An essay on ‘health capital’ and the Faustian bargains struck by workers in the globalised shipping industry

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Abstract

It has long been understood that work directly generates ill health and disability through injuries and occupational exposure to toxic and carcinogenic materials, but the more complex relationship between work and ill health that is seemingly mediated through psychological distress is more controversial. For example, the ‘Karasek model’, whereby high job demands coupled with limited latitude in decision making were thought to generate ill health, has not been supported in large-scale surveys. This paper postulates an alternative linking mechanism between work and health, namely Mildred Blaxter’s concept of ‘health capital’, and specifically explores the value of the concept in understanding lay theorising about the links between labour intensification and self-perceived health: workers’ perceptions that their work has become more effortful may be bracketed with their belief that their continuing employment is demanding accelerating expenditure of their health capital. The argument is illustrated by qualitative interviews with an international sample of seafarers, a proto-typically globalised labour force.

Keywords: health capital, labour intensification, health inequalities, occupational health, lay epidemiology, seafaring

Introduction

It’s not generally appreciated that self-assessments of health are better predictors of mortality than epidemiological measures of health status (Mackenbach et al. 2002). Studies in the UK, USA, Japan, Australia, Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands all demonstrated that those who self-assess their health as poor, after controlling for a wide range of measures of health and illness, die at younger ages than their peers whose self-assessments are more positive (Idler and Benyamini 1997). You may think this indicates that we are all pretty hot at self-diagnosis. Or you may think that it indicates the force of self-fulfilling prophecies, as the health pessimists eat, drink and are merry to excess because tomorrow they may die. Or (always the empiricist’s preference) you may think it indicates some combination of the two. But you would still have to admit that there is a strong case for more investigation of how self-assessment of health influences health status. I want to argue the case for more investigation of one particular sociological concept relevant to self-assessment of health, namely Mildred Blaxter’s concept of ‘health capital’ (Blaxter 2003, 2010). I also want to argue for the possible utility of that concept in our understanding of the relationship between
working experience and ill health. And, in particular, I want to argue for the salience of the
concept of health capital in understanding the links between labour intensification – the
proportion of labour performed for each hour of work – and workers’ ill health, using the
shipping industry as an extended example.

Before I get onto a discussion of health capital itself, I should make clear that I am aware
that there is already a candidate contender for the linking mechanism between working
experience and ill health – the concept of ‘stress’. By this I mean, not the physiological
measure of cortisol levels, but rather the psychological concept operationalised by
psychological measures in large-scale population surveys, the most famous variant of which
is the ‘Karasek demand/control model’, whereby high job demands coupled with limited
latitude in decision making were thought to generate ill health (Karasek 1979). The
relationship between work and ill health has been approached through several different
literatures – the literature on health inequalities, the psychological literature on occupational
stress and the labour studies literature – and in several literatures the concept of stress has
been getting a bad press.

Thus, Brown has repeatedly criticised what he sees as conceptual flaws in general survey
measures of stress (see, for example, Brown 1981). Empirically, neither the Whitehall studies
on health inequalities (Marmot et al. 1997), nor the UK’s largest psychological survey of
workers’ health (Smith et al. 2000), found support for the Karasek stress model. Siegrist and
colleagues, while keeping the link with stress, have attempted to identify different ‘health
adverse’ properties of work from those of Karasek’s demand/control model: first pointing to
the health impacts of work involving high effort and low rewards (Siegrist 1996); and more
recently identifying a whole range of properties in the ‘psychosocial work environment’ (for
example, job insecurity, lack of participation in decision making, and organisational
injustice) associated with poorer health (Siegrist 2004, Siegrist et al. 2009). Specific criticisms
have been raised of the putative role of stress in generating health inequalities (Davey Smith
et al. 2001) and Wainwright and Calnan (2002) have suggested that both the causal
relationship between psychological distress and stress may be the reverse of that usually
assumed, and that the rise of ‘stress discourses’ may be linked to the decline of labour power:
adverse experiences in the workplace become medicalised; and job dissatisfaction becomes
depression. Most engagingly, the anthropologist Allan Young has compared the work of
stress researchers with that of the medical diviners he had studied in Ethiopia: ‘both make use
of analogy and ellipsis in order to link together what would otherwise be seen to be disparate
sets of events (e.g. building a house and falling ill…)’ (Young 1980: 133). So there may well
be room for another candidate-linking mechanism other than stress.

