

---

7-4-2011

## Collecting International Merchant Seafarer Oral Histories: Experiences and Reflections

Tom Matyók

University of North Carolina, [tgmtyok@uncg.edu](mailto:tgmtyok@uncg.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Matyók, T. (2011). Collecting International Merchant Seafarer Oral Histories: Experiences and Reflections. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(4), 1001-1017. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1118>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



## Collecting International Merchant Seafarer Oral Histories: Experiences and Reflections

### Abstract

Investigating highly mobile labor populations presents researchers with unique challenges and opportunities. In this paper, I share my experiences and reflections in collecting international merchant seafarers' oral histories and propose to move the dialogue forward regarding the use of hybrid qualitative research practices. Seafarers are constantly moving, at sea and in port, and traditional research methodologies are inadequate in determining the nature of modern-day seafaring. I suggest how qualitative research methods must be flexible enough to accommodate researchers' needs in a chaotic global milieu. Investigators researching highly mobile labor populations, as well as mobile immigrant and refugee communities, can gain insights into the challenges and methods available for meeting those challenges.

### Keywords

Migrant Labor, Oral Histories, Interviewing, Qualitative Research Methods, and Globalization

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

## **Collecting International Merchant Seafarer Oral Histories: Experiences and Reflections**

Tom Matyók

University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

---

*Investigating highly mobile labor populations presents researchers with unique challenges and opportunities. In this paper, I share my experiences and reflections in collecting international merchant seafarers' oral histories and propose to move the dialogue forward regarding the use of hybrid qualitative research practices. Seafarers are constantly moving, at sea and in port, and traditional research methodologies are inadequate in determining the nature of modern-day seafaring. I suggest how qualitative research methods must be flexible enough to accommodate researchers' needs in a chaotic global milieu. Investigators researching highly mobile labor populations, as well as mobile immigrant and refugee communities, can gain insights into the challenges and methods available for meeting those challenges. Key Words: Migrant Labor, Oral Histories, Interviewing, Qualitative Research Methods, and Globalization*

---

“... The only honorable course will be to stake everything on a formidable gamble: That words are more powerful than munitions.” Albert Camus<sup>1</sup>

I am a peace researcher. I use qualitative research as a tool for advancing toward positive peace (Galtung, 1998). I view qualitative research as action-centered. In this article, I reflect on my research process, and suggest how qualitative research methods must be flexible enough to accommodate researchers' needs in a chaotic global milieu. Ideally, my experiences collecting international merchant seafarer oral histories will illuminate others' work and expand the dialogue surrounding the development of qualitative research methods.

When choosing a research topic, smart researchers usually avoid studies of inaccessible populations. Their reluctance stems less from insurmountable methodological problems than inconvenience or lack of will. In fact, the means of studying all manner of populations exist. Their implementation, however, is not easy. What is needed is “money, trained staff, and cooperation of various disciplines . . .” (Goldstein, 1968, p. 249). When I initiated my research project oriented on achieving an understanding of contemporary international merchant seafaring, money was unavailable to me in any significant amount. Yet my position as director of a seafarers' center provided an experienced staff capable of mastering the methods of oral history and positioned me to access hundreds of mariners as they entered and departed our port. And my own background brought an interdisciplinary approach to the organization of the

---

<sup>1</sup> French Algerian author, philosopher and journalist who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957

study and the analysis of resulting data. Two out of three is not too bad. It is hoped that the example of this work will encourage others to undertake similar projects.

### **Background**

In globalization's chaos, labor is in constant motion, seeking work. By definition, globalization erodes national boundaries (Menyhart, 2003). Cross-boundary labor flows, legal or otherwise, are an inevitable outgrowth of globalization. Labor migrates across porous national boundaries pursuing work; work chases cheap labor in a global market. Like water, the labor market seeks a common level, often the lowest point. That is the bedeviling issue. Yet people can formulate rational and humane policies even when national boundaries and jurisdictions fade. Policy is the outgrowth of narrative (Matyók, 2009). Through the telling of stories, narrator and listener interact and negotiate a *new* future.

Globalization promises long-run benefits for all, but it is too often discussed in economic terms stripped of its human dimension. Economists measure outcomes, never processes. Outcomes are measured quantitatively; process defines quality of life (Brady, 2003; Figini & Santarelli, 2006; Goldberg & Pavcink, 2004). My research pleads for creation of worker counter-narratives that confront the human dimension of globalization.

A seaport is an exceptional laboratory to study the impact of globalization on labor. First, international merchant shipping is probably the most global of all industries. Second, ships' crews are composed of men and women from a wide range of cultures and ethnicities. Third, because of this diversity, seaports attract a large mobile, heterogeneous population of seafarers. They exhibit a multi-cultural character coexistent with the relative homogeneity of the greater port community. A study of international merchant seafarers can examine numerous cultural and ethnic groups within the clearly defined geography of a seaport. It can record perceptions formed by a host of value systems reacting to a global economic context. Access to such views promotes an understanding of conflict transformation processes; processes essential to serve the needs of globalized labor. The world shipping industry acts as a lens to glimpse, however darkly, future labor discord—friction exacerbated by cultural and ethnic factors as well as economic and political disputes.

