



The isolated seafarer

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Summary:

Does the isolation of the seafarer affect his personality and socialization, - in other words: Is he being harmed psychologically in his job?

Introduction:

This is a paper about the Danish deep-sea seafarer, and how he is affected by his isolated existence onboard a cargo ship.

The seafarer suffers voyaging with small crews, crews that are multiethnic, increasing workloads, less opportunities for shore leaves, being parted from his loved ones for 2 to 4 months, different colleagues and ships on every tour of duty, lacking satisfactory access to communicate with the family and the outside world, and the limited possibility of spare-time occupation.

The point is, that I am married to a seafarer myself, and for a long time I have been involved in the seafarers conditions onboard and ashore through "The Seamen's Wives Association".

I consider the seafarer to be isolated and lonely in his work, which affects him in a negative way. I consider him to be harmed psychologically by his job.

Method:

I expected it to be rather difficult to find this effect on the seafarers mentality, if at all possible. I have collected data through qualitative interviews. The interviews were carried out with a very loose structure. I interviewed 3 seafarers and their wives. Two of the seafarers were chief engineers and one was a captain. I was uncertain about how my own background would affect the interviews. However, I found it to my advantage, as it seemed as a way to "open up", especially for two of the wives.

Results:

I found that the seafarer gets depressed and fears to become odd. Either that, or he shuns humans, and/or he becomes anxious, and maybe he becomes odd. Apparently it depends on the type of person you are, whether it develops into one or the other. The introspective person shuns humans, and he might become anxious, where as the extrovert person gets depressed. Both types seem to suffer from fatigue and gets more or less apathetic.

Analysis:

I compare the findings with the symptoms of prisoners in isolation.

Conclusion:

My conclusion is, that the seafarer is being harmed psychologically by the isolation in his job, and that it seems he does not manage to rehabilitate or socialize on his rather long holidays.

What can be done:

I suggest that the trade creates openness, recognition and knowledge about the phenomenon. This calls for a dialogue between the seafarer and the experts. Psychologists are needed here. Other suggestions are: Increased crews, more Danish seafarers amongst them. Better opportunities for shore leave. Better facilities for spare-time occupation onboard. Aiming at better meals onboard, this is, the quality of the food and the social aspect of the meal. Fixed crews at the same ships. Better and cheaper opportunities for communication with the family at home, and better news coverage and mail delivery. Better opportunity for the wife (and children) to join his ship. As for what the seafarer can do himself: Create support network or groups of self-help. "Force" himself to socialize more onboard and at home? There is a lack of knowledge on this topic.

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1. Introduction

This paper is about the Danish Seafarer on long voyage.

The law about work environment does not include the shipping business. This is why the interest concerning the work environment at sea, has begun much later than the one ashore. However, things are now proceeding.

The Danish Maritime Occupational Health Service has now taken control over, what you will call; “smoke, noise and filth”.

On the agenda today is particularly the mental work environment. (1)

This paper is about the mental work environment at sea.

2. Why this subject?

For a long time I have been interested in those, to me “strange creatures” we call seafarers, this partly because I’m married to one myself, but also because I find seafarers a forgotten and overlooked group.

Because of my marriage to a seafarer on long voyage and my trips with him on several occasions, I have discovered this part of a seafarer’s life myself and believe that I have a good fond of knowledge about the topic.

Furthermore, I am active in “The Seamen’s Wives Association of 1976”, an association which takes care of the interests of the seafarer family. Through the association, debates and conversations with seamen and their families, I have been around many areas of a seafarer’s life and working conditions

I am in contact to the FMM (Research Centre for Maritime Medicine) and the Danish Maritime Occupational Health Service, where I have been participating in meetings in which mutual sharing of experiences took place and also, I have been on workshops about the environment at sea.

During my work with this paper, I have spoken to psychologists, including one, used by the Danish Maritime Occupational Health Service for seamen in crises. (17) I have spoken to the Danish Navigator Union, the Danish Maritime Authority, the chief of The Danish Maritime Occupational Health Service and with a scientist from the FMM. (21)

As mentioned above, there is now more focus on the mental work environment at sea. This apparently means that changes and improvements are needed. There is also an awareness of the

fact that a seafarer lives an isolated life onboard the ship and that this condition has worsened since the size of the crew has been reduced and more foreigners are onboard. However, I do believe that this isolation also has a cost on the personal level.

Both privately but also through the Seamen's Wife Association I have discovered how this isolation does "something" to the seafarer. It is this "something" I will try to bring out to light. I believe that during the life at sea, the seafarer changes mentally. A change in the personality, you can say. The seafarer gets mentally and socially ill, or you can say he gets "mentally handicapped".

These are indeed tough words, but only expressed to bend it in neon. The isolation, loneliness and monotony he experiences on board, becomes a permanent condition. When he returns to his family he does not wish to participate in the social life – at least not more than he has to. He becomes reserved and quiet, more than he normally is. He never really escapes the feeling of isolation. He may even be apathetic.

3. A characterization of the Danish seafarer and his working-conditions

In many people's consciousness, the Danish seafarer is defined as the "bird" living a life in freedom, under exotic and foreign sky and with a girl in every harbour. But reality is rather different. What is a seafarer actually like? This question I will try to answer in the following:

The seafarer on long voyage is characterized by being separated from family, friends and native country, often in very long periods.

He lives in two different worlds; the one at sea and the one at home. Often he works with a changing crew and work on different ships. This means that both the physical as well as the social environment varies a lot – and that, he has none or just very little influence on this.

