



### Workplace fiddles in the shipping industry

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which workers employ rule breaking, rule bending and deviations from management defined norms in the workplace and the impact this has on their occupational health and safety (OHS) experiences.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The paper uses qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with thirty-seven seafarers working on board four vessels engaged in international trade. The data were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo software.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that seafarers utilised workplace fiddles – which included rule breaking, rule bending and deviating from management defined norms – in order to engender a workable system in which they could remain safe but also profitable to those who controlled their labour. Moreover, the findings suggest that shore-side management deflected the responsibility for rule violations by deferring many of the decisions regarding features of life on board – such as the scheduling of work hours – to the senior officers on board.

**Originality/Value:** The paper sheds light on where, in practice, responsibility for OHS lies in the international shipping industry, an industry in which workers experience relatively high rates of work-related fatalities, injuries and mental health conditions.

### Introduction

Whilst the ways in which work is organised have changed considerably since the early 1900's, much of what is considered today as the norm stems from Taylorism, and consequently, work methods are both standardised and formalised.

Despite such standardised ways of working, research indicates that workers utilise their tacit knowledge and accumulated knowledge to circumvent workplace procedures in order to maintain control over the environment in which they work. In his ethnographic study of deep-level mining, Phakathi (2017) revealed numerous ways in which workers manipulated formalised work systems, such as frontline miners utilising creative informal practices to resolve bottlenecks in the extraction of mineral-bearing rock.

Workplace behaviour in which workers manipulate formalised work systems are referred to in the literature as workplace fiddles. Whilst several definitions of workplace fiddles exist, the term is used here to denote behaviour that involves workers utilising their knowledge and experience to break or bend workplace rules (Webb and Palmer 1998). This behaviour may include what Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) term 'divergences from management defined norms'.

In their dimensions of workplace fiddles model Webb and Palmer (1998) argue that workplace fiddles can be viewed along two dimensions. First, they can be categorised according to whether they are pursued by an individual or a group of workers acting collectively. "Collective action denotes that the beneficiary of the fiddle is dependent upon the active complicity of another worker" (Webb and Palmer 1998, p.616). Second, they can be categorised according to either evading surveillance or making time. Evading surveillance is considered to be action which is essentially defensive, with the aim being to avoid detection by management. Making time, on the other hand, is defined as action which enables workers to gain some measure of control over their immediate work environment.

Several studies suggest that workplace fiddles can – in some circumstances – have positive implications for both employers and employees. Richards (2008) calls such behaviour

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2  
3 *functional misbehaviour* which they define as behaviour that does not comply with official  
4 instructions but leads to positive outcomes for the employer organisation. Similarly, in his  
5 study of the British Army, Kirke (2010) states that some behaviour which bends or breaks  
6 rules can make the working lives of those concerned easier without compromising the  
7 reputation or effectiveness of the employer. Examples include hiding surplus equipment  
8 during inspections so as not to have the spare equipment – which was anticipated to prove  
9 useful at a later date – removed from the troop and exaggerating the quantity of equipment  
10 destroyed in an incident so as to gain extra items (Kirke 2010).  
11  
12

13 Deery et al. (2010) also suggested that work groups are sometimes able to create norms  
14 which shield workers from the adverse effects of stressful job demands. In their study of call  
15 centre workers, emotional exhaustion and work intensification were mitigated through a  
16 shared culture of absenteeism whereby a permissive attitude of absence taking was  
17 prevalent.  
18

19 Conversely, there is a body of research which indicates that work methods which deviate  
20 from formal safety rules and procedures can have serious repercussions for occupational  
21 health and safety (OHS). Hopkins (1984) found that both management and miners tolerated  
22 concentrations of methane gas which were substantially higher than formally permitted and  
23 this informal tolerance was cited as a factor in the deaths of fourteen miners in 1979 when the  
24 Appin Colliery experienced an explosion of methane gas. Similarly, Nichols (1997)  
25 discovered that one of the key causes of occupational injuries in the manufacturing and  
26 mining companies which he studied was the deviation from formal safety rules. When  
27 production blockages – such as breakdowns in machinery – occurred, workers bypassed  
28 formal safety rules in order to restore production. Thus, the workers broke safety rules in  
29 order to cope with management pressure to keep levels production up (Nichols 1997).  
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33 Taking these findings as its basis, and by utilising Webb and Palmer's (1998) dimensions of  
34 worker fiddles categorisations, this study explores workplace fiddles in the international  
35 shipping industry – an industry in which OHS is a particular concern. Whilst it is difficult to  
36 obtain accurate figures, those who work at sea have higher rates of fatalities (Roberts et al.  
37 2014) and occupational injuries (Hansen et al. 2002), as well as relatively high rates of  
38 depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Lefkowitz et al. 2019) than many workers in shore-  
39 based occupations. These issues make the international shipping industry a particularly  
40 interesting industry in which to study workers' use of workplace fiddles and the impact this  
41 had on their OHS experiences.  
42  
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### 44 **Structure of the international shipping industry**

45 There are several factors related to the structure of the international shipping industry which  
46 are likely to influence the use of workplace fiddles by those who work at sea. In recent  
47 decades this structure has changed considerably and one feature of this has been the rise in  
48 ship owners use of third-party ship managers. In 2018, third-party ship managers were  
49 estimated to have nearly 13% of the global shipping fleet under their management, despite  
50 the first instance of third-party ship management occurring only 43 years earlier (Lloyds List  
51 2018). These managers offer a range of services including technical management, crewing  
52 management and even full commercial management.  
53  
54

55 Another key change has been the enabling of ship-owners to shift the registry of their ships  
56 from their country of domicile to other countries with comparatively relaxed regulatory  
57 conditions. These relaxed regulatory requirements have had an important impact on the ways  
58 in which work and employment in the industry are organised. First, ship-owners have been  
59 encouraged to source seafarers from new (and cheaper) labour supply countries (Alderton et  
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1  
2  
3 al. 2004). Consequently, multi-national crews – in which seafarers of three or more  
4 nationalities work alongside one another – are now the norm (Wu and Winchester 2005).

