

Pain, Boredom and Despair: The sufferings of Seafarers and their Families

John Paul J. Petrola¹, Dr. Rowena V. Isidro²

¹Teaches Philosophy at Senior High School Department-University of San Agustin, Iloilo City Philippines

²Teaches Social Science at the Iloilo Science and Technology University, Iloilo City Philippines

Abstract: *This study analyzed the sufferings of seafarers and their families in the Philippines. Being away from each other for a long period of time, the seafarers and their loved ones have suffered from emotional and psychological stresses such as, pain, boredom and despair. Employing Arthur Schopenhauer's concepts of the suffering of the world, the researchers showed that the experiences of pain, boredom, and despair among seafarers and their families stemmed from their desires of happiness and satisfaction to their families.*

Keywords: Sufferings, Schopenhauer, Filipino seafarers, pain, boredom, despair

1. Introduction

Maritime industry in the Philippines was considered one of the major factors in country's economic growth. According to Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) overseas employment statistics in 2014-2015, there are 406,531 Filipino seafarers deployed in the different countries [1]. This means that out of 1.5 million seafarers globally, 25 to 27 percent are Filipinos. Because of this, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) noted that seafarers shared 25 percent of OFWs remittance or US\$5.328 billion to country's economy just in November 2017 [2].

Moreover, in a 2016 study conducted by German-Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry entitled *The Impact of Maritime Industry on the Philippine Economy*, it has stated that the shipbuilding industry alone have provided 24 billion pesos in taxes to the Philippine government and a total cumulative investments in the country amounting to 116 billion pesos in 2015. Moreover, the study also showed that there are 46,000 workers have been employed in the maritime industry and each enjoying a salary ranging from 15,000 to 40,000 pesos depending on the job classification [3]. These only show the high demands of workforce in the country's maritime industry and the large number of Filipinos willing to fill the global economic demands.

But why Filipinos choose seafaring as a career? In an article made by the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), they have listed reasons why people want to work at sea. First in their list is the good wage that the ships' officers are receiving monthly. ICS noted that seafarers belong to the top paid professionals in their country, who are also entitled to tax free incentives. It is followed by opportunities to travel. For ICS, despite the fact that most of seafarers spend less time in ports, still they believe that career in shipping provides them the opportunity to travel different places [4]. These opportunities simply manifest that through seafaring; seafarers and their families may have big chances of improving their lives and visit places that they have dreamed of.

Furthermore, ICS also noted long vacation days given to seafarers as an opportunity to enjoy more time with their families after finishing their contract with their shipping company. Despite the 3-9 months being away from the family, seafarers are given vacation ranging from 2-3 months of longer holiday periods [4].

In our interview with Harold (not his real name), a chief engineer of an international shipping company, he mentioned his experiences working abroad. Harold has been employed in maritime industry for more than 15 years now. For him, being in this kind of work, had helped him improve his family's lives. In fact at present, he and his family live their own house in an exclusive subdivision, they own cars and recently opened their water refilling business. Also, for Harold, having a good salary in an international shipping company, he got the chance to bring his family for vacation in different countries. Yet, despite the leisure and improvements in the lives of their family, Harold and his wife Anna considered seafaring job as both the happiest and saddest career in the world. On one hand, happiest because their family enjoyed almost all the perks in life; while, saddest because they sometimes felt depression and longing being away from each for a long period of time.

The narrative simply proves that seafarers and their families, despite the perks and privileges they received still, suffered pain, boredom, and despair like any other Filipino families. These experiences of suffering are inevitable for every human person, particularly to seafarers, as a result of their desire of giving good life for their families. This is where Arthur Schopenhauer's concepts of sufferings come in. Schopenhauer's concepts are used in understanding the sufferings of the seafarers and their families.

1.1 Objectives of the study

- 1) Discuss the stories of actual life challenges of seafarers and their families;
- 2) Briefly present Arthur Schopenhauer's concepts of pain, boredom and despair; and,
- 3) Appropriate Schopenhauer's concepts of the suffering of the world in understanding the experiences of pain,

boredom and despair among seafarers and their families.

2. Literature Review

In this section, the researchers provided several studies showing that indeed, seafarers and their families have experienced psychological stress while the seaman is called for his on-board duties.

