

Wellness at Sea: A New Conceptual Framework for Seafarer Training.

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Keywords: seafarers wellness, social, intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual

1. Introduction

Seamanship is a trade rooted in ancient times and yet today it forms an integral and essential part of how we as humans survive and flourish. At the very heart of this industry are human beings, sailing ships across our oceans in often arduous and sometimes agonising circumstances. The global shipping industry of the 21st century is confronting seafarers with unique challenges such as multi-national crews, the Internet, quick turnaround times and the world as a small global village. On the other hand, the challenges seafarers are faced with are as old as the industry itself.

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The author argues that a new holistic, multi-dimensional conceptual framework is needed to assist seafarers in coping within the 'total institution' (Simonds, 2013:63) of a ship. The author proposes a framework in which the occupational, emotional, physical, social, intellectual and spiritual aspects are acknowledged and championed as an integral and equal part of being a seafarer and are subsequently incorporated in training.

This paper attempts to better understand life at sea by acknowledging seafarers as holistic, multi-dimensional and unique human beings. It investigates the correlation between a better life at sea and the training of seafarers as holistic human beings. It also offers a hypothesis that holistic training will not only lead to better lives for seafarers, but will increase profit for companies.

2. The Sea as a Social Space

There seems to be incongruent and irreconcilable differences in the way life at sea versus life on land is understood. Even sociology in its efforts to understand social constructs rarely admits to the sea being a social space. Cocco (2013:5) points out the fascination sociology has with land as though social relations would only occur on land and not on the waters. He explains that social scientists usually consider whatever happens "at sea" and "on board" as something spaced out and unrelated to what happens on land, or, in the best of cases, as a preparatory phase for the real life that takes place on land.

To a certain extent this is also true about how the maritime industry see seafarers. Training of seafarers' bears testimony to this as it is only concerned with the technical side of seafaring as if life at sea is separated and removed from the emotions, ideas, feelings, behaviour, needs and values land-based people experience. The inability to recognise the sea as a social space is the root of the ever expanding divide between seafarers and the recognition that they are human beings.

Coco (2013:9) makes a case that the sea is not only a medium but a social space, which could not be merely 'used by society' but rather represent 'a space of society'. This social space is complex in nature, not only because of relationships with fellow crewmembers from different backgrounds, religions, ethnicity and social standing, but also because this social space is filled with relationships that span across the globe and connects them to families, friends and communities in an often constrained and misconfigured way.

As a first step in working towards a new conceptual framework for the training of seafarers, it must be acknowledged that this framework, as well as the shipping industry as a whole, is set within a social space that is unique, but in the same breath shares the emotions, ideas, feelings, behaviour, needs and values of land based people.

This may seem too obvious a statement, yet there is painfully little evidence of addressing the human side of seafaring in the curriculums of maritime institutions and the operations of shipping companies across the globe. The neglect of the human side comes at a hefty price. Not only do companies run massive financial losses, but through ignorance of the human factor the most valuable asset in the shipping world is a neglected – human beings themselves.

3. The Uniqueness of the Social Space – the Ship as a ‘Total Institution’

The uniqueness of the working environment of seafarers is commonly known. Jensen, Latza & Baur (2009:96) confirm this based on research done on German seafarers by stating that seafaring is associated with special mental, psychosocial and physical stressors unlike any land-based job and that it is characterised by long-term separation from family and home for months, growing economic pressure as well as considerable and partly extreme psychosocial problems.

Simonds (2013:63) points out the correlation between life on board a ship and the theory of ‘total institutions’ developed by Erving Goffman.

Goffman (1961:11) offers this definition of a total institution: ‘A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.’ This is in many cases true about seafarers and the environment they operate in. Cut off from the wider society and confined to the steel structure of their ship, for many life at sea happens within a total institution. In his earlier work, Goffman (1959:54) comments that a total institution encompasses a person’s whole being. It undercuts the individuality and subjects the individual to a regimented pattern of life that is inescapable. It would, however, be inaccurate not to acknowledge positive experiences of seafarers. Life at sea, for many seafarers, is a positive and valuable experience.