Alfred Schutz (1967) has argued that all social science concepts are inevitably
systematisations of lay theorising. Blaxter’s (2003) concept of health capital, which of course
is quite distinct from the economists’ term of the same name (Grossman 1972), is likewise a
systematisation of a lay concept: an accumulated store of health (bodily strength and fitness,
immune status, inherited tendencies, physical damage, vulnerability), which although
augmentable must eventually be spent, and where the timing and nature of this loss is socially
patterned. Coincidentally, Wacquant has coined a similar concept, that of ‘bodily capital’,
and described its preservation and expenditure among amateur and professional boxers
(Wacquant 2004: 127–31). But Blaxter’s concept is the more developed and is the one I
concentrate on here. Notions of health capital – like Douglas’s cosmologies of risk – are
cultural products, differentially distributed across families (Blaxter and Paterson 1982) and
across workgroups (Bellaby 1987, 1999). Material differences in access to resources both
influence the ability to exercise choices and to ‘plan’ health capital, and equally they shape
the cultures of the workplace and the neighbourhood which promote and depreciate those

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choices (Bellaby 1999). Blaxter has drawn on Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus (Bourdieu 1984) to suggest how routine activities and tastes such as food consumption are shaped by class-related norms of behaviour and may serve to augment or deplete health capital (Blaxter 2010). The study of health capital is tied into what Davison et al. (1991) called ‘lay epidemiology’ – ‘lay theorising about health and illness; drawing on local observations, daily experience, scientific evidence and health education messages’ (Bloor, 2000: 138) – a field of conjoint interest between the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g. Wynne 1992) and medical sociology (e.g. Williams and Popay 1994) and social history (e.g. Watterson 1993).

**Labour intensification and seafarers**

A particularly topical issue in the study of the relationship between work and health is the possible effect of labour intensification on workers’ health. In an influential review and synthesis of evidence, Green (2001) has concluded that average working hours in the UK have not increased since 1981. A minority are indeed working longer hours (‘labour extensification’ – offset by the concentration of workers in fewer households), but the main increase in work effort in recent years in the UK has been through an increase in the proportion of labour performed for each hour of work (‘labour intensification’). Reasons for labour intensification are probably multiple: employees are prepared to work harder for the glittering prizes of consumerism (Ichniowski et al. 1996); and/or employees are driven to work harder by a reduction in labour power and globalising economic processes, leading to more ‘flexible’ workers (Burchell et al. 1999); and/or employees are induced to work harder by technological and organisational change, particularly e-mail communications, just-in-time management and team-working – reducing dead time and increasing Foucauldian surveillance (Green 2004). Data from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (Kersley et al. 2006) suggest work intensity in the UK reached a plateau in the late 1990s; it is unclear whether that plateau will simply be maintained or further increases will occur.

In the shipping industry, although systematic international survey data are lacking, it is pretty clear to industry-insiders that processes of labour intensification that began 30 years ago are continuing unabated. The dip in world trade volumes that occurred following the OPEC oil-price rise in the 1970s coincided with a rise in ship carrying capacity to produce a disastrous collapse in world maritime freight rates, a wave of bankruptcies and mergers, and an unrelenting search by ship operators for economies (Lane 1983). Ship operators increasingly ‘flagged out’, a process of off-shoring whereby they exited from traditional national ship registries like the UK, Greece and Norway and re-registered their ships with so-called ‘flags of convenience’ registries (Liberia, Panama, and more recent entrants such as the Marshall Islands and even land-locked Mongolia), which enabled them to also exit from national collective bargaining agreements and to employ cheaper casualised labour (‘crewing out’) from the new labour supply countries, most notably from the Philippines, which now supplies a quarter of the million-or-so seafarers working in the international trade (Wu and Sampson 2005).

