

### Raising children in a maritime setting: experiences and attitudes of twentieth-century seafarers' wives

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► HANNA HAGMARK-COOPER

## Raising Children in a Maritime Setting

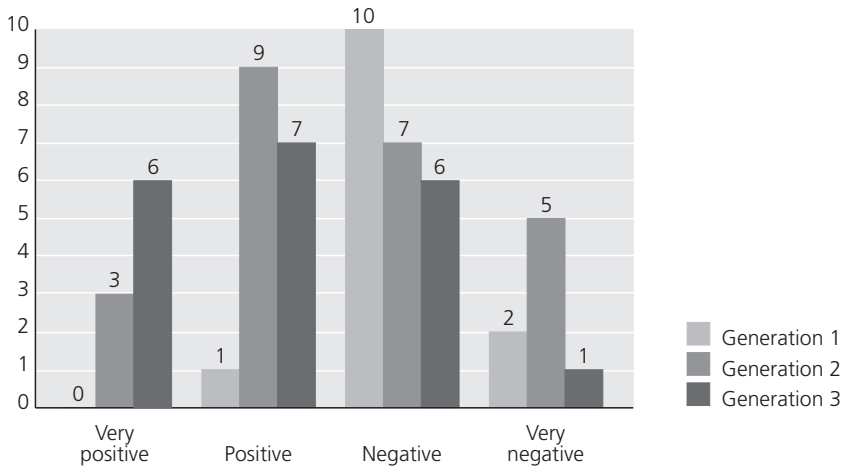
### Experiences and Attitudes of Twentieth-Century Seafarers' Wives

The empirical foundation of the paper is a body of qualitative oral and written testimonies of seventy-five seafarers' wives from the Åland Isles in Finland, born between 1912 and 1969. The women were divided into three groups, roughly according to age. Generation group one was made up of eighteen women; generation groups two and three were made up of twenty-nine and twenty-eight women respectively. In my interpretation of the testimonies I have used the approaches of discourse analysis and social constructionism. The examination of the relationship between reconstruction and discourse sheds light not only on the extent to which social ideals feed into subjective identity, but also on how common discourses are constructed and sustained through individual narratives. Furthermore, by looking at how the women reconstructed their subjective experiences, we learn how life-story narratives are affected by the discourses available to the narrator, both at the time when the events are experienced and at the time when they are related.

The women who shared their reflections on raising a family with a seafaring partner, did not only discussed their own relationship to their children, and how and to what degree it was shaped by the absence of the children's fathers, but they also shared their thoughts on the relationship between father and children. The women's experiences of maritime parenthood differed considerably, ranging from the very positive to the very negative, and proved to be a textbook example of how discourses change over time and colour narratives. Women who described the relationship between father and children as healthy were considered to hold a "positive" position. These women's narratives differed from those of women with a "very positive" stance in that they nevertheless regarded their partners' work situation as a negative factor, overcome by the seafarer's conscious effort to build a sound relationship with his children. Women who took a very positive position in their reconstructions projected views that seafarers did not miss out on their children's lives at all. There were frequent references to "quality time" and how the seamen were "one-hundred-per-cent dads" when they were on leave. In some reconstructions, polarisation was evident between land-working and seafaring fathers, of whom the latter were deemed to be as good as, or superior to, the former group of fathers. "Negative" attitudes were apparent in narratives in which the nature of the seafaring life, not the seafarer himself, was blamed for causing a fragile relationship between father and children. The seafarer was said to make a conscious effort to catch up with his children while on leave or, in some cases, make up for lost time with his grandchildren after retirement. In the "very negative" stories, the women were fundamentally pessimistic about the relationship between father and children. The fathers

were often described as distant and not interested in their children, while the children were said to have very bad or non-existent relationships to their fathers. In this group, it was the women who carried full responsibility for the children's upbringing and wellbeing without the support of their partners.

As shown in the chart below, there were also substantial differences in attitudes from one generation group to the next.



Virtually all positive or very positive reconstructions of raising a family with a seafarer came from younger informants. Although this was partly due to better working conditions and improvements in communications, one could not overlook the debate on gender equality that gained in strength over the last decades of the twentieth century. By the late 1990s, the father was expected to take an active part in raising his offspring, so by presenting a positive image of this particular aspect of maritime family life, the informants were able to conform to assumed contemporary ideals. The older informants, who had been raising children in a time when that was considered a woman's job, had less desire to place their reconstructions within the aforementioned discourse. Their stories were almost exclusively placed within the category of negative experiences, though they blamed external factors rather than the seafarer for an unstable father-child relationship.