In formulating a new conceptual framework for training, a thorough understanding of this unique environment is needed. Research already exists through numerous studies done in maritime sociology, the maritime welfare sector and by shipping companies, all emphasizing the uniqueness of the social space. Yet, it seems that very little has been done in practice to implement change processes and coping mechanisms to address the issues unique to this environment.

A new conceptual framework will thus take two things into consideration. Firstly, that this social space is highly unique and, secondly, that this social space does not stand in isolation from land-based social spaces. Essentially, a human being is not able to survive at sea. We are inseparably attached to the shore for our every need. The framework is thus dualistic in nature, both taking into consideration that seafarers suffer from isolation, yet they are not isolated in their experiences, feelings, emotions and ideas. While seafarers’ unique environment separates them from others, the common humanity we as people share unites them. Thus not only will the uniqueness of their environment influence a new conceptual framework, but also the everyday humanness of them having ideas, feelings, emotions, needs and values.

4. Person-Centeredness

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How a seafarer experiences life at sea, how he or she reacts to an incident, or how he or she steers a ship, are thus related to him or her as an organized whole, multi-dimensional human being. Interrelatedness is something that cannot be escaped but is part of us as human beings and therefore also plays a telling role in the maritime industry.

Seafarers react to the social space of the sea and to the total institution of the ship as holistic human beings, suggesting that to be the best seafarer you can possibly be, you need to be holistically well. Holistic wellness is a multidimensional state of being, describing the existence of positive health in an individual as exemplified by quality of life and a sense of well being (Corbin & Pangrazi, 2001:3). The multi-dimensional nature of holistic wellness suggests that there are different aspects that all need to be in balance to, ultimately, ensure positive health, quality of life and wellness.

Training, taking the holistic person into consideration, will thus include the physical, social, intellectual, emotional (mental) and spiritual and not just the occupational as is presently the case.

5. The Different Aspects of Wellness

5.1. Social Wellness

Socially, seafaring presents many challenges. Crewmembers not only work with each other but, when they complete their work, they have to live in the same social environment as their work-mates (Shea, 2005:29).

There seem to be many rules, regulations and conventions in place in an effort to govern the social space. Communication is, for example, governed by conventions such as the STCW, the MLC and ISM code, but if you, however, look at incident reports, it is evident that it is the interpersonal skills and interpersonal communication that fail seafarers. Inadequate communication is listed as one of the three main factors in shipping accidents (Rothblum, 2000:8) The solution is thus not more regulation but, instead, a stronger focus on relational skills. Chirea-Ungureanu & Rosenhave (2012:528) remark that good communication isn't created by efficiency or influence, but instead it is created by connection, interaction, balance and understanding. A renewed effort to learn to communicate through connecting with fellow crewmembers, and having a greater understanding of one another, would significantly improve life on board.

You can't talk about communication and not recognise the difficulties seafarers face in communicating properly with family back home and in maintaining these relationships. Jensen et al (2009:96) measured seafaring stressors aboard German Flagged vessels. Seamen rated the individual stress level of 23 different stressors aboard, with separation from their family ranked as the highest of all. This statistic demands a reconsideration of how training can assist seafarers to better function within their family structures while separated from loved ones back home.

Further to this there is the issue of culture, with the maritime industry probably being one of the most diverse working environments in the world. Seafarers are confronted with cultural diversity through different languages, customs, religions and rituals on a daily basis. Understanding a fellow crewmember involves much more than the ability to understand language but, instead, asks for cultural competence to be able to function optimally in the work and social space on board. Chirea-Ungureanu & Rosenhave (2012:527) state that even when evidence is found where cultural competence is incorporated into curriculums of training schools, 'the institutional culture of maritime education systematically tends to foster static and essentialist conceptions of "culture" as applied to seafarers'. They go further by saying that education should aim to gradually build the needed intercultural competence, with an aim to train seafarers objectivity in dealing with other cultures and their representatives.