Cheap maritime freight rates are one of the motors of globalisation, with the transport costs of a pair of Chinese jeans marketed in the UK being around 20p, and with even such improbable contracts being undertaken as the shipping of cargoes of broken glass from Humberside all the way to Italy for re-cycling. The shipping industry is now characterised by modular ‘global value chains’ (Gereffi et al. 2005) divided among multiple enterprises scattered across the planet. Ships are typically owned but not operated by transnational corporations or shareholder consortia, and operated, but typically not owned, by specialist
international ship management companies. Crews may be employed by the ship managers, but are also frequently outsourced, with specialist crewing agencies contracting to supply of ‘just-in-time’ crew with the requisite paper qualifications (Bloor and Sampson 2009). The new multi-national crews, compared with their predecessors of 30 years ago, have greatly diminished labour power, are paying for their own training, are working on short-term contracts, and are dependent for new contracts on favourable personnel reports from their senior officers and the goodwill of shore-side staff in the crewing agency offices. The shipping industry is the traditional industry that has been most changed by globalising economic processes and, accordingly, labour conditions in the industry hold especial interest, insofar as they may be the shape of things to come for other workers in other industries.

Technological innovations, such as automated enginerooms, have allowed reductions in crewing levels, but then place additional demands on the diminished crew when – as often happens on older vessels – the automated engineroom breaks down. Other technological changes have reduced crew ‘dead time’ for relaxation and recuperation: most dramatically, containerisation and other port handling innovations have changed port turn-around times from several days to a few short hours. Satellite technology and the internet offer seafarers the chance to keep in touch with their families, but they also enormously increase the control head office exercises over the day-to-day running of the ship, and greatly increase the administrative burdens for senior officers. Some shipboard roles (such as the purser) have simply disappeared and their continuing duties (such as charge of the medical chest) are assigned to other crew. New responsibilities, such as the operation of the International Ship and Port Security Code [ISPS], introduced to guard against terrorist threats in 2004, do not lead to the creation of new posts, but simply load additional burdens onto existing crew.

Minimum manning levels for vessels are specified by the flag-State, but with commercially operated flag-States competing for ship registry business (the Mongolian registry, with 1,600 ships on its books, is operated by a Singaporean businessman who was previously licensed to operate the Cambodian registry), there has been a tendency for minimum manning levels to be progressively reduced beyond any changes that might be expected as the result of technological change. This can be seen most clearly in bridge watch-keeping. Most industry-insiders recognise that the administrative burdens of being the master of a modern vessel, make it inadvisable for the master to share watch-keeping duties with the other bridge officers. But minimum manning levels which permit ship operators to dispense with a third officer are forcing masters to undertake eight hours a day of watch-keeping duties in addition to their other tasks. And minimum manning levels, which dispense with the second officer, are by no means uncommon, forcing the master and the mate (first officer) to watch turn-and-turn-about every day, every week, every month of their contracts, while simultaneously attending to a hundred-and-one other duties. Commercial pressures make it difficult for better crewed ships to make a profit, unless they are operating in niche markets where they can charge premium rates for quality services. There is a Gresham’s Law of the sea: ‘Bad ships drive out good’ (Bloor et al. 2000).

To sum up, the outsourced global seafarer is prepared to work hard: labour power is limited, alternative employment opportunities in the new labour supply countries are few, and crew are frequently the sole support of extended families. This preparedness to work hard is appropriate because crewing levels are being cut, new technologies and new management systems are eliminating dead-time and increasing surveillance, and new regulatory burdens and regulatory slippage are generating both labour intensification and labour extensification.

In 1885 a UK Royal Commission reported on loss of life at sea and calculated that, every year, one in 73 seafarers would die at sea. This terrible toll has hugely reduced, but next to
fishing, seafaring remains the occupation with the highest mortality rate in developed countries. In Denmark, for example, seafarer occupational mortality is 11 times as great as average shoreside occupational mortality (Hansen 1996). In the UK, seafarer occupational mortality is 12 times as great as the average occupational mortality rate; it is twice as high as occupational mortality in the construction industry and eight times as high as in manufacturing industry (Roberts and Williams 2007). Yet, it would be a mistake to ascribe the great majority of these seafarer deaths to maritime disasters and tempests. In the UK fleet, founderings and collisions claimed only two deaths in 1988–2005 and, although there were five crew lost overboard in 1996–2005, only two of those occurred in heavy seas (Roberts and Williams 2007). The cruel sea is not to blame.

