25 contracts (e.g. falling into debt). Most seafarers interviewed
26 portrayed a general sense of insecurity in their employment,
27 and some expressed a fear of their employer, seen to have all
28 the power to terminate their contracts. In this backdrop, the
29 shipping industry presents interesting barriers to researchers
30 trying to access it, where seafarers' perceptions of the
31 researchers could be set within the unbalanced power dynamics
32 between them and their employer. Employers, too, might have
33 reservations when it comes to providing access to researchers,
34 for instance due to the exposure of malpractices or due to the
35 fact that ships are considered closed and restricted work
36 environments. For example, it is likely that employers who do
37 not comply with the industry's global regulations in relation
38 to seafarers' employment (Bloor and Sampson, 2009) are
39 unlikely to be open about such malpractices with researchers,
40 even when anonymity is guaranteed.
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45 **Negotiating initial access: Gatekeepers and** 46 **stakeholders in shipping** 47 48

49 When it comes to accessing the global shipping industry,
50 Sampson and Turgo (2018, p. 3) note how this industry is a
51 'geographically dispersed, elite, and exclusive field for
52 research which renders access and engagement challenging'.
53 Bearing similarity to other ethnographic settings (e.g.
54 Gouldner, 1954; Lumsden, 2009; Warden, 2013), there are
55 several 'layers' of gatekeepers in shipping that researchers
56 need to go through. The first gatekeeper would be the shipping
57 company that needs to approve the researcher's access to the
58 ship.
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3 In both research projects, gaining access to employers in
4 the shipping industry proved to be challenging. Attempts to
5 contact potential gatekeepers were made early on in both
6 projects, in order to secure a research voyage. In my
7 correspondence I presented myself as a student who is
8 interested in seafarers' lives and welfare, as well as their
9 motivations to work on board. A detailed account was kept of
10 the people who could potentially assist with data collection.
11 Nevertheless, despite dozens of letters, emails and phone
12 calls, in most cases these attempts did not result in an
13 interview or in access to a ship.
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16 Primary access (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) was eventually
17 achieved through a gatekeeper in a global shipping company
18 owning and operating a fleet of approximately 150 vessels
19 worldwide. The first successful contact with the company was
20 established in the early 2010s and was what can only be
21 described as a 'lucky break'. The HR manager contacted me over
22 the phone as a response to a letter sent to the company, and
23 said he was interested in the project. Consequently, a meeting
24 was scheduled, at the end of which the gatekeeper along with
25 another colleague were very supportive of the project and made
26 the arrangements to facilitate a voyage on board. There was no
27 explicit request for information on behalf of the company
28 representatives, which raised concerns that a request for
29 tangible or intangible output might arise at a later stage, as
30 noted for example in Sampson and Turgo (2018).
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34 In order to maintain a positive relationship with the
35 company that could potentially lead to additional research
36 voyages, I felt compelled to produce a report of some kind,
37 albeit not having been asked to. Having prepared a
38 presentation with seafarers' photos from my first voyage on
39 board for the seafarers' enjoyment, it seemed sensible at the
40 time to show the presentation to the company representative as
41 a token of gratitude. Without intending to do so, however, and
42 despite the fact that the presentation was received
43 positively, it also prompted several comments regarding
44 seafarers' work practices on board, for example, in relation
45 to health and safety regulations. For instance, the manager
46 commented on seafarers not wearing protective equipment even
47 though they were photographed during their break time. The HR
48 manager also noted how, judging by my photos, the ship
49 resembled a cruise ship rather than a working cargo ship. The
50 company's reaction to the presentation has provided a valuable
51 insight on the research field and the power relations between
52 the company and the seafarers working on board. Subsequently,
53 the presentation played a crucial role in facilitating further
54 access to the research field, which was arranged through the
55 same company approximately six months later. To demonstrate,
56 during a conversation I had with the captain on board at the
57 beginning of my second voyage, he mentioned how the deputy HR
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3 manager had spoken favourably of my previous voyage and my
4 presentation.
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6 Having established some contacts in the shipping industry
7 during the first project, I commenced the second project in
8 2013 believing that access to my third voyage be easier, which
9 transpired to be a somewhat naïve assumption. Starting a new
10 project in a different country, I was not sure my previous
11 connections were still viable, thus I attempted to negotiate
12 access to new shipping companies found through an online
13 search. However, as these efforts were largely futile, I
14 resorted back to pre-existing contacts where I managed to
15 secure a research voyage. At this time, however, there had
16 been a change in management and the new contact person made an
17 explicit request for information about my experience on board
18 at the end of the voyage. This presented an ethical dilemma in
19 the sense that I needed to negotiate my position and find the
20 balance between maintaining access to the ship while not
21 compromising seafarers' trust, anonymity and confidentiality.
22 Even though I clearly explained the ethical limitations to
23 what I could and could not share with him, I felt that this
24 request placed me in a difficult position. Bell and Bryman
25 (2007) note how organisational researchers often find
26 themselves in a weak bargaining position compared to other
27 disciplines when trying to gain access to their field, as
28 business organisations usually operate on a cost-benefit
29 model, expecting something in return for their cooperation.
30 Accessing closed research settings such as the global shipping
31 industry often means that to secure access, 'researchers in
32 relatively weak positions have to make use of non-material
33 resources in order to win the 'favour' of more powerful
34 gatekeepers' (Sampson and Turgo, 2018, p. 2). Eventually, to
35 appease the contact person at the company and to maintain an
36 option for future access, I stated that all results would be
37 published and available in an online report at the end of the
38 project. Nevertheless, the access granted by the company
39 underpinned my presence on the ship and inexorably influenced
40 my position on board, as shown later in the paper.
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46 While the company representative would have been the obvious
47 gatekeeper in the field, as Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016, p.
48 546) note: 'obtaining permission from such a person does not
49 necessarily mean that all employees ... will welcome the
50 researcher'. Although access to the ship was facilitated
51 through the company representative ashore, contact with them
52 ceased for the duration of the fieldwork, so regardless of any
53 previous arrangements made with the company representative
54 ashore, to facilitate a successful study I needed to be
55 accepted and trusted by seafarers on board.
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Accessing the ship and seafarers on board