Further to this, feedback from companies suggests that crew changes because of conflict between seafarers are common and that this comes at a huge financial cost. In a study done on Thai seafarers, around 9% of seafarers that changed their ship, changed it because of conflict with workmates or the

captain (Rojnkureesatien & Jampaklay, 2006:14). In extreme cases such as the recent case of the MV Qing May, where two Chinese men were stabbed to death and another injured in violence among crewmembers of the cargo ship, the price of this conflict comes at an extreme price (philstar.com, 2015).

How is it then that with so much evidence of the social challenges seafarers face, and the influence these have on the operations of ships, that the training of seafarers does not portray this? At heart, the social aspect must deal with how we maintain relationships with those back home and with those on board. The social aspect is as much part of the shipping industry as is the navigation of a ship or the operating of an engine.

5.2. Emotional Wellness

Shea (2005:129) quotes studies where the strong correlation between prolonged periods away from supportive social structures and poor mental health is proven. It also shows a strong correlation with an increase in the frequency of occurrence of accidents. Shea (2005:53) in his discussion of seafarers' mental health, uses seven independent studies suggesting that seafarers seemed to be more affected by mental illnesses than any other ailment, with officers being more prone than ratings. These studies also suggest a strong correlation between psychiatric illnesses and a decreased ability of the seafarer to cope with job expectations and a negative impact on the safety culture of a ship.

In a recent ITF research report, studies revealed that cross regional, 66 per cent of seafarers know someone working with them who is depressed, while in the Philippines a staggering 75 per cent of seafarers responded saying that they know a workmate who is depressed (ITF, 2015:15).

No wonder then that in research undertaken by Roberts, Jaremin, & Lloyd (2013:1235) under UK seafarers it shows that seafarers have the second highest suicide rate of any occupation, second only to coalminers.

Again, if research repeatedly suggests that the emotional health is of such importance, it must be questioned why training to deal with these matters does not fall within the realm of compulsory training.

5.3. Physical Wellness

Traditional training is obsessed with safety procedures and standards to keep accidents from happening. The human side of accidents comes at a hefty cost to both seafarers and companies taking into consideration the costs of search and rescue efforts, injuries, loss of income, diversions, hospital care and rehabilitation. A death at sea could implicate any one of the costs listed above adding up colossal losses in revenue. This being said, a case could surely be made to defend the arduous and rigorous obsession with safety within the industry.

It is a common misconception that ship casualties are largely because of accidents. Yet, more seafarers die because of illness. In a study on UK seafarers by the Hong Kong Department of Shipping and Transport Logistics and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Li & Shiping, 2002:3-4), mortalities were divided into four categories, namely ship casualties, personal accidents, homicides and suicides and diseases. The study reveals 5,389 mortality cases to UK seafarers in a 27-year period. The first category 'ship casualties' accounted for 572 cases (10.61 per cent), while the second category 'personal accidents' accounted for 1,749 or 33 per cent of all mortality cases. 348 suicide cases were listed under category three while the fourth category (mortality from diseases) accounted for 2,640 or 49 per cent of the total mortality.

Hansen & Pedersen (1996:1238) confirm this in a study into the mortality of Danish Seafarers, listing 264 deaths in the sample group of 24 132 seafarers. Of these 264 deaths 188 were health related.

A natural death or illness on board often incurs the same financial implications as a safety incident, yet there is little evidence of programmes rigorously building awareness around physical health issues. In further research of the causes of the main diseases contributing to seafarer mortality rates, it is evident that better awareness and lifestyle choices may influence these numbers significantly.

There seems to be an assumption that knowledge regarding physical health is general knowledge. HIV serves as a perfect example. The recent ITF HIV and Wellbeing report (2015:15) found that many myths about the transmission of HIV/AIDS still remain. In one labour supplying country only 17 per cent of respondents believed condoms are effective in preventing it, and 46 per cent believed it can be spread through food and drink. It is reckoned that in high HIV/AIDS prevalence countries the labour force will be between 10 per cent and 30 per cent smaller by 2020 (ITF, 2014:61)

The HIV and Wellbeing report further revealed that half of respondents were worried about their weight, while almost 60 per cent experience back/joint pain at work.