International regulations on seafarers’ health and safety require all seafarers to undergo periodic medical examinations to be passed fit for duty. So, in the shipping industry, there is a very strong ‘healthy worker effect’ (Carpenter 1987), whereby unhealthy and incapacitated workers are excluded from the workplace and thereby are not included in labour force health surveys. The fragmentary data that we have from seafarer health surveys is consistent with a substantial healthy worker effect: for example, the investigations of Smith and his colleagues of seafarer fatigue, across a number of different ship types and types of trade, show high levels of fatigue and disturbed sleep patterns, but also show good mental and physical health as measured by the SF-36 health screening instrument (Smith 2006). Thus, seafarers working on rig supply boats in the North Sea were compared with rig workers, and data on onshore workers. Despite long hours (some masters of supply boats were reported to be working more than 19 hours per day [Wigmore 1989]), rotating shift patterns and disturbed sleep due to noise, motion and vibration, the seafarers on the supply boats had similar self-reported health scores to the onshore workers and significantly better self-reported mental health than the rig workers (Smith et al. 2001). Strong selection effects in the shipping industry appear to ensure robust self-reported health. The late-modern seafarer is a survivor: the Keith Richards of the global labour force.

Nevertheless, the present survivor may still have a future price to pay. As Bellaby put it: ‘as embodied selves, workers seek to accommodate to the demands of their jobs’ (Bellaby 1999: 2). Processes of selection in the workplace accentuate some bodily qualities necessary for the job, and suppress others: workers are ‘made’ by the demands of their job. The bodily changes wrought by the worker’s bodily accommodation to the job, whether they be as trivial as a dependence on caffeine or as serious as the temporary exposure to carcinogens, may have long-term health effects but no current health effects. Bodily accommodation to work can produce longer-term disparities in workers’ health. It is the workers’ accounts of this process of bodily accommodation to the demands of the job that I hope to capture in this exploration of seafarers’ health capital.

Methods

Originally, I had intended to study the health capital/work intensification link in a qualitative and quantitative study of 360 seafarers, nurses and steelworkers (employees, sick employees and ex-employees) and also to develop a scored measure of labour intensification that could be used in future health/labour-force surveys. However, after my grant application was turned down, successively, by the Economic and Social Research Council and the European Research Council, I was fortunate that Cardiff’s Seafarers International Research Centre offered core funds for a qualitative study of seafarers’ health capital and its links with work effort (both labour intensification and labour extensification).
Members of an opportunistic sample of 37 seafarers were interviewed, either when they visited two UK port missions or in the course of accompanying a port chaplain on his ship visits. Missions to seafarers have an important welfare function and cater for seafarers of all religions and none. However, short port turn-around times mean that seafarers’ opportunities to visit the port missions are typically brief and the interviews had to be fitted around seafarers’ purchases of toiletries, international phonecalls and emails, relaxing games of pool, etc. The refusal rate was just under 50 per cent and the main reason for refusal was lack of time. The interviews therefore had to be brief and the opportunities to establish rapport were very limited. There was a danger that, across barriers of age, country and differing first languages, seafarers would give abbreviated stock answers to standard enquiries about their health. Accordingly, much of the interview was devoted to getting seafarers to respond to three vignettes of seafarers (a Filipino messman, a Filipino fitter and a Norwegian master) who had experienced new work-related demands (see Appendix A).

In each case my questions to the interviewee related, not to their estimate of the current health of the seafarer in the vignette, but to the longer-term impact of these work demands on his health: ‘Do you think he will be fit enough to go to sea in five years’ time?’ ‘Why/Why not?’ and ‘Are there things he can do to keep himself healthy?’ Interviewees thought the vignettes were realistic (‘Yes, this can be happen [sic] because I have also some companion seafarers that have similar problems’) and some interviewees directly related one or more of the vignettes to their own work situations without prompting. Others were encouraged to do so by similar questions about their own expenditure of work effort and its possible impact on their health, e.g. ‘How long do you think you can continue to work as a seafarer?’ ‘Are there things you can do to keep yourself healthy despite the demands of the job?’

All interviews were anonymous and conducted in English, the international language of the sea. Ethical approval was granted by Cardiff University’s School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Two interviewees did not wish to be audiotaped. Notes were also taken, post-interview, in two cases of equipment failure. The rest of the interviews were transcribed, indexed and analysed (along with the fieldnotes) using analytic induction (Bloor 1978), focusing on the ‘deviant cases’ to extend analytic propositions across the range of cases.

