



Life above water: small-scale fisheries as a human experience

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Abstract

“Life under water” is UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 14, under which small-scale fisheries fall. Yet, most of what is happening in small-scale fisheries, and certainly those things that are interesting to social scientists, are taking place above water—on the water and by the water. Small-scale fishers make their living off the fish that swims in the ocean, but they do so with the lives they construct for themselves and with others on land. Therefore, small-scale fishers depend on their communities as much as they depend on the fish, their boats, and gear. It is as members of communities that fishers acquire the knowledge, energy, motivation, and meaning they need to carry out their work. For fisheries social scientists, the community is a unit of analysis. However, fisheries communities are not isolated from what is happening outside them. Consequently, social scientists focus on forces at higher scales. Still, I argue that it is important that they do not lose sight of local communities, because if they do they also lose the sight of small-scale fisheries.

Keywords Small-scale fisheries · Fishing communities · Social networks · Agency and freedoms · Belonging

“I believe that one is only truly free when learning, and one can only learn when one is free.” (Peter Fonda¹)
“It’s No Fish Ye’re Buying—it’s Men’s Lives.” (Sir Walter Scott²)

¹ <http://www.peterfonda.com/about/>

² <https://www.enotes.com/topics/antiquary/quotes/its-no-fish-yere-buying-its-mens-lives>

Keynote address, MARE Conference, Amsterdam, June 25, 2019. Svein Jentoft is Professor Emeritus at the Norwegian College of Fishery Science, UiT-The Arctic University of Norway. The title of the address is identical with the title of his new book, published by TBTI Global in 2019. The original talk manuscript has here been further developed and converted into a full paper, which draws on the book.

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Introduction

The topic for this paper, which was originally my keynote address at the MARE Conference in June 2019, has always been close to my heart; the fate of coastal communities and the role they play in small-scale fisheries. Communities exist not only as places on a map. They have an important function, which is not always understood. They are also often not appreciated by policy-makers as they should be. Therefore, as social scientists, we have a job to do in demonstrating what communities are and what they do, and why they are important for the sustainability of small-scale fisheries.

The title “Life above water” should ring a bell. Small-scale fisheries fall under UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 14, which is called “Life below water.” Given their contribution to nutrition, food security, poverty alleviation, and community well-being, one should, of course, appreciate the specific mentioning of small-scale fisheries in such a prominent setting. The SDGs could well have ignored them. Yet, what is happening in small-scale fisheries, and certainly those things that catch the eye of the social scientist, are taking place not below but *above* water—*on* the water and *by* the water.

I will argue here that life above water is not just an offshoot of what is happening below water. It is easy to see how small-scale fisheries contribute to fishing communities. It is more difficult to demonstrate how the community contributes to sustainable fisheries and aquatic ecosystems, because this link

is more subtle. Yet, that is what I will try to do here—in the spirit of the conference theme “Learning from the past, imagining the future”.

Embeddedness

Let me begin by stating the obvious: Small-scale fishers and fish-workers make their living off the fish that swim below the water, but they do so with the lives they construct for themselves with others on land. Fishing “out there” is intimately connected with what is happening “in here.” People who fish depend on their communities as much as on their fish, boats, and gear. The social relations of fishers extend beyond the crew.

How global trends affect the social relations of those who populate the small-scale fisheries sector, and how their communities change as a consequence, is of course an intriguing research question. However, here I am more interested in how such trends change communities, and consequently those who inhabit the sector and what they do. I find the latter a more intriguing question.

With the millions and millions of people engaged in small-scale fisheries worldwide, they are too important to fail. However, even a thriving fishery is no guarantee that communities will survive and that people will be secure. Small-scale fisheries will fail if their communities perish. A key to making small-scale fisheries sustainable is to make their communities robust and resilient. This is why secure tenure rights are important, but they alone are not sufficient to ensure sustainable small-scale fishing communities.

