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### Recommended Citation

Boshier, Roger (1999). "Superstition as an Impediment to the Education of Commercial Fishermen: A Psychocultural Investigation Using Video," *Adult Education Research Conference*.

<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1999/papers/8>

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# **Superstition as an Impediment to the Education of Commercial Fishermen: A Psychocultural Investigation Using Video**

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**Abstract: Commercial fishermen are prone to be superstitious and engage in rituals of avoidance designed to resolve anxiety and "diminish" danger. Video interviews with British Columbia fishermen illuminate this problem. The author pleads for a broadening of techno-rational approaches to prevention-education. Psycho-cultural, as well as techno-rational factors (equipment etc) should be considered.**

## **Getting Killed at Sea**

The *Good Companion* is a British Columbia commercial fishing vessel fictionalized in Skogan's and McCallum's story of the same name. She was a sturdy boat and the captain took no chances. "He made sure that the crew's coffee cups, which hung in a row above the sink, faced inboard so not to pour luck over the side. He allowed no cans to be opened upside down for fear of overturning the boat. No whistling that would call up a wind. No black suitcases to bring a doctor or death on board. No fishing trips began on Friday, the unluckiest day of the week. No sly, water-shy cats. No women: women belonged to home and land" (1997, p. 3). As demonstrated by Skogan (1992) in her *Voyages With Strangers*, these kinds of "denial rituals" are practised by fishermen all over the world.

In North America commercial fishing is a dangerous occupation. Despite the collapse of the cod fishery on the east and the salmon fishery on the west coast, men and women on commercial fishing vessels continue to die at an alarming rate. For example, in Canada, an average of 342 vessels come to grief each year. In some cases - such as *Scotia Cape* or *Pacific Charmer* - this results in the loss of several lives at once. In other situations fishermen and women suffer the trauma of lacerations and burns as well as limbs pulled through machinery and bones crushed by flailing lines or blocks. In gillnetting, seining or dragging there is always the possibility of being dragged overboard by wire ropes, lines and nets. Standing in the bight of a seine net is a particular hazard. Falling overboard is exceedingly serious. Sometimes large vessels simply disappear. Having a fisherman for a father can be painful for kids.

These days more women are working in commercial fisheries. But it is still overwhelmingly a "man's world" and one of the most formidable challenges faced by prevention educators is the problem of convincing men fishing is dangerous. There is also a need to break out of reliance on techno-rational discourse - the notion that "prevention" is mostly a matter of ensuring equipment (lights, winches, liferafts, machinery) is in good working order (Boshier, 1997). However, researchers and educators stand on slippery decks. There is a need to break out of an almost exclusive reliance on techno-rational discourse and bring the fishermen's own perspectives and experiences to the foreground. But the educator would need to carefully consider the merits or

demerits of appearing to endorse the notion safety is ensured by observing superstitions and denial rituals. This is both a theoretical and practical problem. How does one embrace subjective meanings without descending into unchallenged solipsism?

### **Lucky Red Socks**

When it appeared New Zealander Peter Blake and his crew were about to wrest the oldest sporting trophy in history (the America's Cup) from "Big-Bad" Dennis Conner and his American crew, luck was enthusiastically invoked. Team captain Blake would win races wearing red socks. Without the socks he lost. The implications were obvious and, although the regatta was being staged in San Diego, New Zealanders strutted around in red socks. Corporate sponsors made jaunty commercials with various illuminaries sporting their red socks. The Prime Minister and Governor-General - both wearing red socks - appeared on television to applaud Team New Zealand. After the victory a large and jubilant crowd turned out to welcome the sailors home - most sporting red socks. During the parade up Auckland's main street the crew was showered with balloons released from red socks suspended above. Now, four years later - with the first New Zealand defence imminent - the official *Team New Zealand* website [<http://www.teamnz.org/nz>] mentions red socks more than it discusses masts, rigging and sails.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This is part of a larger study broadly informed by a psychoanalytic framework wherein superstitions or rituals of avoidance are seen as adaptive mechanisms designed to resolve uncertainty. The classic study in this area was Malinowski's (1925 - reprinted 1948) analysis of Trobriand Island fishermen who combined magic with "scientific" knowledge - both deployed to enhance food-gathering activities. Malinowski lived with the islanders he observed and felt that when events couldn't be explained "scientifically" magic or ritual was deployed to reduce uncertainty. Support for this notion was found in what he felt were the different orientations of the inshore (in the lagoon) as compared to the more dangerous offshore fisheries. Offshore fishermen performed more elaborate rituals and were more deeply superstitious than those who worked in the calmer waters of the lagoon. Wherever the outcome was more uncertain, the greater the need for magic. Hence "we do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes. Further, we find magic where the element of danger is conspicuous" (1948, p. 139-140). Other informative studies are by Mullen (1978) and Orbach (1977).