Although a seaport provides a unique context to explore the impact of globalization on labor, merchant mariners make up a difficult population to study. They are highly mobile, perpetual migrants who seldom remain long in any port. Their brief visits are coupled with intense work schedules while in port. It makes studying this population challenging at best. Further exacerbating problems faced by researchers are the seafarers' remoteness and isolation when at sea. All these complications, however, point to the significance of the study. It is the difficulty that makes the research worthwhile. Because of it, little study has been done. More importantly, the world's merchant seafarers are a singular body of workers. They anticipate the future; they provide insights into the effects of globalization on labor. Totally globalized, maritime laborers are living with the full significance of a phenomenon that as yet barely impacts other fields of labor. My research is pioneering, an attempt to lay a foundation on which to build, regarding the nature of labor in a de-nationalized global marketplace. My research provides a glimpse

into what an uncontrolled, unregulated global labor market will look like. This unregulated space will require new ways of researching and advocating for labor decoupled from traditional nation-states.

Challenges posed by the unique labor force of the global merchant marine call for flexible research methods. They must facilitate gathering data in an essentially hostile environment. Conditions within the maritime shipping industry typically mean that seafarers fear arbitrary dismissal if suspected of discontent or of insubordinate attitudes. They work in a contentious setting. Ship owners, their agents, and even government officials are often pitted against mariners or anyone advocating for their rights or the redress of their grievances. Add to suspicion and contention the conditions under which seafarers labor: severely limited time in port, burdensome work schedules, and limited rest. The brief time available to seafarers ashore and their many competing needs often curtail research opportunities. These circumstances and more make the choice of method crucial.

The purpose of my research was to determine the nature of life aboard an international merchant vessel. I sought to understand what it is to be an international merchant seafarer. I designed my study with the idea that the exercise of power and violence in the context of the shipping industry would be revealed in life-story interviews. Originally, I planned to follow an oral history collection methodology. However, I was required by challenges on the ground to quickly amend my approach. Time and circumstances conspired to make oral history collection nearly impossible. Speaking with seafarers became a catch-as-catch-can activity. In this article, I focus not on the findings of my study but on the challenges I encountered in the research process and the lessons learned.

### **A Trans-Disciplinary Approach to Methodology**

It will be useful, I think, to briefly restate here the philosophic or intellectual foundations of my research methods. My primary guide was Galtung's (1985, 1998) observations on the trans-disciplinary approach needed by peace researchers. A trans-disciplinary orientation, one which crosses the artificial boundaries delimiting academic turf, is especially well suited to studying the multinational populations that crew the ships of the global merchant marine. It is, of course, equally valid for a number of other research projects. But, in my particular study, it is obviously necessary.

Galtung (1985) champions a *holistic* methodology for those researching peace and conflict issues. He emphasizes the potency of integrating a range of perspectives. Assuming an integrative stance minimizes the parochialism of a fragmented academy. It cures the myopia of looking at complex issues through a single lens. Peace and conflict issues clearly encompass a range of human phenomena and to try to compartmentalize them would surely be absurd. Yet, for a peace researcher, it is vital to define a particular path leading to methods in which disciplines inform each other and illuminate the issues. A trans-disciplinary approach permits an individual to "organize the bits and pieces of social structure and culture he gathers into a comprehensive whole" (Wiseman, 1970, p. 270).

By recognizing the interconnectedness of collection processes and messages, research also becomes an intervention (Arnett, 2002; Freire, 1995, 1996, 1998). I sought

to intervene at the Port of Brunswick in the state of Georgia using the *International Seafarers' Center* as the instrument of change. There, I developed a cadre of well-trained Center staff as well as volunteers to help record seafarers' biographic narratives.

Interviews were conducted by me and by International Seafarers' Center staff and carefully selected volunteers. I trained these teams in approved interviewing techniques (Creswell, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Weiss, 1994) and in use of the interview protocols. They were also instructed in the use of recording equipment, which proved less important than training in stenographic and shorthand techniques. They took notes during and after interviews. Cultural sensitivity was a prominent part of the preparation. Once interviewing began, it was, as noted, conducted on board vessels or at Center facilities. Obviously, much energy and attention was expended to maintain privacy and confidentiality.

Training sessions for potential interviewers provided opportunities to learn and practice solicited interview techniques. They were thoroughly taught the techniques of unstructured interviews. And, they were provided with and read pertinent literature and honed their technique by role-playing with experienced interviewers. Interviewers worked in teams and demonstrated mastery in the art of interviewing prior to placement.

I intended to rely upon a *Life History* model for interviewing and analyzing individual narratives (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). A qualitative, action-research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan; Stringer, 1999; Weiss, 1994) intervention employs probative and transformative interview techniques. The particularity of the interview provides grounds for general conclusions. By induction, my research illuminates and discusses the peculiar conditions under which global merchant seafarers commonly labor. It also draws attention to the fact that seafarer narratives are absent from the dominant discourse shaping, defining, and justifying policies and practices in the international merchant shipping industry and the agencies established to regulate the industry. Any comprehensive review of writings on the contemporary merchant marine reveals the virtual absence of narrative in seafarers' own *voice*. Life histories are useful in many situations, and they are especially effective given some five conditions.

First, they are valuable in understanding extremely complex human phenomena. They have been employed to explore the experiences of people subjected to genocide, terrorism, and other severe trauma (Bar-On, 2000; Volkan, 1997). How such people process or interpret the experience and what survival strategies they develop as well as the remedies pursued are molded by a host of social, cultural, and psychological factors. While international merchant seafarers are occasionally subject to intense trauma—as when severely abused by officers and fellow seafarers—their life at sea tends to extend trauma over long periods of time and with gradually increasing pressure. Though less dramatic, perhaps, such extended trauma is very real and may be more damaging. Resolution and redress are vitally dependent upon understanding the broad social and cultural setting of individual mariners and of the ship-board community. We must learn how cumulative trauma is perceived by and affects mariners; what do *they* seek as proper resolution and relief.