The mean age of the sample was 36 years with a range from 19 to 56. Rankings ranged from cadet and messman to chief engineer and master; 43 per cent were officers. The nationalities represented were: Burmese (Myanmar), Chinese, Croat, Filipino, German, Indian, Irish, Korean, Russian and Ukrainian. While qualitative studies prioritise validity over representativeness, comparisons of the missions sample with estimates of the composition of global seafarer labour market (Lane et al. 2002, Wu and Sampson 2005) nevertheless show broad similarity. Officers were slightly over-represented. Filipinos are the largest national group in the global fleet (29% in Lane et al. 2002) and were also slightly over-represented in the missions sample at 36 per cent. Interviewing at two ports with different berthing facilities ensured a broad range of ship types, but crew from cruise ships and oil tankers were absent (although product tankers were represented) and crew from ro-ros (roll-on-roll-off cargo ships) were over-represented.

Findings

‘Better to work and die’

These dramatic words were uttered by a 50-year-old Indian chief engineer, passed fit and back at work after a heart by-pass operation. He wanted to work for the sake of his family.
and he praised the ship operator for giving seafarers access to private emails and a free SIM card for calls home. But he also recognised the demanding character of his work. He was subject to instructions from head office and responsible for the enforcement and observance of company regulations and international shipping regulations, but as chief engineer he also had to reconcile these demands with ‘limited resources’ and with the practical constraints of the ship’s operation. He gave the example of the ship’s incinerator which should only be operated on the high seas, but the vessel’s schedule of frequent port-calls meant that there were hardly enough times to run it: ‘As chief engineer, I am between the ship and the company. And this causes stress’.

The generally demanding character of seafaring was recognised by all interviewees. Unsurprisingly, ratings tended to emphasise the physical demands of the job, while officers tended to emphasise the weight of their responsibilities:

It is much easy to be in good health as officer than ratings. As officer, I stay with radio in office and tell seaman to go and check something [laughs]. But as the rating I must go in weather like this, or today, when it is rain and windy and check something – it is much different (Polish able seaman, aged 36).

He was oppressed by the fact that incompetency could lead to disaster […] he would wake up at night, alarmed by the slightest sound (Notes from an interview with a German master, aged 42).

One exception to this agreement about the demands of the job was evident in the discussions about the second of the vignettes (see Appendix A), concerning a 44-year-old messman (a position combining the roles of cleaner and steward). The vignette reported that, following reductions in crewing levels, he was now the only messman and he was experiencing problems with the cook over the quality of his work. Not all of the officers felt a messman’s duties to be particularly onerous, even if longer hours were required, and some of the European officers regarded tensions within the crew as a frequent feature of shipboard life to be disregarded. But this was not true of all the officers. A 24-year-old Korean third officer explained that in his culture it would be considered shameful for an older man to clean up after younger crew and this would create difficulties for the messman. But other non-European officers simply took the view that his poor relationship with the cook would eventually affect his fitness, as in this interview with a 56-year-old Indian chief engineer:

Chief: … he is pressurised by the cook, as it [the vignette] say.
MB: The relationship. And do you think this…?
Chief: Yes, this makes a difference. Yes. The working environment makes a difference. A lot.
MB: So again you think, if this carries on, he won’t be fit enough [to continue at sea]?
Chief: Yes, I think so. It would affect him, yes.

Most of the ratings took the same view:

Under pressure. You know what makes a man tired? If you are under pressure with your work, always pressure. How can you sleep? […] Especially if you are this messman: you have to clean all the offices, you to clean all the surroundings, and you also have to serve
[meals] for them. [...] Eventually, he is not, he cannot, his body will wear out, especially the workload he receives. OK maybe for now. But [can he still go to sea] five years from now? No, I don’t think so’ (Filipino electrician, aged 54).

That 54-year-old electrician was considering the vignette of 44-year-old Nonoy the messman from a similar vantage point in age. The only ratings who believed that Vignette-Nonoy would still be fit in five years’ time were young men. A 22-year-old Filipino, himself a messman, who took exercise and didn’t drink or smoke (just like Nonoy), when asked why he thought Vignette-Nonoy would still be fit to labour in five years’ time, explained simply that Nonoy kept himself physically healthy, as a non-smoker and one who took regular exercise and watched his diet. The view that work itself could be bad for your health tended to develop only with experience.