Malinowski's was a functionalist analysis wherein superstition served to reduce anxiety where there is uncertainty and a risky situation (both continuously present on a commercial fishing vessel). Thomas (1971) disputed the notion magic appears when science and technology reach their limits. After the author of this paper discussed this with fishermen on boats bristling with fish finders, radios, EPIRB, radars and other electronic gizzmos designed to reduce uncertainty, our view is that it makes no difference. Start whistling in the wheelhouse of a three million dollar seine boat and the skipper will be as furious as his great, great, great grandfather who was a smacksman or drifterman fishing out of Hull, Finland or Croatia a few centuries ago (Lummis, 1983). Same with the black suitcase, label upside down and other forbidden behaviours. Technology has not eroded their "power" and importance.

A relevant theoretical insight is Freud's work on defense mechanisms of the ego. Ego stability can be ensured through *projection* wherein responsibility for accidents is attributed to "outside" factors. Projection and rationalization, both ego defence mechanisms, are part of a process of denial which "diminish" danger. Trouble is, as Junger noted in *The Perfect Storm*, "once you're in the denial business ... it's hard to know when to stop. Captains routinely overload their boats, ignore storm warnings, stow their liferafts in the wheelhouse, and disarm their emergency radio beacons" (1997, p. 95).

Many fishermen claim fishing is not hazardous. Besides, nothing can be done about it because "when your number's up, your number's up." If accidents are due to fate or the Gods, why bother with prevention education programs? Fatalism, superstition and rituals of avoidance - such as not leaving port of Friday - provide little incentive for prevention. Death, injury and property loss are widely regarded as "the price to be paid." These things "just happen." It's all a matter of luck.

Roughly speaking, fish, money and luck are interchangeable. Hence, Zulaika (1981) who spent a summer aboard a Spanish pair-trawler off the Canadian Grand Banks, noted the pervasive, almost obsessive preoccupation with luck that "at the time of fishing ... is ... the medium through which the other two orders (fish and money) are made possible" (p. 67). Hence, when one of the pair trawlers was badly damaged in a storm and nearly sank "it would have been rather ludicrous for the fishermen to blame anybody for what happened, for bad luck was behind it all" (p. 72). Similarly, at the inquest into the death of two Canadians after the 1997 capsizing of *Pacific Charmer*, fishermen giving evidence were reluctant to attribute responsibility to the corporate owners of the vessel. Most noticeably, *The Fishermen* (the local fishing union newspaper) announced that the survivors were "mystified" by what caused the tragedy (Survivors Mystified By Sudden Sinking of the Pacific Charmer, *The Fishermen*, December 22, 1997). On the Spanish pair trawlers the problem is that "luck is the key concept around which all the fishermen's expectations are centred and only belief in its "arbitrariness" supplies the daily energy to keep fishing" (Zulaika, 1981).

Poggie, Pollnac and associates at the University of Rhode Island have made a sustained study of fishing superstitions and taboos and claim that requesting protection from saints or practicing rituals of avoidance serves important functions. Supernatural behavior tends to reduce anxiety associated with risk. It provides comfort and diminishes the subjective perceptions of risk associated with fishing and is part of a larger tapestry of adapting to anxiety-provoking "lifeworld" and "technical" aspects of fishing (Knutson, 1991). The trouble is, denying or trivializing danger does not make fishermen good candidates for adult education. Rituals of avoidance relieve them of the need to become informed. Here is a case of where the "broad experiential base" of the adult learner does not necessarily enhance his responsiveness to education. Is this a case for the kind of "unfreezing" envisaged by Malcolm Knowles?

### **Purpose**

This project builds on Poggie's east coast studies which suggested those in the most dangerous (usually offshore) fisheries tended to manifest a higher level of superstition than those in the least dangerous (usually inshore) fisheries. The purpose of the present study was to examine this phenomenon on the west coast of Canada - and, as a result, inform prevention-education.

Although superstition and belief in paranormal phenomena is widespread (and probably increasing, despite the availability of higher education) it is still regarded as a bit silly and people have a hard time "confessing" to it. This, coupled with high levels of illiteracy in parts of the westcoast fishing fleet, caused us to abandon questionnaires in favour of interviews conducted on video. Fishermen are great talkers and, we discovered, are not fazed by a camera.

Along the lines suggested by Malinowski (1925), Poggie and Gersuny (1972), Pollnac, Poggie and Van Dusen (1995) it was hypothesized that fishermen in the most dangerous (offshore) fisheries would manifest higher levels of superstition and report engaging in more rituals of avoidance than those in the "safer" inshore fisheries. If so, this would point to a need to tailor prevention-education programs accordingly.