## Roles and Relationships in the Maritime Family

No matter how dedicated a father, the seafarer's absence and the consequent lack of continuity rendered it impossible for him to be as involved in his children's upbringing as he might have liked. Ferryman had more chance to have real input into their offsprings' upbringing due to their short absences and their closeness to home, but it was nonetheless the women who bore the main responsibility.

In a study by Ingrid Kaijser, a seafarer's wife felt that she had to account to her husband for her children's behaviour: *It was my responsibility that the children were well-behaved and clean and all of that...and healthy, and did well in school...it was I who had to make sure they got what they needed for life. But he was always in the background. It was kind of as if you answered for the result.*<sup>1</sup>

She further felt she had to take on the role of a strong woman to fight against “the outside world”. It was also a common notion among the women in my study that they demanded more from their children than did their husbands. As the only parent at home, seafarers’ wives felt that they had to be fairly firm with their children. An older woman commented: *I think I was stricter, but then again, it was up to me to make sure everything worked.*<sup>2</sup>

One of her contemporaries acknowledged that she was probably the more dominant of the spouses, and justified this by saying that since the children only had one parent at home she was forced to be quite strict.<sup>3</sup> Similar concerns were raised by a woman in the youngest generation group. She, too, was of the opinion that she demanded more from her children than her husband did. It was important for her to encourage her daughters to become independent and capable of managing things on their own, such as eating, getting dressed, walking up and down stairs, and tidying up after themselves. She said: *Maybe it’s because he is away so much that he – when he is at home – wants to carry, feed and spoil the children. But then, when I’m left alone with them again, they have to be able to do things themselves.*<sup>4</sup>

She and her partner had agreed that she should be responsible for their children’s upbringing, and that the rules she had set during his absence remained unchanged when the seafarer was at home. The agreement was founded on *her desire to spare the girls from the changes that come with having Dad at home and having Dad away at work.*<sup>5</sup> It was not only in comparison with their partners that maritime mothers claimed they demanded more independence from their children, but also in relation to other mothers. A long-distance seaman’s wife commented that she and her children were *very close to each other and that the children had been taught to take responsibility and to help out at home earlier than other children.*<sup>6</sup>

Like many others, one woman described how, because of her husband’s occupation, she felt that she had an extra close relationship with her children. Although this special bond was cherished, it also had its drawbacks, in that she sometimes felt that it resulted in a subtle exclusion of the seafarer from this very tight-knit sphere. She described it as *a pact in the family, me and the children against him.*<sup>7</sup>

Another informant thought that her child was more likely to turn to her with any problems, saying: *If there is anything special, our daughter turns to me, even if my husband is at home. It makes him feel a bit excluded, but it’s only natural that children turn to the parent who is home the most.*<sup>8</sup>

Statements of this kind suggested that the seafarer’s time away from home and family could have a serious effect on the internal dynamics of the family, and despite conscious efforts to negotiate his place as an integral part of the family unit, the seafarer was left somewhat on the periphery. Even in cases where the informants claimed that their husbands and children had a good relationship, they maintained that the children were more likely to turn to them rather than to their fathers with their more delicate and sensitive worries.<sup>9</sup> This could be interpreted as the children displaying a sense of distance from their seafaring father, but equally it could be due to women being perceived as more capable of dealing with these issues by their children. Research has shown that, irrespective of profession, men and women interact differently with their children. According to an American study, fathers of the late twentieth century interacted more with their children than did their fathers, but the direct responsibility for the children’s care and wellbeing was still the mother’s domain, whether or not she was working outside the home. The same situation is prevalent in Swedish families, and therefore likely to be the case on Åland as well; the mother is the caring parent, the father takes on the role of playmate.<sup>10</sup>

The strong bond that existed between the seafarers’ wives and their children could be contrasted with the fathers’ uncertainty regarding how to deal with his offspring. The seafarer’s absence made him detached from family life, and consequently it was difficult for him to follow his children’s development. One informant said that it was nearly impossible for a child to form

a really close relationship with a father who spends as much time away from his family as a seafarer does. The real time spent apart is lost forever and cannot be compensated. She continued: *It is his great sorrow that he has missed out on their childhood and that is irreparable.*<sup>11</sup>

In interviews with seamen, this statement was confirmed. It transpired, rather tragically, that although their children constituted the most important aspect of many seafarers' lives, they did not think of themselves as having a part in their children's lives.<sup>12</sup> Adding to the seafarers' dilemma was the fact that, due to their ambiguous role in the family, they did not always feel confident in setting rules or criticising their children. Thomas Heikell's study shows that there is also great consensus among seamen that it is the women who raise the children, and they are worried about infringing on their wives' territory by getting too involved.<sup>13</sup>