Second, there are virtually no studies of the men or women of the maritime labor force couched exclusively in their own words and attaching *their* values to *their* experiences. Their personal narratives are absent. Personal narratives are vital to understand unrevealed lives and circumstances. Conditions in the merchant marine

remain veiled. Seafarers are truly invisible. Analogies between the mute suffering of seafarers and the silent survivors of traumas such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima or the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans are very cogent. The unarticulated experiences of those victims, however, seem due to psychological shock and shame. For merchant mariners, shock and shame may also play a part but, to a far greater degree, their silence seems due to an absence of channels for safe communication. That surrenders the dominant narrative and makes it the property of elites who control the global shipping industry.

Third, oral histories or personal narratives proffer a different sort of evidence, knowledge. Often, quantitative evidence is inadequate to describe a phenomenon. A vast array of situations are simply too complex to yield to unsupported quantitative analysis. While such evidence is easier to gather and makes for facile analysis, it fails to provide the depth of understanding needed to communicate cryptic, often paradoxical, human experiences. Vast amounts of material quantify and purport to measure the life of seafarers.

Fourth, there are often experiences so sensitive, so traumatic, that individuals are unable or unwilling to talk about them (Bar-On, 2000; Schmidt, 2000). Talking about the experience may subject the narrator to ridicule or dishonor. The most obvious example of this sort of trauma is women raped as a form of torture or while war prisoners (Allen, 1996). While seafarers are not immune to such violence, their reluctance to speak is more often tied to fear of reprisal. In international shipping, institutional and economic forces ensure a surplus of ratings, deck, and engine room hands. Under these circumstances, competition for jobs is keen and any dissent or protest risks dismissal and blackballing. Life history interviews offer anonymity and confidentiality as a prerequisite of the inquiry. They are non-judgmental and value-neutral. At the same time, they allow individuals to identify problems, work through their experiences, voice their concerns, and begin to control their own lives (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Benmayor, 1991). Fear must be overcome, certainly. But, once confidence is established, personal narrative provides both historical evidence and a therapeutic opportunity.

Finally, the life history method is vitally important when we do not yet know with precision what research questions to ask. One can identify the phenomenon to be studied without initially understanding what issues are important and, if important, *why* they are important. Personal narratives, unstructured by the interviewer, nearly always reveal what is significant to the narrator and why they signify. They provide a guide to further inquiry and to more insightful analysis. While the life history tradition in qualitative research served as the foundation of my research method in this case, as you will note, I needed to construct a hybrid-methodological approach that took a little from here and a little from there, in order to meet the unique demands of a merchant marine labor force.

### **Site and Sampling**

The context for my study was anything but ideal. Initially, I thought I knew what to examine and how to accomplish the examination. I was wrong of course. The neat, carefully constructed methods of life-story interviewing simply had to bend to accommodate the dynamics of a busy seaport. And access to crew members became my central concern. The availability of seafarers is seriously limited by circumstance and design.

Car-carrying ships are in port for as little as four and seldom more than twelve hours. Twelve hours is unusual. Bulk carriers and other ship types are a bit better. But break-neck work schedules play havoc with efforts to stage unstructured, open-ended life-story interviews. Cycles of work and rest among mariners are now so compressed that opportunities to mingle with local people are severely restricted. Though sympathetic, many seafarers saw interviews as intrusions on precious time ashore. Several ship masters exhibited overt hostility, suspicious of our purposes. Keying on this, crew members shied away from interviews or used them to win approval. On occasion, an interview became an extravagant exercise in praise of owners, officers and ship. It was necessary to carefully analyze evidence in light of possible influence on testimony. It was not unusual for the circumstance to belie the tenor of the seafarer's responses. Interviewers had to attend not only to what was said but to what was not said. Special attention was paid to non-verbal cues. This required awareness of *high context cultures* and their value of avoiding conflict to protect and maintain group harmony (Augsberger, 1992).

The *unspoken* often reflected difficulty in finding *safe* locations where mariners were at ease. This problem was compounded by the press of time while a ship was in port. By necessity rather than choice, interviewers held sessions aboard a narrator's ship. The ambience on board a vessel was a challenge to the study. The social structure of the ship parallels its physical structure. An able bodied seafarer is at the bottom of a ship's social structure; his or her sleeping quarters are the smallest, least private accommodations, and located far down within the hull. The master and other officers are, of course, at the top of the physical and social structure (Zhao, 2002). The lack of privacy afforded an able bodied seafarer can become internalized to the point where he or she is afraid to speak candidly in their *home* for fear of reprisal. To voice complaints or criticize the power structure risks reprisal in many forms from verbal or physical violence to dismissal and black-listing.

Weiss (1994) discusses the advantages of hearing testimony in people's homes. Safety is one of them. But in many instances the ship—a seafarer's immediate *home*—may not be safe. A narrator who perceives an interview setting unsafe in *any* sense will be guarded in his or her interchange. Insecurity must inevitably restructure a story and make analysis very difficult. We had to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure privacy. In several instances, seafarers were uneasy even when ashore but still in sight of their colleagues. In one case, because he could reach it unseen, a seaman asked to be interviewed in an unused trailer belonging to the Center. Seafarers' willingness to speak with us, even under time-constrained, challenging circumstances, led us to conclude that they wanted to tell their stories.

