

Lost at Sea and Lost at Home: the Predicament of Seafaring Families

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Executive Summary

This was an exploratory study of an under-researched area. It aimed to:

- Identify specific problems in family relationships associated with seafaring work patterns;
- Explore coping strategies utilised by seafarers and their partners;
- Identify changes that can improve family life for seafarers and their families;
- Have a positive impact on welfare initiatives for seafaring families;
- Identify areas for future research.

For cost reasons, the study was based in the UK (with parallel work conducted by Zhao in China). UK seafarers and their partners were recruited to take part in the study using existing SIRC databases, an advertisement in the National Union of Marine, Aviation and Shipping Transport (NUMAST)¹ Telegraph and contacts made whilst doing shipboard research. Data was collected by means of in-depth interviews. Topics covered in the interview included the benefits and problems of a seafaring lifestyle, the difficulties associated with specific aspects of the work cycle, the perceived impact on emotional and physical well-being, sources of support and coping strategies. Interviews took place over a 12 month period in 2000/2001 and were conducted in seafarers' homes and, in a small number of cases, aboard ships in international waters. A total of 34 interviews were conducted, 15 with seafarers, 15 with seafarers' partners and a further 4 interviews with children of seafarers.

Findings indicated that the main benefit of a seafaring career was the high salary relative to shore-based occupations. Indeed for several seafarers money was cited as the only benefit of the occupation and lifestyle. Other benefits mentioned by seafarers and their partners included long leave periods, the flexibility and autonomy seafarers experienced in their work and the excitement and pleasure associated with seafarers' reunions with their partners. Transitions between ship and shore were reported to be the most difficult period of the work cycle as seafarers struggled to adjust to shore life and their partners to being part of a 'couple' again. Seafarers reported taking considerable time to unwind and recover from the stress associated with their shipboard life and many reported difficulties adjusting sleeping patterns to fit in with those of their families.

Not surprisingly, communication was extremely important to couples. Regular communication allowed seafarers and their partners to remain emotionally close and

¹ UK Officers Union.

allowed the seafarer to continue to participate in family decisions and events whilst at sea. Frequent communication eased the transition home and ensured that the seafarer had a role within the family whether at sea or ashore. Couples reported using a wide range of means of communication, from satellite phone calls to letters, mobile telephone calls and email. Rates of ownership of cell-net phones and personal computers were high. The financial costs associated with purchase and on-going use of telecommunication equipment were significant and sometimes prohibitive.

Social isolation was found to be a significant issue for seafarers. Changes in crewing patterns meant that relationships at sea were often limited to 'on-board acquaintances', and, where relationships did develop, geographical separations and unsynchronised leave periods made the maintenance of these relationships problematic. Seafarers' intermittent presences at home along with the costs of ship-shore communication appeared to make it difficult for some seafarers to sustain friendships at home. Many seafarers reported being dependent on their partners and their partner's friendship networks for social contact and support. Seafarers' wives also appeared to be socially isolated. Women with young children often had restricted opportunities to socialise and a number reported feeling uncomfortable appearing at social events without a partner. Seafarers' partners often felt that their lifestyle and the associated issues and problems were not always understood by women whose partners worked ashore and this may have contributed to a sense of isolation.

The presence of children changed the experience of seafaring for many couples. For seafarers' partners, children could make separations more manageable as children were a source of company and a means of 'keeping busy' and hence making time pass more quickly. However very young children were reported to make women feel 'housebound' and socially isolated. Seafarers reported difficulties leaving children for long periods and sometimes found the changes in their children upon their return unsettling. Young children often did not recognise their seafaring parent upon their return home and this could be upsetting for families. Seafarers were positive about the fact that their relatively high leave-to-work ratios meant that they spent more quality time with their children than their shore-based contemporaries.

A significant issue for seafarers was their sense of redundancy upon their return home. Many seafarers spoke of the importance of having a partner who was independent and capable of managing the home and family in their absence. However those very abilities that allowed the seafarers to work aboard ship without undue worry about home often also resulted in problems for seafarers when they returned home on leave. Some seafarers

believed that their family functioned and managed regardless of, or indeed even oblivious to, their own presence or absence and this could lead to them feeling displaced, unnecessary and unimportant within the family.

Contrary to popular images of seafarers as sexually promiscuous, the majority of seafarers in this study remained sexually monogamous and were resigned to the long periods of sexual abstinence associated with their sea voyages. Most seafarers did not feel that repeated and prolonged separations affected their sexual relationship with their partner, although a small number reported difficulties re-establishing intimacy and that high work loads and work-related stress sometimes temporarily affected their sexual function. None of the seafarers' partners in this study reported having extra-marital sexual relationships. As their partners, most women accepted periods of sexual abstinence, and indeed some even welcomed these. The resumption of sexual relationships were sometimes reported as problematic due to women's desire for intimacy and their perception of their husband's need for sexual relief. The demands of managing the home and family could also leave women physically exhausted and this could have a detrimental effect on couple's sexual relationships.

Women typically were pragmatic about feelings of loneliness and depression associated with their partner's absence. None had consulted a medical professional for emotional health problems. The presence of their partner was felt to be particularly important both for practical and emotional support when there were serious health problems within the family. Seafarers reported high levels of work-related stress. However, they rarely sought medical help and strategies to combat stress appeared to be limited to physical exercise. Emotional health problems as a result of relationship difficulties were reported by a small number of seafarers. These problems were occasionally of sufficient severity for the seafarer to contemplate suicide whilst aboard ship. Emotional health problems were also reported after exposure to traumatic events in the workplace.

Trust was regarded as vital to successfully managing the seafaring lifestyle, as was frequent communication. Wives reported coping with separations by 'keeping busy', this could be achieved by involvement in paid work, domestic responsibilities, child care activities or socialising with family and friends. Social support networks were important for both practical and emotional support. Those women who had had previous experience of intermittent absence, either due to employment patterns within their community or through the occupation of a family member, felt better able to cope with the lifestyle due to positive role models and an awareness of the potential problems associated with intermittent partner absence.

Seafarers and their partners came up with a number of suggestions for improving life for seafarers and their families. In particular they mentioned shorter tours of duty and increased access to cheaper or subsidised communication. Company support for families in terms of repatriation of seafarers to deal with family problems/ crisis and opportunities for partners and children to sail were also greatly valued and felt to ease the problems associated with the lifestyle. The women interviewed for this study lived in various geographical areas. They suggested that opportunities to make contact and socialise with other seafaring families would be beneficial to themselves and their children.

Study recommendations: the data from this study suggest that there are a number of steps that can be taken to improve the lives of seafarers and their families. In particular:

- Increased access to private email.
- Subsidised communication.
- Delivery of regular mail as frequently as is logistically possible.
- Tours of duty of no longer than four months in duration.
- Increased opportunities for partners, and where possible children, to sail.
- Improvements in the predictability of seafarers' work schedules so that seafarer's arrival and departure from home can be more accurately anticipated.
- Promotion of social contact between seafaring families.
- Assurance of seafarers' immediate repatriation upon family crisis.
- Improved contact between company and seafarers' partners.
- Where possible seafarers should sail with same crew, thus facilitating opportunities for social relationships aboard.
- Cost cutting through reduced crew sizes along with increased administrative duties should be balanced against detrimental health consequences for seafarers.

Suggestions for future research:

- Research on ex-seafarers and seafarers' ex-partners to explore the experiences of those individuals whose relationship could not 'survive' the seafaring lifestyle.
- Research on the impact of seafaring work patterns on UK ratings and seafarers of different nationalities.
- Problems faced by seafarers and their partners upon seafarers' retirement.
- Impact of intermittent parent absence on seafarers' children.
- Women seafarers and the impact of their work patterns on family life and couple relationships.
- Effect of and responses to exposure to shipboard traumatic events.

Introduction

The world's seafarers can be seen as one of the first truly international and global workforces, comprising of individuals from countries as geographically and culturally disparate as Western Europe, Russia, India, South America and the Philippines. Such seafarers may work on a range of different vessels, operating on different trade routes, with different cargoes and a diverse range of work conditions. However, one thing that these individuals have in common is that their work necessitates prolonged separations from their home and families, separations that often involve infrequent opportunities for communication. As such, seafaring may be seen as a more than an occupation, but rather a lifestyle - a lifestyle that is characterised by a constant cycle of partings and reunions and transitions from the shore-based home environment to the unique work environment of the ship. It is a lifestyle that will impact on seafarers and their families alike.

Given the dearth of research on seafarers in general, it is perhaps no surprise that very little attention has been given to the impact of seafaring on family life or the effect of prolonged absences from home and family on the seafarers themselves. Health research, where it exists, has tended to focus on accidents and injuries (Hansen, 1996; ILO/WHO, 1993; Mayhew, 1999) or occupational physical illness (Hansen et al., 1996; Nilsson et al., 1997; Saarni et al., 1992) rather than psychological or emotional well-being (see Bloor et al., 2000 and Lane, 2002 for full discussion of literature on seafarers' health and safety). However health is more than simply the avoidance of injury or disease. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as:

'A state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the object of living. It is a positive concept emphasising social and personal resources as well as physical capabilities'

Constitution of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The emphasis on physical health is reflected by the seafarers' routine medical examination which tests for physical impairments (sight, hearing etc.) and the presence of chronic illnesses (diabetes etc.) but only explores psychological health in a limited way (MCA,

1999). Yet seafaring is a psychologically demanding occupation, often necessitating long work hours, frequently in socially isolated conditions. For a seafarer, the ship is both a workplace and a home. Emphasis on fast turn around times, reduced crewing levels and offshore discharge/ loading facilities often means that seafarers have few opportunities to go ashore or communicate with home and the world outside that of the ship. Indeed seafarers work in conditions which are sufficiently harsh for some to compare a ship to a gaol (Lamvik, 2001; Lane, 1998). In such an environment emotional well being can be crucial.

There is some evidence of mental health problems amongst seafarers. An Australian study on Fatigue, Stress and Occupational Health among seafarers found that 60% reported moderate to high stress levels (Parker et al., 1997). Further research with harbour physicians in Rotterdam identified three main psychological problems among seafarers: loneliness, homesickness, and “burn-out” syndrome. These problems were primarily caused by long periods away from home, the decreased number of seafarers per ship, and by increased automation (Agterberg and Passchier, 1998).

Mental health problems can also be seen to be reflected by the significant proportion of deaths at sea that are attributable to suicide. Research on occupational mortality among seafarers in the British, Singapore and Hong Kong Fleets between 1981 and 1995 showed that approximately 5% of deaths (50) in each fleet were attributable to suicide (Roberts, 1998a). Statements from crew members through subsequent inquiries suggested that many of the suicides may have been linked to factors such as marital and other family problems, symptoms of depression or more severe mental illness, or work or financial related. Later investigations suggested that many of a further 66 seafarers who were reported to have ‘disappeared at sea’ may have taken their own lives by jumping over board. When compared to other industries these figures are particularly striking: in the same six year period (1990-1996) where there were 27 deaths due to suicide amongst seafarers in the British merchant fleet, there was not a single suicide identified amongst fishermen in British trawlers (Roberts, 1998b).

Investigations into suicide at sea have identified the role of marital and family problems as contributory factors to the event (Roberts, 1998a). There is also some evidence to suggest that seafarers find their periodic absences from home problematic. Recent research by the Australian Maritime Safety Association (AMSA) found that seafarers reported the ‘home-

work' interface to be the largest source of stress (Parker et al., 1997). Similar difficulties were reported by the wives of Great Barrier Reef pilots (Parker et al, 1998).

In light of these findings, this exploratory study attempted to address the absence of research on seafarers emotional health with specific reference to the problem of the intermittent absences associated with seafaring and their impact on family life. This research began from the hypothesis that repeated and prolonged absences from the home and family may have a detrimental effect on seafarers' emotional well-being. Such periods of intermittent absence were thought to potentially impact, not only on the seafarer, but also their partner and family at home. It aimed to explore the realities of managing a seafaring lifestyle, identify potential problem areas and sources of particular tension and well as coping strategies and sources of support.

This report will discuss research with UK-based seafarers exploring the impact on seafaring work patterns and family life². It will begin with an exploration of the relevant literature in this area and will go on to outline the research methods that were used for this study. The subsequent sections will consider the findings of this research and the report will conclude with a consideration of the implications of the study findings, recommendations and suggestions for future research.

² For a discussion of seafaring and family life amongst Indian and Chinese seafarers and their families see Thomas et al, 2002.

Background

Seafaring work patterns

Seafaring work patterns will vary based on a number of factors such as nationality and rank of seafarer, employers' policies, type of trade and routes sailed. A typical length of contract for a Filipino rating is 9 months, with Sierra Leonians working average contracts of 12 months. Senior Western officers (including British) typically work contracts of between 3-4 months (SIRC, 1999). Those working in coastal waters may work shorter rotas, for example, two weeks on two weeks off.

Not only will length of tours of duty vary but so, also, will the ratio of work to leave time. Seafarers from developing countries, such as the Philippines, may take no more than 2 months leave before returning to sea for periods of 9 months or more, whereas senior Western officers may enjoy 'back-to-back' status working four months on and then having a corresponding four-month leave period. Employment contracts may differ ranging from permanent employment with paid leave and other associated benefits to single contracts with no income during the leave period and no assurance of employment when the seafarer wishes to return to sea. However regardless of these (sometimes-considerable) differences in work patterns, all seafarers share the common situation that their work takes them away from home and their families for appreciable periods of time.

A further common aspect of seafaring work patterns is the irregularity of work schedules and uncertainties surrounding anticipated dates for joining and leaving vessels. Companies may experience problems finding 'reliefs' for seafarers who are due on leave, and the logistics of such a global industry along with the vagaries of nature may mean that a ship's schedule may change daily making exact dates difficult to predict in advance. In systems where seafarers work 'back-to-back' with someone of the same rank, personal situations such as birth, death and illness may all serve to determine exact times of relief. Such uncertainty and unpredictability can potentially make the work pattern harder to manage for both seafarers and their partners.

Seafaring schedules, whether involving trips of weeks, months or even years, will involve a constant process of change, readjustment and transition for both seafarers and their families.

Unlike workers in many other occupations, the majority of seafarers do not, and indeed cannot, return home at the end of the working day, or even the working week. Seafaring means a life of constant partings and reunions. For seafarers, they must adapt from the drastically different environments of the ship to home life and vice versa, and for their partners, being married to a seafarer results in changes and upheaval as they adjust to sharing a life with a partner and then being alone again.

Opportunities for ship-shore communication

Opportunities to communicate ship-shore can potentially have a considerable impact on the experience of separation for both seafarers and their partners. Regular contact may be crucial in maintaining relationships with the family and shore-based life (Davies and Parfett, 1998) with a reduced frequency of contact potentially leading to relationship decline and eventual breakdown (Argyle, 1990). The importance of communication may further increase at various points within a voyage and throughout a sea career, for example, contact with home can be particularly important at times of ill health of family members when stress levels at sea can rise dramatically (Parker et al., 1997).

Advances in communication technology have undoubtedly increased opportunities for seafarers and their families to have contact on a more regular basis than in the past. Indeed, such developments have been found to be of considerable significance in the lives of work-separated couples (Robertson, 2001). It has, however, been found that in general, the shipping industry has been very slow to utilise computers and telecommunication facilities, particularly on board vessels (Davies and Parfett, 1998). Indeed, research on seafarers communication patterns and opportunities has shown that much of ship-shore communications occurs via Inmarsat satellite communication services that are often prohibitively expensive (Davies and Parfett, 1998). For those seafarers on both coastal and deep-sea routes, email can significantly increase opportunities for communication at greatly reduced costs. However email access to seafarers continues to be limited, often restricted to officers, and is impeded by the fact that many seafarers may not be computer literate and that family and friends ashore may not have access to email facilities (Davies and Parfett, 1998). Developments in telephone technology mean that seafarers can phone home using mobile phones in national and international waters as long as the ship is in port or within close range of land. However for those on deep-sea routes this service is limited and access

is also restricted due to cost. Such increases in communication technology have been accompanied by a corresponding reduction in access to shore-based telephone points to communicate home. Time spent in port has decreased dramatically over the last 30 years, with seven out of ten ships with 'turn-around' times of 24 hours or less and over a quarter of ships spending less than 12 hours in port (Kahveci, 1999). Theoretically such turnaround times still allow time for seafarers to go ashore however problems are exacerbated by reduced crew size, increased workload in port and the isolation and insecurity of port locations (SIRC, 1999).

The role of the family

The nature and role of the family has changed over time as have patterns of marriage and co-habitation. In Britain, the family, once a unit of economic production in pre-industrial times, has developed to become a private domain providing emotional intimacy to members (Jamieson, 1998). Over recent years there has been a decline in the number of marriages, with a corresponding increase in rates of co-habitation and high rates of divorce, separation and re-marriage (National Statistics, 2001). These figures, do not, however, necessarily suggest that the value and importance couple-relationships are in decline. Indeed some people have argued that, at least in contemporary Western society, the romantic, love relationship between a couple is increasing in importance as wider family and other social ties are weakening and individuals become more and more socially isolated (Giddens, 1992, Beck-Beck-Gernstein, 1995). Research suggests that, after marriage, couples depend mainly, if not entirely, on their partners for support (Mansfield and Collard, 1988). Relationships with children have also been seen to change over recent years, where families and households have been seen to become more child-centred and the social distance between parents and children reduced (Jamieson, 1998).

This dependence on intimate partnerships and immediate family as a support system may be particularly important for seafarers who are, potentially, an extremely socially isolated group. When on leave seafarers are often geographically removed from their work mates, and, where they are in close spatial proximity, may have different work patterns which result in few occasions where leave periods overlap. Current crewing patterns and strategies often mean that seafarers will work with different individuals each time they sail, prohibiting or impeding the establishment of work-place friendships and encouraging more 'on-board acquaintances'. Isolation on board may be amplified by the 'para-military'

structure of the ship where officers and ratings, and different departments (deck, engine, and steward) are separated both socially and physically (Forsyth and Bankston, 1984). Furthermore, the nature of seafaring work patterns may make it harder to initiate and maintain shore-based friendship networks resulting in social marginality and isolation (Forsyth and Bankston, 1984). In this context the importance of a family and marital relationship may be amplified.

Existing research on intermittent partner absence

It is not unreasonable to assume that the nature of seafaring occupations will have some impact on family life as seafarers and their families face constant separations and reunions and prolonged absences of one partner. Census data suggests that the marital status of seafarers (both officers and ratings) does not differ markedly to that of the general population (Census, 1991). However this data gives only a 'snapshot' of current marital status and does not provide information on rates of marriage and divorce. It is possible that relationship breakdown rates may be higher amongst seafarers and other groups where husbands are intermittently absent. Earlier research with other groups whose occupation necessitates separation from spouses (including long distance lorry drivers and sales representatives), has shown that these groups have higher than average divorce rates (Hart, 1976).

Whilst there is no research documenting rates of relationship breakdown, there is evidence to suggest that seafarers experience their prolonged absences from home as problematic. A study by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) found that the 'home-work interface' was reported to be the greatest source of stress for seafarers, regardless of rank (Parker et al., 1997). In particular, seafarers talked about problems associated with the adjustment for themselves and their families around the transition period when they first returned home and when they returned back to sea. Tensions were reported to develop in the week before the seafarer was due to leave home and were also found to be common when the seafarer returned home, needing several days to unwind and adjust to family life again (Parker et al., 1997, see also Foster and Cacioppe, 1986; Taylor et al., 1985). These findings reflect earlier research with Polish trawler crews and seafarers, where again, separation from family and friends was found to be most frequently mentioned as the major

'stressor' associated with their work (ranked highest by 84% of fishermen and 59% of seafarers respectively) (Horbulewicz, 1978). Being married and having children have been found to be linked to lower levels of job satisfaction amongst seafarers (Forsyth, 1990). Separation from family has also been identified as one of the most important 'stress factors' influencing a decision to reduce planned sea service (Telegraph, 1999, see also Forsyth, 1990 and Rochdale Report, 1970).

Seafarers' partners do not have to physically leave their homes and families in the same way that seafarers do, they are, nevertheless, also faced with a relationship that is characterised by separation and reunion and the constant adjustments these transitions require. Research suggests that such a pattern may effect health resulting in higher rates of depression and anxiety amongst seafarers' partners than in the general population (Parker et al., 1998). As with seafarers, studies of partners highlight the difficulties associated with the transition periods of the work cycle. Australian study of seafarers' wives found that 83% reported some degree of stress with their partners were due home or due to return to sea, with nearly one in ten (8%) reporting taking medication to cope (Foster and Cacioppe, 1986). Nearly half (42%) of the women in this sample felt that their relationship with their partner was strongly at risk due to the seafaring lifestyle and 25% believed that their partner was having, or had had, an affair.