The ship is considered a relatively unusual location for conducting fieldwork, as I discovered during my first research project. Other researchers who have conducted shipboard research note how the ship is an isolated work environment that often presents increased researcher risk and restricted options for communication with the outside world (Baum-Talmor, 2012; Bloor et al., 2010; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Additionally, ships often sail for extended periods and access to the shore may be limited or impossible at times (Ellis et al., 2012).

In other settings, once access is secured, participants are generally in a position to walk away or not engage with the researcher. However, people on board a cargo vessel, myself included, are physically isolated from the shore (Baum-Talmor, 2014; Sampson, 2013); once the boat has left the port, people are not in a position to easily disengage from the research. Seafarers are compelled to live and work alongside the researcher; they see me every mealtime, and every day I spend most of my time in their working spaces. These circumstances played an important role in the relationships between different stakeholders in the research, including the relationships with the shipping company employees ashore, who are physically isolated from those at sea. In this respect, the researcher's presence on board can be seen as an intrusion of the managerial gaze in seafarers' 'protected' and normally isolated working space. This could further influence the perception of the researcher as a 'representative' of the company that can often be perceived as an 'enemy' in the minds of some seafarers.

In addition to the power dynamics between the company and seafarers, there are several stakeholders within the hierarchical structure of the ship worth mentioning. The highest authority on a typical cargo ship is the captain, who generally acts on behalf of the ship's owner and is responsible for the day-to-day matters on board the ship (Sampson, 2013). The captain can be seen as the main gatekeeper researchers need to 'win over' once on board, having the power to grant access and smooth their entry into the field. In some instances, captains are potentially in a position to derail research projects by preventing investigators from conducting their studies (e.g. Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Under the captain, crews generally adhere to a very strict hierarchical structure (Baum-Talmor, 2018; Sampson, 2013), divided into officers and non-officers (ratings). Table 1 presents a short overview of roles generally held on board, according to seniority.

Table 1: Typical hierarchy of jobs on board cargo ships

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3 Shipboard hierarchy normally exists through a clear chain of
4 command and through a physical separation between officers and
5 ratings, including separate accommodation, eating areas as
6 well as 'social' spaces e.g. TV rooms for officers and ratings
7 [4]. It is important to note that a researcher's status on
8 board is more likely to be associated with officers rather
9 than with ratings, as the researcher is generally seen as the
10 'company guest,' hence under the captain's responsibility. In
11 both projects I have managed to secure the captain's approval
12 for conducting the research, thus the next 'layer' of
13 stakeholders on board was the crew under the captain's
14 command, which form the majority of participants in the
15 project.
16
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18 19 **Acceptance and rapport**