Over a six-month period, we sought to achieve the widest possible representation in our interviews. The population sample consisted of sixty individuals from twelve different ethnic groups primarily from lesser developed countries. There were Chileans, Filipinos, Koreans, Guyanans, Hungarians, East Indians, Latvians, Norwegians, Poles, Romanians, Russians, and Ukrainians. The groups reflected a fair cross-section of the ethnic and geographic character of merchant seafarers. The largest group was composed of Filipinos; the smallest was Scandinavian. The variety of East Europeans reflects changes in the manning of the merchant fleet since the end of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.



Narrators told their stories and were observed *in situ*. All interviews were conducted in English, the international language of shipping. Only individuals who demonstrated mastery of the English language were interviewed. The intervention sought a demographic cross-section that considered not only ethnicity and national origin but gender and age as well. An accurate representation of seafarers' social structure was obtained by interviewing individuals based on their jobs aboard ship. They ranged from captains to cooks and included deck, engineering, and navigational divisions.

Supplementing the sixty detailed and formal interviews were hundreds of less formal and informative, usually shorter, interviews carried out in the course of daily activities. With very rare exceptions, my staff and I went aboard every vessel that entered port. These interviews were usually more focused. They extended ethnicities to include Chinese, Greek, Japanese, Bulgarian, Sri Lankan, Dominican, Panamanian, Salvadorian, and Costa Rican. Many of these informal interviews yielded information crucial in answering my research questions.

The initial quota sampling led to a form of *snowball* or chain effect. A planned interview led to a natural flow of encounters as one narrator suggested others with a story to tell. The overall sampling design occurred *within case*. Unplanned interviews were nearly always conducted on board mariners' ships. This allowed us to observe the context as well as hear the story. Less often, these interviews derived from chance encounters at one of the Center's facilities.

## Data Collection

I conducted my research aboard merchant vessels that ranged from trampers hauling bulk cargo to technologically advanced car carriers. I prepared for the study by arming myself with the varied paraphernalia of social science research. In early interviews, I carried a field journal, tape recorder, still and video cameras, and a sheaf of forms. These were, I thought, rather benign objects. But I soon discovered how such impedimenta inhibit research and might falsely color findings in the particular setting of my study.

I was most frustrated and hampered by institutional precautions and especially the requirement for informed consent. My Internal Review Board (IRB) insisted that participants be "read their rights" and sign a consent on institutional letterhead. This cumbersome bureaucratic procedure, designed to prevent unscrupulous investigators from engaging in abusive practices and to shield the university from lawsuits, instantly threw up a barrier between an interviewer and a storyteller. It destroyed the context described in Feminist theory (Chase & Bell, 1994). It negated the atmosphere of a free and collaborative relationship. Dealing with individuals unfamiliar with academic procedures and wary of anything smacking of officialdom, the excessive formality bred distrust. It cast the researcher in the role of an official, an agent of the dominant power structure, and made narrators into mere objects of study.

All this was diametrically opposed to the need for relationship in the research process (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007; Pernice, 1994; Rodgers, 2004; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Weiss, 1994). Internal Review Board requirements are designed to protect institutions not facilitate research. They were wholly inappropriate, I felt, to the

sort of research in which I was engaged. Nevertheless, verbal consent was always obtained before any interview. Participants were informed of risks in a non-threatening context. They were also informed that they could quit the interview at anytime. My personal email and telephone number were provided to all participants with instructions that they could contact me at anytime regarding their interviews. I was clear that all interviews were confidential and that no interview would maintain identifying data. Particular attention was paid to the fear and distrust seafarers live with every day. Seafarers are constantly anxious of losing their jobs. Signing formal papers contributes to that fear. For that reason we obtained signed IRB forms at the end of interviews, once trust was gained. In this way the *pro forma* requirements were less disruptive and, if for some reason the narrator changed his or her mind, we could exclude the interview. This never happened.

In terms of following accepted social science research practices, my first day of interviewing was a disaster. It was clear I needed to construct an evolving methodology to match demands encountered in the unique population I was studying and the singularity of its *locus*. Recording an interview often generated anxiety. Seafarers are highly vulnerable to the suspicions, even whims, of their officers. The permanency of recordings, video or audio, as well as the ease of identification, made them seem threatening. I found that recording a conversation, even with assurances that it would never be played publicly and would be destroyed after transcription, generated anxiety. Taping was used sparingly, and only when it was unobtrusive, even when a storyteller granted permission. A similar problem arose when interviewers appeared to be taking extensive notes. Thus, obvious note-taking was not used during an interview. This meant that interviewers had to meet immediately following the contact and reconstruct the conversation in detail. Such a procedure made a two-person team essential. What one missed the other was likely to pick up; an exchange stimulated expanded detail and nuance. Follow-up interviews were virtually impossible.

Before any interview, narrators were told the general purposes of the project and steps were taken to guarantee anonymity. After the first few interviews, they were not asked to sign anything *ab initio*. Encounters were never allowed to interfere with fulfillment of the seafarers' work obligations since that would invite a reprimand or worse. While we preferred to interview one person at a time, in some instances we were forced to conduct group sessions since the crew's time in port was so short. Interestingly, interviewing several people at once sometimes enhanced the process as one person's story stimulated another's response.