The disruption of conventional family dynamics could potentially lead to conflicts either between father and children or between the spouses. In two separate reconstructions from women of different age groups, a conflict arose between the seafarer and his teenage daughters.<sup>14</sup> In these narratives, it was the lengthy absences that were blamed for the conflicts. Difficulties in communication between the seafarer and his children were another upshot of the seafarers' absences. These kinds of problems seemed to be especially pronounced during the children's teenage years. Adolescence is a stressful time for most parents, as well as for their children, but arguably more so for maritime families. The seafarer might have problems asserting his authority since, in the eyes of his adolescent children, his absences have disqualified him in the role of their fosterer. In such a situation, the seafarer will perhaps feel more comfortable leaving his wife in charge of the situation. There were, however, both first- and second-hand accounts indicating that some seafarers preferred to be in charge at home as well as at sea. One informant recalled her husband talking about his father, who was a captain. When he came home, it was he who set the rules in the house, overthrowing any decision or arrangement that his wife and children had agreed upon in his absence. As a child, the informant's husband used to get very upset about this and therefore made a conscious effort not to put his family through the same emotional stress. This proved harder for him than he had expected when his daughters reached their teens, and conflicts arose between the seafarer and his daughters as a result.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the official discourse on gender equality, society is still not gender-equal and the responsibility of caring for children often falls to the woman, regardless of the man's occupation.<sup>16</sup> What makes families in which the father is physically absent over extended periods different from other families is that the mother has no immediate adult support in her task since, at the end of the day, there is no father with whom to discuss childcare matters. The mother is thereby forced to devise her own strategies to keep family life functioning, which may lead to the father feeling excluded from the childrearing process when he returns home. In the study under discussion here, this phenomenon was particularly pronounced in cases where the seafarer was engaged in long-distance shipping, as well as in cases where his time ashore was considerably shorter than his time at sea. Similar observations have been made in several other studies of maritime family life. Like some of the women in this study, many fishermen's wives of Hull and Grimsby felt that they had to act as both mother and father to their children.<sup>17</sup> In Tunstall's study, the seamen seemed at a loss as to how to relate to their children. He noted that: *The fisherman remains something of a stranger to his children. Men at sea talk a good deal about their "bairns", but the attitude seems to be one of disinterest and more like that of an uncle than a father. Some men try to compensate for their absence by giving lavish presents to their children.*<sup>18</sup>

## Experiences of Maritime Parenthood

In about one quarter of the life-story accounts, the interview failed to provide sufficient information regarding child-rearing to allow the informant's assignment to any of the aforementioned categories. In four of these cases, the reason was that the couple had just had their first child and therefore had not yet had much experience in that particular area of family life. In other cases, the seafarers had taken jobs ashore just prior to, or soon after becoming fathers. There was also one informant who was childless. In some cases, the women were uncertain about the consequences of raising a family with a seafarer. Such a reconstruction was presented by a woman who began by saying that the most negative part of maritime family life became apparent to her when she and her spouse became parents. In her subsequent reconstruction, she articulated her concerns: *The newborn babies change so much when he's gone for one to two months. The slightly older children don't recognise him when he comes home, and when they are around a year old, it is difficult to explain why he is suddenly gone. One of our daughters in particular has always been very attached to her dad. It is with tear-filled eyes that I've watched her sit with his picture in her lap, sniff his pillow and hug his working overalls still hanging in the hallway, or explained to the children why he has to leave when they are too young to understand.*<sup>19</sup>

Several areas in which the nature of the seafarer's job infringed on his relationship with his children were emphasised in this short quotation. The first aspect was how much the seafarer missed out on in his children's development, particularly in the early years. The second aspect was that of the children not recognising their father upon his return, and, lastly, the problematic task of explaining the seafarer's departures. Nonetheless, the informant found it difficult to know if her husband's absences had affected their children in a negative way, since he had been at their disposal twenty-four hours a day while on leave.

### Positive

Narratives in the positive category emphasised their belief that the seafarer was an active father, but they also showed awareness of the downsides of maritime family life: *I don't think he loses out on the children's growing up, but parent-teacher meetings, arrangements and rules become my responsibilities. It's easy to take that onboard since he is often absent. You notice a mistake after it is much too late. Such things are probably easier to share when the husband is land-based.*<sup>20</sup>

Here some attention was paid to the contrasts of land-based and maritime life. Although the reconstruction was created in a positive mode, assuring the seafarer's overall participation, the informant acknowledged the drawbacks of maritime family life. It was up to her to take care of most of the practical childrearing issues, issues that she would have preferred – but was unable – to share with her husband.