20
21 The significance of proximity to the participants to
22 facilitate cooperation is mentioned by Adler and Adler (2001)
23 who note that regularly approaching respondents enables
24 researchers to discuss complex issues and cultivate a deeper
25 intimacy with them. Spending time with people in their
26 workplace has been noted as one way of overcoming potential
27 resistance and founding a relationship with them prior to the
28 interview (Adler and Adler, 2001). At the beginning of my
29 fieldwork on every ship I downplayed my researcher role and
30 tried to connect with people in an informal way. I found that
31 the first few days in the field were often beneficial for
32 establishing rapport with the crew, during which seafarers
33 gradually started to show interest in me as a guest on board.
34 I consistently tried to spend time in seafarers' work areas
35 and other communal spaces on board, which often prompted some
36 seafarers to take notice of me and to start conversations. On
37 one occasion, while spending time in the communal TV room, one
38 seafarer started asking questions about my studies and others
39 soon followed. By exchanging information and answering
40 seafarers' questions, I was able to 'enter' a deeper level of
41 the field which later on helped my data collection.
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45 I tried to convince crewmembers to take part in the project
46 in various ways, and there were several interactions in the
47 field that later had a substantial impact on data collection.
48 One example was a routine safety drill which took place
49 several days into the voyage after which I seized the
50 opportunity to present myself and my research properly. At the
51 end of the drill, all seafarers were assembled in the office
52 to discuss it after which the senior officer introduced me as
53 a student, explaining that I was not there on behalf of the
54 company. As a result, some seafarers became friendlier towards
55 me, which facilitated access to more people.
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58 While some events were fortuitous in facilitating access to
59 seafarers, in other instances I actively created events in
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3 order to establish more meaningful relationships with
4 seafarers outside of their workplace. Once when the ship
5 berthed in Barcelona, I invited several seafarers for a night
6 out off the ship [2]. This outing, however, took its toll on
7 some of the seafarers who showed up to work the next day tired
8 and unfocused, at least according to the First Engineer Dagmer
9 [3]. While having lunch with Dagmer, he told me how seafarers
10 who went out the night before were completely exhausted,
11 resulting in him sending one of them to rest in his cabin.
12 This outing seemed to create a real sense of comradery among
13 those involved, and consequently established a bond with these
14 seafarers who subsequently appeared to feel more comfortable
15 with me. However, the unintended consequence of this event was
16 that it impinged on the crew's functionality and had the
17 potential to compromise their safety.
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21 I sometimes felt that I managed to immerse myself in some
22 aspects of the crew's life on board, while not in others.
23 While speaking to Dagmer (the First Engineer), another
24 seafarer named Tycho (serving as Chief Engineer) entered the
25 room and appeared quite irritated with everyone present. I was
26 not spared in this instance and was scolded along with
27 everybody else. Even though Tycho had agreed to a recorded
28 interview earlier, he often interfered with my research by
29 interfering or glowering near my conversations with other
30 people; this was despite the fact that our interactions were
31 taking place during free time (as opposed to time demanded for
32 work activities). The following illustrates this:
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35 *I was sitting with Eddison the cadet and the*
36 *chief engineer Tycho seemed angry with me sitting*
37 *there. ... I asked Eddison if I was distracting him*
38 *from work and he said that he already finished his*
39 *duties for the day. [Fieldnotes, second voyage]*
40

41
42 Despite the negative experience with Tycho and his
43 reproachful attitude towards me, these events turned out to be
44 positive as they facilitated later conversations with other
45 seafarers under his command. It seemed that I was, as it were,
46 'in the same boat' as them when I was criticised by their
47 superior officer at the same time as them; thus a friendly
48 connection was made because we now shared a common 'enemy'. In
49 a sense, the hierarchical relationship between Tycho and his
50 inferiors partially shaped the interaction between me and the
51 participants, and rather than being associated with the
52 'power' of the senior officers, I was now grouped with the
53 'weaker' group, which deepened my rapport and acceptance with
54 the ratings. On several other occasions throughout the
55 fieldwork, some ratings noted how I was 'different from other
56 guests on board' since I tried to spend time with all
57 seafarers equally, rather than mainly with the higher-ranking
58 crew. These experiences suggest that I managed, at least to
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3 some extent, to build rapport and trust with some seafarers on
4 board which was the purpose of the voyage, and which enabled
5 me to collect rich and interesting data. However, this was not
6 always the case.
7

8 9 **Suspicion and resistance**

10
11 In both projects, after almost two weeks spent on board, I
12 managed to establish trust with most of the seafarers who
13 agreed to recorded interviews. However, some seafarers did not
14 agree to take part in the research, recorded or not. In this
15 respect, suspicions of my intentions on board had several
16 features, including seafarers' perception of me as a 'spy' and
17 the power dynamics within the context of a precarious work
18 environment.
19