Only one or two ships ever returned to the port with the same crews. In combination with abbreviated time-in-port, this forced us to structure the interviews more highly than we wished. Open-ended sessions were simply not possible. Thus, we carefully identified a limited number of key topics we wanted to explore with particular mariners of ships and did more prompting than usual. We employed a probing technique. We never, however, stopped a narrator who needed to unburden himself. Because of the pervasive distrust on many, many ships, whenever possible we interviewed ashore at one or another of the Center's facilities. Unfortunately, this was not possible in many cases. Seafarers simply had no time. Therefore, we frequently undertook interviews on board the mariner's ship. But always, the interview space was screened from the eyes or ears of

officers and ratings. It was not good to close doors lest this excite suspicion. However, whenever someone passed by the room, we shifted to some innocuous subject.

We were never able to realize optimal life-story interview guidelines in the challenging environment of a modern seaport. Time for an interview to develop at its own pace was lacking. Storytellers and listeners should establish a research partnership. How, when the seafarer must be back aboard in a matter of hours and will probably never return? Postmodern and Feminist research methods acknowledge the essential value of unstructured interviews and the natural flow of narratives. Only occasional prompts can be used to *move* narrative forward. Restricted time schedules forced us to employ a semi-structured approach. Painfully aware of the drawbacks of the setting and hoping to obviate the most extreme disadvantages, we spent considerable time formulating an *interview guide* (see: Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Weiss, 1994) to *bound* the research.

We identified general areas we needed to cover. Though this imposed an *external* agenda or architecture in keeping with the project's goals, we felt confident of framing questions so storytellers would provide spontaneous responses independent of our own constructs. Comprehending meanings attached to events by merchant seafarers was the primary research objective. If the research context was established by external agents, meaning and value derived from the narrator.

Struggling to create an accurate picture of contemporary life in the world merchant fleet, it was vital to identify those general features contributing the most to our understanding. These were the areas we settled on:

- Seafarers' ethnic and national culture and what he or she encountered aboard ship. The difference between mono-cultural and multi-cultural crews was of special interest.
- Seafarers' self-image and their roles as worker and as mariner.
- Their perceptions of the social-political environment of the ship.
- Perceptions of *home* generally as well as locational identity.
- Shipboard conflicts and how they are dealt with.
- Feelings of abuse and exploitation.
- Attitudes toward uniformed or authoritative figures. The perceptions of authority.
- Motives for going to sea and remaining at sea.
- Perceptions of seafaring as a career.
- Feelings on first sailing and when leaving a ship.
- Relations with family and friends.
- A seafarer's status in his or her homeland, society, and economy.
- Feelings and attitudes toward superiors and subordinates.
- The seafarer's feelings about his or her home government and recruiting agencies.

By exploring these areas of interest, we acquired a compressed but relatively full sense of the meaning of seafaring. Particular attention was paid to eliciting responses from narrators that were not structured by interviewer questions. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used following the general outline of the interview guide. To capture interviews for later analysis, they were audio-taped if taping did not restrain the

storyteller. Videotaping was desirable but rarely possible. Interview journals were substituted to record non-verbal communication. The journals also served as a catalyst to broaden and elaborate discussion in after-action reviews that immediately followed interview sessions. Journals served also to identify *emerging themes* to instruct and re-frame future interviews. The interview process was organic, continually refined and evolving.

In the course of collecting the seafarers' oral histories, we encountered situations that moved us from our original life history research design into an action-research orientation. For example, upon arriving at the Seafarers' Center one morning, we met the crew of a small bulk cargo ship who waited at the door. All twelve crewmen complained that they were not being paid on time and at the rate agreed upon. Further, they stated that they were hungry. There was no food aboard the ship; supplies ran out several days prior to their arrival in Brunswick.

I went on board the vessel with one of the Port Chaplains, the Rev. Dr. Jan Saltzgaber. A former history professor, Saltzgaber also directed special projects for the Seafarers' Center. We were familiar with the vessel, the captain, and the crew from previous visits; it landed in Brunswick regularly. Because of this, we could move freely throughout the ship. The galley and all food storage compartments were inspected. Dry storage was empty save for a five-pound bag of bay leaves. Cool storage contained nothing but some sticks of butter. The walk-in freezer was empty, it was not even functioning. The galley freezer was also empty, and the refrigerators contained only a few chicken parts. Speaking with the ship's master, we were told that he knew the ship had run out of food but denied knowing the larders were empty. Evidently, he wanted us to think the ship arrived in Brunswick coincident with the consumption of the last food supplies. Out of sight and hearing of the master, the ship's cook told us he had had nothing to serve the men for the past forty-eight hours or more. The situation was a flagrant violation of seafarers' employment and human rights, and we were obliged to act.

The Coast Guard Marine Safety Office in Savannah was notified along with the Center for Seafarer Rights of the Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey. This, of course, was an intervention based on action-research. Coast Guard representatives, however, never interviewed the crew nor did they attempt to verify our report. I know this from my personal observations and questioning of crewmembers and inspectors. What they did do was look at the vessel's paperwork via facsimile but only after the master and ship's agent scrambled to cover what appeared to be a violation of international agreements. The chaplain remained aboard until the agent's hurried call to a local ship's chandler produced a delivery of food stuffs. Offering to help with the loading of the supplies, he was able to verify the amount, types, and value of the food. There is a formula giving the daily cost of food for each member of the crew. He confirmed that no more supplies had been ordered; the delivery was only sufficient to last a few days if the crew were fed as they were entitled to be fed. The ship would be at sea for many more days. This information was transmitted to the Marine Safety Office, but the Coast Guard had already accepted as valid a receipt for the purchase of \$1,500 worth of foodstuffs and, before any follow-up investigation could be conducted, allowed the vessel to sail. The quantity of food actually delivered was worth about \$500. It appeared

the receipt had been doctored. The ship's cook was in despair, he simply could not feed the crew without slashing daily rations by about two-thirds!

