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# ‘What is immediate and obvious feels real’: National identity and emotional vulnerabilities in the field

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Nelson Turgo and Helen Sampson

## Abstract

This article provides a critical reflection on methodological issues at the interface of researcher national identity and emotional vulnerability. This aspect of social research is often neglected in discussions of positionality, primarily in relation to emotional risk in the field, and here we address this gap in the literature. Rather than reflecting on access and rapport, or issues related to the complexities of insider or outsider research, the national identity of the researcher is considered alongside emotional entanglements experienced in the field. The emotion work that is performed, and the emotional risks that are experienced by the researcher as a consequence of nationality reveal much about the complexities of identity and power relations in the field. The fieldwork informing this article was undertaken as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded study (ES/N019423/1) that examined how seafarers from different ethnic and faith backgrounds interact with each other on board and how their religious/spiritual and welfare needs are addressed ashore.

## Keywords

Emotional risk, emotion management, fieldwork, Filipino, national identity, researcher identity, seafarers

## Introduction

There is still a common assumption that an ethnographer’s ability to gain the trust of group members depends on his or her degree of similarity to them (Bucierius 2013: 691). This potentially applies to a huge range of characteristics including, for example, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity (Abbas, 2006; Egharevba, 2001; Turgo, 2012b), gender, age, and class (Archer, 2002; Finch, 1984; Sprague, 2016; Ward, 2016). In this paper the focus is on ethnicity/nationality and in relation to ethnicity authors have suggested that reliable ‘authentic’ accounts are much more possible and there is ‘genuine strength in how the researcher interacts with the researched where there is symmetry between the ethnicity of the researcher and the researched’ (Abbas, 2006: 325; Adeagbo, 2021). This is controversial however as similarities in social identities can also cause challenges and difficulties.

Research participants for various reasons could experience researchers who share similarities with them (like belonging to the same ethnic class or cultural group) as a threat to their person or community which could undermine or even cause the termination of participation. ‘Insiders’ can

pose a threat to research participants in a variety of ways. For example, when Turgo (2012a) undertook fieldwork in a fishing community for his PhD he found that at a time of elections his renowned closeness to a leading political family repelled some locals, who distanced themselves from him. In a different context, Bhattacharya (2009), a former seafarer and maritime executive, was denied access to many shipping companies for his research as a result of his employment history. This was made clear to him when one company official told him over the phone that his request could not be granted because ‘(they) did not want to get inspected by (him)’ (Bhattacharya, 2009: 96). In these examples, sharing similarities with the people that they were going to study caused difficulties for researchers as they were perceived to be threatening in some sense.

Seafarers International Research Centre, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Wales, UK

### Corresponding author:

Nelson Turgo, Seafarers International Research Centre, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Wales CF10 3AT, UK.  
 Email: [turgon@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:turgon@cardiff.ac.uk)



In recently published literature, studies of research experience and social identities, and their impact on research outcomes are predominantly focused on gender, ethnicity and class (Gajparia, 2017; Obasi, 2014), and echoing Benwell's (2014) observation in geographical research, we observe that 'nationality is a consistently neglected strand of social identity in discussions of positionality' (p. 164). More specifically, in relation to emotion management in the field, scant attention has been afforded to how the researcher's national identity could interface with emotional vulnerabilities in the field. In highlighting the importance of national identity in relation to emotional vulnerabilities in the field, there is no intention to 'downplay the intersectional nature of (researcher) identities that encompass gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on; national identities here are conceptualised as pluralistic' (Benwell, 2014: 164). We nevertheless suggest that nationality can impact on relationships in the field in a variety of ways. Sharing the same national identity with research participants has the potential to burden the researcher with material, moral and ethical obligations and this may have an impact on their emotional well-being. In addition, a researcher may engage more emotionally with the concerns and problems of the people s/he is interacting with when a national identity is shared, particularly in multinational settings. This may instantiate stronger bonds between the researcher and the researched exposing researchers to a higher degree of emotional risk. Sharing the same national identity as participants may also expose researchers to the harms and vulnerabilities that the group experiences in multinational environments, potentially laying bare power dynamics in the field.

There is therefore a need to critically reflect on how national identity impinges on emotional entanglements in the field. For this reason, we draw upon the experience of Turgo when undertaking fieldwork in the multinational setting of an international cargo ship and in two seafarers' welfare centres. Turgo is originally from the Philippines and holds dual Filipino and British nationality. His fieldwork experiences have led him to believe that being Filipino was more critical to his emotional exposure in the field than any other identity which he willfully displayed, constructed or articulated.

Following up on the assertion made by Jafari et al. (2013), presence in the field and experiencing the nitty gritty of life among the research participants afford researchers the recognition that 'one's emotional state can add a new lens through which to understand data and the researchers' role in (knowledge) production' (p. 1194). The difference that this makes is highlighted in how the researcher's own experiences of the captain on board allowed him to gain a deeper understanding of how Filipino seafarers manage and come to terms with power and nationality hierarchies on board. The production of knowledge in this personal and engaged context results in a greater depth of understanding of 'other' lives which is more intense and empathic. In this context, through a critical reflection on Turgo's emotional labour, the article 'situates the emotional aspects of knowledge production as an integral and

salient aspect of the research process' (Mehrotra, 2014, cited in Hudson and Richardson, 2016: 419). Furthermore, the paper contributes to the widening and deepening of discussions of the importance of national identities on emotion management and, concomitantly, on the emotional well-being of researchers in the field.