5  
6 Second, ship-owners have moved to flags with lower safe manning requirements and this has  
7 resulted in downsizing so that only the bare minimum number of individuals is on board and  
8 consequently there is a lack of colleagues to assist with additional work tasks or to cover  
9 extra working hours. Literature indicates that downsizing has had a negative impact on  
10 seafarers' fatigue, which in turn adversely impacts on OHS outcomes (see, for example,  
11 Pollard et al. 1990).

12  
13 Third, in seeking a cost-efficient way of operating their businesses, ship-owners have  
14 replaced permanent labour with seafarers employed on single-voyage contracts, often  
15 recruited via third-party crewing agencies. Employment insecurity is known to pose issues  
16 for OHS in several ways. For example, precariously employed workers have been seen to be  
17 more likely to take workplace risks due to fears of dismissal and may lack knowledge  
18 regarding their OHS rights (Underhill and Quinlan 2011). Such workers may also lack  
19 knowledge regarding workplace OHS procedures due to lack of training (Underhill and  
20 Quinlan 2011).

21  
22 In many cases seafarers are employed via third-party crewing companies and the shipping  
23 company has no direct relationship with those on board the vessels they own. Consequently,  
24 the seafarers rarely have any relationship with shore-side management (who are physically  
25 removed) – an issue which Sampson et al. (2019) have revealed to be of importance when  
26 considering trust between management and the workforce. A lack of trust between the  
27 seafaring labour force and shore-side management is known to have a number of implications  
28 for OHS, including the under-reporting of injuries by seafarers (Bhattacharya 2012b).

29  
30 The current employment methods also impact on the familiarity between seafarers on board  
31 as fluid crews, made up of seafarers who do not return to the same vessel – or even the same  
32 shipping company – for subsequent tours of duty, are widespread. Additionally, crew changes  
33 tend to be staggered, and consequently seafarers may become familiar with their supervisors  
34 and colleagues on board only for some of their colleagues to leave the vessel at the end of  
35 their tours of duty and be replaced by new unfamiliar seafarers. These are particularly  
36 important structural issues when considering OHS in the shipping industry.

### 37 38 39 40 41 **OHS features of the international shipping industry**

42  
43 Seafaring is a relatively dangerous occupation with seafarers' seen to be around 21 times  
44 more likely to experience a fatal occupational accident than other workers in the British  
45 workforce (Roberts et al. 2014). Whilst figures vary between countries and fleets, fatality  
46 rates for seafarers are higher than for workers in most land-based occupations around the  
47 world (Jaremin 2005). Moreover, rates of non-fatal occupational injuries among the seafaring  
48 workforce are of concern (see, for example, Hansen et al. 2002). A recent study has also  
49 revealed that seafarers have higher rates of depression than workers in other occupations  
50 (Lefkowitz et al. 2019). The OHS of seafarers is therefore a clear concern. However,  
51 regulating OHS in the international shipping industry is a substantial challenge. By the very  
52 nature of the industry ships spend most of their time at sea, physically removed from  
53 regulatory authorities. The enforcement of regulations in the international shipping industry  
54 primarily falls on the flag state – that is the state under which each ship is registered.  
55 Shipping registers fall into three broad categories: national shipping registers, secondary  
56 shipping registers and open registers. National shipping registers are registers for ships whose  
57 owners have links to the country of registry such as a place of business in the country, and  
58 historically these registers have tended to be in the traditional maritime countries. Since the  
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3 1940's ship owners have moved their registration from national registers to open registers in  
4 substantial numbers (DeSombre 2008). Open registers are states which have very few  
5 restrictions regarding the registration of ships from any nation. These registers appeal to ship  
6 owners as they predominantly offer low taxes, registration fees and inspection fees as well as  
7 lax standards in terms of regulatory oversight (DeSombre 2008). In an attempt to increase  
8 ship registrations, a number of traditional maritime countries have set up 'secondary  
9 registers' alongside national registers. These secondary registers offer greater beneficial  
10 environments for ship owners in comparison to the national register (Alderton and  
11 Winchester 2003). These secondary registers represent a middle ground between the weak  
12 regulatory environment of open registers and the stringent environment of national registers.  
13  
14