The men went hungry. Of course, we documented the interviews and have used them in advocating for seafarers' rights. And, when such data was communicated to senior Coast Guard commanders and the newspapers, it led to policy changes. Following this incident, a formal agreement was signed between the Brunswick seafarers' center and the Coast Guard allowing center representatives to act as formal human rights inspectors. More importantly, the interviews gave the seamen a fuller understanding of the master's contractual obligations to them and of their own rights under maritime law. For the first time, the men acted in concert to better conditions aboard ship. Through the narrative process, seafarers articulated the issues and were emboldened to act.

Winning access to individual life histories demands thoughtful design and the development of methods to ensure that individuals tell their stories as fully and openly as possible in a setting that is both safe and accepting. In light of the challenging setting in which international merchant seafarers live and work, however, we found it necessary to adapt our research design. Research traditions were combined to arrive at an holistic and relevant understanding of modern-day commercial seafarers that included action leading toward positive change (Stringer, 1999). Rather than work to fit my research into established traditions and methodologies, I created a hybrid where appropriate methodological pieces supported my research. Stringer's working principles guided my action-research: relationship, communication, participation, and inclusion. They guided my interactions with participants. Informed by these, interviews were "nonexploitative and enhance[d] the social and emotional lives of all people who participate[d]" in the study (p. 28).

## Validity

I describe my work as a qualitative, action-research approach and intervention process. The method of gathering data "[was] relativist, eclectic, subjective, perspective, and empirical" (Hansen, 1994, p. 108). The approach recognized the validity of the process itself. It does not address external-validity arguments, since these may serve as a form of oppression (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The research focuses on verification (Creswell, 1998) and *auditability* as opposed to validity. The data collection and analysis methods were a "dynamic and creative process [of] ongoing discovery" (Creswell, p. 141). The project recognizes that "qualitative research depends on human subjects with vivid stories to tell" (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 32). The stress on auditability accepts the premise that lived experiences are *valid* by definition and require no validation by others, certainly not for the individual who lived the experience. In essence, "truth is subject-oriented rather than researcher defined" (Sandelowski, p. 30). The meaning assigned by the one experiencing events is the crucial *truth*.

An hermeneutic conversation starts with belief. And expressed doubt becomes a form of domination by dismissing an individual's recounting of his or her own lived experience. Hermeneutic conversations transform narrators from *other*, an object to be studied, to *subject*, co-equals in pursuit of a truth. This procedure lessens the "likelihood of domination" by facilitating the entry of narrator and interviewer into a dialectical

relationship in which each works toward mutual comprehension of experiential meaning (Allen, 2002; Habermas, 1985; Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner, & Schmitz, 2008).

Questions of bias in the research were addressed within the dynamic of Critical and Feminist theory. The Positivist's stance in regard to controlling bias was abandoned. Rather, the researcher's bias was recognized and became part of the research activity. Entering into a hermeneutic, multi-cultural conversation to *hear* the stories of seafarer-subjects, interviewers must first develop a relationship with narrators. The action-research process embraces the collaboration of narrator and researcher to subvert the dominant paradigm. No true relationship can be constructed using a Positivistic path since Positivism assumes neutrality. Such neutrality is impossible in the model offered by Critical and Feminist theory and within an action-research (Stringer, 1999) context. Impartiality demanded by the Positivist's approach makes the storyteller an object to be known, the *other*.

I reject an artificial and arbitrary inflation of demands for research *rigor*. Such rigor smacks more of appearance than substance and it needlessly detracts from the soundness of my work. The job of the work is to capture "true-to-life, and meaningful portraits, stories, and landscapes of human experiences" (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 1). The design I employ exposes the "essence of . . . phenomenon" (p. 3). Bias is. And it is used dialectically in hermeneutic conversations to reveal essential qualities of authentic experiences.

### Reflections

So, why does this all matter? Stories told in the context of a major seaport were the raw data of my project. They were collected *in situ* aboard vessels in port or at the International Seafarers' Center facilities located at Colonel's Island and at the East River docks in the Port of Brunswick. A seafarer's center is defined as an *INGO* or International Non-governmental Organization, established to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the world's merchant seafarers. They may also act as Global Social Change Organizations (GSCOs), promoting dialogue between maritime workers and shipping industry elites or their representatives. Global Social Change Organizations are essentially engaged in education, often undertaking research and testifying or reporting to both government and industry groups (Barger & Reza, 1994; Boulding, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1996, 1998/1999). And those active in or working through INGOs and GSCOs may play a vital role in forming a peace culture. Routinely, seafarer centers engage in conflict resolution activities on behalf of seafarers, and many centers participate in advocacy projects for seafarer political, legal, and human rights. They are agents of Track II diplomacy (Diamond & McDonald, 1996; Notter & Diamond, 1996).

In my study, I gave special attention to the danger of seafarers' centers becoming allies of elites in the current global socio-political structure. Seafarer service agencies, or similar organizations, may, unconsciously, merge with elites and share in maintaining the dominant discourse. They may, unwittingly, help perpetuate an oppressive structure by dealing with mariners' needs paternalistically, neglecting opportunities for self-empowerment. Centers may treat seafarers as *victims* in need of care rather than individuals capable of acting by and for themselves to alter the political and social climate in which they live. In designing an action-research project, I needed to attend to

these threats. In particular, to ensure that researchers do not act as change agents themselves but, rather, create an environment of empowerment where seafarers recognize their own abilities, their potential to substantially transform a singular social, political, and economic framework.