So this means the seafarer has no colleagues he works with regularly, and those few Danish colleagues he might be having, often live far away around the country. A huge workload, constant call of ports and lack of sleep is stressing him and affecting him mentally. He often has to accept a miserable nutrition. He finds himself living in very limited space, which he cannot escape. Naturally, this sharpens conflicts between the colleagues. He is there – 24 hours a day, in all the signed on period, which can be from 2 to 4 months or more. Rarely he gets to leave the ship during the short call of ports. He experiences the loneliness among the few people on board,

often people from a foreign culture and people who may not speak the language of the ship (English) very well.

It is an international place of work, partly because of the multi ethnical crew and partly because of the worldwide call of ports where a corporation between the people and the authorities of the countries takes place. Furthermore, the size of the crew has been radically cut down because of the severe competition within the trade. Because he is subdued by the mood of the nature, a voyage in stormy weather can affect the sleep and the daily activities in many ways. He may feel concerned about the ship, be worried whether the mate and captain are able to bring them safely ashore. Just like he is worried about pirate attacks and stove aways. Episodes with stove aways and pirate attacks can be extremely frightening.

He experiences accidents, illness and death on board, naturally due to the fact the there is no emergency room around the corner. Despite these modern days with technology, he has little opportunity communicating regularly, verbally as well as in writing, with family and friends. His options concerning spare-time occupations are very limited. For the navigator, he is working regular shift work.

In order to compensate for all this, the seafarer has a good long holiday, almost just as long as his sign on period.

All these factors – how do they affect the seafarer and what are his options when it comes to work off the experiences, talk with a confident, a confident with whom he can adapt the troubles in his life?

Because, to the description of the seafarer, there is also the picture of the “tuff guy” with hair on his chest, a man who never whines.

The soft man never made it at sea.

Earlier, the seafarer worked off during the shore leave, today this possibility is reduced. A self-elected confidant is also difficult to find, both because of the less time on shore leave but also, because of the limitation within the crew.

My understanding is that the seafarer only very limited or maybe even not at all, gets to work off or recover whatever he is feeling in these conditions.

4. Formulation of the problem

My formulation of the problem is therefore as following:

Does the isolated life of a seafarer affect his personality and socialization? – in other words; is he getting mentally ill and damaged from his work?

With these words I have already assumed how the seafarer is isolated in his job, and I presume that it does “something” to his personality and to his ability of socializing. With socialization I mean his ability, after a sign on period, to blend into the society and “be present, work and function” in it

5. Delimitation of the problem

I assume the seafarer is isolated without going deeper into the subject however well aware of the many other factors playing a part in this situation. Also, I will not be discussing the problems concerning the multi ethnic crew, other than point out how it is reinforcing the loneliness and isolation.

I will only be focussing on what the isolated life on board does to the seafarer.

I have deliberately chosen not to include the female seafarers, partly because they are a minority among the crew but also because women probably would react differently to the situation. This I believe is beyond the limits of this report.

6. Method

As a wife to a seafarer and as an active member of the "Seamen's Wives Association by 1976", I have a great fond of knowledge and experience about the life and conditions of the seafarer. For a long time I have, as mentioned earlier, had a feeling how the life and work of a seafarer is damaging his soul. By saying this, I am also very prejudiced because of my own experiences and assumptions. However, I was also, in the same time, very insecure: was I really able to “prove” this “something”? Was it even existing, or was it just my own personal feeling and idea this assumption was based upon? And furthermore, *if* I happened to meet the phenomenon, would it then only be present as an answer to my unspoken diagnose or maybe even my direct influence? The more I thought about it, the more insecure I became. Because *if* there really *was* something true about the issue, I was convinced it would be pretty difficult to bring it out to light, yes maybe even more than difficult. This partly because the fewest people openly would confess

how they had been damaged mentally by their work, but also because only a minority would be aware of the problem.

This convinced me that only through a confidential dialogue, I would be able to get honest and truthful answers to my questions – and, that this dialogue had to be based on the interview-person and the progression in the dialogue.

Therefore, my method became the qualitatively based interview (2,3), where the guide of the interview is more of a guiding than a strictly followed plan (see enclosure 1 +2).

In my choice of literature I have particularly used Jette Fog: “Med samtalen som udgangspunkt”(2).

Early in my work I decided to interview both the seafarer *and* his wife, this because I assumed that some of the changes and conditions around the seafarer would be so subtle that only the wife would be able to detect them, knowing that they often appear over a longer period of time.

I therefore selected following criteria for my choice of seafarers:

First of all they had to work long voyaging, and had to have been in the trade for some years.

Secondly, they had to be married. Finally, they had to be on board ships with multi ethnical crews.

I found 3 families for my interview: two of the seafarers working as engineers and one as a navigator.

I had wished to find two in each working-area, but my time was short so I had to cut down my number of interview-persons. I interviewed the seaman and his wife separately.

I chose to record the interviews.

This gave me some valuable conversations with these people. Later on, I printed out the recordings, however both intonations, form of contact and body language disappears when you only have the interviews on paper. So in my interpretation and analyses these factors are included implicitly. (2)

During my printing, I found several traps and misunderstandings in my interviews which I naturally have taken under consideration in my analysis. When this is said, I find no particular confounding – all though I am not a real scientist.

I assess the interviews to be pretty valid, this because of my experience of good communication with the interview persons. The content of the interviews surprised me several times, this I believe means that my prejudiced did not dominate the conversation. During the printing, I

discovered new areas in the topic, which I, in the first step, had overheard. All very interesting and instructive.

6.1. Ethical considerations

How much was I allowed to interpret and analyse in my interviews? Was I allowed to conclude something the person in the interview did not see or wish to see? How could I be sure there was any truth in my attitude towards the problem, even though I had a strong sense about it early in the conversation? And how would I be able to sort out my own attitude so it didn't affect the material?

