

# **Ships as ‘Total Institutions’. Acculturating Seafarers for a Global Political Economy**

Sarah A. Simons<sup>1</sup>

(Seafarers International Research Centre, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University)

## **ABSTRACT:**

Seafarers working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global shipping industry are multi-national crew of migrant contract labourers, recruited by crewing agencies to work on a variety of ships for specific periods of time. Types of ships found today may include bulk carriers, container ships, tankers, gas carriers, heavy lift vessels, car carriers, ferries and passenger ships such as luxury cruise liners, among others. The voyages undertaken on board ships cover an expansive global maritime environment depending on where the goods are sourced, the destination, goods being transported, the type of ship, and if there are any designated ports of call for loading and offloading goods as well as boarding and disembarking passengers on the way. Typically, the greater proportion of the seafarers’ contract period is spent at sea, working in a maritime work environment on board different ships where he is assigned by his employer. During this time, crew interact with colleagues from a variety of nationalities, performing role-specific tasks in the same built environment and within a maritime mobile workspace.

While conducting an empirical research on ship crew in the international fleet to harness their views on how maritime piracy in Eastern Africa may be affecting their health and wellbeing, the author observed that the ripple effects of structural changes in the shipping industry in the last few decades could be adversely influencing the seafarer work environment and social interactions, in ways that justify the description by Lane and Smith (2011) of ‘ships as jails’. The author has analysed the social adjustments that seafarers constantly make in order to fit into their evolving mobile workplaces. This discussion has been done using ideas espoused from Goffman’s ‘Total Institutions’ conceptual framework. This article therefore seeks to discuss the acculturation process that crew undergo within their mobile work built environment, as being comparable to some extent, to the social adjustments that Goffman’s subjects underwent in their institutions. Through ‘mortification processes’, the residents in Goffman’s studies were impacted psychologically by the regimented social life in the enclosed institution spaces interacting within limited social circles.

Although a number of aspects have been identified that have the potential to adversely affect seafaring occupational health and safety regime (Walters, Bailey, 2013), this article will concentrate on highlighting some factors within the seafarers work place that in the author’s opinion, have directly influenced some psychological adjustments that seafarers make, in order to adapt the seafaring culture befitting their workplace. Three noteworthy influential factors discussed in this article include (a) the cumulative effect of living and working in an enclosed built environment (b) the seafarers’ limited social circle while onboard ships (c) the physical and social isolation of seafarers from colleagues while on-board ships, and from their families and land-based communities by the ship structure and the geographical maritime nature of their workplace. These features were selected as they could be discussed from Goffman’s theoretical framework as possible influences on the seafarers’ workplace socialization process. They are just a few comparable factors between the situation of modern seafarers and Goffman’s subjects.

The scope of this paper will explore the potential for these three key factors to impact on psychological adjustments that seafarers make during their career working on ships. The author has based the discussion of ‘Ships as Total Institutions’ on the fact that there exists evidence of the cumulative effect of each of these three factors over time in the career of seafarers. The empirical studies provide the evidence upon which the author concludes that the ship is a ‘Total Institution’. This article has been written as the drafting of the author’s thesis is at an advanced stage. The intention of this paper is not prescriptive, rather as a catalyst for discussion of seafarers’ work environment and occupational health and safety from an additional social theoretical perspectives.

**Keywords:** ships, seafarers, total institutions, Erving Goffman

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah A. Simons is SIRC – Nippon Foundation doctoral Research Fellow based at the Seafarers International Research Centre, a constituent research centre at Cardiff University School of Social Sciences focusing on research into the health, safety and welfare of ship crew. Her thesis title is ‘An Analysis of Maritime Piracy in Eastern Africa between 2000 and 2010 and its impact on the welfare seafarers’. This article is informed by certain key observations and empirical research findings from this study.

## 1. Introduction

Sea-borne transport is one of the oldest forms of transport available to mankind. With time and technological advancement, the structure of the watercraft has evolved to meet the changing needs for safe transport of passengers and cargo over varying distances. With the emerging global markets in the last few decades, sea transport remains the cheapest means of ferrying imported and exported bulk items in a variety of forms – liquid, solid and gas and over long distances (Cafruny 1987: 114). Recent statistics estimate that over the last three decades, the volume of international trade hauled by sea has risen to 90% (UNCTAD 2002; Hoffmann, Kumar 2002). Therefore the shipping industry plays a pivotal role in global trade and ships have been described as ‘the lifeline’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global political economy (MARISEC 2006).