Parallels can be drawn amongst partners of those in certain other occupations that necessitate their intermittent absence away from home and the family. Similar problems have, for example, been identified amongst the partners of those in the Offshore Oil industry (Taylor et al, 1985). The study had evolved from a concern that the wives of offshore workers were more likely than other women to suffer problems including anxiety, depression and sexual difficulties, collectively referred to as 'the intermittent-husband syndrome'. The study found that about 10% of wives whose husbands worked offshore were effected by the syndrome. This rate was comparable to that of women of a similar age whose husbands did not work off-shore. However, approximately one third of wives self-reported some form of stress associated with their husband's intermittent absences and the absences appeared to effect women differentially. Those most effected were newly married wives with pre-school children and no previous experience of husband absence (Taylor et al., 1985). Irregularity of husband absence was also more likely to lead to more stress. As the wives of Australian seafarers, women in this study also talked about the difficulties associated with the adjustment to their partners' presences and absences:

Being an oil-wife is like being a one-parent family without the financial worry. I get tired of having to cope on my own and very rarely can I make the effort to go out in the evenings or weekends. We both enjoy the two weeks he is at home, although there are tensions because we both have to adapt.

We both expect too much I think. We have a row on the first night he is home every time. I think, 'Oh great. Jim's coming home today', and I prepare his favourite meal. And he's sitting on the rig, thinking it's all going to be marvellous. And we get together, and it's not all that good. Sometimes I think, 'How dare this man come into my home and disrupt things'.

(Morrice et al., 1985: 481, emphasis in the original)

Such problems have also been reported by studies on the absent partner. Research with those working in the offshore industries found that the separation from family and home was one of the most significant factors contributing to stress (Sutherland and Finn, 1989).

Women married to those in the military may also experience prolonged and/ or repeated periods of separation from their partners. Research amongst foreign-based military wives suggests that those wives who are separated from their husbands for long periods may have higher rates of problem drinking than the general population (Garrett et al., 1978). Other studies have found lack of companionship and loneliness to be the most frequently reported problems experienced by women during their partner's deployment (Brown-Decker, 1978).

Existing research also highlights the different impacts of different work/ leave patterns. Research with partners of those in the Royal Navy suggests that in some cases these shorter periods of absence and presence at home or 'weekending' relationships can be more stressful than prolonged sea duty and longer periods of leave (Chandler, 1991). Such short term changes in routine were experienced as stressful and women reported strains as they tried to make the most of the short period together, something which often led to rows, tension and frigidity (Chandler, 1991). Long periods of leave may also be problematic. Research with Norwegian oil workers has found that long unstructured periods of leave, particularly if the partner is in outside employment, could be fraught with marital tensions (Solheim, 1984).

A further problem identified for those whose partners are intermittently absent is that they often find themselves in the ambiguous state of being neither with a partner nor without a

partner which leads to certain lack of role, or 'role-ambiguity' for women or men who are married but alone (Chandler, 1991; Foster and Cacioppe, 1986; Reardon-Boynton and Barnett-Pearce, 1978). Such ambiguity leads to subsequent stresses and strains. The wife may have sole responsibility for family and household but when partner returns this may change. Wives of airline pilots have reported the main source of stress they experience to be 'domestic role overload', which included feelings of being like a one-parent family, having difficulties involving the husband in things he has missed and feeling upset and rejected when husband is tired. In in-depth interviews wives reported feeling frequently socially isolated and their own resources becoming very stretched (Cooper and Sloan, 1985).

Family life and its impact on work performance and safety

The stresses and strains associated with a seafaring lifestyle may take their toll both on the relationship and on the individuals involved, potentially leading to stress-related health problems and possibly relationship deterioration and eventual breakdown. However, in addition to impacting on individual well-being, problems at home may also have safety implications within the work environment. The importance of the spouse as a social support system and in enabling the pilot to cope with stress has already been acknowledged by the Aviation industry, along with the specific problems associated with a marriage where one partner is frequently absent (Karlins et al., 1989). Research with airline pilots has suggested that domestic stress and other major life events may have a detrimental effect on pilot's judgement and wellbeing (McCarron et al., 1982). Indeed the Aviation Authority recognises the importance of psychological and mental wellbeing to risk and work performance and includes tests for psychological health as part of its standard medical screening for pilots and aircrew.

In discussing causes of pilot error Karlins et al., draw attention to the:

more personal side of the problem - the relationship between a man's (sic) private and public life and the effect that worry and unhappiness in one has on the other. These are delicate matters to investigate, but perhaps in them lies the clue to some of the mistakes that are made in the flight deck.

(Shuckburgh, 1975, quoted in Karlins 1989).

Whilst, of course, it can be argued that any person may take their domestic stresses and problems 'with them' to work, for those who are intermittently absent these problems may take on new significance. In addition, there may also be a concurrent lack of opportunities to communicate with home along with limited opportunities for leisure and socialisation within the work environment which may amplify the impact of psychological well-being and work performance. Indeed, even where there are no perceived problems in family relations, the emotional deprivation associated with prolonged absences from partner and loved ones can lead to psychological deterioration and increased rates of emotional tension which in turn may lead to increases in stress, emotional alertness and aggression, threatening individual and workplace health and safety (Horbulewicz, 1978).

Conclusion

A review of the relevant literature suggests that seafaring work patterns impact on both seafarers and their families. Indeed managing the worlds of world and home has been found to be the largest cause of stress for seafarers (Horbulewicz, 1978; Parker et al., 1997). In particular, transition periods between one environment (home) and another (work) are most likely to be the most problematic periods for seafarers and their partners, as each adjust to their new situation. Studies of the partners of seafarers and other groups whose partners are intermittently absent suggest that such work patterns impact on their health and wellbeing causing, in some cases, anxiety and depression.

Seafaring is a very particular work environment and differs from other shore-based occupations that involve intermittent absence in that the partner may be largely uncontactable whilst away at work and methods of communication may be often slow and unreliable or very expensive. Unlike military wives who may have the support of being in a community of like-situated people, seafarers' wives may be socially isolated from their contemporaries and may not be offered specialised support and services that are frequently offered to military personnel and their families (Brown-Decker, 1978). Seafarers may also be similarly isolated without sufficient support networks, both while at sea and while ashore.

Finally, whilst there is a general dearth of literature addressing the area of intermittent partner absence, what does exist appears to very much focus on the impact on partners, with few exploring how the absent partner experiences the separations and reunions associated with this work pattern and lifestyle. The effect of an intermittently absent parent on children's experiences and wellbeing, has similarly been ignored.

Research objectives

- Identify specific problems associated with seafaring work patterns.
- Explore coping strategies in family relationships utilised by seafarers and their partners.
- Identify changes that can improve family life for seafarers and their families.
- Have a positive impact on welfare initiatives for seafaring families.
- Identify areas for future research.

Methods

This was an exploratory study into an under-researched area. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of seafaring work patterns on both seafarers and their partners and to examine resources and strategies utilised to cope with this lifestyle. It was felt that the most appropriate method to elicit this information would be an in-depth interview. An in-depth interview provides:

The opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply, to uncover new clues, to open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, accurate, inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience. (Burgess, 1982: 107)

The interview was loosely structured thus allowing respondents to discuss their views and experiences in their own words, to emphasise areas of particular importance to them and to allow the opportunity to discuss other salient areas that had not been previously anticipated by the researcher. The topic guide for the interview was drawn up based on a review of the literature and by pilot interviews with two seafarers and their partners. Topics covered by the interview guide included:

- the benefits and problems associated with this kind of work pattern
 - difficulties associated with specific aspects of the work cycle
 - perceived impact on emotional and physical well-being
 - sources of support
 - coping strategies
- (see Appendices 3 and 4).

Demographic details of respondents were collected by means of a short self complete questionnaire (see Appendices 1 and 2), and included questions on average length of tour of duty, length of marriage and number of children. The feasibility of administering a short health questionnaire (SF 36) was also explored with respondents. This report will focus on the findings from the interviews.

Throughout the text, verbatim quotes are included from the interviews. This provides a vivid account of how respondents think, talk and behave. Each quote is assigned an

identifier to indicate the rank of the seafarer, or the rank of the wife's partner as appropriate.³

Contacting respondents

Where research on partner absence exists, the focus has tended to be on the impact this pattern of work has on the partner who remains at home: usually the wife. However as relationships are necessarily between two people it is also reasonable to assume that such tensions and adjustment efforts are also experienced by, and hence impact upon, the absent partner. For this reason it was felt important to interview both seafarers and their partners.

Respondents were contacted utilising existing SIRC respondent databases and further respondents were recruited by means of an advertisement in the NUMAST Telegraph. These methods resulted in a total of 34 interviews, 15 with seafarers, 15 with seafarers' partners and a further 4 with the children of seafarers. Interviews reflected a range of different circumstances and points in the lifecycle and seafaring career. Seafarers interviewed ranged in rank from a recently qualified junior engineer through to captains and chief engineers. Marriage duration varied from a few months to over thirty years, some couples with dependent children, others with adult children and others with no children at the time of the interview.

Conducting the interview

All interviews were conducted by the researcher, face-to-face and in the respondent's home, with the exception of three which were conducted whilst on board ship. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed prior to analysis. All home-based interviews were conducted in the UK, shipboard interviews were conducted in international waters.

The nature of the study involved asking some sensitive and personal questions that potentially could be distressing to participants. The interview schedule was piloted and feedback from respondents requested on the acceptability of the instrument. Respondents were uniformly positive about the interview and felt that the study was addressing an important and often neglected issue. Respondents were advised of the sensitive nature of some of the questions before the interview began and were reminded that participation was

³ Throughout this report seafarers will be attributed the male gender and their partners, female. However, the author recognises that seafarers may be female and have male partners, and that both male and seafarers may choose same-sex partners, may, in some cases not be married and hence not be 'wives' or 'husbands'. However,

voluntary and if there were any questions they felt uncomfortable answering then they could just say so and the interviewer would move on to the next one.

There was the possibility for the interview to raise concerns for the participant or to evoke distressing memories or emotions. After a discussion with colleagues and contacts at a seafarers' welfare organisation it was agreed that, should this occur, the participant would be given the telephone number of a contact at Mission to Seafarers who would then direct them to an appropriate organisation or individual. In the event, no participant became upset or distressed throughout the course of the interview.

Limitations of the study

This research reports on relationships that have 'survived' such separation. Identifying and gaining access to those who have been unable to cope with having a seafaring partner would be problematic but would be likely to yield rich data. Furthermore the sample represents a disproportionate number of senior officers (captains and chief engineers), reflecting the increased likelihood of those in these positions to respond to the request for help. Previous research has indicated that officers experience higher levels of job satisfaction than unlicensed personnel (Forsyth, 1990) and it is possible that UK ratings experiences of seafaring lifestyles may be quite different to those of British officers. However large systematically sampled groups are more suited to large scale quantitative research which aims to make generalisations to a population. The purpose of this study was not to make such generalisations but rather was an exploratory study into an under-researched area. Exploring the views and experiences of this group of individuals should allow us a valuable insight into the lives of seafarers and their families and the impact of seafaring work patterns on family life.

Children are a neglected aspect of family research and indeed throughout the course of the interviews it became clear that attention should be given to the effects of having a seafaring parent on children. In two instances, seafarers and/ or their partners volunteered to allow the researcher to interview their children. This opportunity was taken where it arose (resulting in four interviews with the children of seafarers), however, it is clear that this group requires specific research attention in the future.

for the purposes of this paper, the choice of language reflects the characteristics of those participating in the study from which this data is drawn.

Finally, it should be noted that seafaring is an international and global occupation. Work conditions (such as length of contract, ratio of work to leave, opportunities for alternative employment) and the culture of the home country will be variable. This report focuses on data collected with UK-based seafarers and their partners. Minghua Zhao is conducting parallel work in China, and research with families (with a different focus) has also been conducted by Erol Kahveci (Philippines) and Helen Sampson (India) in the course of the Transnational Communities Project (TNC) (Kahveci et al., 2002). (For a discussion of the impact seafaring lifestyles and conditions of employment on Chinese, Indian and British seafarers' partners see Thomas et al., forthcoming).

The Attractions of a Seafaring Career

Introduction

Thirteen of the seafarers interviewed for this study were, at the time of interview, employed on seagoing contracts. The remaining two had reached retirement age and had recently left the industry after many years of service. There is no doubt that, at least at some level, to work at sea reflected a choice made by these individuals. All were qualified to the standard of junior officer or above and could expect to have alternative employment opportunities ashore should they choose⁴. This section explores the reasons both seafarers and their partners gave to account for seafarers' continued service at sea and the benefits they saw attached to this particular lifestyle.

Money

When asked about the benefits of a seafaring career both seafarers and their partners most commonly mentioned 'money' as attraction of the work. Seafarers often reflected that their salaries were significantly larger than those they could expect to earn ashore. It was also recognised that the differentials between seagoing and shoreside salaries were increased due to the tax benefits extended to seafarers⁵. As two seafarers noted:

Certainly finance [is a benefit], there's no way I could earn this money ashore.

(Senior Officer)

[The] advantage is the money, tax free money cos you're allowed 183 days out of the country and in the country now so that's a very, very big bonus.

(Senior Officer)

The financial security associated with the job and the assurance of a regular wage was also an attraction to some seafarers. As one noted:

Just the security of the job and the money that goes into the bank every month. I know that I've got a job, I know that when I'm home the house is paid for, we've got no debts, we owe nobody anything, you know. (Junior Officer)

⁴ Indeed decisions of seafarers to take shoreside employment have contributed to the current, and predicted future, shortage of qualified seagoing officers (BIMCO/ISF, 2000).

⁵ Seafarers who work out of the country for more than 183 days per year are tax exempt.

The importance of the money and the regular salary was such that many seafarers cited it as the only advantage of working at sea. As one reflected:

The benefits in it is . . . I don't know, I think apart from money there's not a lot.
(Senior Officer)

Indeed this dependence on the particular salary level could act as a trap to many seafarers and make it difficult for them to consider alternative (and less lucrative) shoreside employment due to their existing financial commitments. This dependence on the financial rewards of seafaring was mentioned by several seafarers, as the following selection of quotes illustrates:

[I stay at sea] Because I needed to secure mortgage for a property and I'm kind of obliged to stay where I am to retain the necessary level of income, that's the only reason. (Senior Officer)

Well I don't like going away to sea, it's just that I don't think I can do anything else that brings in the same remuneration package onshore as I can earn at sea. (Senior Officer)

I got to this stage really where I was thinking, you know, 'what the devil am I doing this for?', and then I think 'well I am doing this because I need the money and I am just hanging in until I think I have saved enough'. (Senior Officer)

The benefits of a seafaring salary were also mentioned by seafarer's partners, however they mentioned this less often than seafarers and were more likely to cite other advantages of the lifestyle (see below). Seafarers' wives talked about financial benefits in terms of having a 'nice house' or car and also in relation to the fact that they felt they did not have to 'worry about money'. As wives commented:

Its advantages? Obviously we've got a nicer house than a lot of people, we've got a nice car and we go on nice holidays there's that side of it. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Well all the luxuries we would never have had if he had stayed where he was working [ashore], I mean this house everything that's in it. (Wife of Senior Officer)

You have no money worries. (Wife of Senior Officer)

As with seafarers, women also recognised the ‘financial trap’ where becoming accustomed to a salary at a particular level could act as a ‘tie’ to keep the seafarer working at sea. As one woman responded when asked whether she and her husband had ever considered her husband working ashore:

Yes [we have thought of it]. But we are used to a decent life style. We couldn't afford to do it at the moment and I couldn't earn that sort of money to make the difference up.

(Wife of Senior Officer)

Benefits to relationships

Whilst research has pointed to the detrimental consequences of intermittent partner absence on couple relationships (see Background section) those interviewed for this study saw that such working patterns could have beneficial effects on their relationships. The positive effects were more likely to be mentioned by women than their partners, perhaps due to the fact that women may be more used to reflecting on, and talking about their relationships. Many seafarers and their wives talked about the intense pleasure and happiness they experienced when the seafarer returned home and some used the term ‘honeymoon’ to describe their relationship during reunion. The following quotes are illustrative of their comments:

It's tremendous buzz just seeing your wife again and just being there sort of thing spending time with her. (Junior Officer)

There is always that I am looking forward and I want to see him. There is something that I can always feel excited about and I feel happy. (Wife of Senior Officer)

When he comes home and relationship is fresh and exciting so maybe that wouldn't be there [if he had a shore job]. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Periodic absences of one partner were seen to stop the relationship 'getting into a rut' and encourage couples to appreciate each other and their time together. They commented:

You don't take so much for granted and you do more together as well. (Junior Officer)

I think what happens is as a seaman you learn to value your time with each other, [. . .], you learn to respect each other a lot more, [. . .] we have our ups and downs but I stand back and you pay attention to a lot more things than you would do if you worked in a factory. You don't take each other for granted, I don't, or try not to, put it that way.
(Senior Officer)

You don't get into your ruts that people talk about. I don't think you take each other for granted, and you appreciate each other more and you appreciate the time you've got. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Some couples reported feeling that they had fewer rows when they were together than their shore-based contemporaries did with their partners. As one woman explained:

I think when he does come home we don't argue like a lot of couples. We don't argue that, very, not often at all, because it is like a holiday when he's home then, you know, we get on really well when he's home. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Where seafarers had been in previous, unhappy relationships, the lengthy separations required by seafaring work patterns were seen as making difficult marriages more tolerable. However, this could be disadvantageous as it was also felt to prolong relationships which were considered better ended. As three seafarers explained:

I regretted it [my first marriage], financially, emotionally, in all ways it turned out to be terrible, a terrible move, and caused a lot of pain to myself and my first wife, and had I been living ashore it wouldn't have lasted so long. (Senior Officer)

The only reason I think I stayed - we stayed together - was because of the fact that I was away [at sea]. I could handle a couple of months at home knowing that I was going away, I managed to go away and see friends and relations and all the rest of it so it wasn't too bad. (Senior Officer)

I also know of relationships that fell apart when he came ashore, they were tolerable while he was at sea and so the togetherness was in short chunks which could be tolerated, and when eventually he came home permanently the relationship fell apart.
(Senior Officer)

Leave

A further attraction of seafaring was the work-to-leave ratio. Although working conditions varied, officers in senior ranks could be employed on contracts as favourable as equal work to leave periods and those in junior positions reported work to leave ratios which approximated to 4: 36. Seafarers enjoyed these long periods, free from the constraints and demands of work and couples were positive about the benefits of the time together on their relationships. They said:

It's nice having 2 and a half months. You don't have to work. You can go out every night of the week if you want to. You can lie in as late as you wanted to rather than get up at 8 o'clock each morning, no watches. (Junior Officer)

Really I think we benefit quite a lot from, from the lifestyle as well. Because we do have then home, sort of for long periods of time, which compensates, I think, for the periods they are away. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Both seafarers and their partners often made comparisons to traditional shoreside hours of 'nine-to-five' and pointed to the increased quality time with their families that seafaring work patterns allowed. They explained:

I was that person who had a 9 to 5 job and had to commute to it, I mean I don't think, if you work out hour for hour and a day by day situation, I don't think that same person could turn round and say I've the same quality time as with my children as I have when I'm home. (Senior Officer)

⁶ See Thomas et al., 2002 for discussion of the impact of employment conditions on family life of UK, Indian and Chinese seafarers.

It's lucky because when he's home for a month he's got more quality time with the children than a lot of fathers have because like now yesterday he took them swimming and he'll take [our son] for a bike ride after school so he does do a lot of things like that for the kids where if he was working 9 to 5 he wouldn't be able to do. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Other benefits

Some women talked positively about the opportunities and freedom offered to them during their husband's absence. Women took advantage of this time to pursue their own interests, hobbies and friendships and conceptualised their time alone in a positive way. As two explained:

I was still able to do all the things that I wanted to do and meet new people and go out in the big city as it was. [...] He was doing what he wanted to do and I was doing what I wanted to do and when were together it was great you know, it was really good sort of thing. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Bit of freedom, no one telling me what I can and can't watch on the telly. Doing what I want to do, going out with my friends on the weekend with the kids when I want to and not having to consider him really and then when he's home we do family things. (Wife of Senior Officer)

For seafarers, other benefits related to the nature of the work, in particular the relative flexibility and autonomy that they did not feel would find in shore based employment. As two commented:

I like irregular hours, well on the ships I'm on the watches on our ships is 6 hours on 6 hours off. And I like doing 6 hours on 6 hours off, puts the hours in-between for the paper week and all. I couldn't do a 9 to 5. (Junior Officer)

I don't necessarily think I'd be happy even if I could earn the same money in a shore job if that was too routine, I wouldn't like to be too physically bound to a job in a confined, or by virtue of the job itself where you're stuck in a particular room for a lengthy time, or on a shop floor doing the same job. (Senior Officer)

Additionally, despite increasing rapid turn around times and growth in offshore loading and discharge, the opportunity to travel continued to be a benefit of the job appreciated by seafarers.

