Reconstructing maritime women – a discursive understanding

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Abstract

This paper will show how prevailing discourses in society influence the way in which life stories are told. The empirical foundation of the paper is a body of qualitative oral and written testimonies of seventy-five seafarers’ wives from the Åland Isles, born between 1912 and 1969 and divided into three groups, so as to represent different generations of women. In my interpretation of the testimonies I have used discourse analysis and social constructionism. The examination of the relationship between reconstruction and discourse will make visible not only the extent to which social ideals feed into subjective identity, but also how common discourses are constructed and sustained through individual narratives. Furthermore, by looking at how the informants reconstructed their subjective experiences, we will learn how life story narratives are affected by the discourses available to the narrator, both at the time when events were experienced and when they were related. The informants’ experiences as seafarers’ wives will be set against the popular and established ideas of what being a maritime woman entails.

Keywords: maritime women, family life, discourse analysis, seafarers’ wives.

1 Introduction

Personal accounts draw upon existing discourses available in society, and these discourses, in turn, are influenced and maintained by subjective experiences. Some informants will create their experiences so as to fit the prevailing images of a seafarer’s wife’s attitudes and characteristics, whereas others will seek to distance themselves from the stereotype. Awareness of what the principal discourses communicate about seafarers’ wives in Åland is imperative, since these debates are the frame of reference for the informants’ reconstructions of
their maritime selves. The dominant discourse in Åland casts the seafarer’s wife as being strong and independent. She is a ‘no nonsense’ woman, efficient, practical and steadfast. This image is not only engraved into the Åland psyche through fictional works, in which heroines such as Salminen’s Kartina and Blomqvist’s Maja become icons of womanhood, it is also present in factual writings. Reading Högman’s history of Åland women, it is the discourse of hard-working, capable women that flows off the pages in the chapter on maritime women [1]. Field observations, such as the interviews and questionnaires used in this study, can also reveal much about established attitudes in a society.

2 Independence

One of the questions posed in the questionnaires sent out to Åland seafarers’ wives and asked during the interviews was whether these women felt more independent than women whose men worked ashore. A resounding Yes was expected, but it was not as straightforward as that. The word ‘independence’ was used to describe a number of different things. It was used to denote self-confidence and personal integrity, as well as to refer to an ability to cope on one’s own, of being dextrous and a practical problem-solver. Moreover, a few informants regarded independence as synonymous with being economically self-sufficient. Common to all informants was an awareness of the discursive stereotype, and in their reconstructions the women placed their own experiences in relation to this image. It is noteworthy that women who wanted to distance themselves from the stereotype showed more awareness of its existence than did women who conformed to it.

Despite a plethora of differing attitudes, an attempt was made to sort the reconstructions into thematic groups. Sixty-two of the seventy-five life stories dealt in some way with the idea of independence, and these accounts were placed into three groups. The first and biggest category consisted of reconstructions that predominantly followed the discourse of the strong and independent seafarer’s wife, made thus through her experiences of maritime life. This category accounted for almost two in five narratives, twenty-nine accounts in total. The second category, which consisted of nineteen accounts, also comprised narratives in which the women presented themselves as independent. The significant difference was that they did not necessarily feel more independent than any other group of women. Their sense of strength and assurance did not only stem from their maritime experiences, but also from other factors, such as inherent personality traits and non-maritime events. Some of these reconstructions stated that the informants’ inborn autonomy was the sole source of independence, and thus totally unrelated to her being a seafarer’s wife. The third group was made up of fourteen narratives contrasted with the two previous types. In six of these accounts, the informants claimed that they were not at all independent, at least not in the sense of possessing the vast reservoir of confidence generally associated with maritime women. In the remaining eight accounts, the informants either stated that their independence was none the greater than any other woman’s or that they were unsure as to what extent their situation differed...
from that of women whose husbands worked ashore. Finally, it should be pointed out that although the reason for a woman’s independence was not always explained through her maritime lifestyle, but was said to be either innate in the informant or had been gained through other experiences, about two-thirds of the reconstructions did infer that being on their own had given them the practical skills to cope with the daily management of the household, even if it had not always given them confidence and self-assurance.