Jette Fog writes about this: *“I must be a subject together with another subject, be myself together with this exact other person. If I do not work this way, the interview will lose reliability and validity” (2:pp. 158) and “the tools she (the researcher) use to understand the situation, is developed and limited by the culture and époque she is a part of.” (2: pp. 152)*

I was insecure whether the fact that I was a part of the seaman's life myself was a disadvantage or an advantage. Now, I would dare to say that it definitely was an advantage. It appears in the interviews, how the two of the three wives opened up rather late in the interview. It was when they were to talk about how the work environment affected their husbands. This happened after they asked to *my* life and to *my* experiences. You may say that I putted the words in their mouths, however I strongly felt that it was a matter of understanding. They felt they were understood because of my own personal experiences. An experience that did not leave them alone with this painful recognition. Furthermore, without knowing anything at all about my life, one of the seafarers expressed exactly the same.

The disadvantage could also be that my prejudices could not be explained and would put out a smoke screen.

I have tried to be conscious about this during the interviews, and I do not believe I can get any closer.

But here the advantage was the most important, to be capable of opening up – and I sensed very strongly that it was my own identity which made the opening possible. I took the identification with me, so these people could see that I really was the person I said I was. I explained how they were secured by their anonymity and how it was only me listening to the interviews, and that the material would be completely destroyed afterwards. (Enclosure nr.1)

6.2. The persons represented in the interviews

The two Chief-engineers are voyaging in Danish owned ships and the Captain in a foreign owned ship. I didn't know in advance that the Captain was voyaging with a foreign owned ship – this because I hadn't asked about it when I spoke with the Captain on the phone.

However, I estimated that *if* there was a difference, the similarities would be much greater. In his case I only saw an even greater tendency, a tendency also visible in the Danish Merchant Navy with reflagging – which means more foreigners on board, on the cost of Danes. With more foreigners in the ships, the Danes are forced to leave, and escape to the foreign owned ships. In consideration of the anonymity, I do not describe how I got to the seafarers and their wives. The following list in accidental order:

Age and sign on period:

Seafarer: 51 years old and 33 years at sea, wife: 48 years old and a seaman's wife for 25 years.

Seafarer: 56 years old and 40 years at sea, wife: 48 years old and a seaman's wife for 9 years.

Seafarer: 57 years old and 37 years at sea, wife: 60 years old and a seaman's wife for 22 years.

All three are voyaging with multi ethnical crew. The size of the crew varies from 7 to 13 people.

The combination among the crew is as following:

One ship with 3 Danes, 4 Philippines

One ship with 4 Danes, 2 Ukrainians, 7 Philippines

One ship with 1 Dane, 3 Lithuanians, 1 Rumanian, 1 from Britain and 2 Cap Verde.

All voyaging dry-cargo ships in free speed. There is a changing crew on all the ships.

Concerning the specific ship, there is quite a variation: from a different ship every time to the same ship for several years. The sign on period varies from three to four months and the time at home from two to four. None of the interview-persons are doing nightshifts.

All three of the wives are working or have been working on regular basis.

There are children in two of the marriages.

All have a good health.

7. Analysis:

7.1. Analysis of the material used in the interviews

I am aware that the interviews representing three seafarers and their wives are not representative in numbers. Anyway, I find in the interviews some tendencies looking more alarming than expected.

What I discovered from my material is that the seafarers either become “human-shy” (are avoiding people around them) and maybe fearful, or they get depressions and are afraid of turning crazy. All seem to become more or less apathetic.

Because the reactions are related to the certain type of personality, one will possibly run into more characteristics by using a larger test-material. The withdrawn seafarer becomes humanly shy, is avoiding people around him and he becomes fearful and maybe crazy. The outgoing seafarer gets depressions, which seem to disappear over a longer period of time. The question is if it disappears completely, because he is never really happy as long as his is on board the ship. There seem to be a certain apathy among all three of them and they are all expressing tiredness. This tiredness can be a part of the depression-process.

As the most important factors, they all bring forward the loneliness and isolation together with the monotony. One expresses the concern about pirate attacks. I register a fear, not only about the pirates, but a more diffuse fear. Furthermore, he explains the strain you feel when you are not able to go home to your parent’s funeral.

It surprised me how the seafarer, at least in some cases, is aware of the effects he is exposed to by his job. However, I also sensed that it was extremely painful to talk about. This is not an issue you share with anyone.

The quotations are not personalized:

How is the social life on board?

Well, we don’t have much. The social life is about watching a movie at night, and sometimes we play some cards, and sometimes, we have this Trivial Pursuit, then we play this. But it is very rarely, because I really don’t bother. Then you fling yourself into a chair and you watch a movie. The great social life – we do not have that. It’s a little.....well ...people, you know, they are tired. If the weather is ruff,

then they are even more tired, then they don't get their sleep at night – so they turn in early.

The tiredness is mentioned several times by the seafarers and their wives, both as a phenomenon at sea and at home the first one to three weeks. I interpreted it as a factor of boredom and maybe apathy just as much as an expression of real, physical tiredness. It was also described as: “you are not happy”, so maybe is it a sign expressing a depressive condition?

Do you think you are able to do the same when you are at home as you did for example ten years ago?

No.

Why do you think that is the case?

I don't know. There are many things I should have done, but I just can't get going.

I am not in the mood for it.