## Emotion management and researcher identity

When undertaking fieldwork, researchers expose themselves to risks (Emerald and Carpenter, 2015; Gajparia, 2017; Hanna, 2019; Lee, 1993; Micanovic et al., 2019) both in relation to physical and emotional harm (Lee, 1995; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Sampson et al., 2008; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Possibilities of physical harm (which can be serious and even fatal) can never be discounted in any research setting regardless of the careful consideration of safety issues prior to the commencement of research. Sampson has previously reflected on many of these issues in her discussion of the dynamic nature of risk in the field (Sampson, 2017). However, it is not only physical risk which researchers face in the field. Emotional harm in a variety of forms is also significant and particularly to those engaged in qualitative research (Sampson et al., 2008; Evans et al., 2017; Lee, 1993; von Benzon and van Blerk, 2017). For example, researching sensitive topics (e.g. bereavement, infertility, juvenile prostitution, homelessness) generally exposes researchers to a need for heightened emotion management (Carroll, 2012; Hanna, 2019; Melrose, 2002; Micanovic et al., 2019).

As with physical risks, emotional risks in research are often unpredictable and can arise in the most unexpected of settings. The emotional labour associated with fieldwork can likewise be more damaging than anticipated. For example, Warden's fieldwork with sex workers and former human trafficking victims in Guatemala led her to become withdrawn (Warden, 2013). Upon seeking counselling she was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Other risks have emerged in research settings of different kinds that are very closely associated with power relations in the field. In many situations, researchers are regarded as powerful authority figures who have a responsibility towards participants with regard to ethical conduct and emotional protection. However, sometimes the tables are turned as attested by both Hoffmann (2007) and Adams (1999). Their experiences indicate how in some fieldwork settings researchers relinquish a great deal of control in pursuit of rapport and good relationships. Aboard ships for example, researchers have to defer to the captain's authority if they want their fieldwork to succeed.

In terms of emotional risk various aspects of a researcher's identity, for example, their gender, have been considered in the literature (Sampson and Thomas, 2003) however such reflections have seldom focussed upon national identity. This

paper redresses this imbalance and unpacks the impact of nationality on emotional risk in the field. To facilitate this, we draw upon Turgo's fieldwork experience on a multinational ship and in two ports as 'an exercise of critical reflexivity rather than navel gazing alone' (Boccagni, 2011: 738). While this is a reflexive account, the manner in which the experience in the field is interrogated in the article (and furthermore in its production) should oppose some of the criticisms levelled at the very act of examining the self as lazy (Delamont, 2007) self-indulgent and egotistical (Roth, 2008, cited in Warden, 2013: 151). Highlighting the importance of national identity in the field and the resultant emotional vulnerabilities that it engenders begs us to consider the positionality of researchers vis-a-vis 'fluid fields' of research (Sampson, 2017). In doing this we hope to contribute to a better understanding of knowledge production and power relations in the field (Mehrotra, 2014; Sampson et al., 2008).

### Identity and practice in the field

Turgo was born in the Philippines. He came to the United Kingdom in 2006 as a student and in 2010 he started working at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), which focuses on issues related to the maritime industry. He became a British citizen in 2017.

In 2017 Turgo began work on a study of faith and religion amongst multinational crews onboard merchant vessels funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/N019423/1). The study involved a multidisciplinary team composed of the authors of this account and three others. It considered how seafarers from different countries and religious persuasions (or none) work and live together for an extended period of time at sea and sought to shed light on the practice and management of religion in globalised work places, and how the religious/spiritual/welfare needs of seafarers are catered for by seafarers' centres and port chaplains.

The study involved Turgo in undertaking fieldwork onboard a tanker (lasting seven weeks) and in two UK seafarers' centres, referred to here as Riverside and Porton (pseudonyms) where he spent 6 months observing and interacting with chaplains, volunteers, centre staff and seafarers—generally 'loitering with intent' (Gilliat-Ray, 2011: 471).

The tanker had a crew of 33 seafarers among which there were 27 Filipino ratings and officers. The most senior officers came from the United States, and Europe. During his time onboard, Turgo interacted with the crew daily. This was usually in their free time although it could also be on the bridge and on deck while they were working. He conducted semi-structured interviews to complement the observational data that he gathered onboard and during shore leave in port.

The UK-based Riverside Seafarers Centre is housed in a big Victorian building, beside a major port. A consortium of two religious organisations, Anglican and Catholic, financially supported the running of the centre. Porton Seafarers Centre conducted its operations from two separate buildings

within the port limits of two different ports. The largest of the two seafarers' centres operated in Porton was run by a charitable trust. Like Riverside, it had a bar, a shop, a recreational room and a chapel, all of which could be accessed by seafarers. The centre also provided free transportation to seafarers from the ship to the centre and vice versa.

At both Riverside and Porton, Turgo played the roles of an observing participant and a participating observer. If the centres were busy and needed a helping hand, he would assist with clearing up empty glasses/bottles; preparing hot drinks, assisting seafarers with directions to the city, and answering questions about the merchandise. His fieldwork also involved shadowing chaplains and volunteers on their regular ship visits in order to observe how they interacted with, and addressed the needs of, seafarers.