Working Cycles: Transitions between Ship and Shore

Introduction

Seafaring work patterns involve periods of leave and seetime and the associated transition periods as the seafarer moves from one situation to the other. This section explores seafarers' and their partner's experiences of the different aspects of the work cycle. It begins by exploring the separation between shipboard and home life and moves on to consider specific periods within the work cycle, highlighting issues and problems identified by the seafaring couples.

Two worlds, two lives?

Shipboard and home lives offer distinct contrasts. Not only are the very conditions of existence considerably dissimilar but also there are few opportunities for these two domains to meet and overlap. Seafarers' families often have little opportunity to visit the workplace and be involved in workplace social events as might be more commonplace in shore-based occupations. If relationships are established with colleagues, such shipboard relationships rarely extend into leave time due to geographical separations and conflicting leave periods. Thus it is not unusual for seafarers' partners and their shipboard colleagues to never meet. For seafarers on long deep-sea voyages, (and without access to email), contact with home may be extremely limited for considerable periods. These factors all contribute to a separation of the domains of work and home. For the seafarers in this study, this separation was sufficient for seafarers to refer to having 'two lives', or 'two selves' or existing in 'two worlds', as the following quotes illustrate:

You know it is, you sort of split your life in two. (laughs) Well perhaps I phrased that badly (laughs), yeah, there were two sides to your life really. (Senior Officer)

I always found it was very much a two life existence, wouldn't go so far as saying it was Dr. Jeckyll, Mr. Hyde exactly, but it's very different. And I always found in recent years that once you were back at home, you felt that you were always at home, and as soon as you got to the ship it's like you were always on the ship. There's no comparison between the two. (Senior Officer)

I've always said to [my wife] for me to survive in my industry I have to be two people. This is the good guy, that's the bad guy right. And then when I go away I sort of...how can you say...I'm back in work mode right. [Ö]. And this other guy he's less tolerant of people than what he is with his own family. Then in the reverse sector when I come back I try to forget this guy and bring the other guy back up. So basically I think I am two people. (Senior Officer)

Yes I think for me patterns of behaviour were place associated. So being at home had its pattern of behaviour and in completely different surroundings being at sea had its pattern of behaviour. I suspect it was more different for [my wife] because she was in the same surroundings with different patterns of behaviour. (Senior Officer)

Whilst physically located in the same place, without the obvious contrast of ship and shore, women also experienced considerable contrasts in their lives dependent on the point in their partner's work cycle. Accommodating a partner in day-to-day existence often necessitated significant adjustments, experienced in changes in freedoms and responsibility and the transition from being 'temporarily single' (and possibly acting as a 'single parent') to being part of a couple again. As two wives explained:

It's like living two lives. One life obviously with him away and one with him at home. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Sometimes I like him to be away because I think I've got used to being on my own and my husband is not around and I've got used to it. When he comes home I feel that we have to adjust to one another and adjust to being together again. Because sometimes if you have got used to being without your husband being around by the time he comes home I have to adjust to his presence again. It's difficult, you have to make adjustments all the time. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Transitions

It might be reasonable to assume that the period of separation was difficult for couples and that homecomings are indeed joyous and happy events. However reflecting the findings of earlier studies, the data from this research suggest that it is the periods of transition between these two existences, whether from the ship to the home or from home to ship that were experienced as difficult by the couples. Such transition periods were characterised by both

seafarers and their partners as tension laden. This is not to say that both parties did not eagerly anticipate the seafarer's return. Indeed some described the pleasure associated with the reunions as one of the positive aspects of the job. As seafarers and partners commented:

Coming home to me, it's, it's just like Christmas. (Senior Officer)

Like as if you're on your first date again and you've got to meet someone all over again, you know sort of butterflies in the stomach and can't wait to sort of see each other or again it's that sort of, that's the nicest part I think is going to meet him at the airport or pick him up from somewhere. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Oh I get all excited like an idiot. I do I get all excited I do I think 'oh I'm gonna clean the house right through and then I won't have to do anything for a good couple of weeks, you know, 'we can kind of enjoy ourselves together' you know. So it's silly really after all those, it's not silly I think it's nice in some ways isn't it yeah. (Wife of Senior Officer)

However, whilst return home was much anticipated by both partners it was equally a time which could be fraught with tensions each person adjusted to the new situation.

Stress and unwinding

Problems in the transition period between ship and shore were attributed to a number of different factors. Increased workloads have been identified as a cause of stress within the industry (Parker et al., 1997). Changes in the industry such as increased automation, decreased crewing levels, increased work load and decreased job security have put pressure on seafarers to put in extra hours to keep their jobs (Collins, et al., 2000). Such pressures have resulted in increased levels of stress and fatigue (NUMAST, 1995). These increased hours of work and occupational pressures appeared to expand beyond the confines of the ship to impact on home life. One of the most common problems during this transition period identified by seafarers related to the stress associated with their job and the problems they had 'switching off' when they returned home from a tour of duty. Officers in this study attributed increased work-related stress to reduced crewing levels and new regulatory systems which involved considerable amounts of paperwork, both of which led to longer working hours and more pressure whilst in the work environment. These problems were also recognised by seafarers' wives who found that it took their partners some time to

unwind after the trip and that they were often physically exhausted. As two wives explained:

Yeah it normally takes about a week cos he's normally really het up about being at work, and he's just starting to come down after that. [...] It's usually a week of up and downs, you know, and then its okay. (Wife of Junior Officer)

You know if he's happy I'm happy too, sometimes he's been home and perhaps there's a lot going on and he's going back to a certain situation he hasn't been himself all the way through his leave and I know because it's this job is on his mind or he's got to go back to sort out this and sort out that. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Adjusting sleeping patterns

Shipboard temporal schedules and routines often differ dramatically to those followed at home. Seafarers' working hours are often organised by shiftwork which can cause problems with sleep patterns and indeed the problem of fatigue on board is currently the subject of a large research investigation (Collins. et al., 2000) and has been linked to high rates of seafarer suicide (Telegraph, 1999). Shiftwork, sleep loss and disruption can lead to a build up of fatigue (Finkelman, 1994). Such working conditions aboard ship could manifest themselves as excessive tiredness upon the seafarer's return home. As one seafarer noted:

Yeah, no, it's not good, I don't think, so you don't really notice it until you come home and then your sort of, the first thing you notice is, not bad headaches, but you know just strain cos you're so tired -so it does a week or two - I get a bit stressed -, to calm down. (Junior Officer)

Interestingly, despite the fatigue experienced by seafarers, sleeping problems were also frequently mentioned as an issue when the seafarer returned home from a tour of duty. These problems were attributed to shipboard routines such as irregular watch keeping hours or the need to sleep lightly to listen for alarms. The effects of these work conditions could be compounded by the presence of jet-lag and the simple factor of the unfamiliar presence of another person in bed. The following quotes illustrate the difficulties seafarers faced in readjusting their sleep patterns during their leave periods:

Yeah, I can never have a full night sleep, I never have a full night sleep, on and off continuously. When you're used to work, living on, see the type of ships I'm on are small anyway yeah. So you hear every noises slight engine change noise anything like that you hear it. And the slightest noise wakes me up, I hear the baby wake up long before [my wife] ever does. It's just you get tuned in subconsciously to these sort of things and I never have a full night. (Senior Officer)

Yes, physically you know, getting into sleeping patterns again, that's the awkward thing, you're used to being up all hours and so you kind of have to readapt to a full night's sleep every night. (Senior Officer)

The worst thing is jet lag to be honest with you, especially since I'm working mainly in the far east, it's an 8 hour difference and I come over and, now it's 8 hours on it would be say 12 o'clock here I'll be knocking off I'll be waking up at 2 in the morning because you know it's my waking up time. And that takes about 3 or 4 days at least. (Senior Officer)

These sleeping problems also effected women in the study and a number commented on their husband's difficulties adjusting temporally and the problems they experienced in marrying their own, and their partner's temporal habits and routines.

Everything □ship-shape□?

Other problems associated with the seafarers' return related to the contrast between ship and home life. Several women described their anxieties as they prepared for their husband's return. Concerns related to their perceptions of their husband's desire to return home to a tidy house which mirrored the high standards of tidiness and order they had become accustomed to whilst aboard ship. This issue could be particularly acute for the households with children: both seafarers and their partners talked about the seafarer's difficulties accepting the disorder created by children:

I get more regimented than anything. I get into a ship routine and then I come and I've got to get out of it then.

What kind of things do you feel regimented about?

I tidy everything up. [My wife's] not as tidy as me, I enjoy doing that and it drives me mad when she doesn't leave it tidy. (Senior Officer).

My wife is [he's] coming home', scrubbing everything and I'll be through cupboards and I'll have pans out and I'll say 'Right I want that that way' you know and 'I want that cleaned that way'. Quite a nutter really. (Junior Officer)

Indeed this could be such an issue that it caused rows and conflict between couples. As one seafarer explained:

[We row about] Kids not clearing away their shoes, you know, mostly being fussy I suppose, I'm a bit ... I suppose being at sea in that sense you get to value physically space and things, I can't stand clutter and I'm always my wife's more of a hoarder, and I think 'Christ we can chuck that, and that's untidy!' (Senior Officer)

Problems could increase as seafarers rose in rank and reached the status of Chief Engineer or Captain. Women talked about husband's bringing their ship-board status into the home, making them feel like 'junior officers'. Women who had successfully been managing the household, (from paying bills, to chauffeuring children and managing DIY), reported experiencing a tension between their husband's need for them to be independent and capable in their absence and then become dependent and defer responsibility to them upon their return home (see also section on Role Displacement). As wives explained:

[He's] used to running the ship and his crew, now we're at home 'yes sir' 'yes sir'. But it doesn't work like that, that can cause problems. So it caused a few rows that did. Um, and I'm sure that must have happened in lots of households. [...] Here am I running everything and all of a sudden I'm like junior officer you see. (Wife of Senior Officer)

When I'm on my own I'm the boss and when [my husband] comes home being a ship's master he's used to being the boss I take second place. (Wife of Senior Officer)

It's just like he doesn't have to do it while he's away but you're not good enough when they're home then you know and they sort of take the responsibility away from you so. So yeah it is a big difference, I suppose you have to change personality as well you know from when they're away to when they're home. (Wife of Senior Officer)

These periods of adjustment were perhaps particularly significant for those seafarers who worked on relatively short rotas. Conflicts associated with the transition could absorb a significant proportion of the beginning of the leave and were often combined with a similar

periods towards the end of the leave when both parties began to adjust to the realities of the seafarer leaving home again. As two wives explained:

After 2 weeks you're thinking 'oh I've only got 2 weeks to go and he's going back again', so you don't have that relaxation period in between where you sort of sit back and think, 'yeah well you got another couple of weeks' and it's like the clock. And then you get edgy with each other then, you start getting ratty you know, little arguments will start cause we're both on edge, thinking 'oh only a couple of weeks and then he's going back again you know'. And it spoils the leave then because no sooner you sort of keep winding down and relaxing then he's thinking about going back again then so it goes from one extreme back to the other, so your constantly sort of thinking about him going off again and go back away. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I found it horrendous, he would come home so tired absolutely zonked out cause he was still a second mate and he'd come home absolutely shattered took him days and days to get over it and then half way through he would come alive and then be worried about going back to work the fourth week. So you'd have always 2 out of the 4 weeks that were useless. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Going back to sea

As the return home was problematic so too was the return to work also characterised by stress and unease. The period directly prior to departure could result in seafarers becoming emotionally withdrawn or anxious about completing practical tasks before their return to the ship. Immediate partings could be highly emotionally charged and several couples reported opting for partings at home rather than at the airport or railway station in order to minimise the emotional trauma for themselves and their children. Two women explained how they attempted to minimise the distress associated with their husbands' departures:

If he goes away and he's got to go by plane we never go to say 'bye' he always goes in a taxi because they[the children] just get too distressed, they just cry and it's not fair on them to get them so upset and then he gets upset. So we don't do things like that he just goes in a taxi and it's easier then. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I think the best way we've found, especially when the children were younger was if he hired a car and drove to the airport because if I drive him to the airport and that was -

oh very traumatic. And then it was putting him on the train but that was bad enough, I don't know trains are awful sad when you're waving goodbye to people. But I found then when he hired the car and drove himself to the airport we'd just say 'cheerio' just going down the car on a road like if he was just going to the shop or going somewhere, it wasn't so traumatic. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Women talked about the problems adjusting to an empty and quiet house after their partner's departure. Strategies to cope with this included staying with extended family members, and use of the television or radio as a means of 'company'. In this aspect, women with children appeared to fare better than their childless contemporaries as they continued to have company within the home and not the dramatic contrast of an empty house (see section on Children). One recently married women talked about her feelings after her husband had first returned back to sea:

It probably doesn't really hit you [...] until you come back in the evening, when you've come home for the last 3 months, the lights have been on there's been a TV on, the kettle's been on you know there's hustle and bustle. And I always know that whenever I come back into the house the first thing I do is put on the TV for background noise just to have something there. And I've got, especially in the winter, just timers on so it looks a bit homely when you come in, instead of just complete darkness. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Additional stressors

Problems could be amplified where there was a degree of uncertainty as to the exact date of departure and indeed arrival home. Dates could be so unreliable that one seafarer and his wife adopted the strategy of him informing her of his return date only when he had left the ship and was safely on dry land. Some women avoided the unnecessary distress delayed arrivals caused to their children by not informing them of their father's imminent arrival and thus minimising the risk of disappointment. For partners and families, and indeed seafarers, who were awaiting the end of their trip with some anticipation and longing, such postponements could have significant emotional consequences. One woman recalled her experience of waiting for her husband to return home:

Towards the end of the trip, now this time you know they wouldn't let him off the ship, you know it was - it kept on being 'next week', 'next week'. I said 'if you're not home by Friday I'm going to the doctors and I'm going to scream and scream and scream and cry and cry and cry, I can cope until Friday, but another day - I can't cope another day with it all' (Wife of Junior Officer)

'Never-ending' voyages

Transition periods were uniformly mentioned as the most difficult period. However some women also reported the middle period of the tour of duty to be a difficult time where they felt overwhelmed by the duration of their partner's absence. These women all had in common the fact that their partners did longer tours of duty (3 months or more). As one wife explained how the time she found most difficult was:

About in the middle of the trip, and yet I think you just think it's been such a long slog to the middle and then you think 'oh I've got all that time to do again', you know it just seems never ending. So that, I'd say that was the worse part, apart from the first couple of weeks and then the second, the last 2 months of a 4 month trip they don't, none of it flies really, I couldn't say that flies or that drags, it all drags. Um but you're on countdown, crossing the days off the calendar. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Communication

Introduction

Regular contact and communication has been found to be important to prevent the breakdown of couple relationships (Argyle, 1990). However, many seafarers work in international waters with few, if any visits to ports in their home countries. Thus for seafarers and their partners opportunities for face-to-face contact during voyages may be considerably limited. In these situations contact with home can be dependent on access to communication services and technologies. This section will explore the importance of communication to seafaring families, considering couples' use of various means of communication and the related benefits and potential problems associated with ship-shore contact.

Means of communication

Seafarers and their partners reported utilising a wide range of forms of communication, from conventional letters, to satellite and mobile phone calls and email. Advances in communication technology were heralded as quite life-changing for both seafarers and their partners. Increasing access to email and to cheaper international phone calls via cell-net phones served to expand opportunities for communication significantly. Those working coastal routes could often telephone home using shore-based mobile networks, at dramatically lower costs than satellite phone calls. Indeed, all of the couples (where the seafarer was currently serving) used cell phones to communicate (both nationally and internationally)⁷. Weekly telephone communication was not uncommon for those working in these conditions. Regular verbal contact was important as it fulfilled emotional needs and helped couples maintain an emotional closeness during their separation. As one seafarer put it:

It's so much easier when you speak to people, believe you me, you can get all the Christmas cards in the world but when you talk to somebody it's personal contact. It's as close as you can get to it if you're away. (Senior Officer)

⁷ This is considerably higher than the national rate of mobile phone ownership where from 1990-2000, 44% of households in Britain had at least one mobile phone (National Statistics, 2001).

Similarly, talking about the importance of telephone contact, one wife commented:

If I know there's a phone call I'll try and be at home whatever to get his phone calls cos I know how much it means to him and how much it means to me just to hear him.
(Wife of Junior Officer)

Telephone communication was also valued for its practical implications, allowing seafarers to take part in, and respond to household and family decisions such as queries over house insurance and decisions relating to children's well-being. As one seafarer explained:

I can get information a lot quicker, I can give information a lot quicker, 'why haven't you done this?' 'Haven't you done that yet?'. 'No I will tomorrow'. 'Take the car in for a service', you know! Simple things like that, so you keep in touch with what's going on at home. (Senior Officer)

The advent of email was also seen as a significant improvement in the lives of seafarers. This related to the cost, the immediacy and the sense it was a more informal form of communication than traditional letters. The following quotes are illustrative of the enthusiasm both seafarers and their partners towards email:

Yes, that's a good concept now, with the onset of email being so much available, I find that excellent, because in the past you know you had to write a letter and you couldn't always guarantee that when you sent that letter it got home, at least this way, emailing, what you receive in reply isn't history anymore, you know. (Senior Officer)

Yeah that's just the best invention ever really for us. Again it's not formal writing it's more short chats, I feel the email you do just tend to go on and really just type away.
(Wife of Junior Officer)

It [email] is absolutely wonderful because whereas before I'd say 'Oh bloody hell the girls - they've pissed me off!' or something like that.... Now he can say 'well what have they done now?' Whereas before I'd have had to bottle it all up and you might put it down on paper but when you do that it isn't anything like the day that you've gone through. Maybe by the time he's come back you've got it all resolved but it's better to be able to share it there and then. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Email and telephone correspondence allowed seafarers to keep up with small day-to-day events that might not be reported in a letter or mentioned on their return home. The frequency and content of email and telephone conversations was reported to be vital in managing the transition from home to work and work to home and in linking the two domains so that movement between the two was less problematic.

[I am] constantly in touch with her by email, so it's like I'm away but I'm not away you know. (Senior Officer)

And, it [email] does help that period when you come home because you do know what's going on. (Senior Officer)

Even with modern communication technology, the written word in the form of traditional mail continued to be important to many seafarers and their partners. Letters were valued for their tangible form and the fact they could be 'revisited' (re-read) in a way that was not possible with verbal communication via telephone. In the routine, monotony and isolation of shipboard life, the arrival of mail aboard ship was reported as a matter of great significance. As two seafarers explained:

If a mailbag comes on board and there isn't a letter from your wife you feel let down. So it's, yeah, it's pretty important. (Senior Officer)

It's a very big very big part of keeping the morale up in the ship the mail thing. A large percentage of it is it's another means of communication with home and you're thinking 'well are they - the office - committed in sending it? I don't know if they realise how important it is.'. But you do see a new change sort of thing if mail comes or if mail doesn't come. (Junior Officer)

In addition to regular mail, in the absence of email and cellnet phone facilities, satellite phone calls continued to be appreciated by seafarers and their partners. Whilst acknowledged as expensive, for those seafarers working deep sea and without access to email, the satellite phone could provide a vital link with home. As one seafarer recalled:

I used to have like 5 minutes every week on a Sunday to my wife on a Sat. phone. Which 5 minutes it sounds crap don't it, sounds lousy, sounds like what's 5 minutes? [...] 5 minutes was like priceless, it was like a diamond 5 minutes 'everything

alright?’ ‘Fine’. ‘Kids OK?’ ‘Yeah great’. ‘House not on fire?’ ‘No.’ ‘Fine, ta ra bye’, bang that was it. [...] that was like the best tenner I spent that week. So yeah you’ve got that kind of thing which can sort of bridge a gap you know, put a bridge across things. (Senior Officer)

Problems

Whilst in general opportunities to communicate were viewed very positively, such communication could also be problematic - seafarers talked about coping with the life aboard and separated from their families by ‘switching off from home’ and more frequent communication disallowed this. In particular seafarers talked about the frustration and angst they felt hearing about difficulties at home, that, whilst at sea, they were powerless to address. As two seafarers commented:

[Email is] a wonderful way, but it does mean that you know about problems at home all the time. It’s harder to switch off to it. (Senior Officer)

You have to switch yourself off sometimes. That’s a conscious thing. I mean while it’s easy to switch yourself off, conversely it’s easier nowadays to have communications with home through the satellite telephone, even your mobile phone if you’re around the coast, and that can switch you back on again, if you’re not careful. (Senior Officer)

Another seafarer talked about his feelings after a phone call with to his wife:

I can’t get to sleep. Mind just wracks, just thinking just goes into over drive doesn’t it about home and stuff like that. Thinking about things you actually talked about and I think it’s just thinking more of home and then it wears off and wears off, that never wears off thinking of home but it peaks after you just come off the phone, and then wonder how everybody is and then it goes down a bit until you get into your work. (Junior Officer)

Similarly, a small number of both seafarers and wives also reported that, telephone communication in particular, could be emotionally upsetting due to the fact that it made them miss their partner all the more. In addition, perhaps due to their very importance and value to couples, much anticipated calls were susceptible misunderstanding and disappointment. As one wife explained:

To be honest I don't really like the phone calls. Sometimes I come off the phone and I feel loads better and happy that I talked to him. Sometimes I come off and think I wish he hadn't phoned, I think it can really unsettle me. [...] He'll go, 'you don't sound very enthusiastic' and I think 'oh no! I wanted to speak to him so much and now he's rang it's just like we've fallen out or been a bit niggly with each other'. Yet other times he can ring it's like really nice, it's not hard work, where at other times it can be and I don't like that. (Wife of Junior Officer)

However, these problems did not appear to outweigh the benefits and value of regular communication between couples.