Women who felt that they were able to share the care of their children with their husbands on almost equal terms tended to give positive or very positive accounts of maritime family life. Ferryman were arguably in the best position to play such an equal role, for not only did their work pattern follow a strict week-on/week-off rota, but their shifts were short and they were close to home. In an emergency, a ferryman would normally be able to come home within less than twelve hours – and even faster if the ship was on its way to Åland. One woman commented that during her husband's week off, he used to keep their children at home from kindergarten, and after they started school they would come straight home rather than going to their after-school day-care.<sup>21</sup>

In one of the positive reconstructions, the informant stressed that although the seafarer's wife

would often develop a particular bond with the children, it was still possible for the husband to make up much of the lost time if he wanted to. This woman mentioned that her husband had been at home for six months and a year respectively to care for their newborn babies.<sup>22</sup> In another account, the seafarer stayed at home for two years to look after the couple's three children, one of whom was still an infant. This informant was convinced that the seafarer had been able to create a special bond with the youngest child, and she regretted that they had not made the same arrangements for their older children: *I wish it had been the same for the others. Now in retrospect I see how positive it has been, even though we don't always agree on childrearing, but we discuss how to proceed. Masculine and feminine views often differ, but there's nothing wrong with that; both are needed.*<sup>23</sup>

An article by Philip Hwang supports this informant's point of view. Although he agrees with the general argument of fathers as playmates and mothers as carers, he contends that fathers who have gone on paternity leave and taken direct responsibility for their children tend to interact with their children in the same way as mothers.<sup>24</sup> The informant's husband was a ferryman and, in line with the rest of her reconstruction, she mentioned that he spent his week off with the family and that he had planned his shifts and holidays around the births of his children.

In the oldest generation of women, only one informant gave a positive account of her experiences of maritime parenthood compared to nine and seven respectively in the middle and youngest generation groups of women. Despite being fairly critical in tone, the narrative was classified as a positive reconstruction on account of the active role the seafarer played in the children's upbringing. The foundation for the seafarer's close relationship with his sons was laid during a lengthy period of convalescence during the children's pre-school years. The fact that the informant herself worked gave father and sons a lot of time on their own. When the seafarer returned to work, the relationship was maintained through correspondence, shipboard visits during school holidays and shared activities during the seafarer's periods on leave. The seafarer further chose to work only in European waters due to the superior communication possibilities that were available there as compared to world-wide shipping. As a means of further stressing the positive picture of the seafarer as a father, the informant stated that in adulthood the sons had been grateful towards their parents for actively encouraging the father-son relationship.<sup>25</sup> In an account given by a woman in Generation Two, time aboard ship and frequent communication by means of telephone or letters were similarly mentioned as important tools for establishing and maintaining a good relationship between father and sons. She was of the opinion that all the events in her children's development had been reinforced in her memory because she had been compelled to recount them to her husband.<sup>26</sup>

### Very Positive

There were nine women who regarded maritime family life as something very positive; three of them belonged to the middle group of women and six to the youngest group. It is likely that none of the narratives offered by the oldest women fell into this category because of the working conditions that prevailed during their husbands' careers, particularly the length of absence from home in relation to leave from work. Another explanation can be found in a change in discourse regarding gender roles. From the 1930s through the 1960s, when the older informants were raising their families, childrearing was regarded a woman's job. Since the 1970s, gender equality has been high on the political agenda in Scandinavian society, creating a discourse of equality that states gender as an irrelevant factor to a person's ability to act successfully in both the public and the private spheres. By the turn of the millennium, men and women were expected to assume equal responsibility for childrearing and household tasks, although in reality women took on the greater part.<sup>27</sup> By presenting a picture of a caring father who devoted all his

free time to his children, the women were able to conform to the contemporary ideal, even when they had *de facto* been raising the children on their own. Additionally, it was expected that fathers themselves would be keen to be as involved in their children's upbringing, since this was no longer considered to be women's work to the same extent as it had been earlier in the century.<sup>28</sup> It would have been surprising to find women of the youngest generation group admitting that their husbands regarded childrearing to be a woman's job, whereas it was perfectly acceptable for an older informant to do so. By referring to her husband as being *of the old stock*, one of the older women showed her awareness of the discourse which prevailed at the time of the interview, while at the same time the comment justified her taking full responsibility for raising their children.<sup>29</sup>

The very positive attitudes were often symptomatic of the lengthy stays at home that seafarers of the younger generations enjoyed. Another feature of the very positive position was a propensity to highlight the quality time the seafaring father spent with his children. This was contrasted with the abundance of time land-working fathers had at their disposal to spend with their children but, according to the seafarers' wives, they failed to use effectively. In one such comment, a woman stated that since the seafarer had been responsible for the child care while ashore, he had developed a very close bond to the children. *In a way, the informant claimed, he's been able to spend more quality time with his children than fathers who are ashore.*<sup>30</sup>