Now and then you have an opportunity to do so? (going ashore)

This happens, yes. At least if the weather is not too bad, then I can go for a walk, but I really don't know, I don't think you...you are just not happy. You are not in a good mood...you know. God, how well we are here, right?...No...you are not...you just walk around there...well...and the day is over ...well, it is not...it is something you just have to get over with.

I have also been taking a walk myself, making a call to my family, saying good night and then walked all the way back to the ship. Then I know I have been exercising a bit, because it is a trip lasting 1½ hours – not that it makes a great difference, because you feel you're wasting time. My God, you are not tired, and you are not the opposite, and then I can walk right back to the ship and sit there watching something..that is...well..

It really means a lot if you mentally get along with your colleagues, although Danes and Englishmen are pretty close when it comes to mentality....yes, you can say that...where you are functioning a lot better together.

This idea of mixing the United Nation crew – EVERYBODY suffers from it. It's not just me, you can feel it on the others too and...we try to be polite...and we are, but...you can feel it, you can feel how the others get restless, lying there ...all kinds of different places...then they watch a little television, then they are off again...leaving it on and all this...this is, in my opinion a typical sign that you doesn't thrive at all.

The seafarer is both physically and mentally isolated. Physically, by the limitations of the ship and mentally, by the little contact to the outside world. This is being reinforced by the few and culturally very different people on board – often new faces every time.

...sure you are isolated. You..to be on a ship every day that is...those who are in an open jail, they are really doing much better. Because you are isolated, you can't do a God damn thing...other than...well, you have a ship to be at, and if you're lucky you get a leave and you can go ashore for a few hours. Beyond that you are locked up on a limited area.

The wife of this seafarer confirms his good health not to forget how he is mentally strong and does not wish to work other places than at sea. However, at the end of the conversation she says:

Wish for his job?...That he would be happier about his work, cause I'll tell you, he hates sailing, he tells me that very often: He hates it. But on the other hand he wouldn't want to work these 7-16 jobs....But when he comes home and a few days have passed, he always says...eyhh, I am not going out there again.

So the greatest disadvantage is really that you are separated from your family?

Yes, I believe it is. When you're out there at the Pacific Ocean, you're isolated from everything and you do not know a God damn thing about whatever's going on, even though you get papers now and then....this also bothers me, that you cannot be a part of what's going on around the world. You have no idea what's going on in the world, you really don't. I remember once I got home many years ago, that was the time they were making explosions at Chernobyl. I didn't have a

clue, and it happened while we were at the Atlantic. Then you get home to hear such a thing. That was choking I think.

But there is one thing I do not understand: you say you are doing all right and that you thrive well with your job, and when I ask you if there was anything you could wish for....something different...then this could be a completely different job?

Well, of course the job can get a bit monotonous, right, and it is the same and the same year in and year out.

For a long time, the seafarer kept a positive attitude, but suddenly he expressed an outburst of rage when this got out.

I sensed at this moment a pain so locked up, because the seafarer not in any possible way could see how it would ever get better. And he had no suggestions when it came to making things better, other than wishing for more Danes on board – which he knew was unrealistic. Neither did he know how to improve things concerning his own situation.

So what are you thinking when you go on board such a ship...are you looking forward to meeting new people, or...?

No, absolutely not, I just have to go out there and get it over with, I have caught myself in being enormously depressed when I am to leave my home. Not because you have to go to work...but it is more that you have to get out into this...this...where all life is placed on the edge.

Not that you have to stand up, because I can do that, but I just get very depressed, eight, ten days ...then it suddenly disappears again. This happens when I have arrived in my destination, it is actually not when I leave.

...But it has all become so scanty and so...humanly hostile in a way.

In many other areas of life, this seafarer has a very outgoing personality, and earlier he always found it interesting meeting new people. Still, his is so affected by the depression that he once went to his doctor, asking for something against it.

How will you describe your health?

Well! But my soul is sensitive to the bad life out there and this is what's forcing the depression, now you have to get down in the sad part again, because this is the way, and I...I have been talking to my colleagues about it and it's the same everywhere, you are feeling bad about it., that's how I'll put it, because in my opinion...My blood pressure, it is like the blood pressure of a 20 year old racing cyclist...a doctor said last year, so I...

What do you think life as a seafarer has done to you as a human being?

As a person I have learned a lot, human knowledge beyond every limit, I've been with thousands of people, also because it interests me very much, I mean, it has to, especially as a captain, well, you turn into being somewhat of a homespun psychologist in many ways.

The seafarer answering this question is outgoing by nature and interested in the people surrounding him. He is aware of the danger in the trade – that you become “wired” – he does absolutely everything to keep himself posted, goes with family and friends to parties, travels and so on and so forth – all though he would rather stay at home, needs to feel the “spirit” to get anything done at home, and then he gets a depression when he goes voyaging.

He knows why, and tries to oppose it. He knows how he has to find himself again when he returns to his home, and he believes he's succeeding.

The wife senses no difference, probably because of her own horrible job-situation, and maybe because she is so tired, listening to the same song over and over again, and maybe because the seafarer didn't succeed “shaking off” the isolation of the ship...Both of them are equally powerless.

So do you pity him?

Yes of course I do. But it is just like....it's just like he has to be pitied. As you know it is also tuff working here inside the country.

One can comment how the mental work environment at sea isn't any worse than the one experienced ashore. However, there is this major difference that ashore you get to go home everyday (mostly), and you don't at sea. There is no escape! You are there 24 hours a day – and I

believe this is where the damage appears. And furthermore, people working in the country also have many colleagues with an overload of Danes.

How does this affect you (the isolation among others)

It does affect you, if you are not very careful, you get wired...I mean...really wired, selfish.

Can you describe this a little deeper?