We struggle to precisely define what small-scale fisheries are because of their enormous diversity globally. Yet, they have a common denominator in their links to community. Economic sociologists would recognize this observation more generally as the “embeddedness” concept, which they would associate with people like Mark Granovetter and Anthony Giddens, or the seminal work of Karl Polanyi.

Gislí Pálsson, the social anthropologist, who has left an important mark on our discourse, applied this perspective in his account of Icelandic fisheries in a book he published in 1990 titled “*Coastal economies, cultural accounts. Human ecology and Icelandic discourse.*” “Fisheries are embedded in social life”, he says (p. 51). Small-scale fisheries involve a set of social relations that are rooted in local communities—much more so than in markets. Communities involve a more complex, fundamental, and more lasting set of social relations than markets do.

I always found the book of Paul Thompson and collaborators “*Living the fishing*” stimulating. Published in 1983, it is based on life-story interviews with men and women in

Scottish and English fishing communities. The community embeddedness thesis is clearly reflected in this quote:

“[E]conomic and social development depend as much on the situation of women, and of children, and the history of and consciousness of communities, as on matters of capital, cash and profit, and today’s and tomorrow’s market.” (page 3)

Understanding communities

To see how fisheries activities form the life of the community, one would need to be at the landing site and watch the boats coming in and the fish being unloaded. The beach or wharf is often a place buzzing with life, with people running around doing things, talking to each other, and bargaining on the price. A newcomer observer may find it chaotic. Finding order in what one sees could be challenging; it would require a piece of research. You would want to quantify what the fishery generates in terms of employment, food, and income, and follow the fish from where it is landed until it is served on the dinner table. You may have to run some surveys. There may be public records available. You would need to get an indication of how life on the beach changes over the year, since fisheries communities are not places where time stands still. Yet, to get an idea of how the community forms the life of the beach and at sea, you would have to go deeper. You would need to get to know the people and their social relations, interactions, and traditions, including their governance. You would try to see the community as member sees it.

For my PhD research, I lived for two years in a small fishing community about where the Arctic Circle crosses Norway. This was back in the late 1970s, which for me does not feel a long time ago. When I left and went back to my university, I cannot say that I knew everything about that community, but I had grown fond of the place. I had established friendships that still last. When I returned to this community many years later, I could see that much had changed. I was not even sure it could be called a fishing community anymore. Many of the houses had been converted into second homes for city people. The fishing harbor was now filled with leisure boats. I found several of the fishers I knew and went out with in the graveyard. Some were retired, and their children had moved away. This is the fate of many small-scale fishing communities in Norway and elsewhere in the world.

To get a sense of what a fishing community is, you need to go there, hang out with people where they gather, visit their homes, and join their meetings if you are allowed in. You should also participate when they go fishing. If you do these

things, you will get to know people and what they do, but only if you let them learn who you are and why you are there. You will listen to their stories, hear about their concerns, and they will wonder if you share them.

With these experiences, you will understand that the community is more than a landing site, that it is also a place that people call home, and that there is more to their life than fishing. Not all the people you meet take part in the fishery. Still, they make an important contribution to the fishing community. They run the school and daycare center; they operate the local store and café. They coach the local soccer team, nurse the elderly, drive the bus, and conduct the school band. They all help to make the fishing community a good place to grow up.

Sometimes fishers have a second career after they retire. Birger, my best friend in the community where I lived all those years ago, built a fisheries museum after he stopped fishing. If you visit the community, he will proudly show you the museum and run the old boat engines that he keeps there. With the museum he helps to keep the memory of the fishing community alive, preserving the idea of what it once was—and to a limited degree still is. Thus, he is reminding people of where they are, where they come from, and where they ultimately belong. For this and many other initiatives Birger has taken locally after he stopped fishing, he received the King's Medal of Merit.