Another informant declared that her husband was very *present as a father for his children*. She further believed *that he is at home more than the average man in an Åland family.*<sup>31</sup>

The women in this category were also of the opinion that the seafarers did not miss out on their children's lives and developments, as is suggested in this quotation: *My husband has always planned work around the pregnancies and childbirths and has therefore been a great support and participant. When our youngest son was born he took out paternity leave and also 2.5 months' parental leave. Since he's been working according to a 1:1 system he's generally spent much time with the children, more than "normal land-working" fathers, I believe.*<sup>32</sup>

Here, the informant stressed the support and involvement her husband demonstrated with regard to the couple's children and their upbringing. The seafarer's decision to use his rights to paternity and parental leave was cited to demonstrate his devotion to his children. The fact that working 1:1 gave him plenty of time to spend with his children further emphasised his role as a caring father who took an active part in raising his children. There is no need to doubt that this seafarer's children were very important to him. However, even though he did spend as much time at home as he did at sea, he was nonetheless absent for a month at a time. How these periods of absence affected the relationship between father and children was not discussed, but it is difficult to imagine that they would have had no impact at all. This aspect was typically overlooked by the informants who took a very positive position in their reconstructions of family life.

## Negative

Negatively positioned reconstructions placed the blame for a frail father-child relationship on the seafarers' working conditions rather than on the seafarers themselves. This allowed the informants to express their pessimistic opinions of maritime family life without vilifying the seafarer and making him out to be a bad father. On the whole, this was the category that accounted for the highest number of reconstructions, but it was only among the oldest generation that it was the primary position. The accounts varied considerably in tone, from one verging on the very negative to those that also included some positive elements. In order to present the seafarer as a caring father, some women tried to emphasise their husbands' feelings upon departure. They sympathised with their partners, describing the distress the seafarers experienced



when they had to say goodbye to their children just as they were beginning to feel relaxed in each other's company.<sup>33</sup> This approach was mainly used by informants of the oldest generation group, whose husbands did not enjoy the same degree of time off as did their younger counterparts, but younger women also commented on their husbands' distress on their departure.<sup>34</sup>

Most informants in this category agreed that the seafarers did miss out on a very large part of their children's lives, which in turn had a number of consequences for family dynamics. In one narrative, a woman boldly stated that *seamen in long-distance shipping should not have children*, since both father and children are deprived of so much. The informant was nevertheless quick to restore her own partner's image by implying that this did not apply to her situation since her husband was, in her own words, *fond of children*.<sup>35</sup> A younger woman stated that she personally would never cope with being separated from her children the way her husband was. Despite the fact that she said her husband probably missed out on more of their children's lives than she could ever imagine doing herself, she did evoke an image of him as a caring father. She mentioned how he would devote his time off to the family and how he spoiled his daughters with affection.<sup>36</sup>

One seafarer's wife wrote that she referred to "my children" more often than to "our children", and wondered whether that was more common in maritime marriages. In a manner typical of this attitude, the woman maintained that the relationship between father and children was sound, while at the same time stating that she felt as if she had raised her – or their – children almost exclusively on her own, and that her husband had missed out considerably. She further commented that she regarded any criticisms relating to the children as a personal failure and, similarly, the children's success was hers too. It was noteworthy that while she gave her partner some credit for their children's accomplishments, she did not do the same when it came to the children's less commendable actions and adventures. She said: *I think I have raised them pretty much on my own, so I can get very upset if there are conflicts with the hubby about the children. I think of those conflicts very much as personal failures. When the children do well, I also take it personally, even though I know my children have always had quite a good dad in the background. He's very fond of his children.*<sup>37</sup>

By taking the blame for her children's failures and affording her husband some credit in their children's success, she was able to downplay the consequences of the seafarer's absences with respect to the children's behaviour.

As mentioned, a number of reconstructions focused on the seafarer's relationship with his adolescent offspring. One seafarer's wife attributed her partner's problems understanding their teenage children to his absences during the children's earlier years: *But there is, no doubt, a lot that he missed out on during the children's years of growing up. Maybe that is why he sometimes finds it harder to understand them. Discussions around the dinner table, I've missed that too. He said to me how he wanted it, but the unpleasant things he left to me. He wanted to be a kind dad.*<sup>38</sup>

From this episode, it was clear that the seafarer felt unable to deal directly with his children with sufficient confidence and therefore chose to exert his influence through his wife. In a comparable account, a woman testified that the seafarer had spent much of his time looking after and caring for their children, *especially when they were little*, although *he has not been so good with troublesome teenagers but preferred sitting in front of the TV*.<sup>39</sup> She continued by saying that she was aware of her children thinking that while they had been given money by their father, he had not given them enough of his time. The informant's reconstruction was classified as negative (and not "very negative") because despite being fairly critical in her view of the relationship between her husband and their children, she tried to restore her husband's character by expressing her opinion on the matter, which differed from their children's. She claimed that she found their comments rather upsetting since she knew *that he had tried in his own way*, but

that, particularly as he got older, work drained him of all his energy. The week he was at home was just enough for him to build up his strength before he had to go back to sea again.