20
21 As some people have no or little knowledge of social
22 research, researchers can often be perceived as a threat in
23 the field, whereas 'field researchers are frequently
24 suspected, initially at least, of being spies' (Hammersley and
25 Atkinson, 1995, p. 80). The closed research field of the cargo
26 ship (Alderton et al., 2004; Sampson and Turgo, 2018) placed
27 me in an ambiguous position from the seafarers' point of view,
28 since I boarded the ship with no apparent nautical skills nor
29 family connections to any seafarer [5]. To assert my
30 independence from their employer (Green et al., 2017), one of
31 the common questions I was asked by seafarers related to my
32 stay on board, with particular interest shown in discovering
33 whether someone was paying for my passage. While no direct
34 payment was received from the company for conducting the
35 research, my access to the vessel meant all food and board
36 were provided for the duration of the voyage, which, in turn,
37 meant that the company indirectly paid for my voyage by
38 agreeing to me being on the ship. While I did pay some fees to
39 the company in two out of the three voyages to cover basic
40 costs and local taxes, generally I was not charged for joining
41 the vessel, which might have been perceived as suspicious by
42 seafarers (who sometimes asked questions about who funds my
43 stay on board) and inevitably positioned me as having a hidden
44 connection to the company.
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48
49 In a handful of cases, some seafarers were hostile towards
50 me from the outset and despite several attempts to speak to
51 them throughout the fieldwork, their reluctance to take part
52 in the research persisted. For example, overt resistance to
53 the idea of a researcher on board was evident during the
54 second research project, where one seafarer questioned me from
55 the moment I set foot on board. After I was helped to board
56 the ship through the gangway, I was met by the AB Alton, who
57 signed me in onto the ship's logbook and introduced me to the
58 third mate Euron, who bluntly said in Hebrew: 'so you're here
59 to investigate us, huh?' I gained the impression that he did
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3 not favour the idea of having a researcher on board. When the
4 ship reached deep sea, he seemed slightly more at ease and
5 after sharing some information about himself, openly said that
6 he believed I was sent by the company to spy on seafarers on
7 board. Even though Euron 'softened up' towards the end of the
8 voyage and had numerous informal conversations with me, he
9 never overcame his suspicions to the extent that he agreed to
10 be recorded. In this respect, the issue of the 'managerial
11 gaze' interfering with the seafarers' work environment played
12 a role in Euron's perceptions, as he could not disassociate me
13 from his employer, constantly feeling like he was being
14 'watched'.
15

16
17 In another case, one seafarer on board the first ship
18 refused to talk to me at a very early stage of my research,
19 and despite spending over two weeks in the vicinity of that
20 seafarer, he declined to partake in the project. The following
21 notes document my frustration with this:
22

23
24 *I believe I met my first reluctant respondent on*
25 *board, his name is Tormund, he seems to oppose my*
26 *research fundamentally. When [I tried to initiate*
27 *a conversation with him] he said something along*
28 *the lines of 'no one is telling you the truth when*
29 *you ask them questions, even though I'm not sure*
30 *what exactly you're asking them...' I told him that*
31 *he didn't have to answer any of my questions, and*
32 *he seems to have chosen not to participate. [Notes*
33 *from first voyage]*
34
35

36 I came to terms with Tormund's explicit opposition to the
37 research, but his reluctance to participate took a turn for
38 the worse when I realised that he was actively sabotaging my
39 access to other informants of his nationality (i.e. Polish). I
40 noticed how most of the Polish seafarers were following
41 Tormund's approach, avoiding contact with me and shying away
42 from my attempts to schedule interviews. In this context, what
43 might have played a role in their suspicion was their origin
44 from a country with a 'history of mass surveillance'
45 (Beresniova, 2017).
46
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48 **Fluid identity in the field**

49

50 This aspect of gaining rapport and trust could also be
51 linked to my personal background. Abu-Lughod (1991, p. 137)
52 refers to 'halfies' as those whose 'national or cultural
53 identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education,
54 or parentage.' I was born in Latvia while it was under
55 Russia's communist regime, and then spent most of my life in
56 Israel, which could classify me as a 'halfie,' having a mixed
57 cultural identity. Based on several informal conversations in
58 the field, I discovered how my USSR origin has likely played a
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3 role in my positioning in the field. With my name and details
4 appearing on the crew list (freely available to all
5 seafarers), my place of birth was a known fact on board. Some
6 seafarers came from countries that were previously occupied by
7 the USSR or were affected in one way or another by the
8 Communist Regime, for example Poland, Romania and Ukraine. In
9 both projects, there were seafarers from these countries who
10 explicitly refused to take part in the research and treated me
11 suspiciously from the outset.
12
13