15  
16 Within the international shipping industry, a regulatory framework to govern is provided by  
17 the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and there are several important regulatory  
18 instruments of global governance including the International Convention on Standards of  
19 Training, Certification and Watch Keeping for Seafarers (1978) (STCW) and the  
20 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (1974) (SOLAS) – which contains the  
21 International Safety Management (ISM) Code. The introduction of the ISM code in 1998  
22 brought regulated self-regulation to the international shipping industry. In complying with the  
23 ISM Code, shipping companies are expected to produce their own specific policies and  
24 procedures, commonly known as a Safety Management System (SMS). The policies and  
25 procedures within the SMS dictate many of the aspects of life on board including each  
26 individual's responsibilities and duties on board, including their responsibilities whilst  
27 mooring the vessel and whilst the vessel is in port. The SMS also details things such as on-  
28 call procedures for unmanned machinery spaces and the requirement for Cadets to receive  
29 time off from work on a weekly basis to undertake academic studying. Whilst the  
30 introduction of the ISM Code has resulted in a systematic approach to OHS management at  
31 sea, there is substantial criticism of the code. Bhattacharya (2012b) revealed that the Code  
32 requires a participatory approach, something which is unlikely owing to the organisational  
33 context and employment relations which currently exist in the international shipping industry.  
34  
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36

37  
38 In addition to the IMO, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has played an important  
39 role in regulating the international shipping industry. In particular, the ILO's (2006) Maritime  
40 Labour Convention (MLC) sets out the rights of the world's seafaring labour force to decent  
41 conditions of work. The MLC regulates several important aspects of work on board ships  
42 including seafarers' hours of rest. It also requires the flag state to develop a table of shipboard  
43 working arrangements for each ship. The table of shipboard working arrangements must  
44 include all of the occupational positions on board and it must be prominently displayed on  
45 board. It enables all seafarers on board a vessel to be aware of their daily working routine  
46 whilst the ship is both at sea and in port. A copy of the table of shipboard working  
47 arrangements for one of the product/chemical tankers on which interviews were conducted  
48 for this study can be seen in appendix I.  
49  
50

51  
52 In addition to the work carried out by both the IMO and ILO, trade unions have played an  
53 important role in the development of labour regulation (Walters and Bailey 2013). Across all  
54 industries the importance of trade unions in the management of OHS is widely  
55 acknowledged. In a systematic review of OHS management literature, Bohle and Quinlan  
56 (2000) pointed to the need for effective worker representation in OHS management, whereby  
57 the workforce needed to be organised and able to present their view in a representative  
58 manner. Similarly, Walters (1996) also indicates that a strong trade union presence is  
59 necessary for effective representative participation. At a shipboard level, however, trade  
60



1  
2  
3 union presence is in most cases non-existent due to the nature of the workplace and the  
4 precariousness of the labour (Walters and Bailey 2013).  
5

6 This paper, therefore, examines the reality of breaking rules, bending rules and deviating  
7 from management defined norms for workers in a challenging industry. In doing so such  
8 behaviours are presented as a double-edged sword depending on both their purpose and  
9 application in the absence of a strong trade union presence.  
10

## 11 **Method**

12 In order to explore seafarers' experiences of workplace fiddles, this research took a  
13 qualitative approach. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards  
14 required by Cardiff University. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with  
15 thirty-seven seafarers working on board four vessels. This research method was chosen as it  
16 allowed a structure which enabled a degree of comparability whilst also allowing respondents  
17 to answer on their own terms (Bryman 2016).  
18  
19

20 The researcher joined each of the four ships immediately after they had berthed in various  
21 UK ports and remained on board until the vessel commenced departure checks  
22 (approximately one hour before sailing). All of the interviews were conducted in private  
23 rooms on board.  
24

25 The ships included an offshore support vessel and three chemical/product tankers. The size of  
26 the crew varied between ten and twenty-three seafarers and whilst literature (see, for  
27 example, Winchester et al. 2006) indicates crew sizes vary in relation to ship size and type,  
28 the crew sizes of these vessels were generally representative of the current state of the  
29 industry as a whole in which the average crew size across ship types/sizes was found to be  
30 twenty-three (Deloitte 2011).  
31  
32

33 Each of the ships had three or more nationalities of seafarers on board and would therefore be  
34 considered as multi-national crewed vessels. Those interviewed were British, Dutch, Filipino,  
35 Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Russian and Swedish.  
36  
37

38 The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 62, and the average age was 39. Thirty-six of  
39 the thirty-seven participants were male, however, the gender imbalance of the participants is  
40 representative of the industry in which female seafarers are estimated to account for 2% of  
41 the workforce (ITF 2019).  
42

43 On board a ship seafarers are generally employed in either the deck, engine or hotel  
44 department. Within both the deck and engine departments there are senior officers, junior  
45 officers, trainee officers – known as Cadets – and ratings. Ratings are seafarers who are  
46 employed in roles requiring lower levels of professional seafaring qualifications (Glen 2008).  
47 Seafarers in the deck department navigate the vessel and in port they load and discharge  
48 cargo and maintain a security watch. Those in the engine department undertake the  
49 monitoring and maintenance of the machinery and equipment on board. Finally, seafarers in  
50 the hotel department tend to be ratings and these individuals take care of the domestic  
51 requirements such as cooking and cleaning.  
52  
53

54 Of the thirty-seven seafarers who participated in this study, ten were senior officers, eleven  
55 were junior officers, twelve were ratings and four were cadets. The participants were from  
56 each of the occupational departments on board, with twenty-two from the deck department,  
57 ten from the engine department and five from the hotel department.  
58  
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3 Each of the four ships sailed world-wide, however, at the time of study the offshore support  
4 vessel was predominantly involved in work in an oil field in the North Sea. Two of the  
5 chemical tankers were principally short-sea trading around North-West Europe and the third  
6 was trading deep-sea in the long-haul trade. The flag state under which each was registered  
7 varied. However, the classification of the four flag states was either white or grey.<sup>1</sup> This  
8 would suggest that all four vessels visited were from the 'better end' of the international  
9 shipping industry.  
10