Turgo introduced himself as a volunteer to seafarers with whom he expected only fleeting contact, and in contexts where he did not wish to interfere with the interactions of the chaplains and volunteers whom he was observing during ship visits. In seafarers' centres, if and when interactions were more prolonged, he would also add that he was also a researcher working in the university and that he was interested to know more about the life of seafarers. This additional information was oftentimes met with interest by Filipino seafarers who would then ask questions about the purpose of the study and how he ended up working in the United Kingdom. Turgo felt that his presence in the centre, and indeed, on board ships during ship visits, was always welcomed by Filipino seafarers who would claim him as their 'kababayan (countrymate)' and therefore could be relied on for favours like more biscuits or a steady supply of brewed coffee which they were too shy to request from chaplains and centre staff. It is also along these lines that some Filipino seafarers, having found a confidant in a foreign country, would share more personal experiences, comforted by the fact that they had a 'kababayan' to talk to.

Onboard the tanker, Filipino seafarers initially regarded him as a journalist, spy, company official, or medical doctor although after a week of constant explanation, they arrived at a better understanding of his purpose. When probed about the possible outcomes of his stay, he explained that one was writing a book. As a result, he came to be seen rather as, in the words of Scheper-Hughes (1992), a 'minor historian' for people who otherwise would have no history (Bucerius, 2013: 698). He also acted like a counsellor to most of them—although some were older than him. They sought his opinion on family matters, especially with regard to the education of their children. With younger seafarers, he talked about their career prospects and future plans.

In producing the article Turgo and Sampson re-read field-notes and interview transcripts with a view to identifying key issues and themes that would inform the central arguments.<sup>1</sup> Sampson has undertaken extensive fieldwork at sea and in a period of twenty years has also experienced challenging interactions attributable to identity—primarily age and gender. In the

course of Turgo's fieldwork on board, he was in constant communication with Sampson and they extensively discussed the captain and his behaviour. Despite her different characteristics Sampson had experienced very similar behaviours as a researcher at sea which she conveyed to Turgo while he was in the field. Once Turgo had returned from his fieldwork, Turgo and Sampson talked about their respective experiences with seafarers, shared fieldnotes, and jointly explored the issues discussed throughout the paper. In doing so each author came to see their own experiences in a slightly different light and gained an insight into how subjectively experienced self-identity and our perceptions of how we believe others see us in the field impact on researcher emotion and wellbeing. This jointly authored paper is a co-produced outcome of those deliberations and discussions.

In the next two sections, we focus on the experiences of Turgo in the field, reflecting on his experiences of emotional vulnerability and his perception of the role of his Filipino identity in his interactions with seafarers that he met onboard, in seafarers' centres, and during his ship visits.

### Being Filipino in the field

The seafaring industry is considered to be one of the most globalised in the world both in terms of ownership and in terms of the labour market (Alderton et al., 2004; Sampson, 2013). Today the Philippines is one of the two most significant suppliers of seafarers providing close to a third of the seafarers working on the global fleet (BIMCO, 2015). In the latter part of the twentieth century Filipino seafarers were predominantly employed as ratings but the dawning of the twenty-first century saw increasing numbers of Filipino officers employed. Today the Philippines is the second largest supplier of officers to the global fleet (ICS, 2020).

In the field, Turgo was able to identify many advantages associated with sharing a nationality with Filipino participants. He felt that his experience had parallels with that of Obasi (2014) in terms of 'comfort with (the) participants [. . .] [and] the ease with which interviews flowed. The participants seemed relaxed and appeared to talk openly about experiences and views they held' (p. 65). As in most settings of the maritime industry where Filipino seafarers and office staff (working in ship management and crewing agencies) are ubiquitous, his national identity became a ticket to access. When gatekeepers got wind of his name and accent (while talking on the phone), their usual comment was that it was not a surprise that he was doing research on seafarers given his Filipino heritage.

Both ashore and at sea, Turgo found that many Filipino seafarers saw him as an ally. However, regardless of a shared national identity, he was aware of the ways in which he was an outsider in terms of research with Filipino seafarers. His occupation and associated education set him apart. More significantly, perhaps, his dual nationality constituted supremely valuable symbolic and social capital. However, he nonetheless recognised that there was an assumed level of trust and familiarity, either 'established or inherent' (Obasi, 2014) between himself and Filipino seafarers.

In the field, therefore, he saw himself as an outsider-within (Adeagbo, 2021; Guevarra, 2006; Zavella, 1997), somebody who was an outsider and yet shared similarities with many of the people that he was interacting with. There was both a calculated distance and spontaneous intimacy that he felt in the presence of Filipino seafarers. He therefore came to the field seeking more information about people with whom he shared a certain kind of bond. Despite the positive benefits that his background lent him in the field, however, his reflections led him to consider that it was also a doorway to emotional vulnerability in the field.

### In seafarers' centres and during ship visits

Part of data gathering required Turgo to do research in seafarers' welfare centres in two UK ports and to spend time accompanying chaplains/volunteers on their regular ship visits.