14 On another occasion during the first voyage, I was walking
15 around the vessel with my camera taking pictures of the
16 different spaces of the ship. At one point, I was trying to
17 take an artistic picture of my surroundings, which was
18 observed by the bosun. He was Romanian and asked me if I was a
19 spy taking pictures of the crew. It was not clear whether his
20 question was a serious one. Later on, when I saw him on the
21 bridge, I showed him the picture I had taken but he did not
22 seem to be too impressed by this. In consequent conversations
23 with other crew members, it was implied that my Ex-Soviet
24 origin had played a role in his choice of words. In this case,
25 I had no control over the way I was perceived in the field.
26 Being a 'halfie' enabled me to have a deeper understanding of
27 issues associated with Soviet 'surveillance' and the way
28 seafarers could perceive my position as a 'spy', but also
29 thwarted my access to some of them [6].
30
31

32 Being aware of such possible perceptions, in turn, enabled
33 me to negotiate my role in the field and establish
34 relationships with seafarers based on my other 'ascribed'
35 characteristics (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) such as my
36 gender, my age group and my ethnic identification [7]. With
37 reference to the latter, my ability to speak Russian enabled
38 some seafarers to express themselves in their mother tongue
39 which led to rich and meaningful data. In terms of my age, I
40 tried to use 'marginally similar experiences' (Tewksbury and
41 Gagné, 1997, p. 133) to those of seafarers in order to enhance
42 the research process. For example, being in my 30s while
43 conducting the study resembled the age group of some seafarers
44 with whom I shared references to music, films and video games;
45 this served as another means of building trust and rapport.
46 These experiences could also be related to the fluctuating
47 identities in the field and the influential role identity
48 plays in a researcher's positioning in the field, as also
49 noted by Gosovic (2018) and Merriam et al. (2001). Another
50 identity I 'flaunted' (Mazzei and O'Brien, 2009) was my
51 gender. Some seafarers often associate women with a 'caring'
52 role (Acejo and Abila, 2016; Sampson and Thomas, 2003), making
53 them more likely to share their feelings and experiences with
54 a female researcher. Similarly, in some cases in the field,
55 seafarers shared their problems with me, telling me how they
56 missed their families and how they did not get along with
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3 their superiors, which enabled a greater understanding of
4 their experiences at work.
5

6 There is a 'grey' area between full cooperation and obvious
7 resistance to the researcher as I discovered during fieldwork,
8 which can also be linked with the power dynamics of different
9 stakeholders in shipping. For example, I was baffled by my
10 relationship with some who, although largely cooperative,
11 still assumed I had been sent by the company. On one occasion
12 at the end of a recorded conversation with a trainee cook, I
13 asked him a routine question of whether the interview had made
14 him feel uncomfortable or intimidated. He replied that it had
15 not, but he also added: 'it's okay even if you are a spy,'
16 stating further he would feel comfortable talking to me
17 because he did not have anything to hide. I was concerned by
18 his comment, as it highlighted the fact that even after
19 spending a considerable amount of time with seafarers it was
20 difficult to convince them I was not sent by the company.
21 Undoubtedly, boarding a ship for data collection has
22 facilitated rich and invaluable data, but following his
23 comment, I questioned whether my efforts in arranging a voyage
24 on board for interviewing seafarers was the most effective way
25 to gather the information I needed, rather than, for example,
26 accessing them while their ship was berthed ashore.
27 Subsequently, even though I did manage to collect the data
28 that answered my research questions, my relationships with the
29 seafarers were shaped to some extent by the power dynamics
30 between them and the company, where seafarers held the
31 underlying assumption that I was sent to the ship to spy on
32 them.
33

34 In other cases, seafarers were willing to participate but
35 did not agree to be recorded. It would have been ideal to have
36 an official recording of all my interactions with seafarers.
37 Recorded conversations can produce a comprehensive account of
38 conversations conducted when compared to the pen-and-notebook
39 approach which inevitably means the loss of much detailed
40 information (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 186). However,
41 this was not always possible. On one such occasion, for
42 example, I interviewed a captain about his experiences at sea
43 and he explicitly asked me not to record the interview, which
44 meant I needed to capture what was said on paper. In this
45 instance, the captain appeared to trust me to the extent of
46 sharing information about his life and experiences at sea but
47 did not agree to have a physical record made of the
48 conversation apart from notes. This was due to suspicion on
49 his behalf that the recording might end up in the wrong hands.
50

51 During a recorded interview with a captain on board a
52 different ship, he expressed his concerns about the destiny of
53 the recording, explaining that his reservations related to his
54 fear it could potentially reach the company [8]. On another
55 occasion, I had a plethora of informal conversations with one
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3 bosun, but when I tried to initiate a recording of our
4 interaction that was particularly useful for the research, he
5 refused. After trying to schedule a convenient time for him to
6 record a conversation, he politely admitted he preferred not
7 to be recorded. The participant had voiced many personal
8 opinions which were often critical of his employer and of
9 management on board, and he preferred not to have a formal
10 recording of these exchanges for fear of job loss.
11