11  
12 English was the working language on board all four vessels and all the interviews were  
13 conducted in English, digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.  
14 Transcriptions were coded using NVivo. Numerous codes were generated from the data, and  
15 these were then grouped based on areas of commonality, giving rise to the themes explored  
16 below.  
17

## 18 **Findings**

19  
20 The following sections describe the workplace fiddles our participants talked about, using the  
21 categories included in Webb and Palmer's (1998) dimensions of worker fiddles model.  
22

### 23 ***Making time: Individual action***

24  
25 Seafarers developed individual ways of organising their own working practices in order to  
26 exert some measure of control over their working environment. In organising their working  
27 schedules these seafarers diverged from the shore-side defined norms. One Captain, for  
28 example, stated:  
29

30 *"If I want to go ashore for example I can plan my administration work and maybe to*  
31 *do it the next day"* Captain.  
32

33  
34 In accordance with their contract of employment and the table of shipboard working  
35 arrangements as detailed in the MLC (2006), the Captain would be expected to work every  
36 day whilst on board. Nevertheless, such rearranging is likely to positively impact on the  
37 Captain's well-being as prior studies (see, for example, Bauer 2007) indicate shore leave to  
38 be a significant factor in improving the well-being experiences of seafarers.  
39

40  
41 Similarly, some seafarers reported being able to adjust their work schedule so as to work  
42 when weather conditions were more favourable. One junior officer explained how he  
43 adjusted his working schedule to avoid working on the exposed weather decks at particularly  
44 hot times of the day:  
45

46 *"I was on the 8-12 watch then and if you've got safety stuff to do, you know 2 hours*  
47 *during the day after lunch and of course they can call you for mooring as well.....*  
48 *Sometimes when we were like at anchor and it was really hot cos we were stuck off*  
49 *UAE, so after dinner in the evening I'd go and make a round on deck or whatever*  
50 *instead of after lunch"* Junior Officer.  
51

52  
53 The table of shipboard working arrangements states that the watch keeping officer on the  
54 0800-1200 watch should carry out non-watch keeping duties after lunch at 1300-1500 and  
55 thus the junior officer deviated from these pre-determined hours of work.  
56  
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### ***Making time: Collective Actions***

Seafarers also utilised collective fiddles in order to make time and some reported divergences from shipping company defined norms in relation to work scheduling. For example, despite the SMS detailing the company policy regarding the on-call procedure for unmanned machinery spaces and the rotation for which individuals were to be on-call, some seafarers reported senior officers swapping with seafarers who, in accordance with the SMS, should have be on-call:

*“If you have bad luck when you join the ship you can be on duty but unofficially we do this that this one who’s joining he’s never on duty so let’s say the Second [Engineer] will take his first night yeah, or let’s say on this night I was not on duty because it was the duty of the Second Engineer but we had a crew change and they just arrived in the evening so I said, well this has become normal practice, take a rest, I will take the duty until 0800”* Senior Officer.

Similarly, one senior officer detailed how the Captain would adjust his own working schedule to make the schedule of the senior officer, on his first day on board, less of a burden.

*“The Captain used to plan that quite good so sometimes if I join the ship direct then I can sleep to the morning or something so he will arrange that, so far he have handled it really good, if I have been awake from early morning because of the flight and I arrive in the evening then more or less he would have started up everything and I can rest and start in the morning”* Senior Officer.

In accordance with the table of shipboard workings the Senior Officer should have been working between the hours of 1600 and 2000 – irrespective of how long prior to this time they had arrived on board or the duration of their travel to the vessel.

One head of department revealed that he utilised a democratic approach to work scheduling whereby a majority decision from the team members determined which hours the entire team would work – as opposed to following the pre-determined hours of work as shown in the table of shipboard working arrangements. He stated:

*“[A] 7 o’clock start in the morning is quite early but the lads want to do that in order to finish at 4 if possible so I’ve had people start at 8 and finish at 5 I’m flexible either way, whatever they want to do”* Senior Officer.

Many of these divergences from the norms defined by the shipping company appeared to be seafarers’ responses to situations which they perceived were not adequately addressed by either regulations or company procedures. For example, there are no regulations which prohibit seafarers from travelling a long distance to join the vessel and immediately commencing work on board. In fact, in a study regarding fatigue Wadsworth et al. (2008) revealed that 66% of participants in a questionnaire study stated that they did not have the opportunity to sleep between travelling to a ship and beginning work on board. Of this group 47% had travelled more than 6 hours and 19% for 12 or more hours. Consequently seafarers diverging from the management defined norm in a manner whereby new joining seafarers were not immediately on call or their shifts were covered whilst they rested – two examples which were presented above – is prudent behaviour which is likely to have positive implications for not only the OHS of the new-joining seafarer but also for the safety of the vessel and its crew as a whole.