The challenges of mobility and the uniqueness of seafarers' working environment ask for a training approach that would take into consideration the physical side of seafaring by building awareness campaigns and encouraging healthy choices. It is evident from mortality rates and the costs associated with mortality on board that this would not only benefit seafarers, but companies, too.

5.4. Intellectual Wellness

Intellectual wellness is how one engages in creative and stimulating activities and the use of resources to expand knowledge and focus on the acquisition, development, application, and articulation of critical thinking (Foster & Keller, 2007:13).

Intellectual wellness in seafaring implies more than current knowledge application, but extends to knowledge that falls outside of the traditional realm of knowledge thought to be relevant to seafaring. This among other includes knowledge about seafarers' rights, piracy and finances.

A survey conducted by Seafarers' Rights International revealed that 8.27 per cent of respondents had faced criminal charges; 3.94 per cent had been witnesses in criminal prosecutions; 32.77 per cent knew of colleagues who had faced criminal charges. 44.28 per cent of vessels were searched; 63.75 per cent of cabins were searched without warrants and 43.55 per cent of seafarers were given body searches (SRI, 2013:12-28). Dimitrova (2010:77) states that one of the reasons why seafarers are unable to enforce their rights, is their lack of knowledge of legal systems. Enhanced knowledge would ensure better mediation of day-to-day rights incidents by negotiating incidents with confidence and adequate comprehension. Not only would companies benefit, but, the severe stress factors associated with rights abuses will be reduced.

In the case of piracy, there seem to be many contradicting views on the occurrence and regularity of incidents. Official data, however, suggests that piracy is at a five year low (Statista, 2015). However, in discussions with seafarers it seems as though the fear of being attacked is just as real and that this psychological factor influences their day-to-day being. Initiatives such as the Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme's (MPHRP) pre-departure piracy training, evidently shows how accurate knowledge about piracy can be a positive step to curb these fears.

A UK report, researching how to better support seafarers and their families, endeavoured to quantify the challenges seafarers face. The research revealed that financial problems, including access to benefits, advice on money matters and debt were cited as one of the main concerns of seafarers (Maritime Charities Funding Group, 2007:16). In an online discussion between seafarers about financial matters, lump sum income and big spending habits are identified as the main reasons why seafarers are notoriously bad at financial management (Mylifeatsea.blogspot.com:2015).

There is a wealth of research that justifies broadening the intellectual scope of training. Once again a broadening of the traditional realm of training will not only benefit individuals, but also companies.

5.5. Spiritual Wellness

Myrna (2007:259), in a study of religiosity of Filipino seafarers found that in general, migration impacts the religiousness of seafarers. At the same time, their religiousness and faith practice mitigate difficult situations during their migration. It seems that spirituality operates as a contextual framework that orients an individual in interpretation, comprehension, and reaction to life experiences (Gall, Charbonneau, Clarke, Grant, Joseph, & Shouldice, 2005:88). According to Koenig, Levin and Chatters (in Gall et al. 2005:88) beliefs facilitate an active attitude towards coping and a strengthening of social support in response to stress. Spirituality also operates as a mediating factor in stress coping processes.

It is not proposed that seafarers now specialise in religious or spiritual studies. Instead, training should create an awareness of one's own beliefs and how it influences responses and actions. A safe reflective space could, for example, be created where seafarers can focus on identification of potential spiritual coping mediators as part of a strategy to understand and prepare for life at sea.

6. The Cost of Poor Wellness

A culture change where person-centred holistic wellness takes priority in the training approach of seafarers is not merely an altruistic exercise in the sense that it champions personal well-being. Instead, it is argued that a holistic approach will save the industry millions of dollars through increased awareness and better well-being.