12
13 While my ascribed positioning as a spy shaped some
14 relationships with the seafarers on board, there are other
15 reasons that can be identified regarding seafarers' reluctance
16 to participate in the research. In their paper about reluctant
17 respondents, Adler and Adler (2001, p. 528) note how sometimes
18 research respondents within a workplace setting can find
19 themselves in a vulnerable position due to fears about losing
20 their jobs. A 'fear' of the employer is particularly
21 noticeable within the context of the global shipping industry
22 and the precariousness of seafarers' employment, as noted
23 earlier.
24

25
26 On one occasion, after listening to a recording of an
27 interview with a seafarer, I noticed how his attitude
28 developed defensive undertones when I asked him a relatively
29 standard question about the length of his contract, when he
30 replied:
31

32 *I don't know... and besides, it can change. If I*
33 *want to do another round [on board], they give*
34 *me the option to do that. So I cannot say*
35 *anything [bad] about the company, I'm sure they*
36 *are working as they should be, I'm not saying*
37 *they are not. [Jojen, Deck Officer]*
38

39
40 Jojen's cautious manner illustrated his misgivings that if
41 anything negative was said to me about the company, it might
42 be shared with his employer, consequently compromising his
43 employment. Other conversations I had with Jojen supported the
44 view that he was convinced I was sent by the company to spy on
45 seafarers, and he was cautious in what he told me.
46

47
48 Another dimension of seafarers' misapprehension of my
49 positioning in the field sometimes involved requests they
50 wanted me to 'pass on' to the company. For example, during an
51 interview with an electricity cadet, he spoke very positively
52 about the company and openly promoted himself as a candidate
53 for a training program the company was funding at the time:
54

55 *I already have one-year experience, that type of*
56 *main engine, and that type of ships. So actually,*
57 *I think that I will be a great candidate, you*
58 *know, for that [course]. [Matthos, Electrician*
59 *Cadet]*
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3 As Tewksbury and Gagné (1997, pp. 140-141) observe: 'no
4 matter how careful researchers may be about self-
5 presentations, we can never be in total control of the
6 impressions we make on others'. Matthos' assumptions about my
7 connection to the company brought about his attempt to promote
8 himself to the company; this contrasts with Euron, who saw the
9 negative watchful eye of his employer through my presence on
10 board. Matthos actually wanted to be noticed by his employer,
11 and tried to use my presence on board to do that.
12
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14 Additionally, seafarers' reluctance to participate in the
15 research could be related to their general unfamiliarity with
16 academic research which might have raised suspicions as many
17 of them had not previously encountered a researcher on board.
18 It is also possible that the intense and all-encompassing
19 schedule of the ship led to seafarers' fatigue (Wadsworth et
20 al., 2008), meaning some were too tired and preferred spending
21 their 'off-work' time on their own in their cabins. The
22 intensive nature of fieldwork on board the ship also took its
23 toll on me and sometimes I was too tired to carry on with
24 mundane conversations, feeling the pressures of shipboard
25 isolation and fatigue myself. This helped me to understand
26 more deeply the experience of seafarers' life and work on
27 board, even though this shared experience occasionally
28 thwarted attempts to develop relationships in the field.
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32 **Conclusion**

33
34 By negotiating access through the shipping company, on three
35 occasions I managed to gain initial access to what can be
36 considered the closed and precarious work environment of the
37 cargo ship (Bryman, 2012; Sampson and Turgo, 2018). However,
38 this immersive ethnographic approach did not always best serve
39 my interests or increase rapport with the participants; it was
40 often mitigated by the underlying power dynamics between the
41 company and the seafarers working on board. In the cases where
42 the seafarers were convinced that I was sent by the company,
43 my relationships were negatively affected. It is important to
44 acknowledge that researchers need to be able to accept that
45 they cannot 'win them all' and even though we may strive to
46 speak to as many people as possible, some respondents will
47 never be persuaded to take part in the research, as this paper
48 demonstrates.
49
50