Cost of communication

Access to telecommunication can vary according to rank and indeed use of such facilities will be variable simply due to the constraints of cost. Couples in this study were fortunate in that the seafarers held senior ranks and had access to shipboard telecommunication facilities (such as email) and salaries that allowed the financial costs associated with communication to be less than prohibitive. However this may not be the case for seafarers of different ranks and nationalities (SIRC, 1999; Thomas et al., forthcoming). However cost was still relevant and satellite phone calls often restricted to special occasions (such as Christmas or birthdays) or emergencies. As one seafarer's wife explained the circumstances when she and her husband would use the ship's the satellite phone:

If it's been a bad day or Christmas or something special but apart from that no. Cos it is very expensive, and once you're on the phone you can't just stay on a few minutes you know. Phone and talk, talk. If you've not heard from him for little while, you know to phone for a few minutes it's very hard to say 'right OK, better get off the phone', you just can't do that so of course there's that. (Wife of Junior Officer)

In addition to the on-going costs of communication, the initial cost of purchasing equipment to communicate could also involve large financial outlay. Approximately half the couples in this study, where the partner was currently working, had access to email at home. It is not clear whether access was solely the result of a need to communicate with an absent partner or whether the equipment and the Internet connection would have been purchased regardless. However the initial costs of purchasing computer hardware and software

and the ongoing costs on Internet connection could be considerable. Other couples in the study reported buying Fax machines to be installed in their homes as a cheaper alternative to satellite phone calls. It is unlikely that such equipment would have been purchased had their husbands been in shore-based employment.

Whilst couples often disregarded the expense of communication in order to have some contact with each other, the financial costs nevertheless often restricted length or frequency of communication. Access to cheaper (or free) communication was frequently mentioned as a means of improving the welfare of seafaring families and reducing the negative effects of a seafaring lifestyle on family life.

⁸ This is considerably higher than statistics for the general population, which showed that in 1999 - 2000, 38% of households in the United Kingdom had a personal computer (National Statistics 2001). Whilst data was not available on the percentage with Internet access, it is likely that when this is taken into consideration the figure would drop considerably.

Social Isolation

A seafarer is a peculiar animal. He is a stranger when he comes ashore and is the odd man out in almost any situation. We cater for the loneliness of the seafarer - that might sum the whole thing up. When you come home you stick out like a sore thumb - the world has gone on without you and it is not going to stop to fit you into it. Often this is part of the loneliness of seafarers. A man goes to sea, he begins to look forward to coming home. He begins to wish his time away at sea, that's a dangerous thing for a man to do. He is in danger of losing his soul, I would say - his sense of being. He comes ashore and it's fiesta time for him and nobody else. All too often the leave you look forward to falls flat on its face.

(Padre in charge of a Seaman's Mission quoted in Hill, 1972: 68)

Introduction

This section will consider the impact of seafarers' work patterns on their social isolation and integration both on board and ashore. It will go on to explore the experiences of seafarers' wives, considering their friendship and support networks and the effect of an intermittent partner on their own social participation and inclusion. The final part of the section will consider the significance of the couple relationship as a source of social, emotional and practical support.

Social isolation aboard ship

Historically seafarers have been known to have a workplace culture which promotes strong solidary relationships: the very term 'comradeship' is said to originate in the Spanish word 'camaradas', referring to the shared sleeping 'chamber' of the Spanish mariners of the sixteenth century who survived their epic voyages, if at all, thanks to the mutual aid of their fellows (Perez-Mallaina, 1998). However, reduced crewing levels, fast turn around times, increased automation and increased working hours have resulted in much diminished on-board relationships and have led to subsequent concerns about social isolation whilst at sea (Chapman, 1992; Forsyth, 1988; Groth, 1987). In the context of an occupation where individuals are isolated from outside social networks, often for significant periods of time, such work-based relationships may be of considerable importance.

Good social relationships with other crew members are, of course, important contributory factors to a seafarer's experience of that particular tour of duty. Seafarers are not only dependent on their colleagues for the successful running of the workplace and work-related task completion, but they are also reliant on them for company and companionship during leisure hours. However the consequences of such relationships may also be more wide reaching than whether a trip is relatively pleasurable. Social networks have been found to be important to emotional and physical health (Holmes and Rahe, 1967; Sarason et al., 1978). Indeed, strong family relationships and close social bonds can be very protective of health (Cassel, 1976; Headey et al., 1985; Perlin and Schooler, 1978) and social support can be an important coping resource for people experiencing stressful life events (Cohen and Willis, 1985). This study produced little evidence to suggest close relationships existed aboard ship or that shipboard relationships were sufficiently strong to be maintained beyond the tour of duty. When talking about their relationships with the other seafarers aboard ship it was clear that were usually seen as confined to working rather than close personal relationships. As two seafarers explained:

These are just people you happen to...nine out of ten you wouldn't speak to them in the street or even have a drink with them, well a lot of them. (Junior Officer)

It's not, you know them but you don't really know them. Know what I'm getting at? You don't know, you're just having a onboard . . . - like work colleagues innit and that's the only interests you have basically, and that's it. You have nothing doing with them out of your work basically it's like any job innit? Unless there's a couple that are really on the same wavelength as yourself. (Junior Officer)

Where relationships of more depth did develop, this usually occurred where seafarers sailed with the same people for more than one trip, thus allowing the time and continuity for closer relationships to be established and maintained. Occasionally seafarers reported 'hitting it off' with someone they were sailing with, however instances of this appeared few and far between. Crewing strategies, which often resulted in seafarers routinely sailing on different vessels with different crews, and reduced crewing levels, reflected in single person tasking, all appeared to impede and restrict the development on onboard friendships and social relationships.

Several seafarers talked about the isolation that they felt characterised their trips. This was perhaps felt most acutely by captains who felt that their position and responsibilities necessitated social distance and prohibited close social relationships with other crewmembers. As one Captain commented:

You can't afford to have any kind of relationship that will affect your position, even though it's a small ship you've still got to have some semblance of authority. (Senior Officer)

The inadequacy of such relationships may be particularly stark at times of emotional stress and crisis. Research has shown that being at sea when there is illness in the family is associated with increased levels of occupational stress (Parker et al. 1997). Indeed, a striking feature of the interviews was the common experience of having to deal with an emotionally traumatic event whilst physically separated from the home and family. Some such events may be considered to be a 'normal' part of the lifecycle. Stressful life events reported by seafarers included occurrences such as the death of a parent, the life threatening illness of a spouse, marital breakdown and divorce, and death of a child. In such times of crisis it is usual to utilise existing social networks for support (Kubler-Ross, 1970). Such support resources may be crucial to effective coping (Cutrona and Russell, 1987, 1990). However such resources are not readily accessible to seafarers. It is true that many companies will endeavour to repatriate seafarers in family emergencies however once the initial 'crisis' has passed seafarers may be expected to return to work, whilst their needs for emotional support may be on-going. At such times contact with home may be vital. However, communication home may be variable, dependent on company, ship and route and may often be limited due to cost (see section on Communication). In these situations seafarers may be reliant on their fellow crewmembers for social support. The data from this study shows that the ship may be at best unreceptive and at worst hostile to such emotional needs.

Seafarers' accounts suggested that seafarers could experience their tours of duty as emotionally isolated and in the event of emotional stress, problems were internalised as seafarers attempted to cope with personal difficulties alone. As one seafarer with many years sea experience commented:

I've never heard anybody, you know, talking about, particularly personal, emotional problems no, not really, I don't think it's . . . it's not something you expect to happen on ship life. I think we all tend to be pretty isolated.

Individually I mean - on the ships. (Senior Officer)

Whilst personal problems and emotional 'stressors' may be internalised, their consequences could still be manifest, as one seafarer recalled:

Another guy actually come to mind he's another engineer, he was just really obnoxious and nasty to everyone for quite a while and then we sort of found out that, he got violent one night with the second mate after a night on the piss in a port, but we found after that was because his missus sort of carrying on behind his back you know, and he didn't talk about it at all until, 'that bitch I've divorced her' that sort of thing. So yeah, but I mean that was the way that guy reacted you know he didn't tell anyone at all he was just like sort of miserable and sort of horrible. (Senior Officer)

Personal problems did not appear to be an accepted part of shipboard discourse. Shipboard culture seemed to reflect the belief that one's problems should be kept to oneself.

Unwelcome disclosure could occasionally be met with impatience, indifference, discomfort and occasionally hostility, as the following quotes illustrate:

You occasionally get these people who have two beers and you sometimes find that quite embarrassing, especially the problem concerns his wife and his wife is due to come out to the ship. (Junior Officer)

I think the depression is something you just tend to hold into yourself, you don't talk about, I mean if you've got a problem with your marriage you don't want to be telling everybody and then they're going to get fed up with hearing about it. I mean cos you do get people who are kind of, I remember years ago a guy got divorced and he used to go on and on about it, in the end people used to say 'shut up will you!'. And if he'd be talking about something he'd say 'so and so' and you'd say 'you're only saying that cos you just got divorced yourself', and you know, you got fed up with hearing about it. (Senior Officer)

Such periods of relationship breakdown are an example of emotional stress and a time when one may wish to draw on others for support and comfort. However the response to a

'Dear John' letter⁹ was a situation cited by many officers as an example of shipboard reaction to the emotional problems of colleagues:

One guy in port came in the bar 'just had a letter from my wife she's filed for divorce moving out the house'. So at sea you know, you just mention it and just put it on the dart board, that's what everybody does, you know put it on the dart board and everybody throws a dart at it - 'A Dear John'. (Senior Officer)

Seafarers attributed the avoidance of 'emotional talk' or deep conversation to concerns about confidentiality, or not wishing to 'bring anyone else down'. Captains talked about the responsibility and social distance necessitated by their position, prohibiting emotional disclosure. However the pressures of managing emotional problems without access to social support networks may have severe consequences: two of the fifteen seafarers in this study had contemplated suicide whilst on board due to relationship problems and three reported feeling sufficiently concerned about their psychological well-being to seek professional help once ashore.

Research suggests that male friendships are often devoid of emotional disclosures and empathetic support and more usually based more on leisure activities (Allan, 1989; Ingham, 1984; O'Connor, 1992). Thus the tendency of the seafarers in this sample to contain their emotional needs and react with discomfort to the emotional disclosures of others may be simply a reflection of male culture as a whole, rather than specific to seafaring culture. It is interesting that such 'male' attitudes to emotional disclosure appear to have been adopted by the only female seafarer in the sample, however one cannot assume that this seafarer reflects female seafarers as a whole. However, whilst it is difficult to ascertain whether such reactions to emotional stress and trauma are a function of male culture or specific to seafarers, the consequences of such norms and ideologies may still be of significance. Seafarers are in the unusual situation of being confined to the shipboard social environment, (often for long periods), with little access to other social groups and relationship networks. Thus whereas an individual in a shore-based occupation may receive little support from work friends or colleagues in times of emotional stress or upheaval, they may still have access to alternative social networks of friends, relatives or partners who will meet such needs. Away on a tour of duty, seafarers do not have this opportunity. Whilst the

⁹ A letter announcing the end of a relationship.

mental health of seafarers is drastically under-researched, the significant proportion of deaths at sea that are attributable to suicide (Mayhew, 1999) suggests that concerns about seafarers' emotional well-being and isolation from social support networks whilst at sea may not be unfounded.

Seafarers' social isolation at home

Whilst occupational factors may make it difficult for seafarers to develop and maintain relationships with fellow seafarers whilst at sea, seafarers also spend significant periods ashore and thus, theoretically, have the opportunity to establish shore-based friendships and relationships which may, to some extent, compensate for the inadequacy of those aboard ship. However, in addition to transient and work-centred shipboard relationships, the data suggested that seafarers might also have limited shore-side relationships. This is perhaps not surprising given that the main cause of decline in friendship relationships has been found to be geographical separation (Argyle and Henderson, 1984). Indeed the majority of seafarers felt it was very difficult to maintain friendships when their occupation necessitated them being absent from home for long periods. As one seafarer explained:

I've never been here so you know, I don't . . . , I couldn't say that I was very close friends with anybody particularly, we have plenty of friends and you know we've got chums. But, you know with a seafaring life you are here today and gone tomorrow. You are not a sort of permanent character in the, in the scenario. (Senior Officer)

The only seafarer who reported having a group of close friends was based in a small community where he had lived for over 20 years and was able to maintain telephone contact with his friends whilst away due to a considerable company subsidy on ship-shore telephone communication. Another seafarer reported maintaining a close relationship with his best friend from school. Other seafarers talked about shore-side acquaintances with whom they might go out for a drink, but did not feel these could be described as friends with whom they were close. It appeared that several seafarers relied on their wife's social networks as a basis of friendship and social contacts. The importance of a partner in order to integrate life at sea and shore-based social and family networks is not a new phenomenon. Fricke in his research with seafarers in the 1970's notes how ' . . . the wife provides the vicarious link with society ashore for the married officer through the provision

of home and a network of friends' (Fricke, 1973: 147). The reliance on female partners to maintain extended support networks is not restricted to seafaring families (Dicks et al., 1998; Ingham, 1984). However due to their limited opportunities to form and maintain relationships both at sea, in the workplace and also ashore, for seafarers, such dependency may be amplified. As such friendship networks are not self-selected, they may not always be satisfactory. As two seafarers commented:

We tend not to go out so much and mix with other people. If you do mix with people they'll be your wife's friends and you may not particularly like their husbands, so you know. (Senior Officer)

I know the husbands through the wives she knows, and I'm not close, not as close as she is to her crew who work in the town and all that so. But yes [...] I wouldn't say a great many friends. (Junior Officer)

Such social isolation was also reflected in seafarers' choice of leisure activities whilst ashore. The majority of seafarers reported activities that were centred almost wholly around couple and immediate family relationships and home-based activities. Where seafarers talked about hobbies, these again, were almost exclusively those that could be pursued alone: cycling, exploring the internet, golf, fishing and motor cycling being typical examples of leisure activities mentioned by seafarers.

Seafarers reported low use of clubs available to them in the community. This was attributed to the reduced value for money: seafarers were reluctant to pay annual membership fees for something they may only be able to utilise for six months of the year or less. Reluctance to become involved in group activities and organisations outside the home also reflected seafarers' perceptions of their partner's and families intolerance to their intermittent absences. Separated from their families for long periods, some seafarers expressed difficulties justifying and negotiating their absence to pursue their own interests. As one seafarer commented:

Family life takes so much of your time, I'd love to go and play golf. But I can't justify the time away.

*Do you think it's harder for seafarers to go and play golf than, say, an office worker?
Oh yeah.*

Why do you think that is?

Because his wife's said to him, 'look you spend half your life away, you're not spending the other half on the golf course'. (Senior Officer)

This was reiterated by some of the accounts of seafarers' partners. As one seafarer's wife explained:

We always spend a lot of time together when he's home and I think if he'd have been the type that sort of go off out - I mean when he first started the job yeah he use to come home and all his mates would phone him up 'oh you coming down the pub?', 'yeah alright I'll be down', I used to say to him 'what about me? I haven't seen you for 3-4 months, you go off out with your mates' and then one day he said 'you're right I married you, I'm not married to them'. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Seafarers also felt that their inability to attend clubs regularly prohibited their participation whilst ashore. Those who did attend clubs talked about the frustration associated with their sporadic attendance:

It's the same now again. I get depressed and I'm going to go shore side and give up the sea because, it's like I do a lot of scuba diving and I used to play a lot of Squash and you can't get involved in clubs either. You know you come home, I'm involved with 2 diving clubs but you come home you do your bit and then you go away and they're arranging diving sort of weekends and a week away here, and you can't get involved cos you're away. And cos your only home for 6 weeks that's only 6 club nights, that's very difficult you know. So now and again I go through depressed stage when I'm giving it all up and coming home to work. (Senior Officer)

I've often wanted to take up a marshal art, always but never, perhaps I could have done, I feel you need to be in a position to attend a course weekly and you can't do that at sea so that's always been a draw back. (Senior Officer)

Thus, seafarers' accounts suggested that just as they may be socially isolated at sea, so seafarers may also find themselves isolated whilst at home. Their intermittent absence prevents the development and maintenance of close friendship relationships and hinders their involvement in community-based clubs and activities which require continuous

attendance and participation over time. Just as seafarers learn to become self sufficient whilst at sea, so too, they learn to pursue solo and family-based activities whilst ashore. Such an absence of social support networks and community engagement is likely to effect seafarers' quality of life and may also impact on their health status. Many studies have found evidence to support the positive association between social support systems and levels of well-being. Indeed it is argued that 'social capital' (Putnam, 1993), that is, social support and engagement in activities and the resultant social cohesion, is an important factor in promoting health and preventing disease (Campbell, 1999). In the absence of such 'social capital' seafarer's health may be particularly vulnerable.

Social isolation of seafarers' partners

As seafarers' partners are not subject to the same intermittent absences from home as their husbands (unless of course, they decide to sail with their husbands on a regular basis), it may be reasonable to assume that their opportunities for the development and maintenance of friendships and social networks is similar to that of women in non-seafaring relationships.

When asked about their leisure activities, similar to their partners, seafarers' wives talked about home and family-based activities and those that could be pursued alone, such as gardening, watching television and reading. Three of the women reported belonging to clubs which were for their own pleasure or benefit, (aerobics, dance class and gym). These women were similar in that they did not have any dependent children living at home.

Participation in paid employment was mentioned by many women as an important opportunity for social contact and as a means to avoid loneliness and isolation (for further discussion see section Women's Employment). As one woman explained:

I work up the school and the girls I work with they're all friends and we go out and I'm quite involved with the school I help in the school and that sort of thing so, I suppose I think if I wasn't working I'd be very lonely yeah. (Wife of Senior Officer)

One factor that appeared to have a considerable impact on women's experience of social isolation while their husband was away was the presence of children in the home (see also

section on Seafarers' Children). Many women in society find their social lives outside the home, restricted and confined by the needs and demands of children (Deem, 1986). Seafarer's wives often were temporarily as 'single parents', taking on childcare responsibilities without a partner present to ease and share the associated tasks and demands. In some cases, the need to care for children without a partner at home, appeared to severely restrict women's opportunities to socialise outside the home and many women talked about the particularly acute sense of loneliness and isolation they felt when their children were very young.

Whilst very young children and babies could leave women feeling very lonely and 'tied' to the home, as children grew older this effect appeared to be reversed. School, and sometimes church-based, activities with the children provided a source of social contact and a means of being introduced to and developing further friendship networks. Indeed, several of the women talked about being involved in voluntary activities outside the home and these activities were almost exclusively child-centred, for example, assisting in 'Rainbows' or 'Brownies'¹⁰, acting as teaching assistants or helping out in school-based activities and events. Older women in the study and those whose children had left home were sometimes involved in church-based voluntary activities. All these activities had the benefit of integrating women into the community and allowing them social contact and opportunities for establishing social networks and friendships.

