Dressing and Addressing: Symbolisms on board merchant ships

Abstract

Within the traditional occupation of seafaring, symbols are well-embedded and serve to function as an organising principle influencing language and practices (e.g. manner of dressing and addressing). In maritime social science literature, studies where organisational symbolism is used in analysing shipboard life is quite few. Examining organisational symbolism on merchant vessels provides a perspective on the norms, values and behaviour that underpin shipboard occupational culture. Drawing from shipboard fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions involving seafarers and cadets and e-mail exchanges, this study aims to look at how symbols are deployed and (re-)produced through maritime education and training of officer cadets and how these become an important part of the process of maintaining the traditional notion that ‘a ship is a man’s world’. In particular, hierarchical practices, which are manifestations of authority and power aboard reproduce and maintain occupational values among seafarers. As symbols mediate social relationships aboard, how does the presence of a female (researcher) who wants to know about shipboard life, align with seafarers’ work-life routines? By going beyond what may be tacitly understood as part of shipboard life, the ethnographic detail involved in this study aims to understand not only the meanings but also how those meanings are generated, as it were, through symbolism.