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3 Divergences from management defined norms were also seen to include the allocating of  
4 work tasks and some of those interviewed revealed that they arranged their work tasks in a  
5 collective manner which resulted in colleagues who were more familiar carrying out the tasks  
6 at times when it was perceived to be particularly risky. For example, one rating stated:  
7  
8

9 *“We’ve just done a lot of tank cleaning on here before going to dry dock and line*  
10 *washing and educting and that some of it had to be done during night time like me*  
11 *and [seafarers name] burst it between the 2 of us, we went sixes and me and*  
12 *[seafarers name] agreed, I had a bit more experience especially when it comes to*  
13 *draining the lines and that because at the time we had one new lad not too clued up*  
14 *on that and the last thing you want to be doing is trying to get him to do something so*  
15 *what we were doing during the daytime was just working like normal two of us*  
16 *together and when it got dark he [new seafarer] went to the bridge and I just stayed*  
17 *on, done what needed to be done” Rating.*  
18  
19

20  
21 The SMS details the roles and responsibilities for each individual on board depending on both  
22 their rank and work shift. In this example the rating who remained on deck should have, in  
23 accordance with company procedures, been undertaking lookout duties on the bridge during  
24 the hours of darkness. Instead the rating who was less familiar with the vessel carried out the  
25 lookout duties.  
26

27 Research from shore-based industries has shown that workers experience an increased risk of  
28 occupational injury when they are new on the job (Breslin and Smith 2006). Thus, seafarers  
29 arranging their work tasks such that those who are more experienced and familiar with  
30 particular tasks carry them out is likely to have positive implications for OHS. Moreover, as  
31 many of the work tasks undertaken on board are safety critical, arranging them in this manner  
32 is likely to be prudent for the safety of the vessel.  
33  
34

35 In previous studies (see for example Parry 2003) workers in occupations such as mining were  
36 seen to form tight-knit communities and relied on their colleagues in relation to their own  
37 colleagues. Such colleagues formed bonds over extended periods of time and often shared  
38 very close cultural identities, having attended the same schools and grown up alongside one  
39 another in the same villages. It is particularly noteworthy therefore that the seafarers in this  
40 study utilised collective actions to gain some control over their own immediate working  
41 environment despite unfamiliarity with their colleagues, whom they would likely work with  
42 only for a few weeks or months.  
43  
44

45 During the analysis it emerged that the use of collective action for making time did not  
46 always positively impact on the OHS of each team member. One junior officer revealed that  
47 he had experienced ill treatment as a consequence of others in the work team re-organising  
48 their own work. In explaining his experiences on board a previous vessel, the junior officer  
49 stated:  
50  
51

52 *“When I was with [company name] I was doing sixes<sup>ii</sup> all the time cos we had this*  
53 *lazy Chief Officer” Junior Officer.*  
54  
55

56 The comment indicates that instead of the usual working routine of 4 hours on/8 hours off the  
57 Chief Officer (a senior officer) had instructed him to work 6 hours on/6 hours off – thereby  
58 working the hours the Chief Officer should have been working.  
59  
60

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3 In complying with these collective actions such individuals were not co-operating for the  
4 good of the group or because they agreed with the work scheduling arrangements, they  
5 simply had no choice but to do as instructed by a more senior officer who was abusing the  
6 power they held. Thus, some individuals held the power to organise things, whilst others on  
7 board did not.  
8  
9

10 Moreover, the use of informally arranged collective actions which deviated from the shipping  
11 companies' policies resulted in some seafarers' work schedules changing when their  
12 colleagues on board departed from the vessel and new colleagues joined. For example, on  
13 board one of the vessels the company policy as detailed in the SMS stated that Cadets (trainee  
14 officers) were to be given 15 hours per week for academic study and if the vessel was at sea  
15 this time should be given as a half-day on a Saturday and a full day on a Sunday. During the  
16 data collection one Cadet, however, was not aware of which days he would be working as the  
17 previous Chief Officer – who had informally decided which days the Cadet worked, rather  
18 than following the company's policies – had completed his tour of duty and departed the  
19 vessel that day and had been replaced by a new joining Chief Officer. The Cadet explained:  
20  
21

22  
23 *“It depends on the Chief Mate or whatever so with the last Chief Mate we worked all*  
24 *day Saturday and got a half day or usually a full day off on a Sunday but obviously,*  
25 *this Chief Officer is new and I think its half day Saturday full day Sunday but it might*  
26 *be work, but usually I get at least one day [off]”* Cadet.  
27

28 Seafarers may experience changes in the work team fairly regularly. In a situation whereby a  
29 new joining seafarer changes the informal work practices of their predecessor it may be that  
30 those subjected to the change perceive being ill-treated – particularly if such changes result in  
31 additional work, a situation that is feasible given the statement made by one head of a  
32 department:  
33  
34

35 *“Saturday afternoons and Sunday afternoons we are usually cheating the working*  
36 *time. We say that we work but actually we are relaxing”* Senior Officer.  
37  
38

39 In accordance with the Table of Shipboard Working Arrangements the Senior Officer (and  
40 the rest of the team) should have been working on both a Saturday and a Sunday. Thus, if the  
41 new joining senior officer was unwilling to diverge from the company's policies and also  
42 allow those in his department to rest on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, discontent among  
43 the team is likely. A reduction in the amount of rest a seafarer experiences is likely to impact  
44 on fatigue and will thus have adverse consequences for OHS outcomes.  
45  
46