In their paper titled *Psychological stress in seafarers: a review*, Carotenuto, Molino, Fasanaro and Amenta argued that seafarers are usually exposed to several inevitable stressors such as sleep disturbances, homesickness and isolation, and fatigue. According to Carotenuto, et al., various environmental and social factors affect not just the delivery of work of the seafarers but also their total well-being [5]. For instance, there are people, particularly young seafarers, are very sensitive to noise brought by vibration, adverse weather conditions on seas, and erratic shifting schedule of duties affect the sleeping conditions of the seafarers. Also, social isolation, loneliness and family problems also resulted in depression and anxiety which are the leading causes of suicide among seamen. Because of these factors, Carotenuto, et al., suggested the development of stress-coping mechanisms that will help seafarers overcome their pain, loneliness and boredom [5].

In an on-line article entitled *12 main reasons seafarers quit sea jobs*, Rauneka Kantharia, a marine engineer turned into maritime writer and professional blogger, enumerated the main reasons why seafarers experienced suffering, namely; unsettled lifestyle, hectic life, onboard politics, lack of social life, away from the family, personal/family problems, rise in maritime piracy, health issues, reducing shore leaves, lack of shore jobs, reducing crew members, and stringent maritime laws [6].

In addition, Kantharia argues that most of the seafarers desire of a more stable lifestyle and professional satisfaction. In an onboard work, seafarers have difficulty to balance their personal and professional lives due to the fact that they all work and live together with their fellow seafarers for a long period of time. Oftentimes, according to Kantharia, personal problems affect the effectiveness of seafarers to deliver his tasks. Because of this, onboard politics or conflicts arise as a result of differences in opinions, heated arguments, and other professional and personal conflicts [6]. Because of these on-board conflicts, many seafarers were not able to finish their contracts and leave the ship illegally.

Other psychological sufferings that the seafarers have experienced are homesickness and boredom due to monotony in works and lack of recreational activities. In most cases, these sufferings cause more problems in terms of performance of duties and mental health of a seafarer. In fact, in one of a supreme court's decision in the Philippines on *Fil-Pride Shipping Company, Inc., et. al., vs. Balasta*, G.R. No. 193047, March 3, 2014, it noted "that an overseas worker, having to ward off homesickness by reason of being physically separated from his family for the entire duration of his contract, bears a great degree of emotional strain while making an effort to perform his work well. The strain is even greater in the case of a seaman, who is constantly

subjected to the perils of the sea while at work abroad and away from his family [7]."

The separation of a seafarer to his family creates psychological and emotional pain, boredom and despair not only to seaman but also to his family. In an article titled *Yes, I am Seafarers Wife*, written on a magazine entitled *Life at Sea* by Nandkishore Gite dated 21 March 2008, the anonymous author narrated her life story, her pains, struggles and disappointments as a wife of a seaman. The wife noted:

*"Every day, I struggle in living a life without him. From the moment I wake up, I think of him. I miss him...
Everyday I wait for him. I wait for his call and for his text messages. My heart leaps every time my mobile phone rings, wishing it is him. And most of the times, I am rather disappointed after finding out that it is not from him...
I stopped looking at the calendar. It adds agony in my misery to see that it will still be weeks and months before I see him and be in his arms again. I live in a manner of wait and see. Wait for the day to end and see for another bland tomorrow to come. Life is never the same without him here. It is him that I look forward every time I go home, every time I prepare the dinner and every time I end the day with a prayer[8]."*

These words from a seaman's wife showed the emotional stress she felt every time his husband is on-board. The wife felt pain of missing her husband and experienced a sense of boredom because of waiting so long to have his husband back home. Yet, as you have seen, the wife is hopeful that her husband be back in her arms again.

In an article on *Marine Insight* entitled *Seafarer's Wife: The Woman Behind A Successful Life At Sea* dated 09 October 2017, Chief Officer Abhishek Bhanawat, an active officer of in an international shipping company, discussed the life's experiences and sufferings of being a wife of a seaman. According to Bhanawat, parenting, loneliness and household errands are just some of the stresses that the wife should bear while her husband is on-board. For Bhanawat, being away from their husbands, the seafarers' wives obviously, brings them loneliness and depression. Also, the stressful thing for the wives is to act as a father and a mother to their children during the absence of their head of the family. Yet sometimes, what is more disappointing and challenging for the seafarers' wives are the "badly timed questions from relatives and friends regarding married life and their concern about upbringing of children, family issues, managing household jobs, among others [9]."