Well, you think about yourself that you have a...that you know more about everything, you turn to be very critical towards many issues, you are not very flexible, and that goes for almost everything, it could be the government at home and it can be...yes, it can be practically anything. You are just so God damn wise about everything, and in reality, you don't have a clue...you have a façade to defence yourself against some insecurity, great insecurity, because you get insecure.

Why do you think you get insecure?

Because you have no opportunity of catching up on what's going on in the world, that's what I think. We discussed this; we have to be careful that our "circles" don't get too narrow.

When you are at home, are you watching the news a lot?

Yes I do. I watch and listen to the news all the time. The first thing I do in the morning is turning on my computer, looking through the papers, and then I watch the CNN and the Danish news and radio as well.

We all have a need of being a part of a society or a community, a place with bonds and a common frame of reference, which contributes to the meaning of life. And we have a need to know what's going on around us. But the seafarer has lost the community earlier existing on the ships and which probably compensated for the privation and longing towards home.

That is why the little news coverage and contact with the family feels even worse than before. Maybe because there is no meaning to find onboard? It creates insecurity and depression, as the isolated prisoner, shut out from the community.

What is it like to return to your home and to be at home?

That, I definitely have to get used to. You just have to adapt to it.

What is it you have to adapt to?

I don't know, I just know I have to adapt. You have two different homes right?

When I get on board the ship I have to adapt as well. It takes at least a week before I have completely gotten used to it.

So it is easier getting used to being at home again?

The first week when I get home, I just lay there on my back, relaxing, doing nothing at all.

So lets say you get home on a Monday and your wife says that "tomorrow" you have to go to this and that...

I won't go!

You are not going?

No, absolutely not. I am not going anywhere this first week – that's for sure.

But you aunt Olga turns 80...

Yes I know, but I will not go.

You're really not going?

NO, definitely not.

Why do you think you feel like this?

Because when you finally get to go home, you just want to stay at home. That's what you have been looking forward to for three months right? You feel just like a little kid, so full of longing.

...we do have some good friends we see regularly. With them we meet once in a while. But other than that, I do not have a large social circle, and that is probably because of my work. You can easily get a bit turned inwards. This thing with a lot of people, I don't like that. And I do not bother to go into some stupid store,

crowded with people. I don't feel like doing that. But that's strictly because you're used to be in a...

...in a small isolated community?

Yes. Yes. I am sure of that. Because my wife, she is very outgoing, and that I am definitely not. It is probably because of the many years at sea. I am certain of that. ...I just don't want to. The big birthdays and parties, I just haven't got the eager to go there.

The wife of this seafarer says:

...And then I normally call the shipping company asking them when he arrives, which plane, and then we drive there to pick him up, because he hates going on a train and all those strange people. Let me get into the car and home, Yes!

The seafarer needs to recover when he returns to his home. One to three weeks with complete quietness, that's what he needs.

The wife of this seafarer explains how he has always been the withdrawn type. Those two weeks it takes to restore (because it takes two weeks, she says) she defines as a jetlag. She has adapted to this pattern, just as she has gotten used to him wanting the same dinner and coffee hours as the ones at sea. I sense how painful it is admitting how the love of your life may have been damaged by his job.

Several times she is expressing, how you always find many explanations. Even though she has adjusted herself, it bothers her to think that he does not like meeting new people.

...It's like the body language reveals him, right. He doesn't look very kind and forthcoming.

Is it like this attitude: stay away from me?

Yes! That is the way I see him. Of course *we* know him and we know that he isn't like that. But I think other people sees him like that. Good lord!...

This seafarer has always been the withdrawn type, however, he accentuates how you become withdrawn, so it definitely gets worse. This statement, the wife fully confirms. The withdrawnness is escalating into a human hostility and shyness. The shyness is melted into the body language, it is being internalised. Primarily it's there to protect oneself, secondarily it

worsen the whole situation. He is isolated and isolates himself. It becomes a vicious circle. This, despite a good and interesting fellowship with a colleague he has been working with during two sign on periods.

What is a seafarer like, if you should describe him?

It's certain that many old seafarers, voyaging for many years become wired, but that is probably because of their withdrawnness, they have been to themselves for so many years. However, not everybody turns out that way. I have been with a whole lot of them, a whole lot. There are a lot of those who get some pretty obdurate ideas: if it has to be like this, it has to be like this. You cannot discuss any common sense with those seafarers voyaging for many years. It affects people in some way and sometimes in a very negatively way. But there are differences, not everybody turns out to be like this. I think it was even worse in the old days, where seafarers travelled for a much longer period. Today, many go home after those three months and some only voyage for two months...they do not reach this...well, they have time to leave it behind them, if you know what I mean?

I sensed a doubt or an uncertainty whether he and the other members of the crew really believed in succeeding when wanting to leave it behind before it got to them.

An insecurity, so troubling and painful to speak out, especially when it comes to oneself. Every time he returns to his home, the seafarer needs to be socialized all over again – get used to the pulsating society. Something tells me that this hasn't been succeeding very well.

Another withdrawn seafarer:

Don't you consider how lonely it is? (working alone)

No I do not. I feel I'm better off this way.

...(about having close friends)...well, I am..I am not the type of guy who likes opening up...I've never been like that...

You have never been like that?

No, I am not the one needing help in crises...and support..well, I deal with it myself.

The wife explains how he needs a period of one to two weeks for restoring. A period where he feels better left alone without any guests and company. And that he's like all other seafarers she knows about: They are not into meeting with new people. On several occasions she mentions how you just have to let them "leave", whenever you feel something is wrong. She feels he has become more of a nervous man. Personally, the seafarer explains how he had a nervous heart when he was younger plus a tendency of getting stomach ulcer. Besides this, he still claims to be happy about the job, even though he acknowledges how many seafarers are not doing very well at sea.