### 47 ***Individual action: Evading Surveillance***

48

49 Seafarers developed individual methods of evading detection of contravention of company  
50 policies and regulations. In some cases, policies and regulations which were contravened  
51 were international regulations. By fabricating legally required records seafarers were able to  
52 ensure that violations were not noticed by shore-side inspectors. For example, one head of an  
53 engineering department stated:  
54  
55

56 *“When we are playing, gambling with the rest hours to make sure we don't get red for*  
57 *a stupid half an hour somewhere. I'll have a look, maybe I took 2 hours' lunch instead*  
58 *of 1 hour, little bit forgery, not big forgery, just small”* Senior Officer.  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 The MLC (2006) states that seafarers' records of hours of rest must be made available for  
4 inspection by both flag state control inspectors and port state control inspectors. In addition  
5 commercial hirers of ships, particularly in the oil sector may also conduct inspections of  
6 vessels and may request to see various records, including records detailing seafarers' hours of  
7 rest on the vessel.  
8  
9

10 In detailing how he tried to evade surveillance from shore-side inspectors, the senior officer  
11 went on to say:  
12

13 *"Somethings you cannot move [rest hours] too much because arrival and departure is*  
14 *always noted the times officially in the logbooks and everything so them I cannot*  
15 *move and also when we're taking bunkering I cannot move that because those are*  
16 *official times logged there. That's the first thing they [inspectors] check, how many*  
17 *engineers were awake"* Senior Officer.  
18  
19

20 A further area in which seafarers evaded surveillance was when injuries occurred. Seafarers  
21 were seen to be reluctant to report injuries, with one Captain stating:  
22

23 *"If I don't report it I think it's not so serious. Let's say that I go on a ladder here and*  
24 *I miss the steps and I fall down and I hit my arm but I feel that ah it's just nothing. To*  
25 *report something it's a lot of paperwork all the time, I don't want to have so much*  
26 *paperwork so any minor of myself if not so necessary. If anybody else I have to report*  
27 *it, if they come to me I report but there can be the situation also that they keep it for*  
28 *themselves"* Captain.  
29  
30  
31

32 The Captain was keen to avoid the time-consuming task of completing an injury report, thus  
33 saving time, as well as avoiding drawing shore-side management's attention to events on  
34 board.  
35

36 Similarly, a junior office reflected on an injury he had experienced earlier in his career that he  
37 had not reported:  
38

39 *"I was going to get bollocked for it mainly, well back when I was cadet, I wouldn't care*  
40 *as much now obviously.....I was coming down a ladder and I swung on the thing and I*  
41 *slipped off and landed on top of my foot and I didn't report it and my foot swelled up*  
42 *quite badly but I didn't report it because [captains name] was the old man and it was an*  
43 *Indian Second Mate so he'd make a big thing about it, write a report, I couldn't really be*  
44 *bothered with that so I never told anyone"* Junior Officer.  
45  
46  
47

48 Like the Captain, the Junior Officer did not want to draw shore-side management's attention  
49 to the fact that he had experienced an injury.  
50

### 51 ***Collective action: Evading Surveillance***

52

53 Seafarers also utilised collective actions in order to evade surveillance whereby non-  
54 compliance of regulations and company policies occurred. For example, two seafarers acted  
55 collectively to sign a checklist to state that a familiarisation tour for a new joining seafarer –  
56 something which is required both by regulation (SOLAS and STCW) and company policy –  
57 had taken place, when in fact it had not. The officer who had just joined the vessel explained:  
58  
59  
60

1  
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3                   *“He [the Second Officer] gave me a form for it [the familiarisation tour], someone’s*  
4 *already kindly put yes,yes,yes,yes in there. So I just signed it”* Junior Officer.  
5  
6

7 The junior officer elaborated:

8  
9                   *“I had a little look around myself, round the accommodation like and then later on*  
10 *one of the Cadets showed me round the deck, that was it.....understandably they’re*  
11 *too busy with cargo and what not”* Junior Officer.  
12  
13

14  
15 Owing to the intensive workloads of seafarers whilst in port and the insufficient duration of  
16 handover periods seafarers did not have the time to conduct familiarisation tours for new  
17 joining seafarers.  
18

19 Whilst in the above example the seafarers appeared to co-operate in order to evade  
20 surveillance, it became apparent that such co-operation was not always immediately  
21 forthcoming and some individuals ‘persuaded’ others to co-operate in such fiddles. One  
22 junior officer described an event in which he had recorded a non-compliance with rest hour  
23 legislation. A short time later he discovered that his records had been altered by the senior  
24 officers on board in a manner which resulted in the non-compliance not being recorded. The  
25 seafarer explained the incident as follows:  
26  
27

28                   *“Everybody was breaking hours of work then and later on you know you go and look*  
29 *at your hours of work and you’re still in compliance somehow even though you filled*  
30 *it in yourself and you were in noncompliance. The Chief had been tampering with it”*  
31 Junior Officer  
32  
33

34 Upon querying the changes, the junior officer was pressured by the Chief Officer – an  
35 individual who was higher in the occupational hierarchy – to go along with the falsification  
36 of the rest hour records. The junior officer stated:  
37  
38

39                   *“I went to him [the Chief Officer] and said look what’s going on, so he says, I’m you*  
40 *know, I’m telling you”* Junior Officer.  
41  
42

43 Requirements for seafarers’ rest hours are determined by STCW and the requirements for  
44 seafarers to undertake suitable familiarisation are stated in the ISM Code (and STCW).  
45 Regulations for rest hours directly impact on seafarers’ fatigue, an issue which is known to  
46 relate to well-being, as well as safety.  
47