As I began the research process, I felt equipped to inquire. I had a solid grounding in qualitative research method. In a very real sense, transformations in the world's merchant marine foreshadow potential developments in the broader economy. It has been suggested by some that enumeration and mathematics is not the language of human beings. I agree. My research is qualitative. The maritime milieu is not readily twisted to fit the strictures of quantitative methods nor does quantification truly describe conditions. And, of course, the implied objectivity of enumeration and statistical analysis is largely mythic. A holistic understanding, a true grasp of the modern international merchant seafarer culture, is obtained only through careful study of the seafarers' own words. Such study is necessarily subjective, as are all forms of research, as well as qualitative; it denies the value of mensuration and numerical manipulation as a sufficient grounding for conclusions and action. Further, and inevitably, in the context of my study the researcher is actively and consciously engaged in a transformative process.

Through narratives emerge identifiable conflict themes. Collecting, coding, and determining conflict themes is an intertwined process in which each activity illuminates the others. A key outcome of the process creates a stage upon which seafarers can act to empower themselves as agents of change.

Biographical narrative, collected and collated, attains another goal. It helps establish a foundation of common experience. And such shared experiences coalesce into a community of interest. Although all mariners derive from a particular culture, in a sense, common interest generates common culture. It forges an identity, economic and political, if not cultural. This goal swells in significance as maritime shippers increasingly try to subvert unity by multi-cultural recruiting. Developing awareness and recognizing common interests and shared problems—common culture, perhaps, or at least a range of sub-cultures—serves to mitigate disunity caused by cross-cultural friction.

A third goal derives from collection and dissemination of data—data that can be juxtaposed to that of the shipping industry and its allies in the corporate and governmental realms. It can be used to determine, and define with accuracy, conflict points between maritime labor and those who profit from it. With such definition, more effective intervention strategies may be developed by those who seek to resolve or transform conflict. Employing *elicitive* data collection methods strengthens the agency of individual seafarers and the power of their narrative. But that agency alone will neither resolve nor transform issues in the global merchant marine. The imbalances are too immense. Seafarers must win allies in the public arena; and the data generated through seafarers' stories, properly presented, will raise public awareness of injustices and abuses.

This life history, action-research, process also sought to intervene in contentious situations. The process empowers seafarers much as the talk-therapy of psychology empowers patients (Payne, 2006). It is an opportunity to frame their own stories from their own perspective and within a context expressing their specific life experience. Storytelling encourages the identification of issues and, in consequence, the will to act appropriately and effectively. Additionally, it offers legal and human rights advocates

pertinent data on the often inhumane treatment accorded mariners. The gathered data creates a body of evidence, testimony that reveals violence within the merchant marine industry. It collects a history owned by seafarers rather than their adversaries. The seafarer's story conveys a realistic account of human-rights norms in the world of the maritime shipping industry. And it vividly addresses the physical realities and the socio-economic structure aboard contemporary cargo vessels. Such perspectives are vital to enlarging the realm of justice.

The research conducted is critical in demonstrating how qualitative research methods need to be modified when studying highly mobile populations. Hybrid methodologies are required. Academic rigor is gained through auditability.

My research process became circular or, better, spiral. Each inquiry, each interview, generated insights that led me to act. And action produced renewed investigation. Practice informed action, which informed further practice. What emerged was an open system of execution and feedback. And this gave rise to an interactive process effectuating more fully developed method and the implementation of method to the population under study. Possibly, the example of this process is the most significant facet of my research.

My work attempts to stretch a narrowly defined paradigm of scholarly research to encompass a plan for responsible action. It does not, I hope, render scholarship less rigorous. Nor does it undervalue the studied objectivity of research on methods, problems, and issues in peace research and conflict resolution. Such research is essential in a world characterized by cultural, social, political, and economic ambiguities as well as disharmonies. Yet here, consciously, the aim is engagement. It outlines a means of persuasion firmly tied to rigorous scholarly practices. But it is not neutral. The goal is to enlist as large an audience as possible in the *act* of transforming conflict rather than simply observing and reporting it. It offers a concept of action-research, clearly expecting an outcome of substantive change. The arena of such change happens to be the international merchant shipping industry. Problems within the industry and the injustices inflicted upon those manning the ships of the world's merchant marine have been the focus of my professional activities for some years. The conclusions I have drawn from such activity are broadly applicable to other settings.

### References

- Allen, B. (1996). *Rape as warfare: The hidden genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Allen, D. (2002). Jurgen Habermas and democratic principles. In S. L. Bracci & C. G. Christians (Eds.), *Moral engagement in public life: Theorists for contemporary ethics* (pp. 97-122). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Anderson, K., & Jack, D. (1991). Listening to listen: Interview techniques and analysis. In S. B. Gluck & D. Patai (Eds.), *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history* (pp. 11-26). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Arnett, R. (2002). Paulo Freire's revolutionary pedagogy: From a story-centered to a narrative-centered communication ethic. In S. L. Bracci & C. G. Christians (Eds.), *Moral engagement in public life: Theorists for contemporary ethics* (pp. 150-170). New York, NY: Peter Lang.