Fishing is predominantly (but not exclusively) about “men's lives”, as Peter Matthiessen (1988) called his book about the disappearing Long Island fishers in New York. Women also fish, but more commonly they provide crucial support to make the boat operative and the community function. They take care of the fish after landing, and do a number of other things related to the fishery and to the community. More subtly, in a paper titled “*Woman the Worrier*”, Dona Lee Davis (2010) noted that women release the anxieties of their men by taking over their worries associated with the physical and financial risk of fishing. Strangely, however, women's contributions to sustaining the fishery are typically ignored as if their work had little value. Why this is the case is worth exploring.

In a talk I gave at the Women's World Conference in 1999, I suggested that one reason why women's roles, rights, and inputs are overlooked is because community is overlooked. Consequently, the many direct and indirect contributions that women make to keep the community and the fishery functioning become invisible. Not only does it hurt women, but also the men who depend on them. Men's lives are intimately connected with women's lives, even if capitalism in fisheries has changed this relationship, as Gislí Pálsson observed (p. 166). Still, if we want to understand what makes a fishing community what it is and how it makes small-scale fisheries work, we need to understand how men's and women's lives are intertwined.

Morality

Twenty years ago, Bonnie McCay and I (1998) published a paper positing that IUU (illegal, unreported, and unregulated) fishing is to be expected when the moral fabric of the community evaporates. Free-riding, violating rules, and cheating on the quota may be beneficial in narrow economic terms, but they are also a sign of the breakdown of norms of honesty and solidarity. They are a moral failure. Without such norms, there will be no mutual trust, and without trust, people will not be able to cooperate, even when they see the need for it. The community (in the sociological meaning) will malfunction. “Community failure,” as opposed to “market failure,” is therefore something that must also be addressed in dealing with IUU fishing, we argued.

People find ways to circumvent rules if they feel they must, if they see nothing wrong with it, and if the community has no way of sanctioning it—or may be even supporting it. The problem has no technical solution, but that seems to be the only thing management agencies can think of these days. Stricter control and surveillance, with or without the use of satellites, will hardly do the trick if the motivation to fish illegally is strong enough. As social researchers, instead of asking why people break rules, we should ask why they follow them, which they do most of the time. The risk of being caught and sanctioned is hardly the whole answer. People follow a rule when they support the norm behind it and respect the authority enforcing it, even if they may be asked to make a sacrifice. In a healthy, moral community, we want to be honest and trustworthy.

We may thus conclude that a fishing community is more than a landing site and a value chain within which goods, services, and money flow. It is also a moral system, where social norms and cultural values are building blocks. Women not only are part of the moral community but also play an important role in making it so. This is what mothers do. One should therefore nurture those institutions in the community where people learn to be moral, honest, respectful, and trustworthy. You would need to focus on the family, the school, and the places of worship—all the places in the community where people learn to distinguish between what is right and wrong. “It takes a village to bring up a child,” as the African proverb says. Hillary Clinton (2008) adopted it for the title of her book. It also takes a village to bring up a fisher.

Notably, the moral community is not only a “super-structure,” an offshoot of the economy as Marx would have it. Weber questioned this one-sided determinism, that the causal arrow is unidirectional, going from material base to super-structure. I believe Marx and Weber are both right. In a comment to the historical materialism of Marx involving the relation between the “base” and the “superstructure” of Marx, Jürgen Habermas (1995:148) argues that “species learn not only in the dimension of technologically useful knowledge

decisive for the development of productive forces but also in the dimension or moral-practical consciousness decisive for structures of interaction.” Culture, and the moral norms and principles it encompasses, including the language that they require, is both a dependent and an independent variable. The causal arrows run in both directions, and men and women are typically riding each of them.