### Very Negative

The very negative accounts made up the smallest of the four categories, even though it was only marginally smaller than the very positive position. The accounts were presented with varying degrees of discontent, but all displayed the basic elements that characterised this group. In these testimonies, the lack of emotional bonds between the seafarer and his children was one of the main factors, together with a feeling that the informant had been responsible for raising the children on her own with very little support or none at all.

The most negative reconstruction was made by a woman in generation group two. Although childrearing was not the only reason for her pessimistic views, it was evident that the problem of bringing up a family in this kind of marriage was responsible for a considerable part of her disillusionment. On this issue she commented: *Unfortunately, my husband has little contact with the children. They are like strangers to him. I received no support in raising them. If the children do anything wrong, it is my upbringing that is to blame. He has missed rather a lot if he doesn't know his children.*<sup>40</sup>

This quotation contains both of the key elements that are representative of the very negative reconstruction. Firstly, there is the estrangement between the seafarer and his offspring, indicated in comments such as "they are like strangers to him" and "he doesn't know his children." Nowhere in the narrative did the informant offer a story that would serve to redeem the seafarer of his shortcomings; on the contrary. She described her role in the marriage as that of a *childminder and maid*. Although the seafarer was said to have been *babysitting* his children during his week off, it was not described as a means by which the seafarer made up for lost time with his children. On the contrary, the very phrase "babysitting", rather than "caring for" or "looking after", suggested to the reader that this was a chore rather than a privilege or source of enjoyment. Thus even though the seafarer was given the opportunity to spend real time with his children, it did not appear to promote a stronger father-child relationship. Secondly, the lack of support in the children's upbringing was stressed. Not only did the woman feel that her husband was unsupportive, he was even presented as critical of her childrearing methods. This feeling was repeated in another account in which the informant was of the opinion that she had *received more criticism than support* from her husband when it came to childrearing.<sup>41</sup>

Yet another very negative reconstruction came from a woman who began her narrative by stating that if she had been aware of the full implications of maritime family life she would never have married a seafarer. In her view, she had not been given enough support and her children, who had wished for a father who was at home and a constant part of the family, had instead been brought up by their mother alone and subsequently found it difficult to communicate with their father.<sup>42</sup> A similar view was evident in an account in which the informant described the role of sole carer as a burden: *It isn't easy to be both mother and father at the same time*. It was her explicit opinion that a child fared best when brought up by both parents and that it was inevitable that there should be a certain degree of detachment in the relationship between a seafaring father and his offspring as a direct result of his absences from the family.<sup>43</sup>

The critique of the seafarer as a father not only revolved around poor relationships between the seafarers and their children and the deficit with respect to assistance or encouragement in connection with the children's upbringing. One seafarer's wife questioned her partner's emotional capacities. Her husband worked in long-distance shipping during the first two years of their firstborn child's life, and thus he spent two nine-month periods at sea with three months in between. This was part of his training and the woman wrote: *I experienced this as*

torture for all senses. He was no doubt strong to work so systematically towards his certificates to completed schooling. He subsequently came ashore, but we did not get the valuable baby time back. A person who does this, I have often thought, cannot be very emotionally bound to those closest to him.<sup>44</sup>

Although the seafarer went ashore only two years after their first baby's arrival, the wife nonetheless felt that she had to a large extent raised their children on her own, and while she was hesitant as to how much the seafarer's initial absences and later shift work had influenced his relationship to his children, she experienced her bond with their children as *very strong*, much stronger than that between her children and their father.