Ship visits tended to last for between 30 and 60 minutes. Chaplains and volunteers were often warmly welcomed onboard although this was not always the case (Montemaggi et al., 2018). Ship visits are important to seafarers, especially for those who have been at sea for months, because chaplains and volunteers bring a variety of material goods with them. They also offer a range of services to seafarers whose vessel may be berthed a long way from a city centre in ports which are usually characterised by a very poor public transport infrastructure (Sampson and Wu, 2003). One of the most significant aspects of a ship visit is the sale of sim cards and mobile top-up vouchers, and sometimes temporary access to free Wi-Fi. Chaplains and volunteers also provide seafarers with local information and frequently provide free transport to shopping malls, local tourist attractions and/or seafarers centres.

Around two thirds of the ships which were visited had some Filipino seafarers onboard. When there were Filipino seafarers on board, the chaplain or volunteer would inform the crew that he was with a Filipino volunteer (i.e. Turgo). This would create a flurry of enquiries about the services that he/they could provide. On the occasions when they had more time for interaction, questions would be raised about how he ended up working in the centre and how long had he been living in the United Kingdom. Occasionally, Filipino seafarers would share with him issues about working conditions onboard, or their own personal problems.

Turgo found that he was automatically considered an ally by some Filipino seafarers—somebody that they could confide in or extract favours from. For example, some requested a discounted price on mobile top-up vouchers. These were not in his gift, and his failure to help them made him feel badly. He was torn between the need to help seafarers, and the friendship that he had developed with chaplains and volunteers (whatever their nationalities) over the weeks and months that he had spent with them. He knew that such

requests were impossible to grant as mobile top-up vouchers were sold at 'cost' or with a very small mark up. He also knew that whatever small profits were made, went to funding services for seafarers. Unable to do what he 'ought to do' as a fellow Filipino, he often left a ship with a heavy heart, feeling inadequate.<sup>2</sup>

However, it was not only during his ship visits that he was exposed to emotional tension. In seafarers' centres, some Filipinos saw him as a safe person to unburden themselves to, somebody who was both a stranger and a friend; somebody who would not judge them. These seafarers were not looking for answers. They wanted somebody to listen to them, and it so happened that he was there. Sampson and Thomas (2003) had similar experiences on board ships. They suggested that seafarers' socially isolated environment increased the likelihood of sharing emotional stories with total strangers. In addition, they suggested that when researchers take an interest in the lives of seafarers [ . . . ] they invite the rare opportunity for seafarers to emotionally unload (Sampson and Thomas, 2003: 176). This happened to Turgo a couple of times in the centres where he felt that his nationality was a key factor in inviting confidences. One example stands out.

One afternoon, Turgo was approached by a Filipino seafarer who saw him helping in the bar. The seafarer asked him if he worked in the centre, and he explained the purpose of his presence. Later, they talked about the seafarer's family back home. He said he was planning to use the remittance facilities at the centre to send money to the Philippines because his mother and brother were both in hospital. They had no one to ask for help except him, and he said he was feeling the strain. He had been supporting family members, from his parents to his siblings' children and the burden was too much for him. His story was familiar to Turgo as it is not an uncommon situation among Filipino seafarers. However, he wanted to be supportive and he listened attentively. Then suddenly, out of the blue, the seafarer broke down. Turgo was not prepared for this emotional outburst (see also Rowling, 1999) and he did not know what to do. He sat there for what seemed like an eternity with a lump in his throat.

In these encounters with Filipino seafarers, either in seafarers' centres or during ship visits, Turgo's national identity facilitated the possibility of an immediate rapport. Though he was not a seafarer, and held dual nationality, there was a sense of familiarity and intimacy in every encounter. This exposed him to instances of emotional vulnerability. As an intruder with an agenda, he was interested in seafarers, yet after every emotive encounter, he would wonder about the purpose of his interactions. Should he be gathering data or trying to help seafarers, as the chaplains and volunteers were doing? He wondered if he could really play both parts at the same time. This echoes the observation made by Emerald and Carpenter (2015) when after every emotional encounter with their interviewees, they would ask: 'Where do I draw the line between objective researcher, emphatic listener and

researcher as therapist?' (p. 8) Active listening is emotionally exhausting (Carroll, 2012), and as explained by Etherington (2007), being powerless in the research encounter can itself be part of what is emotionally challenging (Hanna, 2019: 528). In this case Turgo felt that his Filipino identity made him something of a hostage to fortune when interacting with Filipino seafarers. He felt they had him at their bidding.

On board a merchant vessel, this also happened though in a different context. There, he felt his national identity exposed him to the same prejudices that Filipino seafarers experience on board. Prejudices that he had previously only heard about from seafarers that he had met in training centres and ports. On board, a hierarchical ship where Filipinos dominated but were absent among the very highest shipboard ranks, he felt that his cultural heritage and Filipino nationality trumped and overwhelmed all others.

### On board a tanker

The tanker which Turgo joined was the fourth vessel where he had undertaken research. As a result of his previous experiences of multinational crews he was not worried about his national identity impacting negatively on his relationships with non-Filipino seafarers. He thought that as long as there were Filipino seafarers on board, there was nothing to worry about inasmuch as he would have some natural allies on board who would help him out and with whom he would inevitably feel a cultural affinity. He was also conscious that on this voyage he was carrying with him supplementary status identities (Beoku-Betts, 1994): his professional affiliation as a UK-based academic and his British citizenship. On one previous ship, he was able to use these to further his engagement with the Chinese and Sri Lankan senior officers who were curious about life in the United Kingdom. In addition, he shared a common gender with the seafarers on board. Female researchers on board ships have written about the challenges they face on board (Acejo and Abila, 2016; Baum-Talmur, 2019; Sampson, 2017; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). As a male researcher, he had not previously experienced similar issues and forms of harassment.