However, at the same moment he also says how he really needs to be grateful about his job, well aware of the huge unemployment figuring.

When he talks about the pirate attacks I register a fear, a fear not only limited to the attacks. A fear much more diffuse.

All seafarers expressed a need of more contact with their homes and pointed out the great importance it had to their well-being. A good, solid background is very important.

When you return to your home what are then the optimal conditions for recovering?

To have the right wife, and...well, I have been married twice and the first time, that was really hard, you see, there has to be some kind of understanding about it, also from you partner, there has to be.

My first wife, she was a tuff cookie, there was always an endless list of all the tings needed to be done in the house, and you know what...If you have been out there for four months in the Pacific Ocean you really need to "shake your head" when you return home. You know, your partner shouldn't push you too hard in the first period of time.

In all the interviews I was told how an adjustment was taking place between the married couple after the seafarer's arrival at home. This itself is not a special thing. However, it seemed to be necessary, a prerequisite for the relationship. It may be like this in other marriages as well. But here, we are talking about wanting to socialize or not, outgoing or not. In the two families it was obviously the wife adjusting her self to the circumstances, and in the third it was the husband.

But still, you have decided to stay at sea. Why do you think that is?

I don't know. After I've gone voyaging, I've never had a 7-16 job. And I don't think I would like to have one. I believe that's one of the reasons.

All three of them talked about having a job ashore. However, I sensed with the two "withdrawn", a kind of worry whether they would be able to function in such condition.

They also pointed out the "good, long holiday", a time where they can do whatever they like to do, - the opposite of being on board the ship. It would be easy to think how the seafarers would be very outgoing once they were home, but surprisingly, it appears to be the total opposite. They rather stay at home.

And when he was young, he could easily go visiting at aunt Olga's birthday?

Yes, yes I would say so. I would say so....But you know...you always put the blame on something, tell the "others" it is because of him being away for so long...haven't been catching up on the news, and that he really would like to sit there, in his chair watching television...and...Arrgh.

The apathy is reducing the possibilities of exploring life and that is, for everybody, indeed very hard to see through.

7.2. Comparison with prisoners in isolation

Even though seafarers haven't got the exact same complex of symptoms as prisoners in isolation develop, it is relevant to take a look at the effects of the isolation – because here, we find several similarities.

When we talk about isolation there are three types:

1. Sensory-isolation, where a reduction of stimulations of the senses is taking place.
2. Perceptual-isolation, Where a stimulation of the senses is taking place, but the stimulation is either unstructured or too monotonous.
3. Social isolation, where the numbers of daily contacts with people are very low or have stopped completely. (4)

With the limited possibility of socializing with other people, seafarers suffer from social isolation in their jobs. In some cases they also suffer from perceptual and sensory isolation, for example when pointing out the tasteless and monotonous food they are having every day and the uninspiring physical environment.

Looking at the symptoms appearing among prisoners in isolation we find depression, apathy, fear and withdrawnness – just as I discovered with the seafarers. (4,5). The situation of the seafarer can be compared with a light isolation. An isolation which can maximally be accepted for a period of three weeks (Inge Lunde 4). A longer period would be torture! Prisoners experiencing hard physical torture, find the isolation a lot worse. (4)

It is well known how the social deprivation (6) is the part of the isolation-complex giving the most intense consequences, and the consequences are seen many years ahead. With the Norwegian seafarers voyaging during the war (6) we know how they were suffering from tiredness, restlessness, tendency of isolating oneself socially, depression and fear.

The constant threat of death was one of the factors behind developing the symptoms. Isolation and the longing for home was the other. But also with isolated and infectious patients a similar palette of symptoms is discovered. (6)

In the chronic syndrome of isolation an unexplainable tiredness is seen, unexplainable because they never really do anything active, some become apathetic, lying in bed all day long. (6) The social after-effects with prisoners in isolation are visualized particularly in a humanly shyness and a certain fear of being close to people, both physically and emotionally. Sometimes the feeling is so intense that the prisoners voluntarily chose to continue the isolation. This disablement can last several years after ending the period of isolation.

The isolated people often try to hide how badly they are feeling. Isolation is seriously reducing physical and mental health.

It is no wonder how the seafarer, going away into the isolation over and over again, is developing these symptoms.

7.3. Other studies with comments

More scientists researching in sensory and social deprivation and their consequences, have all discovered a similar palette of symptoms showing how the function-level of an adult is changing during deprivation.

The feeling of a personal identity is changing and depressive and psychotic mental disorders are common. (6: pp. 112)

The explanation of the insecurity the seafarer describes, will probably be found in these facts.

The same goes with his depression and fear. Also, I believe it is the explanation of the following: From studies among seafarers there is found a more widespread tendency of mental disorder than in similar groups ashore. Also, there is found a much higher frequency of suicides.

Seafarers who have committed suicide have often been changing job prior to the incident. This must be viewed in the light of an active selection by the statutory health examinations at the maritime doctors. (7)

In 1995 the Danish Maritime Occupational Health service made a survey among 128 seamen's wives. 88% believe that the job is affecting the mental health of the seafarer. (8)

During my work with this report I have been asking my own husband a lot of questions. One day when I asked him if he felt a discomfort socializing with other people (others besides the family (4)) he answered: No, but there is always a kind of wall between us"

It is known how social support in the working situation and at home has a major importance to the health and well being of the individual. This because isolation not only worsens the tendency of mental disorders, but also affects the tendency when it comes to physical illness like heart diseases. (9,10,11) So when you discuss the lifestyle of the seafarer, his consumption of tobacco among others, (12) you also have to count in his isolated life on board because this fact has just as great an importance.