## 2. Conceptualizing Goffman’s “Total Institutions”

Erving Goffman pioneered the ‘Total Institutions’ theoretical framework from observations made during a participant–observer ethnographic study of inmates at St Elizabeth’s hospital in Washington DC. In subsequent publications, Goffman documented his initial ideas conceptualised in a sociological scrutiny of selected aspects of groups of like-situated individuals who lived in large numbers in a formally-administered and enclosed spaces, interacting with the same group of individuals and cut off from the wider community for a period of time (Goffman 1957a). In his study, Goffman focused on the psychological impact of the social life of these residents as individuals drawing attention to the regimented lifestyle, restricted interactions/contact among the residents, and power relations between the residents and the administrators in these institutions.

Goffman made a number of observations during his study. Firstly, he noted that while the staff of these institutions felt superior to their charges, patients and inmates felt inferior and complied with regulations in those institutions as these were imposed on them from above by officials (Goffman 1961). This programmed and solitary life that the patients and prisoners led in, these ‘Total Institutions’ was in contrast to the social realities outside of the confined residential system, in that:

“It encompasses his or her whole being. It undercuts the resident's individuality. It disregards his or her dignity. It subjects the individual to a regimented pattern of life that has little or nothing to do with the person's own desires or inclinations. And it is inescapable” (Goffman 1959).

Secondly, while elaborating on the gradual yet progressive process through which the ‘Total Institutions’ socialized the individual to fit into these establishments, as a participant observer in this study Goffman observed how the environment in the institution took over the individual’s life in a ‘degradation ceremony’, manifested in a gradual psychological process that transformed the individual’s personality resulting in a negative and unrealistic re-definition of one’s self-concept. Describing the mortification processes within these institution settings, Goffman states that:

“The recruit comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements (...) he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally mortified (...) radical shifts (...) progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others” (Goffman 1961: 15).

A third observation by Goffman was that after release the inmates experienced challenges reintegrating in social life due to their acculturation in prison to fit into the culture of the social establishment. The resulting transformation in the individual's self-image and self-concept then become a hindrance to their social life beyond the walls of the prison "for it seems that those who eat and sleep at work, with a group of fellow workers, can hardly sustain a meaningful domestic existence" (Goffman 1961: 24).

### 3. Modern ships as 'Total Institutions'

About 1.5 million seafarers provide the bulk of the human resource for the global shipping industry. The seafarers' work environment is quite unique as all their needs are met on board as they work, eat, sleep and indulge in leisure activities on board their mobile workplace. Furthermore, modern ships are massive in size, a factor that when considered in combination with the containerization of goods, has revolutionised the appearance of watercraft into massive maritime mobile built environments. *Figure 1* depicts a container ship that is a common sight in ports and shipping corridors worldwide.

Figure 1. Container ship



Source: SeafarerMedia, [www.seafarermedia.com](http://www.seafarermedia.com)

Ellis et al. (2012) established that there are variations between ships in the provision of space, amenities and facilities in ways that could influence the quality of life for seafarers while on working on board ships. The variations identified were found to correlate with type of ship, where and when the ship was built and its size thus reflecting a trend in ship building over the last three decades. Whatever the rank of a seafarer on the ship they are working on; their activities are conducted in the built environment of ships. *Figure 2* depicts the seafarers' role-specific workspaces, carried out within the same storage spaces as the commodities which the ship is transporting.

Figure 2. A 2nd Officer on a container ship



Source: SeafarerMedia, [www.seafarermedia.com](http://www.seafarermedia.com)

Ships have been built to carry a variety of goods, so the outlay of ships and the space available to seafarers to move around while on or off duty varies from one ship type to another. In the case of cargo ships, oil or gas tankers, the crew member's work space may be located between or above containers or tanks and engine rooms. Thus, at the end of one's shift, the crew weave their way between containers and other immovable structures within the ship built environment in order to reach their cabins and/or areas designated for leisure activities. Walking from one part of the ship to another in routine activities, frequently entails navigating multiple floors depending on ship size and layout. The provision of lifts for ease of such movement also varies from one ship to another.