Just as some of the officers and inexperienced ratings took the view that Vignette-Nonoy would still be fit to labour in the future, despite his long hours and problems with the cook, so there was also a small minority of ratings (but no officers) who thought that Vignette-Gunnar would be able to recuperate in his periods of leave and thus continue to work on as a ship’s master, despite his additional duties. However, I have no space to document these further variations in viewpoint here. There is nevertheless a general, but not universal, understanding of the resilience of the body being gradually eroded, of employment-related changes in the body over time that bring ill health in their train:

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Your body is the same as an engine [...] the wear and tear of the body and the wear and tear of the engine: it is the same (54-year-old Filipino electrician).

Your capacity of taking the stresses reduce [...] Before [when] I had the stress it wasn’t really affecting. And now it affects more (56-year-old Indian chief engineer).

This erosion of health capital is acceded to in a Faustian pact. Faust signed away his soul in return for knowledge. The reasons for seafarers to sign away their future health are various. Seafarers from the developing nations are spending their health capital in pacts to support their families, as with this 51-year-old Filipino bosun:

MB: When do you think you will retire?

Bosun: As soon as my children will finish their studies [...] I have already one daughter graduated as a nurse. And two others they are going to nursing schools. So they are now in their third year and first year college. So still I have to go onboard to support.

Relatedly, others hope that the fruits of their labours will be the accumulation of sufficient financial capital to enable them to start a small business. The American Dream has been successfully exported to the developing world, as exemplified by this 32-year-old Filipino third engineer:

MB: How long do you think you could work as a seafarer?

3rd Eng: I think maybe at the age of 45 or 50, I think that is the time to come in to my family [...] If I earn and I have savings in the bank and I make a small business, then that is the time I will stop working on the ship.
Seafarers from the transitional states of Eastern Europe, however, are more likely to cite the
dearth of alternative employments. Lack of job opportunities drives them to sea and lack of
job opportunities prevents their return from the sea:

Sometimes we haven’t a chance. I haven’t any chance in the Ukraine now […] I can’t find
any interesting work for me, aside of sailor. I haven’t any chance (31-year-old Ukrainian
AB).

When I get some job ashore I will stay in home – it is much better for me […] the world
situation, this big crisis – before we have some jobs [in Poland] and now there is nothing
 […] Staying ashore, where I go? (51-year-old Polish AB).

_Salvation is elsewhere_

Interviewees who thought that the seafarers in the vignettes would not be healthy enough to
continue to go to sea in five years’ time were asked if the vignette-seafarer could do anything
to improve his health. Of course, it was commonplace for interviewees to point out that
Vignette-Sam and Vignette-Gunnar could improve their health by quitting smoking,
especially among those interviewees who were non-smokers themselves. But beyond (and
often additional to) the advice to quit smoking, interviewees would suggest that the vignette-
seafarer could improve his health by taking a new contract, with a new ship and consequent
relief from the health-eroding demands of his current work situation. Similarly, among those
interviewees who believed that the vignette-seafarers _would_ be fit enough to continue to go to
sea in five years’ time, the commonest reason given for this optimism was that, on a
subsequent contract and on a new ship, the vignette-seafarer would escape from his current
unhealthy situation: Vignette-Sam, Vignette-Nonoy and Vignette-Gunnar had only to endure
and in a few months’ time they could perhaps find salvation in a new contract:

...The only positive way that he [Nonoy] can do is just finish the contract. And after finish
the contract, maybe later on he will [be] assign[ed] to another company or another ship
(41-year-old Filipino AB).

...If he [Nonoy] could, he could try and get a different ship for his next contract (19-year-
old Irish cadet).

Maybe he [Sam] can still [go to sea] because the ship he was on board is all the
breakdowns. But if he goes on a new ship he can still [continue to work at sea] (51-year-old
Filipino bosun).