2.1 The traditional ideal

The stereotypical characterisation of an Åland maritime woman is that of a strong-minded and resolute woman, multi-skilled as well as self-confident, and perhaps even somewhat domineering. This image was adopted by just under two-fifths of the informants in this study. It was not, however, exclusive to Åland women. This was also the image to which the older maritime women in Cole’s study likened themselves, and Kaijser argues that since seafarers’ wives spent so much time alone and had to assume greater responsibility than other women, they gained self-confidence and a very independent position [2]. Although this attitude was significant in all three generations, it was more common among the older women. Both in Generation One and Generation Two, nearly half of the reconstructions followed this line of reasoning, compared to less than a third of the accounts in Generation Three. Typical of these reconstructions was the tendency to state that the informant’s particular circumstances as a seafarer’s wife was the reason behind her said independence, implying that she would have been less accomplished had her husband worked ashore. Such a comment came from a woman in Generation One, who openly admitted that she did not think she would have been as independent as she was had her husband not worked at sea. This remark appeared slightly out of line with the general tone of the narrative, wherein the informant stated that not everyone was cut out to be a seafarer’s wife; that you had to be of a certain type to cope with that kind of life [3]. The conflicting comments showed that the informant was to some extent eager to identify with the mainstream discourse of acquired independence, but was unable to do so without contradicting other parts of her narrative. This reconstruction was an exception and most accounts were seemingly consistent in tone. Women stated how they had adjusted to their situation and, in doing so, had learnt how to cope on their own. Some women stressed their transformation into a seafarer’s wife, describing how they had grown with the responsibilities put on them. Others contrasted their situation with that of women whose men worked ashore, emphasising the increased responsibility that a seafarer’s wife had to shoulder.

It is self-evident that we as seafarers’ wives become more independent. We have a completely different responsibility for children, house and home etc. And you have to make your own decisions. [4]

An interesting aspect of this quotation was that the informant was not only referring to herself, but also appeared to speak for seafarers’ wives as a collective. In doing so, she intuitively suggested that all maritime women shared
the same experience. This serves as evidence of how ingrained the stereotypical image of the maritime woman was in Åland society, for although seafarers’ wives were forced to cope on their own as best they could while their husbands were at sea, it did not necessarily make them feel any more independent.

Compared to the other two generations, fewer third generation women presented themselves in accordance with the dominant discourse of maritime women, but those who did, did so wholeheartedly. They would make it obvious that they thrived in their role and that they would not want to change anything. One informant proudly proclaimed: ‘I think I’m more independent than women whose men work ashore and I think that is a strength; as a matter of fact I wouldn’t want to change anything’ [5]. This woman stressed that she ‘wouldn’t want to change anything’. This was a powerful way of signalling her contentment with the situation. It was almost as if she felt that they had to prove something to the rest of society. And admittedly, despite being one of the most common professions in Åland, at the end of the twentieth century, seafarers were still attributed with some of the old vices associated with the profession. There was ample evidence that the wives were faced with insinuations from people around them, doubting their partners’ character. Maybe this was why they felt they had to state their contentment so clearly.

Older women were usually more careful in their approach. Despite claiming that they generally felt more independent than women who had their partners at home, informants of Generations One and Two were more willing to acknowledge that they too experienced moments of insecurity. In cases where the informants appeared very self-sufficient, they still recognised that the strong sense of independence that they as seafarers’ wives felt they possessed was more complex than just being able to cope well on one’s own. For when the husband returned home, some women found it difficult to let go of their autonomy, continuing to make all the decisions without much consideration for the seafarer’s opinions. During the seafarer’s active period this was more easily overcome, but when the seafarer retired ashore, for whatever reason, the situation became more difficult to handle. One informant wrote:

I believe I’m much more independent than women whose men work ashore; yes, and that is the seafarer’s wife’s big problem. You’re supposed to cope on your own, the household economy, and all the practical stuff and first and foremost you are almost solely responsible for your children. This is fine but the problem is that when he is at home I feel it is my responsibility to make him feel manly and important. Seamen want to be much more masculine than many other professionals. [6]

This account followed the outlines for the stereotypical view of maritime women, but it also reminded the reader of the negative effects it could have on a relationship.

2.2 The nature and nurture approach

Accounts that took the second discursive position stressed both nature and nurture as significant elements in the women’s sense of independence. Innate
independence was placed alongside independence gained from life as a seafarer’s wife in this group of reconstructions, particularly in the two older cohorts. One informant claimed that if she had not been of an independent nature she would not have achieved all she had done. However, she continued by saying that she had also ‘learnt to be independent’ [7]. This was an attitude prevalent in the majority of accounts in this category.