The children of a seaman are also emotionally affected by their father's absence especially during their memorable occasion. Take for instance, Mark Collin Solas, a former student from a maritime school in Iloilo City, a son of a seafarer, and was awarded by Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI) as one of the 10 promising students of the Philippines, noted that growing up, while his father is away, is the biggest challenge he bears. According to Solas, he experienced sadness and pain every school graduations and other special occasions knowing that his father will not be with him on these memorable milestones in his life. Yet, he

understands the reasons why his father has to sacrifice for their family [10].

The above discussion concretely showed that seafarers and their family have suffered from various psychological and emotion stresses which in Schopenhauer's concepts, the human persons' inevitable experiences of pain, boredom, and despair. Yet, these inescapable human sufferings were brought by their desires to achieve happy and better lives for their family.

3. Research Methodology

In the first phase, this study made use of hermeneutic and descriptive methods in discussing some stories of life's stories of the seafarers and their families. In the second phase, actual interviews were conducted to some seafarers and their loved ones in Iloilo (city and province) to account their real stories of pain, boredom and despair. And lastly, critical-analytic method was employed in the appropriation of Schopenhauer's concept of the suffering of world in understanding the experiences of pain, boredom and despair of the seafarers and their families.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Schopenhauer's Concepts of Suffering of the World

In this section, the researchers presented Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of suffering namely, pain, boredom, and despair. In his work entitled "*On the Suffering of the World*," found in his famous book titled in Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. II, translated by E. F. J. Payne. Schopenhauer argued that life is full suffering namely, pain, boredom and despair. For Schopenhauer suffering is innate to human life since every human person desires for something that is beautiful or pleasurable in his life. As for Schopenhauer, in this world, man's desires for pleasure are always accompanied with pain and sorrow [11].

Schopenhauer was convinced that life is a continuous process a task to be done yet, in the whole life of a human person, he always experiences the feelings of pained, cheated and disappointed. Put simply, Schopenhauer believes that life is an on-going process or a work in progress that every human person has to understand. It is always a life full of decisions to make, actions to take and challenges to overcome. Since it is a task to do, in life, as for Schopenhauer, it is "inevitable" that one experiences pain, boredom, and despair in achieving his desires for pleasure, happiness and satisfaction. Because of the "unending sufferings" that human persons are experiencing in life, they feel bore; lose hope, and some desired suicide [12].

Moreover, Schopenhauer rejects the idea that sufferings in the world are forms of negative evil; instead, he considers pain, boredom, and despair as positive forms of evil, which enables the human persons appreciate the value of life. In this context, Schopenhauer argues that happiness of human being is not only measured by enjoyment and desires but to be free from suffering or from these forms of positive evil. For

instance, as Schopenhauer noted, if we are in a good condition or in good health we are not aware of this positive evil that is present to us such as poverty, illness, mutilation, loss of sight or reason. Thus, Schopenhauer is convinced that the great majority of a person never lives a positive life; their lives are negative and they spend alifetime trying to escape from pain, boredom, and despair [12].

4.2 Understanding the Experiences of Pain, Boredom and Despair of Filipino Seafarers and their Families

4.2.1 Concept of Pain

For Schopenhauer, pain and sorrow are inevitable in the life of every human person particularly along with achieving our desires in life. As for the seafarers, they only wanted one thing in life-that is to give their families good, happy and better lives. However, along with these life's desires, they have to be away from their families for a long period of time. In being away from their family, boarding on a ship at the middle of the deep sea and ocean, the seafarers are experiencing loneliness and homesickness which deeply pains them.

Moreover, the seafarers didn't only experienced emotional pains but also physical discomforts brought by their manual activities on-board. Aside from their duties and responsibilities on the ship, they have also to take care of themselves and attend to their personal needs, such as washing of their clothes, treating their minor illness, and medicate themselves when they are ill.

Like their head, the family members who were left behind have also felt the pain brought by separation from their beloved. However, unlike the seafarers, the wife and their children could easily overcome the pain they have experienced because of the various recreational and social activities that are available in various social places.

4.2.2 Concept of Boredom

Schopenhauer's concept of boredom hinges on the idea of inability to do something that one wanted to do. The inability that the researcher mean here is not just about the failure of buying some things that one desires for a long time, rather, it is the feelings or actions that someone wanted to do but failed to do them because of certain hindrances.