There were a number of factors that appeared to impact on women's choices to become involved in social activities outside the home. For those women with dependent children, the financial costs associated with childcare often influenced women's decisions on their social life while their partner was away. As two women commented:

You're not going out a lot because you've got the children and you need baby sitters and everything. (Wife of Senior Officer)

It costs a lot of money to enjoy yourself. (Wife of Senior Officer)

As is reflected in the general population, women often did not feel their own leisure time to be sufficiently important to justify the cost of paid childcare (Deem, 1986, 1996; Green et

¹⁰ Clubs for young children.

al., 1990). In some cases, it appeared that women felt that putting their own needs before their children's conflicted with their own ideologies about what it was to be a 'good mother' (Wimbush, 1987). Those women with close extended family in geographical proximity fared better than those who did not have family close by, as they were able to use extended family networks as a resource and support network, providing a place to go for company and a means of unpaid childcare. Those women who could drive or had access to a car, also appeared to be less likely to feel socially isolated than those who were reliant on public transport to get around.

In addition to the costs of childcare, their temporally 'single status' whilst their husband was away appeared to make some women reluctant to socialise outside the home and family. Previous research with American military wives identified problems as women were married yet without husbands, leaving them unable to fit in with either married couples or single friends (Bey and Lange, 1974). Women without partners are not always welcomed in social situations (Gordon, 1994). Indeed this was reflected by the accounts of seafarers' wives, some of whom talked about the discomfort they felt in social situations they attended without their husbands, fearing the unwanted attention of men who may perceive them as 'single' (and therefore 'available'), being seen as 'sexual predators by partnered women and feeling 'the odd one out' when they socialised alone with other couples. One seafarer's wife described how she felt attending a social event without her husband:

I went to somebody's wedding reception which was one of the mothers up at school, and the whole crowd of the mothers and fathers went to this wedding reception and [my husband] was away so I thought 'well I'm still gonna go' and I didn't care about I was on my own cos there was a whole crowd going together. But I sort of feel, how can I put it, that the other women will say 'oh look at her on her own, don't want her talking to my husband' sort of thing, do you know what I mean? (Wife of Senior Officer)

However, despite such restrictions on external social activities, relationships may be sustained in the private arena of the home. Research with women has highlighted the importance of female friendship, which may be close and involve disclosure, empathy and confiding (O'Connor, 1992). The seafarers' partners interviewed in this study were asked

about their social networks and sources of social, practical and emotional support. In response to questions about practical assistance whilst their husband was at sea (for example, with household problems such as plumbing failure), most women reported friends or extended family to whom they could turn for help and advice. Many women also felt able to deal with such problems alone. This was particularly the case for those women whose husbands had been in the merchant navy for a number of years (see section on Role Displacement). However when asked about emotional support what was perhaps particularly striking for several of the women was the apparent lack of any social support they felt they could draw on in times of emotional need: just under half of the seafarers' wives reported that they would turn to no-one and rely on themselves only. The following quote illustrates the belief in self-sufficiency of many seafarers' wives:

What about if you felt emotionally you know just down? You know, you talked about feeling lonely, who would you tend to turn to then?

Well I wouldn't cos I'm that sort of person, it's like pull yourself together I think. I think in a way you're sort of admitting to it, instead of being positive and getting on with it. (Wife of Senior Officer)

This is unusual as the literature suggests that women's friendships are important and usually contain a high level of confiding (Booth, 1972; Bell, 1981a, 1981b; Duck and Perlman, 1985). Women did talk about having friends, but these did not often appear to go beyond a surface level and support from extended family appeared to be largely limited to practical (as opposed to emotional) support. It is difficult to determine the reasons for this apparent absence of close, confiding relationships for many seafarers' wives. However, it is possible that this absence may be the result of their lifestyle as part of a seafaring family. Many seafarers' wives, particularly those with young children, reported feeling exhausted managing the home and family while their partner was away at sea. In this context, they may have felt unwilling to deal with the extra efforts associated with maintaining close friendship networks (Dicks et al., 1998). The intermittent presence of the husband in the home could also have impacted on the ability and desire to pursue close friendships. Previous research has found that the wives of unemployed men find their husband's constant presence in the home as detrimental to close friendships, their husbands both resenting friends visiting the household and also resenting them leaving the home to visit friends (O'Connor, 1991). Thus the relatively long leave periods where seafarers are home-

based may impede the continuation of friendships. Furthermore, women themselves may also be reluctant to develop friendships that may put unwanted demands on their time when their husband is home. After long separations, such time together can be regarded as very precious. As one seafarers' wife explained:

When we moved we really conscious of not getting too friendly with neighbours, it's just the time is not your own. It's very precious when I do get him home and you wanna make the most of it so you don't want people intruding on your [time together].
(Wife of Senior Officer)

A further possible explanation of women's apparent lack of close friendships related to their sense of being 'set apart' from women married to shore-based workers. Being married to a seafarer necessitated a certain lifestyle and brought with it specific problems which women sometimes felt were difficult for others to understand. As two wives explained:

Nobody understands what you're going through and how you feel, and you feel like an odd ball, you know, you don't fit in to the rest of the community cos your husband doesn't work 9 till 5 and you can't go down the pub every Friday night and do that sort of thing. You haven't got a normal life, well what they call a normal life style. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I am actually upset even though I don't sit and cry about it, I do actually get upset about [him] being away and being on my own I do get lonely. But I think that they just see me as 'oh [she] just gets on with it'. But I've only myself to blame because that's the way I suppose I want them to be, but then sometimes I think I wish they could just see it as it really was. (Wife of Junior Officer)

The data suggested that the disappearance of the link between occupation and community (including the disappearance of traditional 'sailor towns') had negative repercussions, withdrawing an important source of social support in the form of 'the neighbourhood'. The women in this study lived in geographically disparate regions, none of which had a strong seafaring community. Although a few women were aware of other seafarer's wives in their area, only one reported having a close friendship with another seafarer's wife living locally. Several women talked about how much they would welcome the opportunity to meet with

other seafarers' partners who would have an understanding of the unique way of life necessitated by being married to a seafarer. Having a close confiding relationship either with a friend or with a partner has been found to be strongly inversely linked to the presence of affective disorders (O'Connor, 1991) thus the absence of such relationships for seafarers wives may have a detrimental effect, not just on women's general well-being, but also on their emotional health.

Intensity of couple relationship

In contemporary society it is suggested that needs for emotional intimacy and support are satisfied by couple relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernstein, 1995, Giddens 1992). Indeed, it is often argued that 'the increasing complexity of modern life leads individuals of both sexes to place greater emphasis on intimate and loving relationships as a 'haven in a heartless world'' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993: 235). Upon entering a committed couple relationship outside sources of support and intimacy are disregarded (Mansfield and Collard, 1988). The data from this study suggested that the combination of factors that impede the development and maintenance of seafarers' friendships both at sea and ashore may lead to an increased dependency on their wife or partner for intimacy and emotional support. When asked about who they would turn to if they felt down all seafarers said they would turn to their partner. In over half of the cases their wife was the only person they felt they could turn to. This was often regardless of the nature of the problem (professional or personal) and whether the problem occurred whilst at sea or at home ashore. The following quotes illustrate the importance of seafarers' partners as a source of support to their husbands:

I had always assumed that part of the reason for being married is that you have that someone to talk to. I think if you have emotional problems or some kind of thing that is bothering between the two of you that's what you're there for. I don't think you would turn to anybody else. If you haven't got a wife or a husband then maybe you do have to think of someone to talk to but otherwise I don't really see. (Senior Officer)

I'd talk to her, that's why I get £4000 phone bills. Yeah there's nothing my wife don't know. I can talk to her about anything, I mean physically [sic] anything, I mean if you can't talk to your partner who you gonna talk to anyway? (Senior Officer)

Well if you have problems you sort of discuss them with your missus. (Senior Officer)

If something was worrying me, say something is wrong, I get on the phone I would, that would make it a lot easier. I would get on the phone straight away. (Senior Officer)

No it's hard cos sometimes I've felt really stressed out at times and she'll just be really supportive on the phone and you know she's got her problems at home but she won't let me worry about it. You know if there is problems she won't tell me about them. And then I'll phone up and give her all my problems as well, [she's] very supportive. (Junior Officer)

Where seafarers turned to individuals other than their partner this was either another family member (mother or brother) or long-standing friends. However, dependence on their partner for social and emotional support was considerable and often exclusive.

The accounts of women in this study showed that this support involved a conscious effort on their part. Indeed, it appeared that women engaged in considerable amounts of 'emotion work'¹¹ (Hochschild, 1983) in order to protect their partner's wellbeing. They were the recipients of their partners' problems both when they were ashore and at sea, providing emotional support and comfort for personal and professional problems alike. Women also made considerable efforts to protect their partners from news or events that might induce negative emotions or feelings. This 'emotional labour' manifested itself in women's discussions about communication with their partner whilst he was away at sea. Women were anxious not to give their partners cause for concern, particularly whilst they were away, and hence often relatively powerless to help. As one woman said:

He'll have enough worries too handle without a moaning wife at home or the little wife that can't cope. (Wife of Senior Officer)

In order to protect their partner from unnecessary distress, women managed information whilst their husband was away. For example, one woman talked about a time when their home had been broken into whilst her partner was at sea. She waited until all the consequences had been addressed and the crisis had passed before she contacted her

¹¹ Hochschild (1983) describes 'emotion work' as labour which 'requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (1983: 7)

husband to let him know what had happened. She recalled:

So I got everything sorted so it was fine, you have to tell [him], it's not something you can keep from him for 4 months but it's always I feel there's no point in panicking him. There's nothing he can do about it so deal with it and then tell him 'it's all sorted, everything's fine', and that's OK. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Other women reported how they made efforts to protect their partner from their children's, and indeed their own, distress at his departure and subsequent absence. One woman reported how she felt she had find a delicate balance in her letters between not worrying her partner about her wellbeing but also not making him think that she was having too good a time while she was away. She explained:

You feel like you've got to keep them informed of everything but you don't want to rub their nose in it by telling them what a great time you're having at home, cos that's how it can sometimes sound in your letters. You know I write a letter saying I've had a really busy week, I've done this and I've been out and it can sound like, well you're getting on with your life OK. You've got to be careful. [...] I tried to play things down that I was doing at home in case it sounded like I was living the high life when really I wasn't, and that's not what I wanted to portray because I thought you know it's not, you know 'I'm going out but my hearts not always in it, it's not what I want and I am really sad and I'm missing you'. So I didn't use to tell him everything I'd done and only for that reason cos, you know, I don't want him to think 'oh I've missed out on that and there's another good night I missed'. I just used to like kind of skim over it or not mention it at all. (Wife of Junior Officer)

The imbalance of emotion work in relationships is well documented (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995, Mansfield and Collard, 1988; Thompson and Walker, 1989). Indeed appears to be reflected in this study. Whereas men, almost exclusively, turned to their female partner for emotional support, this form of support did not appear to be expected in return from women. When asked about who they would turn to when they felt emotionally low, less than a quarter of the seafarers' wives said that they would turn to their husband.

Such emotional labour was not apparent in the case of the husband. As noted earlier, seafarers' wives in this study were often socially isolated, but in many cases they did not feel that they could turn to their husband for support. However seafarers' were very dependent on their partners to provide emotional support and maintain social networks. Such dependence could leave seafarers particularly vulnerable should the relationship break down.

Children

Introduction

Seafarers may be fathers as well as husbands and their wives may have the dual roles of both partner and mother. The introduction of children into any family inevitably precipitates change. This section seeks to explore the impact of children on the family life of seafarers and their partners. Through the accounts of these couples, this section will also explore parent's perceptions of how seafaring lifestyles effect children. The majority of participants in this study had children. Their children ranged in age from one year to adult children in their thirties. Two couples had recently married and had no children at the time of the interview and one couple had no children together, but both had children from previous marriages.

Children and seafarers' partners

The advent of children into the family impacted on both the seafarers and their partner's experiences of the seafarers intermittent absence from the home. For seafarers' partners children could have quite positive effects on coping with their husband's absence. 'Keeping busy' was one of the most often acknowledged coping strategies for dealing with partner absence (see section on Succeeding). Children could facilitate this, keeping women busy and occupied so that they 'did not have time to be lonely'. As the following women explained:

She's company all the time now where as before she wasn't talking, now she is it's like having another little person in the house with you so yeah that's for the better I think that way. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Sometimes I do [get lonely] yeah, but not a lot because I do enjoy the children and that's genuine, I could have a really good time with my kids. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Well I say lonely but my life is so busy that you don't have time to, I'm lonely in the sense of not having another adult to talk to I suppose. But because I chat to the children but that's not like an adult level. I'm just busy you don't have time to stop and analyse it really. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Children also provided company in the house and which helped dissipate the silence and emptiness experienced by childless couples when their partner first returned to sea. One woman talked about how her experience of her husband's absence changed after her children left home. She said:

I think it's more, I suppose now it's more lonely for me, because when they were home - the children, you are always busy doing things for the children you haven't got time to stop and think and then all of a sudden they moved out, you come home [to an empty house] every night. (Wife of Senior Officer)

However the presence of children in the family had both positive and negative impacts on everyday life. Whilst the partners of seafarers may have children in a dual parent household, the realities of the work pattern may mean that the mother may often bear the responsibilities of parenting alone. Research has shown that women are aware of the burdens and difficulties of single motherhood and in some cases, the perceived problems of bringing up a child alone can lead to the decision to remain childless (Gordon, 1994). This perception of the realities of parenting when married to a seafarer is reflected by those seafarers' partners who were childless but planned to have a family at a later date, both of whom commented that they would like their partner to either stop working at sea or work shorter trips if they were to have a family. They commented:

I think for everyone involved it would be - 4 months - really just too long. I can't actually imagine it to be honest I think it would be, it's OK when your dealing with yourselves, adults, but when children are involved it's a whole new story altogether. (Wife of Junior Officer)

We've talked and thought about it and because [my husband's] now 33 and we both want to have a family but neither of us want to have a family while he's doing this job. (Wife of Junior Officer)

The data suggest that these perceptions were not unfounded. Indeed, several of the women in the study who had children likened their role to a 'single parent', the only difference, they felt, was that they did not have the money worries often associated with lone parents. However children created extra work for mothers, which, particularly when then children were young, could leave mothers exhausted and sometimes resentful about their partner's

absence. Women reported struggling under the burden of their dual role of 'being both mum and dad' and talked about the responsibilities they felt making decisions about their children's welfare in isolation from their husband's input. The following quotes are illustrative of women's accounts of the difficulties bringing up children in their partner's absence:

Just being on your own with her all the time is hard work as well and you can't get your sleep, it's quite hard. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Having children is extremely hard work. When [he] works, away for a month and home for two weeks and with tiny babies, nineteen months between them, it was sheer hard work and very very tiring. (Wife of Senior Officer)

And I said yeah but we went through some rough patches with them, he said 'yeah but every family goes through rough patches'. But I think because you're on your own you look at those things more, you know, you look into them more than you should do perhaps sometimes. And it's because you're there on your own bringing them up, and you think well if I hadn't treated them this way and if I hadn't done that and if your father had been there would he have been different you know. (Wife of Senior Officer)

The presence of young children in the family could also contribute the social isolation of the mother. It is not unusual for women with children under the age of five to remain outside paid employment although evidence suggests that this group is increasingly likely to enter the labour market. In 1996 42% of women with a dependent child under 5 years old were in paid employment (14% working full-time and 28% working part time), increasing to 54% (18% full time, 36% part time) in 2001 (National Statistics 2002). Comparison with general population data is difficult as women in this study were of a range of ages, some having very young babies at the time of the interview and others having grown up children in their 30's. However in general it can be said that labour market participation for the seafarers' wives with young children in this study appeared to be rather low. Only two seafarer's wives reported working, or of having worked, when they had a young child. Women often talked of the years when children were very young as the most difficult times and the times when they felt it sometimes difficult to manage when their partner was not home. Not only were young children's needs found to be very demanding, but staying at home to care for the children could result in a very child-centred, small and

lonely world. Children made social events for mothers limited. Many women discussed the difficulties of organising baby-sitters and the end result was often that social activities were restricted to home-based activities and those that involved children. Those women who fared better were those who had close family living in close geographical proximity who could assist with child care and other domestic tasks leaving women temporarily free from household and family responsibilities (see section on Succeeding and Social isolation).

Even as children grew older they could continue to limit women's choices in outside employment as women took jobs the allowed them to fit in with children's routines, often part time jobs or jobs in schools. It is not unusual for women to choose employment to fit in with domestic responsibilities. For seafarers' wives, perceived responsibilities to children were often amplified because of the intermittent father absence: some women felt that their husband's periodic absences meant that children needed the stability of having one parent consistently at home. As one seafarer's wife commented:

I knew I couldn't work cos it wasn't fair to have him away and me then coming home [...]. But I thought no it's not fair to leave these kids, they've got no dad here permanent so I've got to be here for them permanently. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Women talked about their partner's lack of understanding and experience of family life and experience with children and this could sometimes lead to conflict. One woman explained:

[He is] used to living on the ship, he likes to have everything absolutely ship shape which is extremely hard with children. (Wife of Senior Officer)

The advent of children also served to limit or curtail women's opportunities to sail with partner. Many companies did not allow children to sail and this was compounded by the mother's inclination to prioritise the needs of the children. However the opportunity to sail with their husband was something that was greatly valued by many women, facilitating a greater understanding of their husband's working life and allowing an opportunity for them to spend precious time together (see Thomas et al., forthcoming).

Seafarers and their children

For seafarers, the presence of children in the family added a new dimension to their understanding and experience of seafaring life. Seafarers talked about the difficulty they felt leaving home and how this was amplified when they had children. For many, this was perhaps particularly marked in the children's younger years when changes were rapid and long tours of duty could mean that seafarers came home to children who at best did not recognise them, and at worst felt anxious and frightened of this new 'stranger'. The following quotes illustrate seafarer's feelings about the impact of their lifestyle and their role as a parent:

And the other, the other part which really tears you to pieces is when the children are smaller and ah several times I've gone at maybe - midnight, you know, going up to have the last look before going away for six months it's uh, it's a killer, it really is. (Senior Officer)

It's like when I go away it cuts me terrible not to see them children often. (Senior Officer)

On reflection when I think about it now, after the life at sea, I think it was wasted, because I didn't see much of them. (Senior Officer)

And not only that it was, things like the kids grow up you know they kind of go up in lumps you know, like the last time I went away you could say my daughter was up to here and now she's up to here and now she comes up to here you know, things like that you sort of like notice you know. (Senior Officer)

Fathers were aware that their occupation meant that they often missed out on significant events such as birthdays, school plays, first communions etc.. Indeed sadness at the absence of their father on such 'special days' was something reported by the children interviewed for this study and, in a separate study, by children of Filipino seafarers (Kahveci, 2002). However a father's involvement with children in non-seafaring families can also be limited (Brannen et al., 1994). Indeed research suggests that fathers who are not particularly involved in the lives of their children remain common (Jamieson, 1998). One of the frequently mentioned advantages of the job expressed by seafarers was that the

leave periods allowed them to spend quality time with their family, and that a parent who worked more common working hours (approximating to nine-to-five) would have considerably less opportunity to spend time with their children. As two seafarers commented:

I was doing 4 and a half months away and two and three quarter months home so I used to be home, and I used to be home for a fair bit and when I was home I was home for a good time. I saw probably more of my kids then than most of the people at the school who's parents were working, cos I used to see them sort of everyday, especially in the holidays I'd see the all day every day for a long time you know. (Senior Officer)

I don't regard it any different than somebody who works a 9 to 5 job and might get back in the house later than 5, let's say someone who works in London but has to commute from outside London, they might have to start their commuting before the children get up for school and by the time that person comes home the children, of mine's age, might be getting ready for bed, and the only time you see them, have real quality time with them is perhaps weekends, whereas in my time at home, especially at school holidays, it's quality time all the time, so I regard that as good. (Senior Officer)

The accounts of seafarers and their partners also suggested that the presence of children in the home could effect seafarers' experiences of adjusting to shore and family life during their leave periods. It seemed that children's routines and the existence of 'child centred routines' often appeared to contribute to seafarers sense of displacement and redundancy in their role in the family (see section on Seafarer displacement). Household routines were often complicated and involved several after-school activities with which the seafarers were unfamiliar. This sense of exclusion was exacerbated seafarers' sense of being marginalised as they felt that family life continued, unchanged and unhampered whether they were at home or at sea. Seafarers sense of redundancy in the family can also be seen to be reflected in their perceptions of their children's reactions to their return's and departures: most felt that their children were not negatively affected by them leaving and indeed in some cases, felt the children might even welcome their departure from the family home, as the following quotes illustrate:

Sometimes I think they're glad because I don't shout at them at all! No, they probably think 'well dad's gone away now, now I can play mummy up'. I think they accept it.
(Senior Officer)

How are your children usually before you go away?