The ‘nature-nurture’ position was the most popular category among Generation Three narratives. Ten of the twenty-eight women in this age cohort presented narratives that followed this discursive pattern. The corresponding number of narratives in this group made by women in Generations One and Two were three out of eighteen and six of twenty-nine respectively. Furthermore, six of the eight women who asserted that they were of an independent nature and would have been so irrespective of their partner’s occupation, belonged to Generation Three. The two other women who took this stance were of Generation Two. Younger women displayed a higher propensity to present themselves within an individualistic discourse. Therefore it was not surprising to find many women proclaiming that their sense of independence had little or nothing to do with their husbands’ choice of occupation. One informant said that she had always been confident of her abilities and she did not think that it was dependent on her choice of partner. On the contrary, she felt that she and her partner had got together ‘because we have discovered qualities in each other that suit this kind of life’ [8]. The equation of independence and seafaring thus took on a different shape. Not only were women who married seafarers forced to obtain a certain level of independence in order to cope on their own, but also this narrative seemed to imply that self-reliant women and seafaring men made a good match. For a strong-minded woman who thrived on responsibility, partnership with a seaman meant that she could maintain her sense of independence as she was left to manage her and her children’s lives more or less according to her own design. For the seafarer it was reassuring to know that he had left house and children in the hands of a capable woman.

2.3 The third way

The third discursive position evident in the data was that in which the informants positioned themselves in opposition to the central discourse. In all, only two women of each generation did not consider themselves independent, either in relation to other seafarers’ wives or in general. Despite acknowledging their ability to cope on a practical level while they were on their own, their narratives did not project an image of the strong and confident character that formed the basis of the traditional ideal, and which was also widespread in the nature-nurture approach. The women nonetheless showed an awareness of the prevailing image by setting it against their narratives. That the ideal of the maritime woman as a self-sufficient and versatile person could be regarded as detrimental rather than beneficial was stated very candidly in the following excerpt: ‘Compared to women who have their husbands ashore, I am expected to be independent but it only gives me a feeling of failure’ [9]. This quotation demonstrates the informant’s consciousness of how the society in which she
found herself expected her to behave, but instead of giving her encouragement these expectations only served to make her situation more conflictual.

An issue that ran through most of the narratives in this group was the meaning of independence. Two women, who had both divorced their seafaring husbands, raised this question explicitly. One of them said that although she was capable of many things, she was still financially dependent on her husband [10]. The other woman said:

*The question of independence is a difficult thing. Sometimes I think I’ve been independent but as soon as my husband came home that came to an end. We have had many difficult years when my husband has been at home through early retirement. I struggle each day to make my voice heard and for my independence.* [11]

This statement signalled the confusion the informant felt on this particular subject. While she was on her own, she felt that she coped well and could handle her situation. She felt confident and self-sufficient, just as a seafarer’s wife should, according to the societal consensus. A certain degree of acclimatisation was an unavoidable part of the seaman’s return in all maritime families. In the majority of cases, the different parties managed to negotiate their space and role in the family successfully, to find an equilibrium that suited all family members. In this particular testimony, however, it appeared that the informant was unable to maintain her status when her husband returned from sea. The exact reason behind this remains hidden from the reader, but there was doubtless something in the seafarer’s character that made it impossible for his wife to feel like an able and confident woman while he was at home.

The remaining eight accounts in this category dealt only very briefly with ideas of independence, implying that the question was irrelevant. Perhaps this was true, but nevertheless, by presenting informants with the discursive stereotype they were given the chance to agree with it or to reject it to varying degrees. The result was a debate that clearly illustrated the complexity of the idea of independence and it also brought to light the subordinate discourses on the subject that existed in Åland society at the turn of the millennium.

## 3 Children

Substantial differences in attitudes to raising a family with a seafarer were displayed throughout the sample. Theses attitudes were divided into four groups; very positive, negative and very negative. 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 a very positive stance in that they nevertheless regarded their partners’ work situation as a negative factor, overcome by the seafarers’ conscious effort to build a sound relationship with their 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 first group of fathers. Negative attitudes were apparent in narratives in which the nature of 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 any support from their partners.

Of the twelve women in Generation One who discussed the issue ten showed a negative attitude, one woman held very negative view and one positive. One probable reason for the high proportion of negatively positioned narratives was the fact that in none of the other generation cohorts did the men spend as much time away from home as did the first generation of seamen. Absences of nine months and over were commonplace and opportunities for communication were limited. Due to 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 had fathers with land-based jobs and seamen of later generations. Subsequently, 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 [12].