- Augsberger, D. (1992). *Conflict mediation across cultures: Pathways and patterns*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Know Press.
- Barger, W., & Reza, E. (1994). *The farm labor movement in the Midwest: Social change and adaptation among migrant farmworkers*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press.
- Bar-On, D. (2000). Impossible encounters: Descendants of Holocaust victims meet descendants of Nazi perpetrators. In D. Bar-On (Ed.), *Bridging the gap: Storytelling as a way to work through political and collective hostilities* (pp. 21-27). Hamburg, Germany: Korber-Stiftung.
- Benmayor, R. (1991). Testimony, action research, and empowerment: Puerto Rican women and popular education. In S. B. Gluck & D. Patai (Eds.), *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history* (pp. 159-174). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Boulding, E. (1985). Nongovernmental organizations. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 41(7), 94-96.
- Boulding, E. (1988). Building a global civic culture: Education for an interdependent world. New York, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Boulding, E. (1991). The old and new transnationalism: An evolutionary perspective. *Human relations*, 44, 789-805. doi:10.1177/001872679104400803
- Boulding, E. (1996). The cultures and futures of peace. *Futures*, 28, 535-538. doi: 10.1016/0016-3287(96)84436-3
- Boulding, E. (1998/1999, Winter). Peace culture: The problem of managing human difference. *Cross currents*, 48(4), 445-457.
- Brady, D. (2003). Rethinking the sociological measurement of poverty. *Social Forces*, 81(3), 715-752.
- Chase, S. E., & Bell, C. S. (1994). Interpreting the complexity of women's subjectivity. In E. McMahan & K. L. Rogers (Eds.), *Intercative oral history interviewing* (31-46). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (1998). *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Diamond, L., & McDonald, J. (1996). *Multi-track diplomacy: A systems approach to peace*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Figini, P., & Santarelli, E. (2006). Openness, economic reforms, and poverty: Globalization in developing countries. *The Journal of Developing Areas*, 39(2), 129-151.
- Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). The literacy process and cultural action for freedom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4), 480-498.
- Galtung, J. (1985). Twenty-five years of peace research: Ten challenges and some responses. *Journal of Peace Research*, 22, 141-158. doi: 10.1177/002234338502200205
- Galtung, J. (1998). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Goldberg, P. K., & Pavcink, N. (2004). *Trade, inequality, and poverty: What do we know? Evidence from recent trade liberalization episodes in developing countries*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Goldstein, M. (1968). Anthropological research, action, and education in modern nations: With a special reference to the U.S.A. *Current Anthropology*, 9(4), 247-254.
- Habermas, J. (1985). *The theory of communicative action: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. Vol. I. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hansen, A. (1994). A riot of voices: Racial and ethnic variables in interactive oral history interviewing. In E. M. McMahan & K. L. Rogers (Eds.), *Interactive oral history interviewing* (pp. 107-139). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C., & Pittaway, E. (2007). Beyond “do no harm”: The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2), 299-319.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1999). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Matyók, T. (2009). *Constructing counter-narrative: A key to challenging neo-slavery in the de-nationalized world of globalization--The shipping industry and the case of the M/V Agios Minas*. Retrieved from [http://www.transcend.org/tri/downloads/Slavery\\_at\\_Sea.pdf](http://www.transcend.org/tri/downloads/Slavery_at_Sea.pdf)
- Menyhart, R. (2003). Changing identities and changing law: Possibilities for a global culture. *Indian Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 10(2), 157-199.
- Notter, J., & Diamond, L. (1996, October). *Building peace and transforming conflict: Multi-track diplomacy in practice* (Occasional Paper No. 7). Washington, DC: The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy.
- Payne, M. (2006). *Narrative therapy: An introduction for counsellors*. London: Sage.
- Pernice, R. (1994). Methodological issues in research with refugees and immigrants. *Professional psychology: Research and Practice*, 25(3), 207-213.
- Rodgers, G. (2004, September). “Hanging out” with forced migrants: Methodological and ethical challenges. *Forced migration review*, 21, 48-49.
- Sandelowski, M. (1993). Rigor or rigor mortis: The problem of rigor in qualitative research revisited. *Advances in Nursing*, 16(2), 1-8.
- Schmidt, W. (2000). Peace making by storytelling. In D. Bar-On (Ed.), *Bridging the gap: Storytelling as a way to work through political and collective hostilities* (pp. 13-172). Hamburg, Germany: Korber-Stiftung.
- Sisneros, J., Stakeman, C., Joyner, M., & Schmitz, C. (2008). *Critical multicultural social work*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum.
- Stringer, E. (1999). *Action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, S., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Volkan, V. (1997). *Bloodlines: From ethnic pride to ethnic terrorism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Weiss, R. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Wiseman, J. (1970). *Stations of the lost: The treatment of skid row alcoholics*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Zhao, M. (2002). *Emotional labour in a globalized labour market: Seafarers on cruise ships* (Working Paper Series Paper 27). Wales: Cardiff University, Seafarers International Research Centre.

---

### Author's Note

Tom Matyók, Ph.D., is currently working as an Assistant Professor of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His research interests include the education and training of conflict workers, the changing nature of war, global violence, modern day slavery, and oppression. Currently, Tom is a research scholar at the Center for New North Carolinians investigating the impact of violence on refugees and immigrants. Tom is also involved in identifying the missing narratives of the cost-benefit analysis of war. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to: Dr. Tom Matyók at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 402 Tate Street; Brown Building, Room 337; Greensboro, NC 27412; Phone: +1 336-334-3865; E-mail: [tgmtyok@uncg.edu](mailto:tgmtyok@uncg.edu)

Copyright 2011: Tom Matyók and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

Matyók, T. (2011). Collecting international merchant seafarer oral histories: Experiences and reflections. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(4), 1001-1017. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-4/matyok.pdf>

---