In the initial 2-weeks of the voyage Turgo found that his presence was extremely well-tolerated and facilitated by the European captain and senior officers. At a US port of call, however, the captain left the vessel to take his leave and was replaced by a European captain of a very different kind. Prior to the arrival of the new captain, Turgo was made aware of the fact that the Filipino seafarers on board, who had previously sailed with the on-signing captain, did not like him. They believed him to be prejudiced and racist. As a Filipino, Turgo became anxious about what this might mean for his stay and for the progress of his research but he reassured himself that his identity as a UK-based academic and a British citizen – would insulate him from the micro-politics on board. In the event, when the new captain joined the ship he came to believe that his national identity trumped his

alternative statuses. This supports the observation made by Duneier (1999) ‘that aspects of a researcher’s identity may become more or less salient over the course of the research process, depending on the context’ (Bucerius, 2013: 698). On this ship, his national identity became the underlying current that steered him towards emotional turmoil and upset.

The new captain’s reputation preceded him. Turgo was warned by those who previously worked with him that he was both feared and loathed in equal measure. They said that he was foul-mouthed, ill-tempered and unpredictable. According to the messman, he made the life of a particular chief cook ‘hell’ to the extent that he was forced to cut short his contract. Regardless of this, the crew downplayed the likely negative impact on Turgo as they said, he was ‘different’—he was an academic from the United Kingdom! Furthermore, his presence was sanctioned by the management company. This reassurance soothed his anxieties and fears. He planned to commence his formal interviews with the crew during the third week of his fieldwork and the cooperation of the new captain was crucial.

His first meeting with the new captain set the tone of their relationship for the rest of his stay. The meeting was very short as the new captain seemed not interested in talking to him. Turgo attributed it to the busy schedule of the captain as they were still in port and the captain had a lot on his plate. He knew from discussing shipboard research with Sampson, and other colleagues, that this was relatively commonplace. He thought that the captain would be in a much more relaxed mood once they were underway. But Turgo was wrong. His second encounter with the captain reflected this and he recorded in his fieldnotes that:

Around 10:15 am, I bumped into the captain in the hallway. I greeted him but instead of returning my greeting or maybe just acknowledging me by nodding his head, he said: ‘Tell me your about your plan, what is your plan? Because I want you to sign off in (name of next port)’. It was so sudden that I could not say a word. ‘Should we go to your office, captain?’, I asked. ‘No’, he said. ‘This is very short, just tell me about your plan’. I thought he was very arrogant. He was treating me like one of his subordinates. I then explained to him that I plan to be on board for five/six weeks. He said it’s impossible’ and that I should speed up my interviews and sign off in (name of port). He sounded definite. I told him that I will have to inform my director (Sampson). He said I better do and sign off in (name of port) as instructed (Fieldnotes).

Some days later, the captain once again made it clear that he wanted Turgo to finish his interviews immediately and sign off in the next port. Turgo tried to explain to the captain that his suggested time frame would negatively impact on the quality of his research. But the captain was adamant. He said he had made his decision. This posed a great dilemma to Turgo. He had to convince the captain to change his mind. It had taken Sampson almost a year to negotiate access to the ship and the research opportunity could not be squandered.

However, he knew that without the captain’s cooperation he would accomplish very little in his research. As explained by Sampson and (Thomas) (2003), on board the ‘captain is king’.

At sea, captains are ultimately responsible not only for the operation of their vessels but for the safety of each individual aboard. With such responsibilities come significant powers, and Captains are generally in a position to have crew members ‘sent home’ (i.e. sacked) from any port, at any time, without being asked to substantially justify their decisions. (p. 172)

Discombobulated by the turn of events, he sent an email to Sampson asking if she could contact the management company to ask them to persuade the captain that he be allowed to sail for three or four more weeks. While it was being sorted out, with much reluctance, he started interviewing seafarers. Two days later, in a rather tense lunch, the visibly agitated and irritated captain, told Turgo that he received a phone call from one of the ‘big shots’ in the company instructing him that ‘the doctor’ (Turgo) was to sign off on the date of his own choosing. Turgo was relieved. However, this came at a high price as after ‘winning’ this clash of wills he felt he was riding an emotional roller coaster in his interactions with the captain.

As the days went by, Turgo felt unwelcome and uncomfortable in the captain’s presence. Whenever he saw him, he would say: ‘Oh, you are still here’. Turgo would respond to this jibe with a smile, and he would say, ‘Yes, captain’. At times, he felt tempted to rejoin ‘And I will be here until I feel like it’s time to leave’ just to annoy him but he knew that he had to be civil regardless of the captain’s constant badgering. On other occasions, the captain would repeatedly tell him:

‘I told you, since you did not sign off in (name of port), you would spend another month here or even more as I could not assure you that you would be able to leave the ship in the next port’.

This caused Turgo more stress as the idea of spending longer time at sea than he planned filled him with anxiety. He had other commitments back in the university, and the prospect of being stranded on board for an indefinite period of time scared him.