## 48 **Discussion and conclusions**

49 The results of this study add to the body of literature which examines frontline workers’  
50 experiences of workplace fiddles and the ways in which these fiddles can both serve and  
51 inhibit workers. Moreover, in considering fiddles this paper sheds light on where, in practice,  
52 the responsibility for OHS lies.  
53  
54

55 Whilst it was clearly evident in our data that fiddles could be individual or collective, the  
56 dimension of making time/evading surveillance was confounded – suggesting that Webb and  
57 Palmer’s (1998) workplace dimensions model, which considers the categorisation of fiddles  
58 as two dimensional, does not tell the whole story. Rather, the findings of this study indicate  
59 that, in many instances, evading surveillance was *necessary* in order to make time. Simply  
60

1  
2  
3 put, there was not enough slack in the system to allow seafarers the time to be compliant with  
4 all requirements, a situation which inevitably led them taking action to avoid the attention of  
5 shore-side management.  
6

7 Issues such as falsifying familiarisation training records ensure seafarers appeared compliant  
8 and so avoided any sanctions. However, such actions also indicate that seafarers make time  
9 because there is not enough time available when a new seafarer joins a vessel to allow for  
10 familiarisation to be done without compromising the other work happening on board (see, for  
11 example, Vidan et al.'s 2015 study regarding the familiarisation of Croatian and Montenegrin  
12 seafarers).  
13

14  
15 Similarly, by not reporting injuries seafarers evaded surveillance but they also avoided the  
16 time-consuming task of completing the associated paperwork, thus buying themselves time to  
17 get the job done in a situation where they otherwise could not. The under-reporting of injuries  
18 among those who work at sea is a well-known issue. In one study Psarros et al. (2010)  
19 revealed that around 30% of injuries were reported. Consequently, the occupational injuries  
20 which are reported in the seafaring industry are likely to be the tip of the iceberg. Research  
21 (see, for example, Bhattacharya 2012a) indicates that many injuries are not reported owing to  
22 seafarers' fears of drawing attention to themselves – a finding mirrored in this study.  
23  
24

25 Hours of rest records were wrongly filled in and seafarers appeared to be – on paper – rule  
26 abiding individuals even when this was not the case. These findings corroborate other studies  
27 in which seafarers were revealed to regularly falsify rest hours records and under-report  
28 working hours (Bloor 2003; Allen et al. 2006), thus supporting the argument that shore-side's  
29 impressions of seafarers' experiences may not be accurate. In the same vein as falsifying  
30 training records, seafarers normalised the breaking of rest hour requirements simply because  
31 their workloads did not allow them to do otherwise. Thus, regulations and management  
32 defined norms were not fit for purpose and seafarers were violating rules to engender a  
33 workable system. These findings are in keeping with Nichols and Armstrong (1973) who  
34 showed that workers in British factories normalised their approach to breaking safety rules –  
35 such as by bypassing formal safety rules in order to restore production when production  
36 blockages occurred – to ensure that they were able to work in a way which remained  
37 profitable to their employers. Similar findings also emerged in Kurt et al.'s (2015) study of  
38 shipboard standard operating procedures which revealed that procedures do not always reflect  
39 operational reality and are, in some cases, impossible to follow.  
40  
41  
42

43 The reasons why seafarers were keen to present themselves as rule-abiding to shore-side  
44 management even when this was not the case are not difficult to understand. Seafarers are  
45 predominantly employed on temporary contracts (Ellis et al. 2012) and for many these  
46 contracts are difficult to obtain due to a surplus of individuals seeking employment at sea.  
47 Moreover, in many countries the salary earned by seafarers is significantly higher than the  
48 average salary ashore and consequently seafaring is viewed as a lucrative occupation.  
49 Worryingly, seafarers are also aware of the ease with which they can be blacklisted and  
50 denied future employment (Sampson 2013). Thus, many seafarers are reluctant to say or do  
51 anything which may jeopardise their future employment at sea. Furthermore, with the  
52 increasingly weak position of organised labour – owing to the emergence of multinational  
53 crews, drawn from a global labour market with little, if any, common trade union identity –  
54 seafarers are unable to rely on the support and protection typically provided by trade unions  
55 (Walters and Bailey 2013).  
56  
57  
58

59 Abuses of power and negative treatment inflicted on some seafarers by their colleagues –  
60 such as the example presented above in which a junior officer was working additional hours



1  
2  
3 due to the demands of the Chief Officer – are also likely to go unreported for the same  
4 reasons. Examples of abuses of power by senior officers at sea are not unique to this study. In  
5 her ethnographic work Sampson (2013) presented a similar example of a Captain she  
6 described as a bully, who overtly and unpleasantly exercised his power to the detriment of the  
7 other seafarers on board. Away from the oversight of shore-side management it is easier for  
8 workers to adopt such fiddles and owing to their weak position trade unions are unable to act  
9 as a buffer from rogue officers exploiting their position of power thus resulting in an absence  
10 of checks and balances. Moreover, the reluctance of seafarers to do anything which could  
11 jeopardise their future employment indicates a lack of trust between seafarers and shore-side  
12 management, something which is highlighted in recent work by Sampson et al. (2019). A  
13 lack of trust is unsurprising given the current employment practices in the industry which  
14 have resulted in seafarers experiencing no meaningful relationship with those who operate the  
15 ships on which they work.  
16  
17