They don't even notice. The only time they notice is when I go out the door, they say 'bye, see you in 4 weeks', 'say bye' and then they're there still watching cartoons on the telly (Senior Officer).

How do they react when they know you're going back to sea?

Oh ok, they went through a period where they had a few tears and things, but it was more a phase, I wouldn't say they were genuinely distraught because as soon as you were gone they were quite happy. In fact as the boy gets older I think he's looking forward to it. (Senior Officer)

In addition to a possible sense of redundancy in the household, seafarers' perceptions of children's indifference to their presence may also be a result of the 'emotion work' done by their wives on behalf of their children. Aware that tearful and upset children would upset their partner, seafarers' wives appeared to engage in such labour, protecting their partners from the emotional difficulties of dealing with distressed children. This was done by managing departures in a way which normalised them and reduced the trauma for all involved, for example avoiding emotional airport separations and arranging for the seafarer to leave whilst children were at school, and by presenting selective accounts of the children's well-being after the seafarer's departure. Two women explained:

[Our daughter] starts weeing the bed and it's hard you know, really upsetting, she goes on the phone and she's crying to him and that so I just - just 'oh she's asleep love' you know - you know because it's upsetting for him then, so 'oh she's in bed now, talk to her later'. You know cos she's been on the phone before now, she's sobbed and sobbed, and the majority of the time I do let her you know - I do - she does speak to him, but you know they do get upset. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Oh they're a bit down in the mouth, it's all 'why should daddy have to go to work?', they sit and grumble about it but they get over it. But if he's going, [...] when we've gone and taken him to the train station maybe they start crying because you physically see him go, do you know what I mean?, where if he's gone, he's gone, and they know

he's coming home so I don't upset them if I can help it really, it's not worth it for them, not fair on them really because he's away all the time and you've got to get used to it.
(Wife of Senior Officer)

Perceived impact of intermittent absence on children

Research with the children of Filipino seafarers found that whilst children recognised the material benefits of their father's work at sea, they also experienced problems such as missing their father's attendance at special events and taking time to adjust to his presence in the family home whilst on leave (Kahveci, 2002). The UK mothers in this study often made efforts to minimise the effect of their partner's career on their children. They took care to reassure them that 'daddy' was only away because it was his job and not to do with his feelings for them or anything they had done. They also ensured that children were prepared for their father's departure and that they were only aware of his impending homecoming when dates were confirmed, and (often), when he had physically left the ship, as last minutes delays on arrival were found to be very disruptive for children. As one woman explained:

Yeah we always say to them that you know 'dad will be going back you know and it'll be for this time - you know this amount of time', but we don't - like he says 'oh yeah dad's got to go to get money to buy you, you know, birthday presents or sweets'. I say 'no, don't do that, you don't - that's - that's their fault then that you've got to go away because they want sweets - you tell them it's to pay the mortgage and it's to pay the gas and it's to pay the electric and if you don't work away the bills won't be paid and we can't - we won't be able to live anywhere'. I think otherwise you sort of - it's their fault that you're working away and 'well we won't have any sweets then' you know.
(Wife of Junior Officer)

In general both parents reported that children managed well with the lifestyle and 'accepted' the continuous absences and presences of their father. Although mothers occasionally expressed concern about the impact of their husbands' intermittent absence on their children, in the main, children were seen to adjust relatively easily to the comings and goings of their father. This ability to adjust and cope was usually attributed to the fact that the children 'were used to it' and 'it was all they knew'.

Underlying many of the accounts of seafarers and their partners was an acceptance of traditional ideologies concerning parenting roles: that mothers are the best carers for their children and that the father's primary role in the family is of economic provider (Jamieson, 1998). Despite sometimes long absences, the seafaring lifestyle did not necessarily conflict with such beliefs and this may have also made it easier for families to cope with their particular kind of family life.

Role Displacement

Introduction

One of the most frequently mentioned attractions of a seafaring lifestyle was the long leave periods, relative to shore-based jobs working more traditional hours. In particular, such long leave periods were valued because they allowed seafarers to spend significant periods of time with their children and partners. Leave periods were, naturally, much anticipated by seafarers and their families alike. However, the realities of the leave period were often far from the images pictured during long separations, and indeed leave periods could have their own inherent problems that left seafarers with as many difficulties as time spent at sea and separated from loved ones. A particular problem that emerged from the accounts of seafarers and their partners was that of ‘role displacement’. Role displacement refers to the sense of redundancy seafarers often felt upon their return home. This problem seemed to be an inherent contradiction of a successful seafaring marriage: for the lifestyle to work the seafarer had to have a wife who could ‘cope’ and manage successfully without him, however such successful coping meant that seafarers felt unnecessary and sometimes unwanted upon their return home. This section will explore this issue in more detail.

An independent wife

The very nature of a successful seafaring marriage was seen by many seafarers to be rooted in a wife who was independent and capable, a wife whom the seafarer felt confident could manage domestic, family and emotional responsibilities in their absence. Indeed many seafarers interviewed for this study described their wives in this way, praising characteristics such as their ability to ‘cope’ and their independence and self-sufficiency. As one seafarer commented:

Well the wife has definitely got to be a very confident and competent women. If she's the sort of wife who has to ask her husband how to do or what to do about everything you will never succeed, that seems very obvious doesn't it? (Senior Officer)

Seafarers' wives, if not characteristically independent before marriage, often learnt to be as they adjusted to the realities of a seafaring lifestyle. For many women, their husband's

absences had left them very skilled in managing household and family issues and events, from the routines of household bills and finances, to over-zealous door-to-door sales people to unexpected occurrences such as a burglary or a dangerous electrical problem at home. Such competence also extended to household financial management. The majority of women in the study took care of household finances in their husbands' absence and many continued to take this responsibility when their partner returned home. Indeed, several seafarers commented on their dependence on their wife in all matters financial and many referred to their own lack of knowledge and experience in managing domestic finances. As two officers noted:

I haven't got a bloody clue, everything like that the whole financial sort of thing of the house is done by her. (Senior Officer)

So who tends to manage the household economy?

My wife]. Oh I'm hopeless at it, she's very good.

Even when you're at home you don't do it?

Very rare, I very rarely go to the bank. If I do I go and sit down while she does all the business. This is become because she does it all when I'm away, she's excellent really very very good excellent really. If it wasn't for her I'd have no money. (Senior Officer)

Such an ability to cope and manage was vital to the seafarer having a sea-time that was unhampered by worries about domestic and family concerns. However, this also had unforeseen negative consequences as this very same ability to cope, whilst so beneficial when the seafarer was away at sea, often left the seafarer feeling unnecessary, both practically and emotionally, upon their return home. As one seafarer's wife noted:

I'm very capable and I think that's probably part of what's wrong now [...]. If it's a plug that needs changing I can do that quicker than he can. Whenever we've had building work done he always seems to have missed it! So I've lived with bare walls. One place we lived had to be gutted. We bought it and it fell apart around our ears and I was sleeping on bare boards, painting it and doing things along with the workmen and he was away for all that time so he had no idea what I'd gone through. I'm very capable which maybe doesn't help him. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Maintenance of household routines

Such a sense of displacement within the family could be exacerbated by other conditions that contributed to wives' successful coping in the seafarers' absence. For seafarers' partners (particularly when children were present) there was an acceptance that 'life must go on' when their partner was away. Indeed 'keeping busy' was an oft used strategy to manage their husband's absence and to avoid feelings of loneliness and loss. Keeping busy typically involved routinised activities that often required medium term commitment, for example, paid work, participation in school events and after-school activities for children such as 'Brownies', football or piano lessons. These activities could not abruptly be postponed or cancelled upon the seafarer's return home, and indeed, women were aware that such events would need to be continued so that they could cope with their husband's next tour of duty. As two women explained:

You need to have things to do, your own life to lead for the times that he's away and he needs to accept them for the times that he's at home, kind of thing. I don't think you can really sort of, you may be able to develop a stop-start way of life but I don't think so. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Oh yeah, terrible problems. Now you're hitting the nail on the head! [. . .] He's got to understand - which he don't always, because he's away so much I've got to adapt, so when he comes home he's got to adapt how we've adapted. Not expect to come home and like he's home now, lead a different life, I don't see it works like that. He don't adapt like I can. He likes to come home and 'why have you got to do that?', you know, 'but I said I would', he can be a bit like that. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Whilst the maintenance of these established routines was important to the wellbeing of seafarers' partners and children, the continuation of such practices could leave the seafarer feeling his return home was unimportant and his presence in the home irrelevant to the day-to-day existence and well-being of his wife and family. One seafarer recalled his experience of a typical homecoming:

When you get there it's like you sort of come in put your bags down and it's 'Johnny, Johnny's home!' and you know from 'The Shining' you know, and that's where it come from actually. But there's this whirlwind round you no one gives a toss, you know, kids are on the phone with their friends, the missus is in there with one of her mates talking

about some thing up the school you know and the daughters down there with a couple of kids. And you stand there and you think 'Christ I might as well go to the pub!'. And then all of a sudden like 'oh you're home' and it's like 'oh yeah what's happening?' 'oh I can't stop I got so and so to do now' and it's about 3 or 4 days of this you know and you get like a round peg in a square hole. You know and it's like 'don't expect the world to stop spinning cos you're home'. And it's like literally, it's quite funny really, coming home the first couple of days home it's like that. (Senior Officer)

Many seafarers accepted the need for the household to continue functioning in the same way that it did in their absence and most attempted to 'fit in' with whatever was going on. However, routines were often complex (particularly if couples had more than one child at home), and venues, dates and times sometimes changed between leave periods so seafarers returned home to feel out of touch with what was going on. Often routines involved people unknown to the seafarers and despite their best efforts often found it difficult to participate in day-to-day events and activities. Problems could be as simple as being reluctant to help on 'school-runs' as they were unknown to other parents and thus might raise reluctance or suspicions. One seafarer talked about his sense of being an 'outsider' at home:

Do you feel that you can take part when you are home?

Yeah but I do feel like an outsider and that is bad cos their teachers don't know me or this and that but when I'm home I try and get involved as much as I can really

You say you feel like an outsider...

Yeah I do cos they've got a set routine haven't they. And it doesn't involve me in the routine. Monday nights-Cubs night, Tuesday nights-Rainbows night you know so when I do come home everything's all in place. It's not to do with me really at all then it's all in order before I'm home

Do you do anything to try and get in with it?

If I can like but really I'm not needed. (Junior Officer)

This sense of redundancy could be exacerbated by seafarers' sense of their own unstructured time which often left them feeling without a purpose and lonely and distanced from the rest of their family. As two wives noted:

[He] wants to be involved, he needs to know what is going on. But it is more to do with him being jobless and that's what he doesn't like. He changes washers in the taps and stuff like that (Wife of Senior Officer)

He doesn't like it, he doesn't like being left on his own its awful. [. . .] If I do go out he says 'you've been gone for hours', I say 'well you just can't walk in a shop and walk out again, you know'. But I noticed that with him, yeah, he doesn't like being in the house on his own. (Wife of Senior Officer)

The experience of feeling 'removed' from their family and of their own dispensability within the household was something that was referred to by many seafarers (see section on children). As one commented:

I always felt as if, not as if I wasn't important, but they could survive without me anyway.

What made you feel that?

Probably cos I left them all the time and I kept going away to sea to give them better. (Senior Officer)

Coping with displacement

The transfer of male time from the workplace to the home is a recognised source of stress for unemployed men and their families, where men's extended presence in the home is found to be 'alien and disruptive' (Dicks et al., 1998). Similar problems of adjustment and accommodation appeared to be experienced by seafaring couples when the seafarer was home on leave. As one wife explained:

Well when he's home he's obviously home for three weeks, which is a nice time really isn't it - three weeks, although it goes extremely rapidly. But yes the other side of it is that we do have, I suppose it's what I always say, it's like he's away totally and then he's like under my feet, we're like together, 'I wanna be together, all the time'. And that's not what, most couples they go out to work or whatever come home, but we're together all day and all night. I suppose that's quite hard really. (Wife of Senior Officer)

The necessity of the wife taking on all family responsibilities whilst the husband was away often caused problems as couples tried to establish acceptable dual roles upon their partner's return. The following quotes illustrate some of the difficulties faced, and efforts made by couples to adjust to the seafarers' presence in the home:

You're constantly, you have this constant adjustment. Who does what. Which is can be a bit of a battle sometimes. And it doesn't need to. I think, I think, it's the one thing I notice, when people, married mostly because they're home together every evening, so, they sort of have their roles in life, they know exactly what they are, where as we don't know what they are half the time. So some things get left, and other things both of you are trying to do. (Senior Officer)

But I always had a lot to do and think about and you know, I suppose things like lighting the fire, it's very difficult to stop yourself saying 'hey let me do that'. And 'because I can do it and it won't go out and you don't have to use half a box of matches', and things like that! (Wife of Senior Officer)

In some cases seafarers felt, or believed their wives felt, that their prolonged absences from home negated their right to comment on the running of the household. One seafarer recounting his first (and unhappy) marriage recalled his experience of:

Being away and coming home and expecting - being told - not to say anything, you know not to make any comments about the house or the kids or anything because you know 'you're the one that's been away and I'm the one that's looked after them' and 'you come home here and trying to change everything', and all these sort of things. Everybody - no not everybody - when they first get back, because not all relationships are like that, but an awful lot of people had that because I talked to guys about it. I know the captain I use to sail with he had exactly the same problem. (Senior Officer)

Difficulties in making adjustments were also associated with the seafarer's work experience. Many seafarers in this study were of senior rank and therefore, in the context of their work environment, used to being in positions of command and authority. These seafarers returned home to a wife who was used to being in sole charge of the family and household and the adjustment this transition required could often cause tension and conflict for both partners (see also section on Working cycles). As two wives explained:

When I'm on my own I'm the boss and when he comes home - being a ship's master he's used to being the boss - I take second place. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I think the only conflict that there was, and well I suppose there still is there always will be, the fact that he is in the level of his job right and I mean he's got a lot of people under him and he gives orders. And when he comes home he can still tend to give orders you know. [. . .] So I mean we have a lot of adjusting to do there you know. We've got to realise that there's nobody in charge here, there's no sole leaders you know it's a partnership and we have to work together on things you know. [. . .] But I say 'hang on, this is a house not a ship', you know. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Seafarers and their wives reported seafarers attempting to assert their authority upon their return home, for example, through re-establishing control of finances, being overly disciplinarian with children and attempting to make changes to household routines established in their absence. Whilst this may be a reflection of their shipboard authoritative position, it seems this assertiveness within the household may also reflect their need to establish a 'role' or position for themselves within their family and home. To leave their wife to continue managing the household and making decisions and taking responsibility for the day-to-day running of the home could be very difficult for the seafarer.

Other processes of 'finding their place' within the home were more subtle. As one young wife noted:

No he settles in well but, he spends a lot of time going in and out of cupboards and drawers and I don't know why. [. . .] I can have it exactly as he left, when he went away to sea, but he'll come back and he'll just alter everything just ever so slightly, just to make his mark I think. And he likes to look in the fridge and in the cupboard. I don't know whether it's just familiarising himself with it all again or he just wants to make his mark and move stuff about. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Many couples worked hard to adjust to the seafarers' presence at home. Some wives took steps to accommodate their husband within household routines and to integrate them into the day-to-day running of the home and family. However, after often-lengthy absences, this was often problematic and the sense of displacement felt by seafarers was often considerable and in the worse case scenario feeling that their worth and position in the family was related solely to their ability to bring in a wage packet.

This problem does not seem to be restricted to UK seafarers and their families (Kahveci, 2001; Virtudazo, 1997). Indeed, as Forsyth argues, in the case of the seafaring family:

‘The social unit becomes a female headed household, that differs from other single parent families only by virtue of the income from the seaman’s [sic] job and the necessity to entertain what amounts to an extended guest periodically’ (Forsyth, 1988: 42).

Research with wives of those in the military has found that as naval wives become more experienced at coping alone, problems move from coping with partner absence to attempting to reintegrate them into the household upon their return (Chandler, 1991)¹². The more practised naval wives in Chandler’s study reported feigning helplessness when their husbands were home in order to minimise the tension caused by husband’s feeling emasculated by their wives competence (Chandler, 1991). Earlier research with trawlermen reflects these dilemma where husbands wanted wives to be independent and good-managers but if they became too self reliant men felt that they were loved only for their pay packets (Tunstall, 1962).

Such displacement places a strain on seafarers, their partners and often children. Many previous studies (as limited as these are) have tended to focus on the effect of intermittent absences on the partner left at home, with little attention given to the partner who is only sporadically at home. Indeed as Chandler notes: ‘husband absence is rarely seen as the husband’s problem. He is seen as a free quasi-single individual whereas she is essentially dependent and domestic.’ (Chandler, 1991: 27). However as this section illustrates, intermittent absence from the home and the family can have considerable negative consequences for seafarers.

¹² For a discussion of adaptive responses among periodic-father absence single career families see: Forsyth, C. J. and Gramling, R. (1987) ‘Feast or famine: alternative management techniques among periodic-father absence single career families’, *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 17 (Autumn): 183-196.

Health and Sexuality

Introduction

This section will consider seafaring and sexual behaviour, both in the context of long-term and casual sexual relationships. It will go on to discuss the specific health issues raised by seafarers and their partners, including mental health issues and the effects of traumatic incidents on well-being.

Intermittent separation and sexual relationships

Sexual intimacy may be considered an important aspect of a couple relationship. However, an inevitable feature of prolonged separation is the absence of physical contact and sexual activity between couples. Couples participating in this study were asked about the physical side of their relationships and their perceptions of the impact of intermittent absence on sexual behaviour and their own sexual relationship.

Seafarers

The potential problems associated with prolonged separation from a regular sexual partner are clearly reflected in popular conceptions of seafarers as sexually promiscuous ('a girl in every port') and likely to be involved in commercial sexual encounters. Despite these popular preconceptions, only a very small number of seafarers reported having either commercial sexual encounters or extra-marital sexual relationships whilst at sea. Where commercial sexual encounters were reported, these typically occurred prior to marriage, and the extra-marital relationships discussed, related to previous, unhappy, marriages. One seafarer recalled his early days at sea, prior to marriage:

When I first started going to sea it was different we used to go to Hamburg and everyone was shagging their brains out there, you know, it was the Eurocentre and all that, and it was brill', it was great know what I mean. (Senior Officer)

In addition to accounts of their own behaviour, several seafarers interviewed for this study

offered examples of fellow (married) seafarers who had started a new relationship with a woman met whilst at sea or who had had sexual intercourse or sexual contact with a prostitute whilst in port. As one seafarer recounted:

It's his first trip away, goes to a hotel, really nice hotel, four-five star hotel, goes in the bar picks up a Filipino girl. Takes her to the room, has unprotected sex with her, next thing he's got something he don't want right. He's lucky it wasn't HIV right. His first trip away. He's my age right, he's got four kids, comes home to his wife. (Senior Officer)

In general, however, seafarers were dismissive of the image of seafarers as sexually promiscuous, noting that they themselves and large numbers of their contemporaries were monogamous and faithful to their partners at home. Such behaviour of seafarers was attributed in part to changes in external conditions. It was, for example, recognised that decreased crew sizes and increased turnaround times had drastically reduced opportunities for seafarers to go ashore and subsequently to form new sexual relationships. Many seafarers also made reference to the risks associated with casual sexual encounters, in particular the advent of AIDs, which made such relationships less attractive options. Talking about the risk of HIV one seafarer noted:

Nowadays where you know, nobody knows anybody else's sexual history, if you were to contract something unpleasant, you know, 'is it worth it?', that's what I think you've got to ask yourself really, 'would a one night fling be worth jeopardising a happy, stable relationship for?' probably not. (Senior Officer)

Transcending these constraints was seafarers' recognition of the importance of trust to the success of their relationship: seafarers were reluctant to jeopardise their marriage by being sexually unfaithful (see section on Succeeding). The general view appeared to be that men who wished to have extra-marital relationships would do so whatever the nature of their employment and that seafarers were no more sexually promiscuous than any other occupational group. As one seafarer commented:

I would say 90 percent of the guys that carry-on when they're away at sea carry on when they're at home anyway, you know. (Senior Officer)

Whilst remaining sexually faithful, several seafarers did mention experiencing sexual frustration associated with long separations from their partners, however, in general, this was considered an inevitable aspect of the lifestyle and, therefore, one that had to be accepted. Talking about the lack of sexual contact aboard ship, one senior officer explained:

It's easy to think about what's not there and it just accentuates it, but yes there are times when obviously I'd like to be home, but I suppose it's something you just accept about the situation, you just get on with it. (Senior Officer)

Some reported masturbation as a means of coping with the lack of sexual contact. Others reported an absence of sexual urges whilst aboard, something they associated with high workloads and considerable work-related stress.