Then there was the issue of racism. Having interviewed hundreds of seafarers for other previous projects, Turgo had heard of racism on board in various forms. For example, some seafarers (not just Filipinos) would complain that senior officers (usually from OECD countries) would have better food provisions than ratings. On this ship, the Filipino cargo engineer had the same complaint. Although cooks and senior officers would understand ‘keeping senior officers happy’ as relating to hierarchy, where officers and ratings are of predominantly different nationalities such preferential treatment may be perceived as discrimination based on nationality rather than on rank. Some Filipino seafarers also

complained that they were called names by their non-Filipino officers (see also Ostreng, 2001). On this ship, in front of Turgo, and the rest of other officers, the captain called the Filipino chief mate an ‘idiot’ for his failure to understand his instruction. This is not, of course, a specifically racist term but in the febrile atmosphere on board and given the widespread perception of him as a racist many assumed that this lack of respect was rooted in racism.

The clearest confirmation of the captain as racist came when Turgo experienced his prejudice at firsthand. It came as a great shock, it stung, and he was left feeling numb. One Saturday evening, as was customary on this ship, the crew had steaks for dinner. The conversation was about work until the captain asked him for an update on his interviews and Turgo told him that he was progressing well. In his journal entry, Turgo wrote,

Today the captain asked me how my interviews were coming along. I told him that so far I have interviewed 18 seafarers. ‘Very good’, he said. ‘Don’t ask too many questions, limit your interview to five minutes and you will be finished in two days!’ [. . .] Then when I was to leave the crew mess, he called my attention and said: ‘Hey, get a piece of steak and put it in your pocket’. Then he laughed. (Fieldnotes)<sup>3,4</sup>

Reflecting on the brevity of the fieldnote entry about an event which subsequently came to define all his feelings towards the captain, Turgo realised that he had taken several days to process what had happened and how he felt: “Was it a joke?” he asked himself, “Did the captain want to make me laugh? Should have I laughed? Or was he insulting me? Or was I too sensitive? Maybe I was over-reacting? So, this is how to be a Filipino on this ship”. Embodied knowledge can only be gained when the researcher experiences the affronts shown to the group being studied observed Goffman, (1989, cited in Fine and Hancock, 2017: 264). For Turgo, this seemed true.

Every evening after dinner, Turgo would join the ratings for their nightly social event. Officers did not have these. They usually retired to their cabins after dinner. It was his chance to catch up with the crew and relieve himself of stress. However, following the incident with the captain, he found it challenging. He did not want to show that the treatment of the captain was taking a toll on him. The seafarers would ask him if he was okay and he would always say yes. He thought it was not in his best interest to tell them what he really felt. He had to work on his emotions really hard.

What also bolstered Turgo’s belief that he should do much emotion work in relation to what he was experiencing on board was his realisation that the Filipino seafarers were looking up to him; they were proud of his accomplishments. He was a living example that not all Filipinos do dirty jobs, and that some people like him could land a prestigious job overseas. This pressured him to show that he was not affected by the shenanigans of the captain. That he was taking it all in his stride. He wanted to show that he was not emotionally vulnerable for ‘the fear of losing legitimacy, or being

discredited’ (Blackman, 2007, cited in Emerald and Carpenter, 2015: 744) to hide his feet of clay (Warden, 2013). He wanted to show to his ‘kababayan’ that although he was being made to suffer by the captain, he would not be affected. It was for this reason that when Turgo did not sign off as intended by the captain, the crew were joyous and were indeed proud of him. They told him that the captain had finally ‘met his match’. He was only too happy to share with them his personal triumph. But in reality, he was in pieces.

Alone in his cabin at night, Turgo thought about ‘what if’, for instance, he was a bonafide European, with white skin, aquiline nose and not a naturalised British citizen, or maybe if had he been American, maybe, the captain would have treated him differently. He would have treated him like a real guest on board. Or maybe, the fault was his—he spent too much time with the Filipino crew? Then he would fall asleep, bone-tired from thinking about what went wrong and what could he have done better. Looking back, to paraphrase Behar (1996), he felt that this fieldwork had broken his heart.

Three days before Turgo left the ship, he was able to interview the captain. Regardless of their mutual dislike, and urged to do so by Sampson, he kept on requesting an interview with the captain, most especially during lunch after his usual quip ‘you’re still here’. The captain would always decline saying that he already interviewed the previous captain and there was nothing more to say. But one day, he met him in the alleyway, and the captain said that he was available for an interview.

Listening to the captain during the interview, Turgo experienced a strong sense of dissonance and emotional turmoil. By this stage in the voyage, he had been deeply affected by the hostile behaviour the captain had shown towards him. He held him in strong dislike and found it difficult to maintain a friendly demeanour (as demanded of a professional interviewer) in his presence. As the captain talked about his personal life and the challenges of being in command of a ship Turgo could not believe that this was the same person who for weeks had tormented him with his snide remarks, and who on a number of occasions explicitly and aggressively stated that he would not take any part in any interview. He was taken aback by the change and did not know if like himself, the captain was simply surface-acting. However, despite the surface cordiality, the interview felt like the longest 1 hour in Turgo’s life.<sup>5</sup>

After 7 weeks on board, finally Turgo was able to sign off in Puerto Rico. It was his longest fieldwork on a merchant vessel, and the most emotionally charged. He said goodbye to the crew. However, he skipped visiting the office of the captain. He dreaded seeing him. He wanted to leave the ship as fast as he could.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion and concluding thoughts

In this article we have shown how Turgo’s national identity became the pivot from which his emotional entanglements in the field were laid bare. Narayan (1997) explained that one’s



'positionality stems from threads of a culturally tangled identity where a person may have many strands of identification available, strands that may be tugged into the open or stuffed out of sight' (Guevarra, 2006: 539). Some identities become more pronounced and activated than others in the course of fieldwork, and understandably have an impact on the researcher's reaction to situations in the field. Identities are forged through the meeting of different social positionings to make complex individuals who have privilege in some parts of their lives and disadvantage in others, giving them their own unique perspective but one that is shaped by wider social processes and power dynamics (Collins and Bilge, 2016, cited in Thwaites, 2017: 7).