18  
19 Given the nature of many of the workplace fiddles, it appeared that shore-side management  
20 were only too willing for many of the fiddles undertaken by seafarers to remain invisible to  
21 them. In accepting the falsified documents – such as hours of rest records – at face value  
22 shore-side management were able to present themselves as committed, but at the same able to  
23 avoid any rectifications – such as increasing the number of seafarers on board – which would  
24 negatively impact on their profit. This, of course, mirrors research from other industries  
25 which indicates that management are willing to turn a blind eye to workplace fiddles – even  
26 when such fiddles involve breaking safety rules – if doing so enables production targets to be  
27 met (see, for example, Nichols 1997).  
28  
29

30  
31 Responsibilisation – in which workers are assigned responsibility for their own occupational  
32 safety and are considered to be accountable and judged as such – has redefined workers as  
33 both victims and offenders of OHS violations (Gray 2009). Taken together the findings  
34 presented above suggest that those who work at sea are both offenders and potential victims  
35 of rule violations. In producing false records seafarers were offenders whilst at the same time  
36 having little choice but to undertake workplace practices which left them at risk of adverse  
37 OHS experiences, thus making them victims.  
38

39  
40 Shore-side management further deflected the responsibility for rule violations by deferring  
41 many of the decisions regarding features of life on board to the senior officers on board.  
42 Thus, shore-side management was able to distance itself should any rule violations be  
43 identified by regulatory bodies. Such deferring again moves the responsibility of OHS  
44 violations and transgressions to the workers – which again, suggests that, in practice, much of  
45 the responsibility for OHS in the international shipping industry lies with those individuals  
46 who work on board.  
47

48  
49 Seafaring has always been and remains a dangerous occupation. The findings presented here  
50 indicate that, despite regulation and on board safety management arrangements, even  
51 seafarers at the better end of the industry find ways, individually and collectively, to bend and  
52 break rules. For the most part, their aim in doing so is to reduce the risk to their own and their  
53 colleagues' safety and, in particular, health and wellbeing, that result from the ways in which  
54 their work is (meant to be) organised. In essence, seafarers in this study were finding ways of  
55 'buying time' to gain control over their work environment and mitigate stress, fatigue, work  
56 intensity and so on, and shore-side management turned a blind eye not only to them doing so,  
57 but in particular to the factors that drove them to do so. This reflects findings from other  
58 sectors suggesting a gap between the understandings of management and workforces of the  
59 experience of workplace health and safety as a result of a narrow corporate focus on just the  
60 safety part of OHS (see, for example, Walters and Wadsworth 2020).

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2  
3 This study has identified concerns surrounding the need for workers to violate rules and  
4 management defined norms in order to bring about a workable system. Given that our data  
5 are drawn from the 'better end' of the industry, these problems are likely magnified in the  
6 rest of the sector. As indicated above, within a highly regulated global industry, there is much  
7 that shipping companies and policy makers could do to address these concerns and so  
8 improve seafarers' working conditions.  
9

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18

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26 <sup>i</sup> White flags are classified as quality flags, grey flags are classified as between quality and medium risk and  
27 black flags are classified as between medium risk and high risk. For further details see Paris MOU (2017)

28 <sup>ii</sup> Working a schedule of 6 hours on/ 6 hours off  
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### Appendix I: Table of Shipboard Working Arrangements

Position/rank	Scheduled daily work hours at sea		Scheduled daily work hours in port		Total daily rest hours		
	Watchkeeping		Non-watchkeeping duties	Watchkeeping (from - to)	Non-watchkeeping duties (from - to)	At sea	In port
	(from-to)	(from-to)	(from-to)				
Captain			08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00		08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00	16	16
Chief Officer	04.00 - 08.00	16.00 - 20.00	08.00 - 10.00	04.00 - 08.00	16.00 - 20.00	14	14
Second Officer	00.00 - 04.00	12.00 - 16.00	10.00 - 12.00	00.00-06.00 / 12.00-18.00		14	12
Third Officer	08.00 - 12.00	20.00 - 24.00	13.00 - 15.00	06.00-12.00 / 18.00-24.00		14	12
Bosun			06.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00		06.00 - 18.00	14	12
AB (Watchkeeper)	04.00 - 08.00	16.00 - 20.00	08.00 - 10.00	00.00-06.00 / 12.00-18.00		14	12
AB (Watchkeeper)	00.00 - 04.00	12.00 - 16.00	10.00 - 12.00	06.00-12.00 / 18.00-24.00		14	12
AB (Watchkeeper)	08.00 - 12.00	20.00 - 24.00	13.00 - 15.00	00.00-06.00 / 12.00-18.00		14	12
AB (Day man)			06.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00	06.00-12.00 / 18.00-24.00		14	12
OS			06.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00		06.00-12.00 / 13.00-17.00	14	14
Chief Engineer			08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00		08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00	16	16
Second Engineer			08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00		08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00	16	16
Third Engineer			08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00		08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00	16	16
Motorman			08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00		08.00-12.00, 13.00-17.00	16	16
Cook			06.00-13.00, 15.00-18.00		06.00-13.00, 15.00-18.00	14	14

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Mess man			06.00-13.00, 15.00-18.00		06.00-13.00, 15.00- 18.00	14	14
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Employee Relations