Belonging

If we say that we need small-scale fisheries to support local communities, or communities to support small-scale fisheries, we must have an argument for why we need both to begin with. In Norway, fisheries policy has traditionally aimed at securing a decentralized settlement structure. Not only has it been regarded as important in itself, but also because it makes it easier to claim our territorial rights. We need small-scale fishing communities in order to keep the coast populated. This was the Norwegian position in the Anglo-Norwegian Fisheries case, which was brought to The Hague in 1951, a case that Norway won. The issue here was about where to draw the baseline. From time to time since then, the argument pops up in defense of coastal communities on the brink of losing their fishing rights. What was argued then, still holds, critics say.

People have their own reasons to live where they live. No matter what the government thinks about the settlement structure, coastal communities are home to people. Belonging to a community is part of who we are. We always feel attached to the place where we grew up. The British anthropologist, Anthony Cohen, in a paper about Whalsey, a fishing community in Shetland, explains this well:

“‘Belonging’ implies very much more than merely having been born in the place. It suggests that one is an integral piece of the marvelously complicated fabric which constitutes the community; that one is a recipient of its proudly distinctive and consciously preserved culture – a repository of its traditions and values, a performer of its hallowed skills, an expert of its idioms and idiosyncrasies.”

Cohen’s paper appears in a book titled “*Belonging: Identity and social organisation in British rural cultures*” (1992). With the book in my bag, I visited Whalsey in the fall of 1987, and was impressed by the place and the people I met there. They seemed to have a strong sense of place, a firm community identity, and they spoke proudly about their fishery. What the ITQ system has since done to this fishing community is a story in itself, told by Emma Cardwell and Robert Gear in a paper in *Marine Policy* in 2013.

People who fish need more than quotas and secure tenure to access their fishing grounds. Just like anyone else, they also need a sense of belonging, a place to live with other people. Since our community provides us with an identity and an idea of home, we never really leave it; it stays with us. Zweig (2013), the great Austrian playwright, novelist, journalist, and biographer of the early twentieth century, was convinced that “ultimately one needs a fixed point, a place to set out from and return to again and again.” Everyone should read his memoir now that fascism is again gaining traction. He understood the value of belonging better than most, even if he also identified himself as a European. Thus, he demonstrated the possibility of having several identities, something that also the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (2009) talks about, for instance in his book “*The Idea of Justice*.” Belonging to community does not exclude one from having other attachments and identities.

Freedom

The communitarian school of thought, often associated with names like Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, and Amitai Etzioni, argues the case for living in community with others as a way to stay mentally and physically healthy. Yet, the community also requires the willingness to sacrifice freedom, as the sociologist Zygmunt Baumann pointed out. Communities thus inhabit dilemmas. “Whatever you choose, you gain some and lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom” (Baumann 2001: 4).

The voice of the community may discourage us from pursuing our individual ambitions, should they break with community norms like conformity. We often have a bad tendency of holding each other down. Breaking with community norms typically comes with a social cost, as the anthropologist Robert Paine pointed out in an article about entrepreneurship in a fishing community in northern Norway that came out in 1972. People may start to talk badly about you behind your back, or even sabotage your project out of envy.

Baumann has a point when he says “community deprives us of individual freedom”, but we should not take it too far. True, our community limits our choice options, but also shapes our preferences—the idea of which choice options are worth having. Thus, if we do not value what we are missing, the loss of freedom does not necessarily feel like sacrifice. In any case, as Baumann suggests, such a sacrifice may be worth it. Communities, for instance, provide support in times of personal need, as when fishers perish at sea. Small-scale fishing is, according to FAO, the most dangerous of occupations. A fishing vessel lost at sea can have devastating effects on families and communities. This happened at a neighboring island to where I did my PhD fieldwork. One morning when I

was there, I met a crew on the quay mending their seine. The crew consisted of a father, two sons, and a son-in law. I knew the son-in-law, who was from my island. A couple of years after (1981), the boat went down, apparently hit on the side by a big wave, and the entire crew perished. It has taken decades for the community to get back on its feet. How the family have since managed, I do not know, but I am pretty sure that the community helped them to deal with the loss.