Among women in Generation Two the distribution was nine positive testimonies, three very positive, seven negative and five very negative. The greater dispersal between positions could be seen as reflecting the greater variety of working conditions available to the seamen of this generation. The older women of this group of informants had had similar experiences of maritime family life as had the first generation of seafarers’ wives in this study, with very extensive absences and equally limited means of communication. The younger informants, on the other hand, benefited from the improvements in maritime work regulations and telecommunications, making their experiences similar to those of Generation Three. A big difference was made by the opportunities offered to new fathers by the local ferries. To transfer from long-distance shipping to ferry traffic was a viable option for most seafarers of this generation, facilitating a more tangible role for the father in family life.

The youngest generation of women were the most positive in their presentations; seven positive and six very positive testimonies compared to six negative and only one very negative response. The preponderance of positive attitudes cannot solely depend on improved working conditions and superior means of communications, but must be found in a change in attitude regarding parenting and the role of the father in bringing up offspring. Late twentieth-century Scandinavian society saw gender equality as one of the most pronounced
discourses, and it influenced the way in which almost every aspect of life was discussed [13]. Thus, when discussing the role the seafarer played in caring for his children, many women in this generation presented stories that conveyed an image of both parents taking equal responsibility in nurturing their offspring. This change in 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 from the seafarer’s side, his absences continued to place him on the periphery of family life. Life without the seafarer present was regarded as the state of normalcy for most women in all three generations, whereas the seafarer’s sojourns ashore were a break from the norm.

3.1 Maritime parenthood

Despite the official discourse of gender equality, society is still not gender equal and the responsibility of caring for children often falls on the woman, regardless of the man’s occupation [14]. 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. Similar traits were evident in several other studies of maritime family life. Similar to the informants in this study, many fishermen’s wives from Hull and Grimsby felt that they had to act as both mother and father to their children [15].

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 and it was therefore the women who carried the main responsibility. It was a common notion among the informants that they demanded more from their children than did their husbands. Likewise, the children were said to be more likely to turn to their mothers with any problems. One informant said: ‘If there is anything special, our daughter turns to me, even if my husband is at home. It makes him feel a bit pushed out, but it’s only natural that children turn to the parent who is at home the most’ [16]. Statements of this kind suggested that the seafarers’ 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.

The strong bond that existed between the seafarers’ wives and their children could be contrasted with the fathers’ uncertainty regarding how to deal with their offspring. The seafarer’s absence made him detached from family life and subsequently it was difficult for him to follow his children’s development. One informant said meant that it was close to impossible for a child to form a really close relationship with a father who spends as much time away from his family as does a seafarer. The real time spent apart is lost forever and cannot be compensated. 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. Heikell shows that there is also great consensus among seamen that it is the women who raise the children, and they are worried about stepping on their wives’ territory by getting too involved [17].

4 Reconstruction and discourse

As discourses are always based in a historical and social context, it was expected that informants in the three generation cohorts would present their life stories differently, each group reflecting their own era. However, since all informants told their stories at the same time, they were also expected to show awareness of contemporary discourses in the society to which they all belonged. The issues that were considered were independence and child-rearing.

From the discussion on independence, three discursive positions were identified. The first position was a traditional ideal based on the image of seafarers’ wives as ‘no-nonsense’ women, who had gained both self-confidence and resilience from their experiences of seafaring life. This was the most common position among informants of generations One and Two, while women of Generation Three were more inclined to take the nature-nurture approach, which was the second discursive concept identified. The nature-nurture approach downplayed the effects of maritime life, and focused more on inborn personality traits and the impact of non-maritime events on the informant’s ability to cope with her life situation. Individualism was a strong influence in the majority of reconstructions in this category. There was also a third way, in which the informants could present their experiences, and that was to juxtapose their stories against the central discourse stipulated. This could be done directly or indirectly, but common to all informants who placed their narratives in this category was a more pronounced awareness of what the stereotypical seafarer’s wife should be like.

The most conspicuous discourse apparent in discussions on childrearing was that of gender equality. The issue of childrearing proved a textbook example of how discourses change over time and colour narratives. Virtually all the 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, 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, but blaming external factors rather than the seafarer for an unstable father-child relationship.
References


[3] Woman, Generation 1, interview, 3 August 1999 (G104)
[4] Woman, Generation 3, questionnaire, August 1999 (G3088)
[5] Woman, Generation 3, questionnaire, August 1999 (G3070)
[7] Woman, Generation 1, interview, 2 August 1999 (G103)
[8] Woman, Generation 3, interview, 10 January 2000 (G305)
[9] Woman, Generation 2, questionnaire, August 1999 (G2050)
[10] Woman, Generation 2, interview, 29 July 1999 (G205)


[16] Woman, Generation 3, questionnaire, August 1999 (G3083)