In one of our interviews, Nilo (not his real name), a former seaman from an international shipping company, had experienced boredom while he was on-board. One time, there was an emergency call from his family telling him that his mother, who was seriously ill, is dying. Nilo, being the only son, wanted to be on his mother's deathbed and show his love and care for his mother for the last time. Nilo immediately called the attention of his captain, asking permission to go home for family reasons. Yet, the captain wasn't able to grant Nilo's request saying that Nilo has to wait to finish his contract before he will be allowed for leave. Because of this, Nilo felt helpless, angered and disappointed and decided to "jump ship" or leaving the ship without approval from his captain. Because of bad standing, Nilo wasn't able to return to his seafaring career.

It was clear that Nilo hasn't able to get what he desired. His negative feelings have made him react negatively to the situation. Because of his immediate actions, it ended up losing his job. For Schopenhauer, the decision of a person affects his life and so to the degree of his sufferings. In this case, Nilo's immediate reactions and decision of disobeying his superior impact heavily in his career, life and the life of those people depending on him.

4.2.3 Concept of Despair

Despair, for Schopenhauer, happened when something that one desires to happen didn't happen. Because of this, one feels sad and desperate since something he is expecting to happen wasn't realized. In the experience of Mark Solas, as discussed earlier, he suffered life's despair. Mark was expecting that his father would be with him in all momentous events in his life such as graduation exercises, birthdays and Christmas season. However, because of his father's seafaring job, the latter failed to attend in these special occasions. Thus, Mark felt sad and a sense of desperation.

Despite this, Mark came to understand that their family's situation is different compare to others. He was aware that his father has to sacrifice, that is to work away from home, for them to have a good and a happy life. This is what Schopenhauer means that sufferings should be treated as positive rather than negative. For Schopenhauer, these sufferings make the human persons understand the value of happiness and thus, appreciate the true meaning happiness and success.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

Many people view the lifestyle of seafarers and their family as easy money and convenient life. In fact, every time we see seamen and their families, we always associate them as rich, well-traveled persons, happy, and satisfied people. This is because seafarers are classified as higher paid workers in the country and thus, they can own big houses, brand new cars and buy what they wanted. However, behind the material possessions that they have acquired for their loved ones, the expensive gifts for their children, and the sweet chocolates for relatives and friends, laid the sad facts that Filipino seafarers and their families suffered pain, boredom and despair.

Indeed, suffering is part and parcel of every human life. In fact, each one of us, regardless status, profession, religion and political affiliations has experienced unavoidable sufferings in life. For Schopenhauer, in every victory we achieve and in every joy we feel, there is always pain and sorrow that follow. But, following Schopenhauer, these sufferings of pain, boredom, and despair are treated in a positive way--made us realize and appreciate the real meaning of our existence. Hence, life is a task to be done.

References

[1] "Philippine Overseas Employment Administration-Overseas Employment Statistics", <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/compendium/2015.pdf> (accessed 02 February 2018).

- [2] "Overseas Filipinos' Cash Remittances", http://www.bsp.gov.ph/statistics/spei_pub/Table%2011.pdf (accessed 02 February 2018).
- [3] Lara Ritcher, *The Impact of the Maritime Industry of the Philippine Economy* (Makati: German-Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Inc., 2016), 35-38.
- [4] "10 reasons to work at sea", <http://www.crewtoo.com/featured-news/career-at-sea/#> (accessed 05 February 2018).
- [5] Anna Carotenuto, et.al., "Psychological stress in seafarers: a review", *Via Medica*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2012), 188-194.
- [6] RaunekKantharia, "12 Main Reasons Seafarers Quit Sea Jobs", <https://www.marineinsight.com/life-at-sea/12-main-reasons-seafarers-quit-sea-jobs/> (accessed 03 February 2018).
- [7] "Unhealthy Lifestyle of A Filipino Seafarer", <http://unitedfilipinoseafarers.com.ph/unhealthy-lifestyle-filipino-seafarer/> (accessed 02 February 2018).
- [8] NankishireGitte, "Life at Sea", <http://mylifeatsea.blogspot.com/2008/03/yes-i-am-seafarers-wife.html?view=magazine> (05 February 2018).
- [9] AbhishekBhanawat, "Seafarer's Wife: The Woman Behind A Successful Life At Sea", <https://www.marineinsight.com/life-at-sea/seafarers-wife-the-woman-behind-a-successful-life-at-sea/> (accessed 05 February 2018).
- [10] Katherine Visconte, "When a parent works abroad", <https://www.rappler.com/life-and-style/15979-when-a-parent-works-abroad> (accessed 05 February 2018).
- [11] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol 2, translated by E. F. J. Payne, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 291-305.
- [12] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Essential of Schopenhauer* (Great Britain: Unwin Books, 1962), 86.