### **Method**

The author is in the midst of three-year investigation of fishing accidents, part of which involves making a one-hour video documentary designed to broaden discourses used to understand and prevent accidents. During the 1998 summer fishing season the camera was kept aboard the author's 26' high speed salvage boat which is used to respond to fires, capsizes, groundings and other marine emergencies. As part of the broader project, fishermen were interviewed on camera about their superstitions and rituals of avoidance. Questions pertaining to this were usually asked in the latter part of a broader interview. No advance warning was given. The first question in this part of the interview was usually "Would you leave port on a Friday?" If the answer was "yes" (indicating an absence of superstition) there would be questions about other rituals (e.g. black bags, women on boats, labels upside down). If "no" (indicating high superstition) there would be probes about the function of this and other rituals.

Interviews were conducted on a variety of westcoast gillnetters, trollers, draggers, seiners, dive and other boats. These men were variously fishing for salmon (the most frequent), halibut, tuna, rockfish, prawns and scallops. Some of the interviewees were retired fishermen. At the end of the summer the author viewed all the unedited footage and proceeded as follows. Approximately six hours of digital camera tape was dubbed into VHS format. Next, all the interviews were screened and responses to questions about the best known superstitions (e.g. leaving port on a Friday) coded - along with detail about the interviewee's type of vessel and fishery.

### **Findings**

When viewing the tapes it was apparent it would be difficult to label interviewees as primarily involved in either the inshore or offshore fishery. With the new quota and "stacked" licensing system in B.C., some fishermen now do both. Hence, one of our younger interviewees claimed to fish salmon (inshore) in the summer, halibut (offshore) in the winter and quite a few other things in between. Hence, we were not able to confidently compare the nature and magnitude of the superstitions manifested by inshore and offshore fishers. Hence, findings derived from this study are concerned with more general observations about superstition and how it pertains to prevention education.

All the interviewees had "heard about" the most common superstitions. Most interviewees chuckled when the subject was raised and looked a bit embarrassed. But all were familiar with the most popular superstitions.

About one third of respondents said they believed in the main superstitions and engaged in defensive rituals (like not leaving port on a Friday, forbidding black suitcases aboard, not whistling in the wheelhouse). Although several interviewees claimed it was the "old" fishermen that were superstitious, we were not convinced. Several of our younger interviewees endorsed rituals of avoidance while older interviewees repudiated them.

Most boys learn how to fish from their father or other close relative. In the father-son combinations interviewed both engaged in identical rituals of avoidance. A video example shown at AERC involved the skipper of the seiner *Viking Spirit* and his deckhand son - both superstitious and believing that "when you're number's up, you're number's up!"

Not everyone on a vessel necessarily share the same superstitions although, as a survivors of the *Pacific Charmer* capsized told us, those claiming not to be superstitious will avoid engaging in "offensive" behaviour (such as opening a can upside down) as a "courtesy" to other crew members.

Several of those claiming not to be superstitious indicated they nevertheless "avoided any risk" by observing the rituals of avoidance. As one respondent said "It's no trouble to open a can the right-way up so why tempt fate by opening it upside down?"

### **Implications For Adult Education**

Defense mechanisms, denial and rituals of avoidance should be incorporated into curriculum aimed at commercial fishermen. But there are problems for the educator or researcher.

Manifesting Epistemological Pluralism: In this work our mission is to broaden discourses around fishing accidents and their prevention. But moving away from the dominant techno-rational discourse and embracing a subjectivist position, tends to legitimize superstition rituals. Should the responsible educator pour scorn on the "validity" and utility of superstitious ritual, demonstrate its functionality and put it on the table for critical review, or endorse it as legitimate adaptive behaviour? There is no clear answer but, in the meantime, prevention educators at marine colleges, WCB and Coastguard ought to at least acknowledge superstitions and rituals of avoidance are a significant corollary of commercial fishing. Even putting it on the curriculum would create space for discussion and ameliorate embarrassment that currently surrounds this subject.

First Nations Beliefs: Some of our First Nations (i.e. Native-Canadian) informants told us that where a father dies in a fishing accident it is certain the son will do likewise. Hence, there is little point in wearing flotation equipment or engaging in prevention activities. To what extent can the critically-oriented educator who has misgivings about the prevalence of techno-rational discourse legitimise or reinforce such dismal and fatalistic discourses about First Nations fishing? What is

the culturally respectful response here? Confront fatalism head on? Work with but try to change it? The least respectful response is to ignore it.

Familial Factors: Familial influences - particularly that of the father on the son - merit considerable attention. Even though the son has access to radar and other modern aids that the father didn't enjoy - he endorses the same rituals of avoidance. As such, he has the same hesitancy about education as his father. Finally, to what extent does this phenomenon show up in other dangerous occupations - like mining, logging, steel working - and settings where fatalism impedes the impact of safety messages and efforts of adult educators?

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