Typically, in the 21st century shipping industry, only senior officers (masters and chief
engineers) have long-term employment contracts and only senior officers find themselves
returning recurrently to the same ship after their shore leave has expired. For the rest of the
crew, on short-term contracts, each new contract (usually of eight to twelve months’
duration) will find them on a different ship, with different ship-mates and a different working
environment. But only experienced senior officers, whose expertise is in short supply, are able
to pick and choose new contracts and new work environments. A 34-year-old Croat second
engineer, who had always worked on bulk carriers, thought he would have to give up
working at sea by the time he was 50/55, unless he could switch from working on bulk
carriers to less-demanding passenger vessels. Less senior crew must be thankful for any new

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contract. And the new work environment that comes with that new contract, be it less or be it more health-eroding, is part of the lottery of their lives. They cannot plan for a less demanding work experience; they can only hope.

‘What can he do? He has to work’

Lack of labour power makes seafarers fatalists. Perhaps the interviewee that I spoke to who was enduring the most demanding working conditions (and there were several candidates) was a 49-year-old Russian first officer on a bulk carrier who, in the absence of any other deck officers, was alternating ‘six-and-six watches’ (six hours of bridge watch-keeping, followed by six hours off) with the master, every day of his four-month contract. As first officer, he was also responsible for cargo-loading and discharging and for a pile of paperwork. When I asked him about his health, he responded: ‘I never think about it. Now I’m fine. So’. When I asked him whether Vignette-Sam would still be able to continue to work in five years’ time, he answered: ‘Nobody knows: maybe yes, maybe no’. And when I asked him if there was anything Vignette-Sam could do help himself, he replied: ‘What can he do? He has to work’. Only one interviewee mentioned the union, the International Transportworkers Federation, as a possible protection against health-eroding working conditions. Similarly, it was striking that, although ships’ crews are a hierarchical workgroup, only one interviewee suggested that sympathetic officers could offer protection to crew struggling with difficult working conditions. Neither benevolent superordinates, nor collective action, are believed to offer any remedy to the powerless.

An anonymous referee, drawing on Bourdieu’s analysis of the different forms that human capital can take, has suggested that seafarers not only suffer the depletion of their health capital, but they also lack the ‘distance from necessity’ (Bourdieu 1984) which might give them the capacity to transfer between different forms of capital. This seems very likely, at least for those who are not senior officers, but I have no interview data to present on this point.

Some qualifications to my argument need to be stated briefly before concluding. Many of the larger vessels have gymnasia and other recreation facilities, which are not always well used: ‘It is not popular recreation, to do exercise’. Seafarers have the proof before their eyes – their elderly ship-mates – that it is possible, for some at least, to go on working into their sixties. And there are the traditional seafarer consolations of good cheer (‘...We get together on a Saturday night, so all the crew are gathering and we have some fun’) and of religion. The interviewee who left the strongest impression on me was a 41-year-old Burmese electrician who meditated every day, and every day went through his prayer beads; he believed that the mental disciplines of his religion made it possible for him to keep healthy ‘under pressure’ by keeping calm.

Conclusion

Seafarers, like other workers, are ‘lay epidemiologists’, able to construct causal accounts of ill health out of the observed conditions of their work. I have shown how one resource in this lay theorising is the idea of a finite stock of health which is eventually eroded by pathogenic working conditions, even among the sober, the exercised and the smoke-free. Blaxter’s (2003) concept of ‘health capital’ is a second-order sociological construct that seems to capture that first-order lay theorising and also links well with the work of those like Bellaby (1999) who have drawn on the sociology of the body to describe workers’ bodily accommodations to the demands of the workplace. Seafarers conceptualise their bodies’ immediate accommodations
to interrupted sleep, additional duties, overbearing supervision and suchlike, while also seeing those bodily accommodations as time limited: eventually – they believe – something is spent, exhausted, the body breaks down and they are no longer fit to labour. These lay notions of health capital are not invariate, but they are widespread, at least in the present sample. There is a general acceptance by these workers of a Faustian bargain to spend their health capital, and sooner or later compromise their health, in return for a measure of financial security or family advancement. To be clear, I have not sought in this paper to ‘test’ the concept of health capital, but I have tried to demonstrate its value as a sensitising concept to aid sociological understanding both of how work shapes health and of how workers think that their work shapes health.