To the text of Kris Kristofferson, Janis Joplin sang: “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose”. Imagine yourself in such a situation. When you have nothing left to lose, you are entirely on your own. You may be free but you would also be lonely, and by that insecure. You have no attachment to place and things, and to other people. You would not belong anywhere, which was also Stefan Zweig’s personal tragedy after he had to flee his beloved Austria when World War II broke out. You may want to be free, which was Zweig’s ambition in life, but you also want to be secure, which you will not be if you are alone in the world. Belonging is not just a psychological mechanism, it is also a social relationship, because it is not entirely up to you whether you belong or not.

We depend on other people for our well-being. We are not only attached to a place, but also to people, to family, and to friends. We need lasting relationships. We do not just know about community and family values and norms; we share them. The community is not just outside us; we also carry it inside. We also see ourselves through the eyes of others, and base our sense of self on how we think others view us. Individuals and society are therefore not two separate categories, as the sociologist Elias (1989) argued. As Marx said, we are in a sense our social relations, or the assemblage of them (cf. Pálsson 1991:20). Amitai Etzioni has another way of phrasing it: “We are members of each other.” “The ME needs a WE to BE.”³ Marx is onto the same idea when he posits that “the human being is in the most literal sense...an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society” (1973:84.). Likewise, Jürgen Habermas (1995:171) notes that the “inter-subjectively shared knowledge that is passed on is part of the social system and not the property of isolated individuals; for they become individuals only in the process of socialization”.

Agency

Freedom should not necessarily be seen as a problem in the resource commons, as Garrett Hardin (1968) led us to believe. It does not always lead to ruin. If people are free, they can do something with their predicament. The protagonists in the Prisoner’s Dilemma, which is the Game Theory version of tragedy of the commons, are exactly what the name of the

game says they are, inmates kept isolated from each other. Their freedom is severely limited. In Hardin’s narrative, there is no community. In the Prisoner’s Dilemma, the protagonists are not allowed to communicate, to agree on how to act. Communities do not have such a rule. Members can get together and decide to cooperate.

Like other people, small-scale fishers have a right to be free, also because they need their freedom to be secure. To be secure, they must have agency, and they cannot have agency unless they have freedom, because agency involves the power to decide for yourself. Therefore, rather than limiting the freedoms of the fishing community, one should enhance them. As Amartya Sen (2000, p. 10) states: “Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means”. Still, in his *The Idea of Justice*, he argues that the quest for freedom should not be drawn too far: “It is indeed possible to accept that liberty must have some kind of priority, but total and unrestrained priority is almost certainly an overkill” (Sen 2009: 65).

This is also what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1969) was alluding to with the distinction between “freedom to” and “freedom from”: *freedom to* control oneself, which is “positive freedom”, and *freedom from* control by others, which is “negative freedom.” To pursue positive freedom, one also needs negative freedom. If people cannot feel secure, one cannot expect them to take on risk, for instance. There are certain things that you do not gamble with, like the well-being of your family or community. They will hesitate to assume management roles or venture into alternative livelihoods. They know what they have and cannot be sure if they will like what they get. Economists call this “risk aversion,” which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Thus, you need negative freedom to have positive freedom. But you also need positive freedom to achieve negative freedom. Communities need agency (positive freedom) to protect themselves from the vagaries of nature, the whims of government, or whatever threat that is out there (negative freedom). Agency makes communities less vulnerable because it frees them to take responsibility for their own destiny. Tenure rights protect fishing communities from encroachment like “ocean grabbing”, but they need agency to claim and enforce them. Acheson’s study (1998) of the “lobster gangs” of Maine is a classic illustration of this point.

The conflict between security and freedom requires a balancing act. You will never be completely secure and completely free, but you can still be happy if you have enough of both. You may not even want to be completely secure, as you would miss the excitement of taking risk, like when you invest, experiment, and innovate—or when you marry! Neither would you enjoy the total freedom that Joplin is singing about. You must have something, like social relations, to be secure. You must have someone and belong somewhere. The community may tie you down,

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKA4JjkiU4A&t=258s>

but you would not want to lose it, because when you do, you lose more than a place.