Upon their return home, the majority of seafarers reported no difficulties in resuming a sexual relationship with their partner. Indeed some felt the intensity of the physical side of their relationship could ease the sometimes difficult transition from sea to shore. As two explained:

It could be difficult [when I first got home] but of course there were other things that helped ease your passage as well, through that difficult period, you are having a physical relationship again. And I mean that took all the steam out of me (laughs). I mean if you've been away four to six months, or something like that, and then all of a sudden it's marvellous! (Senior Officer)

I think it's quite easy just get back in just get straight back into it cos it's, you love each other like yeah it's something you want to do. (Junior Officer)

For a small number of others regaining sexual intimacy could take some time. Difficulties were attributed to work-related stress temporarily affecting sexual function and the loss of familiarity over the separation period making physical intimacy problematic. As one commented:

I know it's a really strange thing to say but we both get quite shy. It takes a while to become intimate again. (Senior Officer)

Some seafarers with young children also reported reduced satisfaction with their sexual relationship. However such problems are documented in the general population and therefore unlikely to be specifically associated with seafaring as an occupation.

Seafarers' Partners

Seafarers' wives also experienced long periods without sexual contact. Like their partners, some women found long periods of abstinence frustrating, although accepted these as inevitable. As one wife commented:

I miss the physical side of our relationship when my husband is away but what can I do? I miss that but there is nothing I can do. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Women were aware that they had the potential to have an extra-marital relationship during their husband's absence. However all dismissed this as irrelevant to them as they valued their long-term partnership too highly to put it at risk. Some women with young families also commented that even should they be interested, their household responsibilities were such that they would have neither the time nor the energy to pursue a new sexual relationship.

In contrast to seafarers who often talked about their physical relationship solely in terms of sexual intercourse, women were more likely to talk about missing physical contact and intimacy such as 'hugs and kissing'. As the following quotes illustrate:

Yeah you miss the closeness I think, you miss just, it's not just about the sex it's just having someone to give you a cuddle and a kiss. (Wife of Junior Officer)

I think you do miss that, the fact that your husband not in bed with you and the hugs and kisses and the obviously the physical side of it, of your relationship. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Some women were less positive about their sexual relationship with their partner. A number expressed a disinterest in sex and saw the enforced celibacy associated during their husbands' sea time as an advantage of the lifestyle.

It's quite nice actually! It's quite nice not having anyone there, giving you know, so you get a month off. It's quite nice you can go to bed and be left alone and sleep.
(Wife of Senior Officer)

Other seafarers' partners reported enjoying the resumption of their sexual relationship upon the partners' return home. As one women commented:

Oh it's simple, yeah very simple you know [to resume our sexual relationship]. I would say sometimes I wonder if this will ever change because I mean we're as sexually active now as we were 20 years ago and we both really do enjoy sex you know. (Wife of Senior Officer)

However occasionally some women felt their was a conflict between their need for emotional tenderness and the gradual reestablishment of intimacy and their husband's desire for immediate sexual release. As one woman explained:

Yes it can [be a problem] because he comes home and you think 'oh gosh that's it for the next week' and I'm thinking 'no I don't want it to be like that you might as well sleep with a prostitute if that's what you want to do. I want to be loved and all the rest of it'. For him it's a physical explosion of you know, whereas I want the tenderness, whereas he wants the physical wam bam thank you. So yeah that does become trying at times but I think we're able to sort it out know, we're aware of give and take a lot more. (Wife of Senior Officer)

The resumption of sexual intimacy could also be inhibited by other factors. Women reported that their partners' tiredness, jet lag and work-related stress could have a negative impact on their physical relationship. The exhaustion women felt after long periods of managing family and household alone could hamper sexual relationships, as could the presence and demands of young children. One women talked about the difficulties she found resuming a sexual relationship with her husband after he returned from sea. She said:

You get used to not bothering (laughs). I'm too tired. [...] We don't bother much anymore to be honest. But yeah I mean possibly with the children, I mean we went through phases with the children one or the other of them being there. So you couldn't,

you had a job to find the time there. [...And] because you're not together all the time it, it can, it's strange then, it can put a strain on that side of things. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Another two women similarly commented:

I think sort of he comes home after, it's usually a lot of travelling, so he's sort of tired out and catching up on his sleep and then I'm catching up on mine cos he's getting up with the baby so. When you have got a baby it's more difficult cos she's usually in the bed between us so . . . (Wife of Senior Officer)

I think with us, you know, he's away so much you obviously don't [have sex] then, and then when he comes home he's so involved with the children and that, and they go to bed so late your just shattered by then you know. (Wife of Junior Officer)

General health

Seafarers' wives tended to be quite stoic about their health. Many talked about emotional moods swings and periods of loneliness and depression whilst their partner was at sea. These were attributed to the increased strains of managing the household in their partners' absence and physical tiredness. Responses to periods of emotional difficulty were typically pragmatic and included 'getting an early night', 'meeting with friends' or 'eating comfort food'. Talking about their responses to periods of feeling low, two women commented:

I go to Safeways and get my shopping, you know do yourself a comfort meal like that and have an early night and then you get over it. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Well, I go out and I talk to my friend. Sometimes we go dancing in discos and I feel all right then. (Wife of Senior Officer)

None of the women reported visiting their GP for these conditions although one reported self-medication with homeopathic treatments to deal with her emotional health problems, which she attributed to her husband's intermittent absences.

Women with young children reported difficulties coping with personal minor illnesses during their husband's absence. As one woman noted, as a seafarers' wife with young children 'you can't be ill'. She explained:

If you're sort of curled up in bed then nobody else is here to cook the tea for the kids and they would just be sat there, hungry. (Wife of Junior Officer)

The need to carry on regardless of their own health problems was suggested to prolong minor illnesses and impede recovery.

When reflecting on seafaring work patterns and health, women tended to talk about health in terms of major illnesses or health problems rather than in the context of their day-to-day well being. Several cited major health incidents such as cancer treatment or pregnancy complications and talked about the difficulties they experienced managing these when their partner was absent. At such times women felt they needed the emotional support of their partner and also the practical assistance in managing the home and childcare responsibilities during the period of the illness.

The support of the seafarers' employers in terms of extending leave periods or cutting short tours of duty in order for the seafarer to be present during family health problems was something highly valued by both seafarers and their partners. One woman who had complications during pregnancy recounted the dramatic affect of her husband's early return from sea:

When our first daughter was born he was not quite home and I was admitted to hospital because she was a breech baby anyway and my blood pressure was going up so they put me on drugs for a week which calmed me down and my blood pressure went up again so they put me on drugs again and induced the baby and all this sort of thing and the blood pressure stayed up and they were I think quite worried. Three, four days later he came home - the blood pressure went down, bonk it stayed down. But it's all I suppose bottled up you don't really have any control over that. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Seafarers reported considerably more health problems than their partners, health problems that they directly related to their work and the lifestyle it necessitated. Stress was

overwhelmingly the most common health problem reported by seafarers. High levels of stress were attributed to changes in working conditions such as reduced crewing levels, increased commercial pressures, increased administrative duties and generally heavy workloads. Reported reactions to these high stress levels included problems sleeping, severe headaches and emotional volatility. As two seafarers explained:

You just...your head just is pounding, or my head pounds like constantly really you know because there's just so much to take in, it's just and they're screaming...(Junior Officer)

Stress you live stress, it don't come you live it basically cos from the time I get on a plane to the time I step on ship I'm continuously in stress. [...] There was the time where I use to feel really bad, my neck muscles are all tight and it's just a weird horrible feeling. But you can only handle so much of that before it kills you. (Senior Officer)

Whilst attributed to work conditions, several seafarers reported that their experiences of stress and the associated consequences often extended into their leave periods (see section on Working cycles). Although several seafarers reported high levels of stress, few attempted to reduce their stress level or address the possible causes¹³. A small number of seafarers reported engaging in physical exercise as a means to combat stress, however the lack of facilities aboard many ships were seen to inhibit these endeavours. One seafarer talked about the benefits of exercise to alleviate stress:

I have found that if I'm stressed for whatever particular reason, I'll go down the gym and do what I have to do down there and get rid of it, that usually does it, that's good, not therapeutic, but gets you into a routine, it's very easy to condition yourself to do it on a regular basis, especially if you've got someone who shares the same interests as you. (Senior Officer)

In addition to stress, many seafarers reported difficulties sleeping (see also section on working cycles) which they felt reflected irregular and extended working hours and the need to sleep lightly in order to listen out for alarms.

¹³ Possibly reflecting a perceived lack of workplace autonomy for even those in the most senior ranks.

Anxieties about home life whilst at sea could also have severe impact on emotional health. One seafarer recounted his first marriage and the depression and despair he felt on board to the extent that he felt suicidal. He recalled how he felt when he was planning to end his first relationship, he said:

You know it's, but that was it I could not bear, I mean I use to cry on the ship, I used to sit there I used to lie there and I used to work out what I was going to say, you know, when I get home this time I'm going to tell them [my children] I'm going to explain it and I used to cry on the ship. I knew I couldn't do it. I was quite suicidal a couple of times I could have quite easily jumped over the side, on a couple of occasions I was so, I was so down. (Senior Officer)

Other seafarers cited examples of crewmembers displaying, initially inexplicable, erratic, volatile and aggressive behaviour that was later found to be the result of relationship problems at home.

A further potential health problem that emerged from the interviews related to exposure to and involvement in what could be considered major 'traumatic events' such as an 'abandon ship' or the fatal injury of a colleague. In the course of reflecting on their lives at sea several seafarers gave accounts of incidents that to the shoreside worker would be seen as disturbing or indeed harrowing. Such events included 'abandon ship' situations, tackling life-threatening fires, and witnessing the death of a shipmate. The traumatic nature of these events was rarely reported to be acknowledged within the context of the ship in which they occurred. Indeed it appeared that any conversation regarding such events was limited, and if incidents were referred to at all, it was usually only in the guise of 'humour'. The consequences of such traumatic experiences for seafarers could be considerable. One seafarer talked about his feelings after a near fatal fire aboard his ship:

As a Mate I was the person sort of in charge of the fire fighting. And, you had to get people to go down to that engine room. And I was the one who pushed them. And the reason I ended up in counselling was because I kept getting this feeling that I, I might have killed someone. (Senior Officer)

He talked about the affect this event had on his behaviour:

I smoked quite heavily at that time. And I had given up for months. I started again. But I just completely gave up trying to stop at that point. I drank at that time, I was really stressed, tense, used to drink lots. (Senior Officer)

These experiences could also impact on partners and families as wives struggled to support their husbands and deal with the consequences of such exposures. Company responses to such events often appeared to be inadequate if not non-existent. However, where companies were supportive, this was welcomed by both seafarers and their families.

Succeeding

Introduction

The couples interviewed for this study were those that had successfully coped with a seafaring lifestyle. They had learned to make the necessary adjustments and deal with the periodic presences and absences of one partner. In this section couples' strategies for coping will be explored along with the factors they reported important to the sustaining of their relationship.

Trust

The most frequently mentioned factor associated with succeeding in a seafaring relationship was trust. Trust was usually referred to in the context of sexual fidelity. Seafarers were aware that their prolonged absences could not only facilitate an extra-marital relationship, but that the loneliness associated with their absence could perhaps even predispose to infidelity. As two seafarers explained:

I think some women, especially younger women, would have difficulty, especially if they didn't have children actually, the peer pressures are there to go out and have a good time sometimes, so naturally there is a pressure on the marriage or the partnership to stay to a level of fidelity I suppose. (Senior Officer)

I think it's [a worry] for all seafarers, you know because leaving them in a position where they can be lonely leaving them vulnerable really isn't it. (Senior Officer)

For this reason trust between couples was seen as of particular importance. As the following quotes illustrate:

Well she's got to believe what he tells her, trust, if there's any doubt about his integrity then you haven't got you much choice. Because he's not accountable, standing in front of her all the time. I think that is quite important but it depends, seem to be very reliable, strong integrity, some trust between the two of you. (Senior Officer)

I think if you don't have some degree of trust well there's no point in being . . . there's no point in going on with the marriage. (Senior Officer)

Wives were also aware of the potential for extra-marital relationships for both themselves and their partners. In their accounts they referred to images of seafarers as sexually active and 'having a girl in every port' and also perceptions of their own susceptibility to form new relationships. For women too, trust was viewed as crucial to the relationships survival. As two wives commented:

I think that a lot of men would find other women quite easily, and I think that a lot of women would probably do, easy to drift off as well. That's the sort of life we lead these days, but I think you've just got to trust your partner. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Yes they do go ashore, whether there's someone in every port . . .?. But I think you have to trust someone, you have to believe in them and trust them that they're not going to do it. But I mean you have got the same opportunity at home you know to do it yourself you know. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Trust was predominantly referred to in the context of sexual monogamy, however, for some seafarers, trust also extended to include a belief or faith that their partner could successfully manage without them at home (see section on Role displacement). This included a confidence that they partner would manage household financial affairs in keeping with their expectations and could generally 'cope' with an absent husband. Such a belief in their partner's ability to cope allowed the seafarer to work aboard ship without the burden of anxieties and concern over people and events at home.

Communication

For both seafarers and their wives communication between ship and shore was reported as important in managing separations and reunions (see section on Communication for fuller discussion). Indeed those couples who had a long history in the industry often made reference to the problems associated with the limited communication opportunities early on in their relationship and noted how much more manageable separations had become in light

of modern communication technologies. For couples in this study, email was viewed extremely positively and the arrival of regular (non-electronic) post on board continued to be a matter of some significance. Frequent communication could help bridge emotional gaps and provide the couple with the sense that the seafarer continued to participate in everyday events and decisions whilst at sea. As one seafarer explained:

It wasn't too bad always thinking I'm gonna get a letter or something like that and then you imagine a phone call and stuff like that it was good. (Junior Officer)

Such contact, whether by telephone, email or letter also served to 'break up' the trip so that absences did not seem so lengthy. One wife who had regular contact with her husband whilst he was at sea commented:

We're on the phone every other day, we email each other, the contact is so much more now that you just don't feel apart so much as the early days you know. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Support networks

For seafarers' wives, the difficulties associated with partner absence were both practical and emotional. Practical issues related to dealing with household problems, from fixing broken shelves and washing machines to dealing with floods and power cuts. Emotional problems referred to the loneliness associated with separation from their partner and anxieties and depression associated with this absence. In both these domains the existence of a local support network of family and/ or friends could be vital.

Family support was often valued for issues of a practical nature, in particular for help with childcare. As two women explained:

We were living close by [to my family], that helps as well because for all the things sometimes when you do need help or you need to go somewhere and the children . . . I haven't had to take the children shopping for every little thing. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I'm sure it would be harder if I wasn't supported. Although I like to think that I don't rely on people, I'm sure if they weren't there life would be a lot harder, you know it's little things. The other week when the light bulb went and the I couldn't reach - even with the step ladder I couldn't reach - and my dad's 6ft 2 so I got him to do that, and 'oh while you're here can you do that and that' and you know just the little jobs that you never get round to doing, that [my husband] would do. (Wife of Junior Officer)

In addition, close and frequent social contact with family and friends appeared to help protect women from emotional problems such as loneliness and depression whilst their husband was away. One woman living in the village where she grew up described her experience:

This house's an open house, everybody's in and out [...] friends, cousins, children. It was like a port of call, that's what my father in law used to say. So no, I was never lonely. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Such support had a positive effect on the seafarers' wife and subsequently was beneficial for the seafarer, who could continue his work at sea without worrying about his partner's wellbeing.

'A good seafarers' wife'

Interestingly, when seafarers were asked about factors that helped make their relationship work they often talked in terms of either characteristics of their wife or the context in which their wife lived at home rather than focussing on themselves, their own conditions of work or experiences during their leave periods. This may be because the seafarers recognised the importance of their wife's acceptance and support to both the success of their seafaring career and also their marriage. As one seafarer put it:

We simply couldn't, couldn't have survived, if the wife was showing me any, any signs of being unsatisfied, or complaining if you like, about you know going away to sea, I don't think you could have managed or survived. (Senior Officer)

Independence was a characteristic men associated with a 'good seafarers' wife', as was the ability to cope with day-to-day events and demands alone. One seafarer explained:

If she's the sort of wife who has to ask her husband or how to do or what to do about everything you will never succeed. (Senior Officer)

Women also recognised the need to be self sufficient and independent. This independence related to the ability to manage household and family affairs alone and also to the need to maintain their own identity and interests outside their marital relationship. As two women commented:

I think that is the main thing, you have to learn to be independent and strong and cope on your own and cope with all the problems that come with the children. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I am quite an independent person. So I suppose that sort of helps you keep your own independence. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Keeping busy

Seafarers' wives had developed strategies to deal with their partners' absence. The most frequently mentioned of these was 'keeping busy'. This could be done by involvement in paid work (see below), immersion in domestic labour or increased social contact with family and friends. As one young wife commented:

I just try to be strong I think and keep myself busy, I've got brilliant friends and good family so I think that's what keeps me going really. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Children could also inadvertently ease the difficulties of husband absence as not only could they provide a source of company and therefore combat loneliness, but also their needs could be time-demanding, and indeed sometimes all consuming, for their mothers and thus fulfil the need to 'keep busy'. Parental activities such as school runs and involvement in church and school activities could also provide extra sources of social contact for women while their partners were away at sea (see section on Children).

Working partners

As noted earlier, an important means of coping with partner absence for seafarers' wives was to 'keep busy' and, for many, paid employment was particularly effective for this purpose. Going out to work was also a means of 'helping time pass', 'getting out of the house' and making social contact and thus avoiding loneliness, all of which helped women manage while their partner was away. The following quotes illustrate women's feelings about the role of their employment:

[My husband] often says 'why did you bother doing that, you don't need to?' But I find that - particularly perhaps for the periods when he's not here - it's something that I've got. It's an extra thing. I get out to meet people. [...] It just gets me into the outside world. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I just sort of kill time by going to work I suppose [...] like I said throw myself into work and I'm shattered by the time I come home in the evening and then you know it's time for bed and there's another day gone. (Wife of Senior Officer)

I don't go out that much when [he's] away, cos I tend to work anti-social shifts, I volunteer to do night duty when he's away just to make the time go a bit quicker. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Strategies that aided coping of one partner were not always beneficial to the other (see section on Role displacement). Whilst many seafarers recognised the vital importance of outside employment to their partner's well-being, for a small number the disadvantages associated with this employment were of more significance. During seafarers' tours of duty, women's paid employment could affect women's opportunities, and indeed willingness to sail with their partner. In addition, women's work was sometimes seen as interfering with plans for their leave periods, restricting freedom for couples to take short breaks and holidays together and sometimes resulting in seafarers spending considerable portions of their leave period alone. As one seafarer commented:

The only thing that I was adamant about was I didn't want my wife to work, because I didn't see any sense in us being separated for five or six months and me coming home to see her and she has to go out to work. And also I didn't see any sense in, at the

time, any sense in us, me, me being able to bring her away to sea with me and she being constrained by a job. (Senior Officer)

Women were aware of the conflict between their paid employment and the demands of their partner and their desire to be together during his leave period. In addition, women with dependent children had to develop strategies to successfully juggle childcare and work responsibilities (see section on Children). Although some women chose to avoid paid employment altogether, a more typical way to manage these issues was for women to take part-time and essentially flexible jobs that allowed them to be there for their children and/or work only minimal hours during their husband's leave periods. As two women noted:

I landed a lucky job, I work in a school so I'm off with the children because that's always been a bit of a problem because he works away I just can't go out and get a job like an evening job or night work because there's no one for the kids. (Wife of Senior Officer)

That's not too bad [when he's on leave] because I only do 2 days and if need be I can have what they call unpaid leave. So I don't get paid but another young girl gets paid, for which they're very grateful. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Previous experience

A small number of women had had previous experiences of 'intermittent absence', either due to having a seafarer in the family (for example father or brother) or because occupations involving 'intermittent absence' (for example oil rig work) were common within their community. These women felt better prepared to deal with a seafaring lifestyle as they were aware of the potential problems associated with this way of life and felt they had positive role models of successful management of periodic partner absence. As two women explained:

I don't think I saw anything as such but it was just because you were surrounded it by it you just saw everybody get on and cope so you did just as well. (Wife of Junior Officer)

I'd always had seafaring background, my father had always been away at sea and my two brothers have been deep sea and I was used to that lifestyle and I knew roughly how married life would be. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Couples' suggestions for changes

Introduction

The couples participating in this study had developed means of coping with many of the difficulties associated seafaring work and lifestyles and had managed to sustain both their relationship and the seafarer's maritime career. Such 'successful coping' did not, however, mean that couples experienced seafarers' intermittent absences as 'problem-free'. Indeed there can be no doubt that the regular separations had a, sometimes considerable, impact on family relations. Certain aspects of the lifestyle were accepted as inherent and unavoidable features of seafaring, for example, couples recognised the immutability of the seafarer's intermittent separation from family and home. However, both seafarers and their partners made several suggestions for ways in which the negative consequences of the work pattern could be reduced. These will be considered in this section.