As lay epidemiologists, seafarers are pretty accurate: interrupted sleep, intensive effort, excessive working hours and the like, are indeed bad for their long-term health. The material conditions of their work shape their subsequent experience of illness and disability. And notions of health capital shape seafarers’ bodily responses to those material circumstances, affecting in turn bodily resilience.

Notions of health capital vary according to social position, experience and culture, witness the different reactions to the vignette of Nonoy, the cook-harassed messman. But quite aside from the influence of different national cultures, seafarers (like other residential workforces) possess a strong workplace culture. I have described elsewhere (Bloor 2005a) how the shipboard culture is at one with a workplace discipline which prioritises the continued functioning of the ship. Fortitude is strongly commended, as in the old saw that a seafarer who looks for sympathy will find it in the dictionary between s**t and syphilis. This shipboard culture may possibly serve as a leavening influence, reducing variation in individual notions of health capital, despite the differences of status and nationality within the workforce.

The labour force of the globalised shipping industry is an outsourced, casualised, supplied-just-in-time labour force (Bloor and Sampson 2009) and outsourcing and casualisation of labour are associated with reduced labour power (see, for example, Bernstein 1986). Prospects are thus rather limited for collective action to improve seafarers’ health and safety (such as were achieved in the past in UK industries such as coal-mining – Bloor 2000, 2005b), and enforcement of relevant international regulations (on seafarers’ working hours, for example) is very far from effective (Bloor et al. 2006). It should be no surprise therefore if seafarers accede to that Faustian bargain to spend their health capital in a fatalistic spirit, and if they have low expectations of their future fitness to labour. Blaxter’s concept of health capital can help us understand health behaviour – smoking, drinking, diet and exercise – as well as the link between work and ill health.

There remains the question of how far this analysis of the interaction between seafarers’ work and health might apply beyond the shipping industry. It is clear that the industry is not typical of employments in late modernity. It does, however, have an importance in its own right, with a million seafarers working in the international trade. Further, while the shipping industry is not typical, arguably it is proto-typical: it is the traditional industry that has travelled further down the path of transformative globalisation than any other. Other industries and other workforces may yet experience similar transformations in a period of rapid economic change.

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Appendix A: Vignettes

1. Sam is a 45-year-old Filipino fitter on a 20-year-old bulker with an automated engineroom. He has been at sea for 25 years and has a wife and four children, all of whom still live at home. He smokes 20 cigarettes a day and, although he enjoys a drink when he is in the Philippines, never drinks when he is on a contract. He played sports when he was younger but does not have the opportunity to keep fit now and is rather overweight. He had hoped to leave the sea and start a small taxi business, but all his money has gone on building his house, paying for his children’s education and paying his mother’s medical bills. His mother has recently died, but his father is fit and well. Both on this trip and on his previous contract he has found himself on old ships with frequent engineroom alarms which have led to him working long hours and under pressure. He is not sleeping well. He feels healthy at the moment, although he sometimes feels tired.

   Do you think he will still be fit enough to go to sea in five years’ time?

2. Nonoy is a 44-year-old Filipino messman on a 15-year-old car carrier. He has been at sea for 25 years. He is a widower and his three children live with his sister’s family, which he is the main financial supporter for, as well as his elderly but healthy parents. He is a non-smoker and a non-drinker; both when he is aboard ship and at home in the Philippines; he follows his own keep-fit programme and has a healthy diet. He only has small savings but is hoping in the long term to be able to save more and open a cycle shop with his brother-in-law. On his latest ship and his previous ship the company has reduced the crew and he is now the only messman and he has to work long hours to try to keep the galley clean. He feels under pressure from the cook and this is affecting his sleep. He feels healthy at the moment although he is sometimes tired.

   Do you think he will still be fit enough to go to sea in five years’ time?

3. Gunnar is a 51-year-old Norwegian master on a five-year-old container ship. He has been at sea for more than 30 years, for 15 of them as a master. He is a heavy smoker but only drinks when he is on leave. His company was recently taken over and he does not get on well with the new superintendent and the other staff at head office. The ship has been re-flagged and he has lost a third officer, with the result that he now has to take a watch. Because of the extra watch-keeping, he finds it very difficult to keep up with the paperwork. He is working long hours and sleeping badly. He feels healthy at the moment, although he is sometimes tired.

   Do you think he will still be fit enough to go to sea in five years’ time?