Being Filipino played a significant part in driving Turgo's emotional labour on board. He felt that this was perceived as his pre-eminent identity and it allowed him to foster easy and better access to the Filipino crew members. It also exposed his emotional vulnerabilities. However, other identities as a British citizen, and a researcher also played a part, and at times became dominant for example during shore leave, when upon seeing his passport, customs and immigration officials would just wave him away, rather than ask questions, or in instances on board when the crew would direct his attention to certain events because they thought he needed them for his research. These multiple identities overlapped, and could be experienced simultaneously and in succession at certain times. This article has argued however, that it was his shared national identity with the ratings and with some seafarers ashore that exposed him to emotional vulnerabilities more than any other.

Fieldwork, more than any other research methodology, requires researchers to immerse themselves in the place, and among the people, that they are researching. This in turn allows them to explore venues of identification and empathy which expose them to a whole range of emotive experiences and as such requires the constant management of self (Micanovic et al., 2019). Furthermore, as Gilliat-Ray (2010) explains, "being there' in a self-consciously embodied way over a period of time offers the opportunity to gather data of qualitatively different kind' (p. 426) including emotive instances in the most unpredictable times. All this testifies to the fluid nature of fieldwork as a field of emotions, 'where it is more difficult [ . . . ] to apply established "feeling rules" to guide the emotional dynamics between researcher and respondent' (Blee, 1998, cited in Hoffmann, 2007: 323). The ship is very much a fluid field (Sampson, 2017) where risk, either physical or emotional, is always present. In such institutionalised and remote contexts, risks are heightened, and in emotional terms can be expected to be intense.

Sampson and Thomas (2003) have previously described different kinds of risk that attend researchers in the field. Following Lee (1995), they underline the ambient risk attached to particular research settings and describe how such risks amplify situational risks carried by researchers into the field by virtue of their own identities and actions.

This is particularly true on a cargo ship at sea given that this represents a research site which is impossible to leave (Sampson and Thomas, 2003). In confirmation of this, Turgo considered that the ambient risks associated with being at sea intensified the risks associated with responses to his identity. Understanding the impact of gender and nationality on researchers' emotional risk in the highly institutionalised, hierarchical, shipboard context does not necessitate a demonstration of the subjective understandings of research participants. We are aware that both our own reactions in the field and our participants' behaviours are shaped by the stresses, power relations, and wider context of shipboard fieldwork. The mere presence of a researcher on board is likely to trigger anxiety among captains. Researchers by virtue of their access to the management company (which sanctioned fieldwork on board) occupy an ambiguous role in relation to the power of the captain. Unlike the crew, the researcher has no need to obtain a favourable performance evaluation from the captain. The researcher poses a threat to the captain's monopoly of power on board whether this is imagined or real. As someone inviting the crew to talk about their lives, captains may fear that researchers are stirring unrest and discontent. Where a researcher shares a nationality with most of the other seafarers on board but not the captain, a captain's nervousness may be justifiably heightened. Turgo's experience of emotional vulnerabilities on board, therefore, cannot be solely attributed to his national identity, but also to the power dynamics on board. However, in the heat of the moment and in the institutionalised setting of the ship, Turgo found that what is immediate and obvious feels the most real. At the time Turgo, felt that it was solely his national identity which exposed him to emotional distress and this very understanding amplified his unhappiness making it feel particularly personal and an experience that few others could understand or share.

Given the unequal power relations between researchers and participants, Ong (1995) argues that power in fieldwork relations does not reside primarily in the researcher (Guevarra, 2006: 530). Kondo (1986) and Henry (2003) similarly explain that their participants asserted power over them in the course of their research. This rings true with the experience of Turgo in his fieldwork on board and in seafarers' centres/during ship visits. Turgo's powerlessness lay in the fact that his emotional vulnerabilities were exposed by his research participants. It was his research participants who determined when and how he would transact with them emotionally. For instance, when seafarers unburdened themselves to him, he could not say 'no, not this time, please'. In the presence of a Filipino seafarer, Turgo felt morally obliged to listen and to provide emotional solidarity. He was genuinely moved by their stories and uncertain futures. On the other hand, on board, the captain had control over him by dint of his hierarchical position. Seemingly threatened by his presence, Turgo was left exhausted by the captain's

manoeuvres in seeking to dominate him and in the first instance to remove him from the ship. With Filipino crew members, Turgo tried surface acting (Hochschild, 1983), concealing his inner turmoil. It is along this line that ‘researcher(s) are also vulnerable to participants who define the researchers’ place in their social worlds [. . .]’ (Guevarra, 2006: 530).