51 The issues covered in this paper are analysed through an
52 ethnographic framework, placing the research within the
53 comprehensively covered topics of access and rapport. The
54 paper examines issues arising from the power dynamics between
55 different stakeholders in what can be termed a 'precarious'
56 workplace, using the case of the shipping industry. In this
57 respect, the shipping industry has been affected by different
58 processes relating to globalisation, which have created a
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3 strongly precarious work environment for seafarers with
4 minimal regulations of work conditions (Alderton et al., 2004;
5 Baum-Talmor, 2018; Gekara et al., 2013). Seafarers' employment
6 generally involves short-term voyage-based contracts, at the
7 end of which they normally become unemployed (Leong, 2012) for
8 an unlimited period of time. Seafarers experience a constant
9 fear of job loss, lacking many social benefits such as pension
10 schemes, medical insurance, life insurance (Dutt, 2015;
11 Sampson, 2013). Research shows how seafarers' perceptions of
12 their employment are overwhelmingly negative (Baum-Talmor,
13 2018).
14
15

16 My work exposes some of the implications of these dynamics
17 for the establishment of rapport and trust with research
18 participants. The main contribution of this paper lies within
19 its ability to shed light on the often-delicate relationships
20 between different stakeholders in a research project in a
21 hierarchical setting, and its influence on researchers'
22 continuous access to participants. Another aspect to emphasise
23 in this respect relates to the ethical dilemmas often faced by
24 researchers in closed research organisations, whereas
25 researchers are required to cautiously navigate polarised
26 organisational settings. In this project I had to carefully
27 manage my stance with the company who provided access to the
28 ship vis-à-vis my relationship with the research participants,
29 ensuring I was not compromising seafarers' trust, anonymity
30 and confidentiality while maintaining a positive relationship
31 with the company. At the end of the study, I sent out the
32 research reports to the company and had made it publicly
33 available, with anonymised results whereas seafarers'
34 responses could not be traced back to particular individuals.
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38 The experiences described in this paper are based on the
39 global shipping industry, however, they could be relevant to
40 other closed or restricted research settings. For instance,
41 events described in this paper could be similar to those of
42 researchers studying other 'closed' research environments that
43 are not accessible to the general public, especially where a
44 hierarchical work structure involves different stakeholders
45 within a precarious work environment. This could potentially
46 influence the way someone from outside the workplace
47 approaches the field, and the ways they are perceived. For
48 example, research in mental hospitals, prisons or other closed
49 business organisations could present similar issues. In these
50 types of environments, the hierarchical structure of the
51 organisation, determining the power relationships between the
52 different stakeholders, can play a significant part in a
53 researcher's positioning and ability to build rapport.
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Notes

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31 [1]. The word 'precarious' is used here mostly to address
32 the lack of job security among seafarers.
33 [2]. Such spaces are not available on all ships, but they
34 were available on the voyages I undertook.
35 [3]. In this respect, this outing was not considered to
36 have interfered with data collection for the project,
37 as my research topic was not social interaction on
38 board.
39 [4]. As noted in the introduction, all names used in this
40 paper are pseudonyms to maintain participants'
41 anonymity.
42 [5]. This might have looked suspicious since only a
43 maritime related person or someone who is a family
44 member of such person would be permitted to access to a
45 working cargo ship. There are commercial shipping
46 companies that take passengers for a fee, however,
47 travellers on such ships generally have restricted
48 entry to the operational spaces on board. In contrast,
49 I enjoyed unrestricted access to all spaces in all the
50 voyages covered in this paper.
51 [6]. Despite the relationships I managed to establish
52 with some seafarers on board, I will never presume to
53 say I fully understand how seafarers, particularly
54 those who were affected in one way or another by the
55 Communist Regime, might feel when it comes to Soviet
56 occupation. However, it is important to acknowledge
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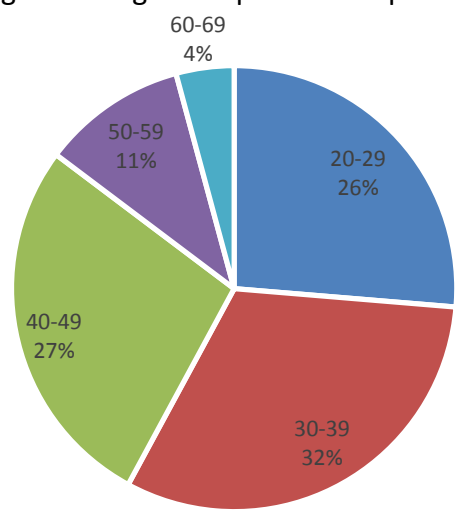
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3 that their background likely played a role in the ways
4 they perceived me at the time.

5 [7]. Examples of how researchers' gender and personal
6 attributes play a crucial role in their acceptance in
7 the field can also be seen in Lumsden (2009); Mazzei
8 and O'Brien (2009); Sampson and Thomas (2003).