Henny, Hartington, Scott, Tveiten and Canals (2013:132) give useful statistics on ship diversions. From the 420,000 seafarers that formed part of their sample 3,230 or 7 per cent will be evacuated per year. Their calculation uses an average use of about 100 tonnes of fuel per day for an average vessel at a cost of about 525 euros per tonne. The average rerouting time is 1.5 days. Thus average rerouting costs per year per ship are as follows:

- 78,750 euros for fuel + 25,000 euros for the helicopter + 60,000 euros indirect cost
- For a total cost of 163,750 euros on average per ship per year.

Henny et al (2013:132) states that in researching several shipping companies it is estimated that one in five ships will be forced to divert course for medical reasons per year. Thus, the average statistical annual cost per vessel to the ship owners would be 163,750/5 32,750 euros per diversion per ship. The high probability of a ship being diverted emphasises the immense importance of preventing diversions in order to lower costs and increase profit.

The maritime system is a people system, and human errors figure prominently in casualty situations. About 75-96% of marine casualties are caused, at least in part, by some form of human error (Rothblum, 2000:1).

The ultimate question is thus how these costs could be reduced. The logical answer must surely be holistic health. If research continuously exposes the human element as the one common factor, then surely the time has come to address this more comprehensively in order to reduce costs.

This being said, in a real person-centred approach, financial gains can never be the ultimate prize but, instead, a better life for every human being at sea should be the incentive.

7. Theory in Practice

In 2010 the *Seafarers' Wellness Programme* was developed in South Africa in partnership with the ITF Seafarers Trust and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). The programme introduces a new holistic, multi-dimensional and person-centred approach to training in the maritime industry. The Programme is now implemented in the curriculum of CPUT and all maritime students receive the training before going to sea.

With significant financial support from Seafarers UK, the Programme was also implemented in the Seychelles and Mauritius. The programme reached out to both seafarers and fishermen. In the case of the Seychelles for instance, the involvement and endorsement of a wide range of partners, including the Seychelles Maritime School, Government, the Seychelles Port Authorities, the Seychelles Fishing Authorities and Seychelles Petroleum Company guaranteed success. With the continuous support and goodwill of Seafarers UK the *Wellness at Sea* programme is still progressing and working towards making the Programme regulation in these countries.

In 2014, an industry-led advisory group met with Sailors' Society to discuss crew attrition rates and the complex problem of maintaining wellness on board. The discussion highlighted the need for a dedicated programme to help prevent such situations arising. Sailors' Society was enthused by the close parallels between the South African born *Seafarers' Wellness Programme* and the Society's vision for a seafarer wellness programme. As a result the Society adopted the programme in December 2014 under the title *Wellness at Sea*. The Society has since worked relentlessly to further develop the programme and it is now being rolled out worldwide.

Sailors' Society's *Wellness at Sea* programme is now also being implemented in companies such as Seaspan, Seateam, Wallem and Univan. It is hoped that the companies pioneering this initiative will serve as a catalyst to a culture change within industry. Although these companies will reap the financial benefits of the Programme, they are genuinely interested in and concerned with the welfare of the seafarers.

8. Conclusion

A seafarer acts as an organised whole, which includes their interrelated emotional, spiritual, physical, social, intellectual and occupational being within the context of a ship, which is set in the social space of the sea. This organised whole stands in an interactive relation to the remote, micro, macro and the direct and indirect task environment. Training will be focused on the mediation of the relationship between the whole person and his perceptual environment and on all factors influencing the seafarers' ability to be holistically well.

On 2nd December 1946, Mærsk founder A.P. Møller wrote a letter of advice to his son: "My old saying: 'No loss should hit us which can be avoided with constant care' must be a watchword throughout the entire organization." (Hornby, 1988:2).

Holistic wellness will curb many losses. The need for the human factor, more than ever before, not only to be acknowledged, but also to be actively pursued through strategies and planning, is evident in hundreds of contributions made by researchers over the last two decades. The human element can no longer be added to the training of seafarers as a mere afterthought, but should instead be engraved in the DNA of seafarer training. The human element is, after all, etched in the DNA of every seafarer.

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