The chase of lifestyle-diseases and the misunderstood health-promotion, where you try to change the lifestyle factors, can in it's outer consequence worsen the seafarer's situation: the little pleasures he has, as tobacco and alcohol in reasonable amounts, are taken away from him. Not to say that tobacco and alcohol isn't dangerous, but that a one-sided focus on these elements doesn't do any good to anybody.

Studies have shown how social and culturally mobile groups (for example people often moving or emigrating) have a high frequency of heart diseases, depressions, lung cancer and sarcomas. (13)

So you have to draw in the influence of the isolation when you are doing the future work-plan concerning the health of the seafarer.

Seafarers are isolated in two ways at the same time: they both feel loneliness and in the same time, they are far away from home.

After a long period of isolation you are having problems fitting in to the life at home. Because you find it so very hard to explain yourself and your situation it, can be problematic even to go to a local office. Because this demands that you are up to date with things. A separation between two universes, impossible to integrate. (14)

Humanly contact is more than just an accidental aspect of our well-being, in many cases the lack of contact *is* the central problem. (10)

One might ask why the seafarer doesn't do anything to change the situation himself. But in order to this, lays a self-perpetuating effect, as the social isolation makes an alienation of the individual. This alienation leads to a feeling of powerlessness. The situation is out of control and he feels trapped. He sees himself incapable of doing anything about it and after some time it becomes difficult answering the question: "Who am I". (15,16) In that situation it is understandably hard to change any situation at all.

8. Summary

The seafarer suffers from the rising isolation on board, and at such high level that it's impossible for him to recover in his rather long holidays.

He does his job, but beyond that he feels tired and not in the mood of doing anything particular. He is not happy. Even when he does something for himself, a trip ashore for example, he really just feels it being a waste of time.

During the holidays he needs to feel the "spirit" to get something done at home, or he doesn't do anything after all. In other words apathetic.

The seafarer dislikes larger crowds of people, the big parties in the family, people he does not know, he feels no eager of travelling, even a trip with a local train is a real abomination, and he actually just wants to stay at home with his family.

His body language reflects the attitude: "Stay away from me". In other words, he becomes humanly hostile and shy. Furthermore he seems to develop a fear.

The seafarer doesn't thrive and sometimes he hates being on board – it's just something that has to be over and done with, he becomes nervous, suffers from the monotony, gets depressions.

A human hostility is affecting the environment on board.

Everybody suffers from the insufficient contact to the outside world, both when it comes to the family, but also because of the low news coverage, which makes the seafarer insecure.

An insecurity around which he builds up a façade.

The seafarer is afraid of turning crazy. Every time he switches between the ship and the home, he needs to adjust between two completely different worlds. It takes the right wife to be able to recover fully. The home needs to be well functioning.

The seafarer's greatest wish is that there is as many people on board as it takes to feel alive. This also means more Danes. It is emphasized how only two Danes on board are too few.

There's no doubt that the isolated life on board has a negatively effect to the seafarer's mind, and that the explanation is found in the isolated and humanly hostile environment within the ships.

Furthermore, there is no doubt how his ability of socializing or more correctly; re-socializing, is limited proportionally with his time at sea. And that this limited ability of socializing is caused by a gradually developed human shyness and maybe fear, all caused by the isolation on board.

You would expect how the long holidays could "better" the damage. However, where you would expect the seafarer to be socially more outgoing in his holiday, he does the exact opposite. He isolates himself. Just as prisoners in isolation do!

During my interviews I registered an unconscious tendency of hiding how bad the seafarer is doing. This goes for both the seafarer himself and his wife.

It was the "other" seafarers who were described as wired and restless and I here sensed a fear of being stigmatised personally. And the wife, she had "so many explanations", also a tendency of hiding the problems – just as prisoners in isolation do it.

Within the environment of seafarers, there is this tendency, where both the seafarer and his wife apparently are feeling happy with the special form of life and don't wish for anything else.

However, the negatively aspects are still there and no one outside the "environment" understands them. This results in making up a lot of explanations to the problems, which seem to be bothering them anyway - one way or the other.

Explanations which are immediate and spontaneous and never really bring out the opportunity of a further reflection about the causes and possible solutions. They never see the light of day with the opposite sign, and because of that, they are stumbling over their own legs.

Only by calling them their right name, by recognizing the situation, something can be done.

This indeed, must be the way ahead.

9. Conclusion

The intention with this report was to reveal that “something” the isolated environment is doing to the seafarer.

I had the impression how the isolation affected him mentally. That he becomes psycho –socially handicapped. I believe he becomes withdrawn, quiet, apathetic, not wishing to participate in the social life. That the isolation he feels on board becomes a kind of lasting condition.

I have discovered all this and furthermore also depression, insecurity, fear of becoming wired, and humanly shyness. I have found how the re-socialization, necessary to the seafarer, isn't succeeding.

He remains in his isolation. Or in other words; the damage is done.

I have found a connection between the symptoms that seafarers and prisoners in isolation are showing.

I have made some suggestions solving the problem, however, I have not succeeded in finding the “golden nut” when finding out what exactly can be done. There is a lack of knowledge in this area!

10. Solutions to the problem

First of all we need to create an openness and recognition to the problem, says the psychologist.