Variations exist in avenues and opportunities for social interactions during the seafaring career depending on one's trade, leisure facilities available on board and in port, the number and nationalities of crew and the ships on works on. For instance, security and hospitality staff members working on cruise ships share their workspace with passengers and therefore the ship offers them a wider social circle unlike staff on the same ship with technical roles. Typically, engineers on the same ship or on other ships ferrying non-human cargo, and whose responsibilities focus on attending to the mechanical operations of the ship may spend an entire shift isolated without any physical human contact. *Figure 3* illustrates an engineer's work place.

Figure 3. A Chief Engineer on a container ship



Source: SeafarerMedia, [www.seafarermedia.com](http://www.seafarermedia.com)

The author observed that seafarers working on most ships, apart from passenger and ferry ships, have a career largely characterised by confinement to a small work space the ship for long periods of time. While at sea, and whether on or off duty, seafarers' movements are restricted to the ship's built environment. Unlike their shore-based workers, seafarers do not have the option to get away from their work environment while off duty or to go to home to their families after work. Thus hemmed in by the sea, they stay on board except for brief stops while docked in port for loading or offloading of cargo or disembarking passengers, when they may visit seafarer missions where available. The nature of the maritime work environment restricts the movement of the seafarer to the ship in ways similar to the confinement of Goffman's subjects to their institutions by fences. Seafarers are made aware of the structure of a ship during training to enable them to mentally prepare to adjust to the specifications of their unique work station. With time, the progression of a seafaring career sees them adjust to long periods of time at sea during which the built environment of a ship facilitates an acculturation process, during which crew adjust to living, working and spending most of their contract on ships as a 'Total Institutions' (Aubert, 1965; Sampson, Thomas, 2003)

#### 4. Seafarers' isolation and limited interactions

Seafarers are vulnerable to isolation from colleagues on the ship as well as from the wider community due to the immense size of ships, as well as the expansive maritime nature of their global work environment. Typically, a significant proportion of a seafarer's contract is spent isolated from the rest of the world (Sampson and Thomas, 2003) and although the seafaring profession has traditionally been thought to have a workplace culture characterised by strong workplace friendships, an earlier study by Sampson & Thomas (2001) highlighted raised concerns on the increased isolation of seafarers on board. This isolation may be explained by inability by the crew to form long term bonds to the seafarers' unsynchronised leave periods, making friendships among seafarers difficult to maintain in the long-term (Chapman, 1992).

In addition, the mechanisation of labour, faster in-dock turn-around times and reduced crew numbers have resulted in shorter periods of leisure-time for the crew. This reduced-time factor poses a bottleneck to the time at the disposal of seafarers to explore a wider circle of social interactions while ashore. It also limits the variety of recreational activities they are able to engage in while their ship is being loaded and offloaded. As such, during their contractual period, the seafarers' social interactions are limited to a small circle of colleagues. The restriction of the seafarers' social interactions to a small social circle of colleagues on board ships for most of their working life further isolates the individual on the ship as a 'Total Institution'. However, unlike the patients and inmates and Prisoners Of War as cited by Goffman, seafarers' participation in their establishment is of their own volition.

Goffmann (1961) highlighted the potential 'ripple effect' of the 'mortification processes' experienced by his subjects in 'Total Institutions' on their wider social interactions in their community stating that: "For it seems that those who eat and sleep at work, with a group of fellow workers, can hardly sustain a meaningful domestic existence".

Goffman suggests that the changes in the self-concept and beliefs of his subjects in significant others, are only one manifestation of the psychological impact of interacting with the same limited group of people for a long time. Due to the contractual nature of the seafaring profession and crew changes, it is difficult for seafarers to form lasting



friendships with colleagues with whom they have shared the work and living spaces on board. As such bonds formed while on a voyage remain “limited to on-board acquaintances” (Thomas, 2003). In expounding on the challenges faced by seafarers when out of their work environment, studies conducted by Kahveci (2001) and Thomas and Zhao (2001) highlighted the challenges faced by male seafarers in trying to resume their traditional role as ‘head of the household’ while on home leave. Efforts by returnee husbands seeking to adjust to family life have shown that unstructured periods of leave and the subsequent intermittent separation from their families pose inherent challenges both for the seafarers and their families. Wives left ashore to raise children and manage the family suddenly have to adjust to being second in command and resent the ‘military register’ used by the crew husband as illustrated by one respondent in the study Thomas et al. (2001): “He is used to running the ship and his crew (...), yes sir!, yes sir! But it does not work like that here”.