## Changing Times – Changing Attitudes

The analysis of the prevailing attitudes in the three generation groups showed that women in generation group one were more negative in their views on raising a family with a seafarer. Twelve women presented either very negative or negative reconstructions, while only one woman had positive experiences. One probable reason for the high proportion of negatively positioned narratives was the fact that the men spent so much time away from home. Absences of nine months and more were commonplace, and opportunities for communication were limited. Due to the lack of continuity, which was caused by their sometimes erratic working patterns and prolonged absences, seafaring fathers in this generation group had less input in the nurturing of their children than fathers with land-based jobs and seamen of later generations. Thus they were more dependent on their wives' judgements regarding childrearing. It has also been argued that the seafarer's short and infrequent visits made it very difficult for him to find his place in the family, both emotionally and structurally. Since the wife was used to caring for the children on her own, she was subconsciously reluctant to let her husband have too much input into the children's upbringing. As a result of his uncertain position, the seafarer chose to separate himself from his family even when he was at home.<sup>45</sup>

Only one of the negatively positioned narratives, however, fell into the very negative category, indicating that, although the situation was far from ideal, the seafaring fathers were not made personally responsible for their failure to take an active part in their children's lives. Even the one very negative reconstruction, in which it was clear that the seafarer had failed to engage in his children's lives during his time at home, the informant was reluctant to accuse him explicitly of not caring. The strongest statement was probably that in which the woman said that her husband had completely missed out on his children's childhoods and that that was evident in their relationship. Other allegations were made more subtly through a number of remarks implicating the seafarer's shortcomings. One such comment was that the children's grandfather became their *bona fide* father figure whereas their real father was merely somebody who showed up every now and again. The transient quality of the seafarer's visits to his home was blamed for the near impossibility of establishing something like "normal" family life. For at least twenty years, the seafarer worked on year-long contracts punctuated by short leaves, approximately one month in duration. Later in his career, he worked under more regular conditions, six months at sea followed by six months at home. During both his month-long holidays and, later, his six-month leaves, it seemed that the seafarer failed to engage in his children's lives. According to the seafarer's wife, her husband would spend most of his time off ship in the outer archipelago of Åland. Since the family lived in Mariehamn, where his children went to school and his wife worked, the seafarer failed to take advantage of the opportunity to become an active member of the family. Moreover, judging from the manner in which this was presented in the account, it appeared that it was a conscious choice on the seafarer's part not to get

too involved with his family. To further highlight the distance between father and children, the woman cited the sadness her son expressed about the fact that he never got to know his father properly or learn more from him about life in the archipelago.<sup>46</sup>

The division between positive and negative reconstructions was more evenly distributed in generation group two. Twelve women described negative experiences and twelve women showed a more positive attitude. Most of the reconstructions, nine in all, fell into the positive category, but there were also five women whose narratives suggested a very negative attitude towards maritime parenthood. The greater dispersal between positions was a reflexion of the greater variety of working conditions available to the seamen of this generation. The older women of this group had had experiences of maritime family life similar to those of the first generation of seafarers' wives in this study, with very extensive absences and equally limited means of communication. The younger women, on the other hand, benefited from the improvements in maritime working regulations and communications, factors which made their experiences more similar to those of the youngest generation group. A big difference was made by the opportunities offered to new fathers by the local ferry companies. To transfer from long-distance shipping to ferry traffic was a viable option for most seafarers of this generation, facilitating a more tangible father role in family life. Seventeen men in this category had at some point in their married life worked on the ferries, and all but two of them had transferred permanently to ferries shortly after becoming fathers.

The discussion on parenthood within a maritime setting presented in the reconstructions of women in generation group three showed a predominantly positive attitude. Thirteen narratives were positive in their tone; among these, six were very positive. In comparison, seven narratives were negative and only one of them very negative. There was a clear difference in attitude towards maritime parenthood between generation groups two and three. The marked change in attitude cannot solely depend on improved working conditions and superior means of communication, but must be sought in a change in attitude regarding parenting and the role of the father in childrearing. As mentioned previously, late twentieth-century Scandinavian society saw gender equality as one of the most prominent issues, and it influenced the way in which almost every aspect of life was discussed.<sup>47</sup> The reconstructions of maritime family life were only one area where the equality discourse demonstrated its influence. Thus, when discussing the role the seafarer played in caring for his children, many women in this generation – especially the youngest of them – presented stories that conveyed an image of both parents taking equal responsibility in nurturing their offspring. This change in the dominant discourse from separate spheres to gender equality was the most significant determinant when explaining the three generation groups' different attitudes towards maritime family life. For although working conditions gradually allowed for more input in childrearing on the seafarer's part, his absences continued to place him on the periphery of family life.

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The interviews are in a private archive and available through the author of this article.