Reduction in length of trip

Months at sea per year, and, to a lesser extent, length of trip, have been found to be good predictors of social marginality of seafarers (Forsyth and Bankston, 1984) and length of trip has been found to be inversely related to job satisfaction amongst seafarers (Forsyth, 1990). The problems associated with longer trips were reflected by couples' suggestions for improving the lives' of seafaring families. A decrease in the length of trip was commonly mentioned as a means of reducing the strain of periodic separation. Couples tended to be more positive about the experience of managing a seafaring lifestyle where the seafarer was working relatively short tours of duty (for example, one or two months). Longer trips were generally regarded as more problematic, as one seafarer who was working four-month trips commented:

It's not the job, the actually work side that's making me leave it's just the actual length of the trips making me leave. (Junior Officer)

Seafarers and their partners felt that shorter trips were considerable more beneficial to their relationship and family life. Shorter trips were felt to allow seafarers to reintegrate more

easily into family life upon their return home and make periods of coping alone more manageable for their partners. A seafarer's wife noted:

Three months to be away is a bit too long [...] too long to be on your own, too long, because like I said to him if he's away that long, you'd be a single person really. (Wife of Senior Officer)

The advantages of shorter trips were perhaps particularly significant for those seafarers who had young children. During long trips, changes in children could be considerable and sometimes unsettling for seafarers upon their return home. Very young children, in particular, were also reported to 'forget' their father over long tours of duty. To be responded to as a stranger by their children could be upsetting for seafarers. One seafarer explained:

I wouldn't want to be away longer than 2 months I shouldn't think. I think that's long enough, to little children, you kind of miss their growing up a lot, and also considering [my wife's] point of view, she's on her own for 2 months with responsibility for the family, I don't think that would be ... she'd cope, but I think that would be long enough. (Senior Officer)

Communication

The cost of ship-shore communication could be a considerable expense to seafaring families, both in terms of initial outlay for telecommunication equipment (FAX machines, personal computers etc.) and the ongoing costs associated with their use (see Thomas et al, forthcoming). The high financial costs of staying in touch could inhibit contact and, where contact was relatively frequent, place a large financial burden on couples as one wife explained:

The companies should allow them so much call time a week or something to phone home. Just once a week to phone home on their time so we wouldn't have to have such big phone bills, cos a lot of the blokes won't phone their wives, no not at all, we spend a fortune. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Subsidised or free ship-shore communication was mentioned by many couples as something companies could do to support seafarers and their families, as one seafarer suggested:

[Companies could] keep the post and the email free, the satellite phone prices could be brought down [...]. [They could] Allow people to go ashore so they can ring their families on a cheaper land line. (Junior Officer)

A further means suggested to improve their quality of life aboard ship and reduce the strains associated with prolonged absence from home and family was increased access to personal email facilities aboard ship allowing couples to communicate frequently and, importantly, privately with each other whilst separated.

Company support

A belief in the company's support during times of crisis was important to couples, in particular the knowledge that the company would endeavour to get the seafarer home if there was a family emergency ashore. Such knowledge helped to reduce the significance of geographical separation and give wives a sense of support even in their partners' absence. As one seafarer's wife commented:

The reassurance and the security of him being there for us, you know it only - it does only take a phone call and he'll be home. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Opportunities to sail

Couples were very positive about opportunities to sail with their partner and many women took advantage of this opportunity and some reported sailing with their husband for a number of years, only stopping when they started a family and childcare responsibilities necessitated that they stay at home. This opportunity allowed couples to spend precious time together and promoted a greater understanding of the seafarers' work and living conditions. Children were also thought to benefit from the opportunity to sail with their father or visit him aboard ship. As one adult child of a seafarer recalled:

Oh definitely [sailing with him] did help yeah. Well because what his cabin was like, what the size of the cabin you know was, how many other people he lived with, where he ate, his routine, his isolation and the loneliness that he probably felt as well at times. (Child of Senior Officer)

Contact with other seafaring families

Women reported feeling that their shoreside friends often had difficulties in understanding the particular issues that faced seafaring families and were keen to have the opportunity to meet up with other women with seafaring partners who shared like experiences and lifestyles. This was felt to be something that could be arranged via the company, at relatively little expense or effort. It was suggested that companies could simply provide contact details to their employee's partners or could take a more active role in facilitating family groups and events. As two women suggested:

I think they could have family days. [...] It would get the families together. The life for the families, wives and children, it can be very isolated. They could build a support network. (Wife of Senior Officer)

That would be a good idea actually, people living the same life, to talk to. (Wife of Senior Officer)

Contact with other seafaring families was also thought to be important for seafarer's children. As one woman explained:

With the children - your mum and dad are divorced or they haven't got a dad, so I think people are quite shocked and they kind of say 'well are you divorced?' and then 'no, my daddy works on a ship', because that's quite - I mean if there's other children if their dad worked on a ship that would be more normal. (Wife of Junior Officer)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The in-depth accounts of seafarers and their partners allowed a rich insight into the lives and relationships of seafaring families. In their accounts, couples reported perceiving very few benefits associated with seafaring. Indeed a number of seafarers cited money as the only reason they continued their sea career. In contrast to the limited perceived benefits of the occupation, the strains associated with prolonged and repeated separation from home and family were both numerous and considerable.

Difficulties were experienced at all stages of the work cycle, however, in common with previous studies, the transition periods between ship and shore and from home back to sea again were found to be the most problematic times for couples. During these transition periods couples had to move between two existences that were sufficiently different for seafarers and their partners to refer to living in 'two worlds' or having 'two lives' or even 'two selves'. Tensions were reported to develop when the seafarer returned home and struggled to adjust to the routines and demands of family life again, and partners had to manage the transition from living alone and, in some cases, acting as a 'single parent family', to being part of a couple again. Many wives had learned to cope very successfully in their partner's absence and this successful coping could paradoxically leave seafarers feeling redundant and 'displaced' when they returned home. For couples with young children problems could be exacerbated during this period as children saw their fathers as 'strangers' and felt their lives to be more normal when they were away. The period immediately before the seafarer's return to sea was also characterised by anxiety and strain as couples anticipated the disruption of family life and the angst associated with their separation. The tensions associated with these transition periods could absorb considerable portions of seafarers' leave periods, leaving seafarers relatively little time to enjoy with their families.

Despite the problems precipitated by the occupational lifestyle, the accounts of couples in this study suggested that family relationships were of particular importance to seafarers. The lengthy and repeated separations from their home appeared to inhibit seafarers' ability

to initiate and maintain friendship networks ashore. Very few of the seafarers interviewed for this study reported long term, close shore-based friendships and many reported spending significant portions of their leave periods alone. Correspondingly, changes in working conditions such as reduced crewing levels, single-person tasking, fast turn around times and increased working hours all served to diminish on-board relationships to little more than 'on-board acquaintances'. In this context seafarers became extremely dependent on their partners for emotional support and the provision of a social support network ashore. Many seafarers reported turning to their partner exclusively for support and often relied on them for assistance with professional, as well as personal and emotional, problems. These factors suggested that the consequences of relationship breakdown for seafarers could be considerable.

Increased access to telecommunication facilities appeared to significantly reduce the impact of seafarers' intermittent separation from their families. (Cell-net) telephone and email communication allowed regular communication between couples and gave seafarers a sense of continued participation in family life. Such regular contact appeared to be important in easing transitions between ship and shore life. There was evidence to suggest that ship-shore communication was particularly important at times of stress or emotional strain. The apparent rarity of close confiding relationships on board meant that, at such times, access to emotional and social support from home could be crucial for seafarer well being.

Whilst the separation from home and family was largely considered to be an immutable aspect of seafaring, the detrimental consequences and experiences of such separation were not regarded as irreducible. In their accounts, both seafarers and their partners referred to a number of factors that influenced their experience of intermittent separation. Many of these related to the seafarers' employment and working conditions. Shorter tours of duty, access to free or subsidised communication, and opportunities for partners to sail could all considerably improve the lives of seafarers and their partners and reduce the impact of seafaring on family life (see section on recommendations, below).

The domains of family life and the environment of work may traditionally have been considered separately, however these data suggest that to continue do this would be a considerable oversight. The accounts of couples in this study indicated that, for seafarers and their partners, home and work lives are inextricably linked. Over thirty years ago the

Rochdale Report (1970) pointed to the role of the family in seafarers' decisions to cut short their sea career and more recent research suggests that this stands true today (Telegraph, 1999). The findings of this study reiterate the significance of seafarers' partners in sustaining the seafarer's participation as sea-going members of the maritime industry. The problems of the retention and recruitment of well-trained seafarers has been highlighted as a matter of global concern (BIMCO/ISF 2000; EC, 2001). The findings of this study suggests that attention to seafarers' families and attempts to reduce the negative consequences of seafaring on family life may have considerable beneficial implications for retention of seafarers.

This exploratory study focused on UK seafarers and their families, however, many of the issues discussed are likely salient to seafaring families worldwide. As noted earlier, work and employment conditions significantly contributed to families' experiences of seafaring work and family life. Those seafarers from developing countries with less economic power and weaker economic positions within the global seafarers' labour market typically have less favourable employment contracts and poorer work conditions than their Western European counterparts. It follows that such reduced employment conditions may considerably amplify the detrimental impact of seafaring work patterns on family life with the subsequent implications for both seafarer retention and seafarer and family wellbeing (see Thomas et al., forthcoming).

Recommendations

The data from this study suggest that there are a number of steps that can be taken to improve the lives of seafarers and their families. In particular:

- Increased access to private email in order to facilitate frequent and regular contact between seafarers and their families.
- Subsidised communication to reduce the financial burden of communication on couples.

- Delivery of regular mail as frequently as is logistically possible in order to increase opportunities for communication and maintain seafarer morale.
- Tours of duty of no longer than four months in duration.
- Increased opportunities for partners, and where possible children, to sail in order that families have the opportunity to spend valuable time together and to enable partners and children to have a better understanding of the seafarer's life and work at sea.
- Improvements in the organisation of reliefs/ replacements so that seafarer's arrival and departure from home can be more accurately anticipated thus reducing the stress associated with transition periods from ship to shore and from home back to sea.
- The promotion of social contact between seafaring families in order to reduce the social isolation experienced by seafarers' partners and facilitate the development of social support networks.
- Assurance of seafarers' immediate repatriation upon family crisis.
- Improved contact between the company and seafarers' partners.
- Where possible seafarers should sail with same crew, thus facilitating opportunities for social relationships aboard.
- Cost cutting through reduced crew sizes along with increased administrative duties should be balanced against detrimental health consequences for seafarers, in particular those relating to stress, fatigue and social isolation.

Suggestions for future research

- A study of ex-seafarers and seafarers' ex-partners to explore the experiences of those individuals whose relationship have not 'survived' the seafaring lifestyle.
- Research with couples when the seafarer has recently retired to explore the issues facing couples as they adjust to seafarer's continued presence in home and seafarers adjust to long term shore-based life.
- An investigation into the impact of intermittent parent absence on seafarers' children.
- Research suggests that many women employed in the cruise sector of the industry do not end their sea careers after childbirth (Belcher et al., 2001). Future research should address the specific issues for couples where women are the intermittent partners.
- An exploration of the effect of, and responses to, exposure to shipboard traumatic events.
- This study suggests that work conditions and employment contracts have a significant impact on experiences of seafarers and their families in terms of the effects of a seafaring lifestyle. Further research should be conducted on UK ratings and seafarers of different nationalities in order to fully explore possible issues and consequences relating to such differing work conditions.

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Appendix 1:

Interview Guide for Seafarers

Seafarers

information to be given before commencing the interview

- nature and purpose of research
- confidentially
- no right or wrong answers, interested in your own views and experiences• tape recorded for accuracy, not to misquote, no one else other than me will hear the tape, can turn of at any point if you wish to say something that is unrecorded or you are free to leave at any point.
- can have a look at the transcript and comment
- I'm sure you'll understand that because of the nature of the study some of the questions are quite sensitive. It is important that we ask these questions in order to get a full picture of the life of seafarers and their partners and so we can effectively seek to improve their welfare. However if there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering please tell me and we can move on to the next one.
- any questions before we start?

Work History

Type of ship worked on

Typical length of trip/ leave

Last trip details (date, length, ports, ship type)

How long worked at sea

Any career breaks, why?

Partnership history

- how long married/ known each other before partner went to sea
- how long married
- any previous marriages/ co-habiting relationships
- feelings about being married whilst working at sea

Home

- management of household (money, household decision making)
- how do you feel about your wife being in paid employment

Benefits of this work pattern

- What are the good things about this pattern of work?

Problems

- *What are the problems associate with this pattern of work? What are they?*
 - *When at HOME*
 - *When AT SEA*
 - *During TRANSITION period*
- Perceived impact on health and well-being (experience on health/ illness over cycle)
- Loneliness / social isolation
- Concern for wife whilst away
- Worries about fidelity
- Problems adjusting to change
 - *Power*
 - *Intimacy*
- Impact on children

Coping strategies

Who do you turn to when you are down (at home/ at sea?)

- support networks - family, community, other seafaring families, company, trade unions, state
- Compensatory good relationships with other people
- Contact with other seafarers/ seafaring families

- Social Capital - civic engagement, participation in formal and informal civic action (e.g. bowling clubs - or anything to give a sense of purposive participation in the community/ community networks).
- Role of religion

Impact of work patterns on relationships

- emotional satisfaction through relationships
- How they experience, make sense of and justify (own) absence from family and relationship.
- Compensatory good relationships with other people
- Use of emotional labour to facilitate relationship
- physical and emotional intimacy
- missing sexual contact
- fidelity (have you had any other relationships whilst you've been working at sea/ commercial sex/ health issues fears)

Other

- Conflicts on time while you are at home (demands from extended family).
- How could things be improved?

Appendix 2:

Interview Guide for Seafarers□ Partners

Seafarers Partners

information to be given before commencing the interview

- nature and purpose of research
- confidentially
- no right or wrong answers, interested in your own views and experiences
- tape recorded for accuracy, not to misquote, no one else other than me will hear the tape, can turn of at any point if you wish to say something that is unrecorded or you are free to leave at any point.
- can have a look at the transcript and comment
- I'm sure you'll understand that because of the nature of the study some of the questions are quite sensitive. It is important that we ask these questions in order to get a full picture of the life of seafarers and their partners and so we can effectively seek to improve their welfare. However if there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering please tell me and we can move on to the next one.
- any questions before we start?

Thoughts for topic guide:

Partner's Work History

- Type of ship worked on
- Typical length of trip/ leave
- Last trip details (date, length, ports, ship type)
- How long worked at sea
- Any career breaks, why?

Partnership history

- how long married/ known each other before partner went to sea
- how long married
- feelings about marrying seafarer (if seafarer when married)
- any previous marriages/ co-habiting relationships? were these to seafarers?

Home

- management of household (money, household decision making)
- paid employment for wives - degree of choice (desires, childcare responsibilities)
- How does your life change when your husband is at sea/ at home?

Benefits

- What are the good things associated with this pattern of work?

Problems/

- *are there any difficulties/ problems associated with this pattern of work? What are they?*
 - *When partner is AWAY*
 - *When partner is at HOME*
 - *During TRANSITION period*
- perceived impact on health and well being (experience of health/ illness over cycle).
- Loneliness.
- Concern for husband wellbeing while away.
- Dealing with problems/ crisis alone.
- Harassment from other men while husband is away.
- Temptations from other men while husband is away.
- Management of identity/ gossip
- Adjustment problems when he is at home
 - *Power*
 - *Intimacy*
- Impact on children.

Coping strategies

- who do you turn to when you are down?
- Who do you turn to when you need practical help?
- support networks - family, community, other seafarers wives, company, trade unions, state
- Compensatory good relationships with other people
- Contact with other seafarers wives.

- Social Capital - civic engagement, participation in formal and informal civic action (e.g. bowling clubs - or anything to give a sense of purposive participation in the community/ community networks).
- Role of religion

Impact of work patterns on relationship

- emotional satisfaction through relationships
- How they experience, make sense of and justify partners (own) absence from family and relationship.
- wife's use of emotional labour to facilitate relationship
- physical and emotional intimacy
- Missing sexual contact.
- Fidelity (yourself/ your partner/ Commercial sexual relationships)

Other

- Conflicts on time whilst partner is at home (demands from extended family).
- How could things be improved?

Appendix 3:

Biography Questionnaire: Seafarers

Seafarers

Participant number

ABOUT YOU

1. Name.....
2. Occupation.....
3. Age years
4. What type of ship do you usually work on?
5. What route do you usually work on?
.....
.....
6. How long is your usual tour of duty?.....
7. How long are you usually on leave?
8. Is your partner in paid employment?
 yes no
9. If yes, what is their occupation?
10. What is your total household income?
 10 - 15,000 30,001 - 40,000
 15,001 - 20,000 40,001 - 50,000
 20,001 - 25,000 50,001 - 60,000
 25,001 - 30,000 60,001+
11. Are you: widowed single
 divorced married
 separated living with a partner
12. How many times have you been married?times
13. How long have you been in a relationship with this partner?
.....years months

14. How long have you been living with this partner?

.....yearsmonths

15. How long have you been married to this partner?

(if not married, please go to the next question)

.....yearsmonths

16. To which of these groups do you consider you belong:.

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> white | <input type="checkbox"/> Indian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black-African | <input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black-Caribbean | <input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black-Other | <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese |

17. How many children do you have? children

18. What are the age/ s of your children?

Age of child 1

Age of child 2

Age of child 3

Age of child 4

Age of child 5

.....
interviewer use only

Date of interview.....

Time of interview.....

Location

Length

Interview obtained through.....

Other

comments.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Appendix 4:

Biography Questionnaire: Seafarers Partners

Seafarers

Participant number

ABOUT YOU

1. Name.....

2. Age years

3. What is your partner's position onboard?

4. What type of ship does your partner usually work on?

5. What route does your partner usually work on?

6. How long is your partner's usual tour of duty?

7. How long is your partner usually on leave?.....

8. Are you in paid employment?

yes no

9. If yes, what is your occupation?

10. What is your total household income (per year)?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10 - 15,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> 30,001 - 40,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15,001 - 20,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> 40,001 - 50,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20,001 - 25,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> 50,001 - 60,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25,001 - 30,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> 60,001+ |

11. Are you: widowed single
 divorced married
 separated living with a partner

12. How many times have you been married?times

13. How long have you been in a relationship with this partner?
yearsmonths

14. How long have you been living with this partner?
yearsmonths

15. How long have you been married to this partner?
 (if not married, please go to the next question)
yearsmonths

16. To which of these groups do you consider you belong:.

<input type="checkbox"/> white	<input type="checkbox"/> Indian
<input type="checkbox"/> Black-African	<input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani
<input type="checkbox"/> Black-Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi
<input type="checkbox"/> Black-Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese

17. How many children do you have? children

18. What are the age/ s of your children?

Age of child 1

Age of child 2

Age of child 3

Age of child 4

Age of child 5

.....

interviewer use only

Date of interview.....

Time of interview.....

Location

Length

Interview obtained through.....

Other

comments.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Appendix 5:

Information Letter for Participants

August 2000

Dear Participant

Study of Seafarers and their Partners

Thank you for taking the time to help me in this study of seafarers and their partners. Just to remind you, I am a researcher at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University. SIRC undertakes research into occupational health and safety and on seafarers' well-being on board ship, among their families and in the labour market.

We are currently exploring the impact of a seafaring career on seafarers and their families. Previous research has indicated that the transition from home to work is one of the major causes of stress for seafarers and may also impact on the health of their partners. We plan to collect data in the UK and China. The aim of the study is to provide us with the means to effectively work to improve the welfare of seafarers and their families.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your assistance in this important study and assure you that anything you have told me will be completely confidential. Nothing that you say will be linked to you and your name will not feature in any of the reports about the study.

This study may raise some sensitive issues. If you feel that you might like to talk about these further, please contact me and I will put you in touch with an organisation or individual who can help. You can contact me on Tel 029 20 876236, email ThomasM4@Cardiff.ac.uk or at the address above. Please also feel free to get in touch if you have any questions or would like any more information about the study.

Once again, thank you very much for your help.

With best wishes.

Dr Michelle Thomas

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