9 [8]. I managed to reassure him that all research
10 materials were kept covertly and confidentially and
11 were only accessible by myself and my supervisors for
12 the purposes of the research.
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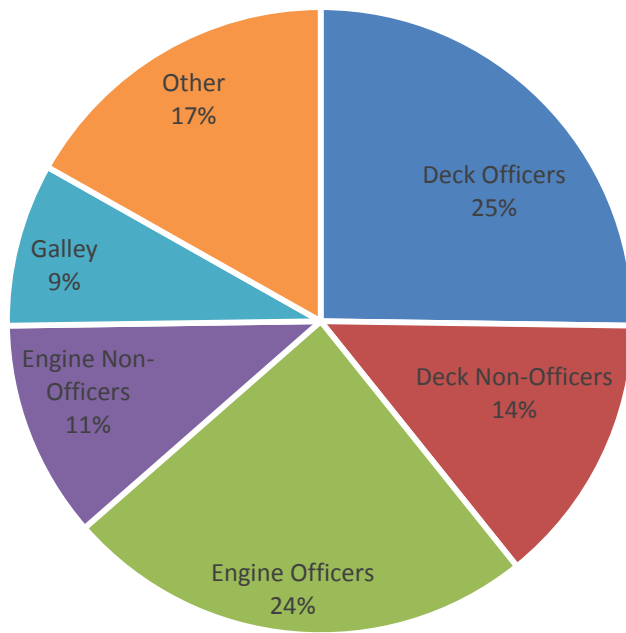
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Figure 1 – Age Groups of Participants



Organizational Ethnography

Figure 2 – Roles Held by Participants

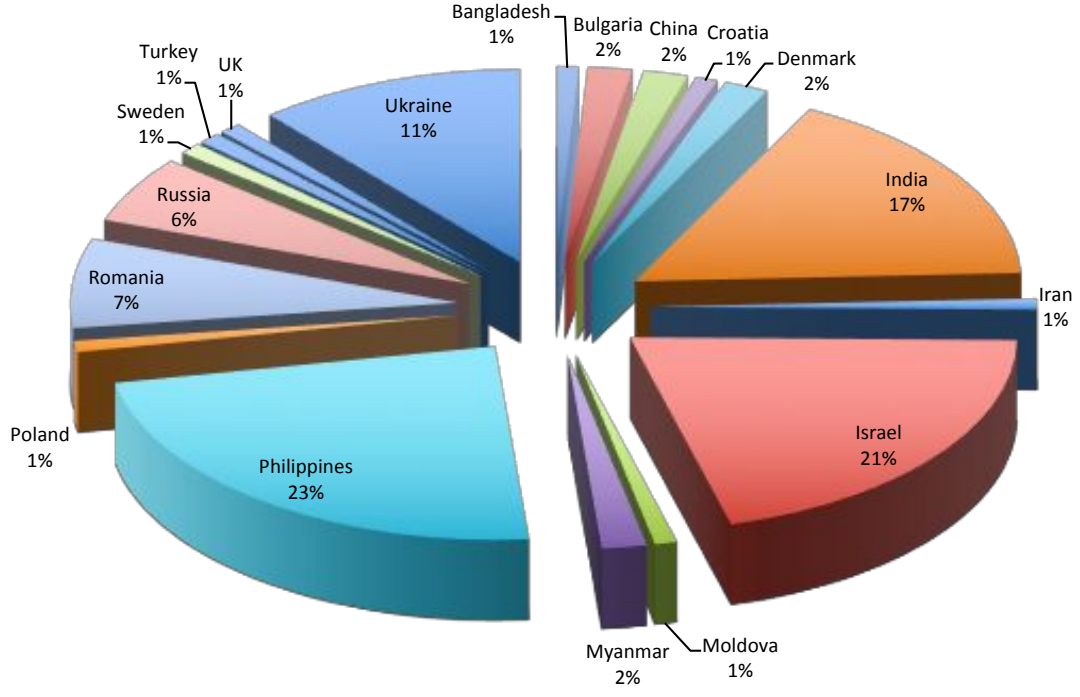


Organizational Ethnography

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Figure 3 – Origin Countries of Participants



Organizational Ethnography

Table 1: Typical hierarchy of jobs on board cargo ships*

Unit	Personnel
Deck Department	Officers Captain Chief Mate/Officer Second Mate/Officer Third Mate/Officer Deck Cadet/Officer
	Ratings Boatswain (Bosun) Able Seaman (AB) Ordinary seaman (OS)
Engine Department	Officers Chief Engineer Second Engineer Third Engineer Fourth Engineer Engine Cadet
	Ratings Motorman Electrician Oiler Wiper
Stewards/Galley department	Officers Chief cook Chief Steward
	Ratings Steward Mess man Second cook

*Compiled with reference to roles on board cargo ships, Baum-Talmor (2018) and Sampson (2013).