**Notes:**

- 1 I. Kaijser, p. 40.
- 2 G105-040899.
- 3 G103-020899.
- 4 G305-100100.
- 5 G305-100100.
- 6 G3088.
- 7 G3001.
- 8 G3083.
- 9 G101-300799, G202-080799.
- 10 Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, pp. 75-76.
- 11 G201-060799.
- 12 Heikell, p. 67.
- 13 Heikell, pp. 60-61.
- 14 G102-120799, G201-060799.
- 15 G201-060799.
- 16 Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, pp. 409-410.
- 17 Starkey & Lazenby, p. 171.
- 18 Tunstall, p. 162.
- 19 G3086.
- 20 G3050.
- 21 G2025.
- 22 G3001.
- 23 G3025.
- 24 Hwang, p. 241.
- 25 G1093.
- 26 G2049.
- 27 Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, p. 409.
- 28 Korhonen, p. 43 as presented in Heikell, p. 8.
- 29 G101-300799.
- 30 G203-230799.
- 31 G3078.
- 32 G3063.
- 33 G103-020899, G105-040899.
- 34 G305-100100, G3095.
- 35 G1061.
- 36 G305-100100.
- 37 G3098.
- 38 G2055.
- 39 G2019.
- 40 G2088.
- 41 G2[3]009.
- 42 G1065.
- 43 G2[1]054.
- 44 G2054.
- 45 Kaijser, p. 39.
- 46 G104-030899.
- 47 Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson.

## Zum Großziehen von Kindern im maritimen Milieu. Erfahrungen und Einstellungen von Seefahrerfrauen im 20. Jahrhundert

### Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag präsentiert Forschungsergebnisse zur maritim geprägten Elternschaft, wie sie von drei Generationen von Seefahrerfrauen wahrgenommen und erlebt wurde. Die hierbei von den Frauen gemachten Erfahrungen unterscheiden sich in vielerlei Hinsicht und verdeutlichen anhand unterschiedlich gefärbter Erzählungen den im Laufe der Zeit vonstatten gegangenen Diskussionswandel.

Die Auswertung der Berichte ergab eine negativere Einschätzung des Aufziehens von Kindern mit einem Seemann bei den älteren Frauen. Einer der Gründe für den hohen Anteil negativer Äußerungen bestand in der langen Abwesenheit der Männer von zu Hause. Infolge der hierdurch und durch unregelmäßige Arbeitsintervalle verursachten fehlenden Kontinuität hatten die zur See fahrenden Väter weniger Einfluss auf die Fürsorge ihrer Kinder als an Land tätige Väter und Seeleute späterer Generationen. Die seltenen und kurzen Landurlaube erschwerten es diesen Vätern zudem, sich in die Familie einzufügen und einen eigenen Platz zu finden, sowohl in emotionaler als auch in struktureller Hinsicht.

Die Einstellung gegenüber einer Elternschaft unter maritimen Vorzeichen war unter jüngeren Frauen allgemein positiver. Diese Veränderung ist zum Teil auf verbesserte Arbeitsbedingungen und bessere Kommunikationsmöglichkeiten zurückzuführen, lässt sich aber auch in Beziehung setzen zu einem veränderten Verständnis von Kindererziehung und der Rolle des Vaters. Der Diskurswandel, von einzelnen, voneinander abgegrenzten Interessenbereichen hin zur Gleichberechtigung der Geschlechter, war der signifikanteste und bestimmende Gesichtspunkt bei den Ausführungen zu den unterschiedlichen Vorstellungen eines maritim geprägten Familienlebens.

## Élever des enfants en milieu maritime: les expériences et les comportements des femmes de marins au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle

### Résumé

L'article présente le résultat de la recherche sur la parenté dans le milieu maritime, telle que trois générations de femmes de marins en ont fait l'expérience. Celles-ci diffèrent considérablement sous plusieurs aspects et grâce à des récits de différente provenance, montrent clairement le changement de discours qui a eu lieu au fil du temps.

L'analyse des récits montre que parmi les femmes plus âgées, l'éducation des enfants avec un mari marin était ressentie de façon beaucoup plus négative. L'une des raisons du taux élevé de ces récits négatifs est surtout due à l'absence quasi permanente des hommes à la maison. Le manque de continuité causé par leurs intervalles de travail irréguliers et leurs absences prolongées faisait que les pères qui naviguaient avaient moins d'influence sur l'éducation de leurs enfants que les pères travaillant à terre et les marins des générations suivantes. De surcroît, en raison des rares et brefs congés à terre, ces pères ressentaient des difficultés à s'intégrer à la famille et à trouver leur propre place, autant sur le plan émotionnel que structurel.

Parmi les femmes plus jeunes, l'état d'esprit vis-à-vis d'une parenté sous des auspices maritimes était en général plus positif. Ces changements étaient en partie dus à l'amélioration des conditions de travail et des possibilités de communication, mais se rapportent aussi à une façon différente de voir l'éducation des enfants et au rôle du père. Le changement du discours général, allant de sphères séparées à l'égalité des sexes, fut le déterminant le plus significatif dans les explications fournies sur les différentes façons d'envisager une vie de famille marquée par la mer.