Further empirical findings attest to the effect on work morale of the crew, brought on by their knowledge of the loneliness, stigmatization and social isolation experienced by their wives while they are away at sea (Tang, 2007). At a personal level, seafarers face additional challenges in adjusting to life ashore because while on board ships, their lifestyle is conditioned to the regimented round-the-clock tempo on board ships. They could find it difficult to cope without a regular routine and having a lot of free time on their hands. In addition seafarers are isolated from regular social interactions with the land-based communities for prolonged periods and face challenges to normalising their social relations and fitting into their traditional and gender-specific ‘domestic roles’. Therefore there are similarities between seafarers’ difficulties in adjusting to home life while on leave, with the challenges that Goffman’s subjects had in social interactions in their wider community after they left the familiar environment of their institutions. For the seafarers, the crew changes could serve to punctuate the rhythm of life for them in their mobile ‘Total Institution’. Furthermore, seafarers have a strong workplace culture similar to the patient culture described by Goffman.

## 5. Conclusion

This article sought to analyse the seafarers’ social interactions and adjustments to life and work on ships as an enclosed built environment using a sample of Goffman’s initial ideas on ‘Total Institutions’. In so-doing, the discussion provided a glimpse of the realities of the ship as a workspace where seafarers interact with the same group of individuals, who provide a limited social circle for prolonged periods while at sea until crew changes are effected. The acculturation process includes formation of temporary bonds of friendship among seafarers that are interrupted and new bonds formed with new seafarers as is the occupational culture of seafaring profession. The physical and social isolation of seafarers, the restriction of their movement to the perimeter of the ship and the behavioural adaptations that crew make as career adjustments have been discussed as some characteristics of the built work environment, that arguably portray the ship as a ‘Total Institution’ of a kind. Through this discussion, the author hopes to stimulate further analytical discussions on the built environment in which the 1.2 million seafarers work and live.

## Bibliography

- Aubert, V., (1965), *The Hidden Society*. Totowa, N.J: Bedminster Press.
- Cafruny, A. (1987), *Ruling the waves: The political economy of international shipping*. Vol. 17. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chapman, P.K., (1992), *Trouble on Board: the Plight of International Seafarers*, New York: ILR Press.
- Ellis, N., Sampson H., Acejo, I., Turgo, N and Zhao, Z, (2012), *Seafarer accommodation on contemporary cargo ships*, Cardiff: Seafarers International Research Centre.
- Goffman, E., (1957), *On the characteristics of Total Institutions. First Essay in Asylums*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Goffman, E., (1961), *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of mental patients and other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Kahveci, A., (2001), "Seafarers' families: The children speak", *The Sea* 155 (Jan - Feb 2002).
- Maritime International Secretariat Services Ltd (MARISEC), (2006), *International Shipping: Carrier of World Trade*. A report prepared by the Round Table of international shipping associations supported by some national shipping associations to mark IMO World Maritime Day 2006. MARISEC, London. Available at: [www.shippingfacts.com](http://www.shippingfacts.com).
- Sampson, H., Thomas, M. (2003), "The Social Isolation of Seafarers: Causes, Effects, and Remedies", *International Maritime Health*, 1-4 (54): 58-67.
- Tang, L. (2007), *The presence of absent seafarers: predicaments of Chinese Seafarer partners*, Seafarers International Research Centre Symposium, Cardiff University, July 2007.
- Thomas, M. (2003), *Lost at Sea, Lost at home, the predicament of seafarer families*, Seafarers International Research Centre, Cardiff.
- Thomas, M., Sampson, H., Zhao, M., (2001), *Behind the Scenes: Seafaring and Family Life*, Seafarers International Research Centre Symposium, Cardiff.