(17) The trade must bring forward knowledge about this to the individual seafarer. Organisations and colleagues must openly admit how this problem isn't an easy thing to handle. However, it can be difficult managing a normal life because of the effects of the isolation. Only through an increased consciousness about the problem, something can be done. This, probably isn't easy as we know how the Danish seafarer still has “hair on his chest”. So even though he acknowledges the poorness of the mental environment at sea (18) he will probably not admit how he is damaged by his job. It takes a certain flair making it commonly known and accepted. Attention

is demanded so that we do not end up like we did with the syndrome among painters: “ well, they were probably stupid anyway”. And we landlubbers, we also have to acknowledge how difficult it is for us to understand all this, and thereby also knowing what needs to be done. It takes a dialogue between both groups of experts. The group of experts knowing what life is like at sea: seafarers, and the group wanting to improve the working environment at sea: the Danish Maritime Occupational Health Service, the Danish Maritime Authority, the shipping companies, the organisations among others.

And furthermore, a demand of having more Danes on board is in place. Some might say how the wish of more Danes on board is unrealistic – this due to the fact that many foreign workers are here for good because of their cheap working capacity. But there are some Danish shipping companies using only a Danish crew, and those companies have been well- functioning for several years.

Demands of more opportunity for trips ashore. That you are along side instead of in the roads, so that the crew have more opportunity of doing something else, besides being on board the ship. Offering more and better facilities concerning spare-time occupations on board, facilities for exercising, for example. Maybe bicycles for the trips ashore.

The nutrition on board has great importance. Partly because of the gastronomic experience itself, but also because of the social element when sharing a meal. From arctic expeditions it has been discovered, how a prolonged meal improved the mental well being within the crew. However, it was important that no one experienced the situation as artificial. (19)

Because of the work-arrangements, meals are often enjoyed alone. It is required that the work arrangements are improved so that the crew can share their meals together and that the food is prepared by qualified cooks.

And furthermore, the cooks shall not just cook meals, they also need to be further qualified in being the social centre of the ship, which is the position they already hold..

To a much higher extend, you have to make a politic in which you make sure that seafarers work together on several sign on periods. This means having a permanent crew. You also have to arrange better and cheaper opportunity for contacting the home and improve the news coverage and mail delivery.

The trade must understand how these elements are extremely important to the mental well-being of the seafarer.

Optimal opportunity of bringing the wife and children when voyaging.

What can the individual seafarer do to counteract the effects of the isolation?

It is almost impossible to find literature around this field. Even at the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University (20) they are not familiar with literature enlightening this aspect.

According to the Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (22), you can create a network and self-helping groups and also be aware of danger signals. This could be transferred to the shipping business, on it's own terms of course. The trade can offer courses in psycho-education, which is also done at the rehabilitation centre.

I have considered the following bid:

Could it be an idea to "force" oneself into a more intense personal contact with the other crew?

“Force” oneself into more social contacts during the holidays?

To arrange the home at sea in a more personal manner?

To improve the effort when it comes to contacting the family?

Going ashore as often as possible even though you don't feel like going?

But first of all, bring forward the discussion, on board and in the unions: What is this doing to me and how can I help my colleagues and myself?

The best solution is always the one, coming from a person who has experienced the consequences on his own body and soul.

However, considering the fact, that the effects of isolation makes you incapable of acting in any way, I believe it is wise to include psychologists as well.

11. Promotion

During the work with this report, I have spoken with several experts within the trade. All of them have shown an interest to this project and some have required a copy of the paper. They will receive a copy as soon as the paper has been approved.

Furthermore, I have decided to contact the remaining instances within the trade so that it will be promoted and commonly recognized and hopefully be a help to the individual seafarer.

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Information given to persons being interviewed:

Anonymity: No names are given. The shipping company is not given the material or the reporting. The interview is recorded on tape but is not used in its fully length. The recording is printed and analysed and the individual quotes are possibly being used in the report. After this, the tapes are being destroyed. Can have the paper mailed if interested.

Form of interview: Open questions as an introduction to a dialogue in which he/she determines the content.

Individual interview, - this in order - not to reveal marriage-related problems, but to avoid the influence from another person present.

Interview guide - Seafarer

Concrete data:

How old are you?

How long have you been voyaging?

What position do you have on board?

How many Danes is present on board?

Which other nationalities?

How many of each nationality?

What is the length of your sign on periods and your holidays?

Are you voyaging with the same crew?

Are you voyaging with the same ship?

What type of voyage are you doing?

Open questions:

Tell me a little bit about yourself. Why did you become a seafarer and why are you still a seafarer?

Tell about a typical day at sea

Tell about the social life and the atmosphere on board

How do you feel about yourself when you are on board?

Tell about the life at home. What is it like to come home and be at home?

How do you feel about yourself when you are at home?

Do you have good friend and what can you used those friends for?

The job as a seafarer: what is good and what is bad?

How would you describe the life of a seafarer?

Tell a little bit about the consequences of being a seafarer

How is your health?

In relation to your profession, what is your greatest wish?

If you had the opportunity of calling a nurse whenever you are not feeling well, one way or the other, would you call her?

Is there anything you would like to add?

Interview-guide – Seaman's wife

Concrete data:

How old are you?

For how long have you been a seafarer's wife?

Do you have a job? What kind of job?

Do you have children? How old are they?

Open questions:

How do you feel being a seafarer's wife – what is good and what is bad?

How do you understand your husband's daily life at sea?

How do you think he handles the adjustment between the home and the ship?

Does your husband have good friends? Are you experiencing him using these friend to help adapt the difficult things in life?

Can you tell anything about what the life at sea does to your husband – Has he changed?

How is your husband's health?

What could you wish for your husband's job-situation?

If he had the opportunity of calling a nurse whenever he felt bad, one way or the other, do you think he would call?

Is there anything else you would like to add?