In fieldwork sites where a researcher does not have the means to leave at will or return home to the support of familiar friends and family on a regular basis it is important that they maintain communication with close contacts and colleagues. If possible we would recommend that contact is maintained with researchers who have undertaken studies in similar contexts. In the case of Turgo, it helped that he was in constant communication through email and satellite phone with Sampson who had previous experience on board ships and had experienced similarly vexed encounters with captains. More specifically, in total institutions like the ship, it is important researchers have a thorough understanding of power dynamics on board and how they fit into these. This understanding could help the researcher mitigate their stress on board.

In the final analysis there are several key observations that have emerged from our reflections on the experiences of Turgo. First, we highlight the extent to which certain aspects of a researcher’s multiple identities may be experienced as predominant in a specific research setting. Second, we note the extent to which our own understandings of our identity, and its impact on field relations are shaped by participants in the field. Turgo came to learn of the expectations which seafarers have of others with a shared nationality as a result of being ‘taught’, by his participants, how a ‘kabayan’ should behave. This placed pressure on him to conform to these expectations when he was conducting fieldwork in ports. Similarly, it was participants who alerted him to the ways in which the captain might negatively focus on his national identity prior to ever meeting him. Such interactional subjectivities and their impact on emotional harm make it particularly difficult to anticipate, and therefore to manage, researcher risk. Third, we observe the extent to which researchers may be unable to effectively construct their desired identity in the field. This has been observed in research settings with powerful elites, but it is less well-discussed in relation to other situations where power relations are less apparently skewed. Finally, we note the subjectivity associated with identity in the field and the extent to which our personal understanding of interactions can result in emotional harm. In this sense, it is not necessary to consider what the perceptions or understandings of participants in the field ‘really are’. In the field, what feels the most real to the researcher can be described as the actuality and this has the potential to cause significant emotional harm.

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### ORCID iD

Nelson Turgo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5508-7260>

### Notes

1. The data were thematically organised and analysed using NVivo 12.
2. It is estimated that there are around 10 million Filipino working and living overseas. They refer to each other as ‘kabayan’ (countrymate), and this word of endearment is socially and culturally loaded entailing an expectation of favours, if needed or asked for. This seems particularly strongly observed by seafarers. For instance, on his first ship he visited a bar close to the port with some Filipino seafarers. The bar was owned by a German couple although the cook and one other employee was Filipino. One of the seafarers told him that they regularly went to the bar because the Filipino cook gave them generous portions and extra ‘pulutan’ (appetiser). When the Filipino cook joined the seafarers, Turgo was introduced to him, and the cook told him that he always cooked something ‘better and bigger’ for Filipino seafarers visiting the bar because that’s what being a ‘kabayan’ is all about. Thus, when Turgo met Filipino seafarers during his ship visits, being a ‘kabayan’ to Filipino seafarers felt like an unspoken mantra of kinship that required him to extend favours to them.
3. Turgo retains a vivid recollection of the incident which differed from the fieldnote. As he was about to leave the crew mess, the captain saw some left-over steaks on the plate on the service table. He looked at the assembled crowd around him, and addressing Turgo, he said: ‘Hey, get a piece of steak and put it in your pocket’. There was a stunned silence. Everybody looked at Turgo. He froze and could not say anything. He could not make sense of what he heard. These details were not included in his diary.
4. Ratings often complain that although the shipboard food allowance is not differentiated by rank, officers get better food than ratings in terms of quality and quantity. On this particular ship, a group of Filipino ratings had raised precisely this complaint with Turgo. Some ratings specifically complained about the quality and quantity of the steaks that they were served with. They said that the steaks served to officers were much thicker and larger than theirs. They also said that officers could have a

second helping whereas ratings had to compete with each other for very limited leftovers. In this context, when the captain asked Turgo to help himself to a second serving of steak, he thought that the captain probably knew about the complaints and was niggling the Filipino crew. It is possible that the captain may have made the comment to any researcher who he felt had been sympathetic to such complaints on board. However, at the time Turgo, given his prior experience with the captain, and given what the Filipino crew had told him about the captain, took the incident as a racist affront. He believed that the comment was made to him because the captain saw him as just the same as the Filipino ratings because of his shared national heritage. He interpreted it as racist on that basis and because it evoked an image of him and of all Filipinos as 'patay gutom' (dead hungry or insatiable).

5. Post fieldwork, and comparing notes with Sampson, who had shared very similar difficult experiences with some previous captains, Turgo came to the realisation that it was entirely possible that the captain had been playing a difficult character as a way of asserting his authority over other people on board. He, like others, may have found having a researcher on board particularly challenging given their ambiguous place in the shipboard hierarchy.
6. Turgo never found out why the captain wanted him to sign off early than planned. There had been some ideas floated by the crew. They said that on the captain's previous ship, he was forced by the Nigerian crew to cut short his contract onboard. He might have thought, they said, that Turgo was sent by the management company to spy on him.

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### Author biographies

Dr Nelson Turgo is Research Associate at the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University. His research interests include ethnography, qualitative research methods, seafaring and fishing communities.

Professor Helen Sampson is the Director of the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University. In 2014 she won the British Sociological Association/BBC Radio 4 'Thinking Allowed' prize for ethnography, for her book 'International Seafarers and Transnationalism in the Twenty-First Century'.