People have more choice options in cities than in small rural communities, but they do not necessarily make use of them all. Also city people need lasting and meaningful social relationships. They often create their own neighborhood communities. They have meeting places in the vicinity of where they live, like their local ball-park, school, and restaurant, bar, and church. A classic study is “*Family and kinship in East London*”, by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, first published in 1957. I was reminded of this study when, in the early 1980s, when I spent a week with a family in Mexico City. The family had their own community of relatives, friends, and neighbors, which was their primary group of socialization. Their sense of home, as I understood it, was not so much Mexico City as whole, but their neighborhood district.

Network

I think we can now agree that communities are more than aggregates of individuals that happen to reside in a particular place. Instead, communities are synergistic; they are more than the sums of their parts. They are social and moral systems where people relate and interact in ways that are important for their well-being, security, and identity, but neither are they a given. The social relations that provide these synergies must be nurtured. People must know and care for each other; they must appreciate their interdependencies. The paradox, however, is that interdependencies come with vulnerability. What your friends, neighbors, and colleagues do and what happens to them also have an effect on you. Should fishers who you cooperate with and rely upon for your own fishing decide to quit, you lose. You would have fewer colleagues to rely on. It may also convince you to do the same. This may cause a domino effect in a community that leads to its demise.

Fishing communities need a critical mass of people, but they also need to function as a collectivity, as an integrated whole. To illustrate, the story about J.A. Barnes is illuminating. Barnes was an Australian British social anthropologist who came to a small Norwegian fishing community in the early 1950s. His paper about the community was published in the journal *Human Relations* in 1954. Barnes is known to be the first who used “network” as a sociological concept. He had studied communities in New Guinea and other places before he landed in Norway. I do not know how and why he came there, which is not important here. The interesting part is how he came to see the community.

Barnes was puzzled over why, in the absence of a hierarchical structure, the community was still so orderly. It did not have the chief he was used to from communities he had studied in other parts of the world. One day as he was walking along the wharf, he saw a seine hanging to dry. (This was

when seines were still made of cotton.) He noticed the structure of the seine, and thought: “This is how the community hangs together, this is how social order is maintained!” He summarized his observation as follows:

“Each person is, as it were, in touch with a number of other people, some of who are directly in touch with each other and some of whom are not. Similarly each person has a number of friends, and these friends have their own friends; some of any person’s friends know each other, others do not. I find it convenient to talk of a social field of this kind as a network. The image I have is of a set of points, some of which are joined by lines. The points of the image are people, sometimes groups, and the lines indicate which people interact with each other” (Barnes 1954; p. 43).

If you ask your students what they associate with the word network, I bet they will not think of a fishnet. As a concept, network has now long become part of common language, and it pops up in many contexts. Barnes does here what social scientists often do. They take a word from daily language, reinterpret it so that it acquires a somewhat different or broader meaning, and then give it back to society. Eventually, the new meaning of the word becomes part of the way we think and talk. Take for instance Ervin Goffman’s (1990) sociological language drawn from the theater. Today, we use his concepts as if they have nothing to do with the theater, for instance when we talk about society as a stage where people have “roles”, and where there are important things going on both “front-stage” and “back-stage.”⁴

For Barnes, a net is an image of the social structure of the fishing community, where the knots are people and the threads social relationships. And here is the point I want to make: remove one knot, and it leaves a much bigger hole than just the size of the knot. The social relations that the threads symbolize are cut off and hanging loose. Barnes’ observation and concept work well to illustrate what happens in a local fishing community when fishers quit. Their exit has consequences for other fishers. To fish well, the net must be intact; all the knots and lines are needed, as a soccer team needs to have all the eleven players to perform well.

I once gave a talk about fisheries management in the Faroe Islands. There, people have a tradition that when they gather on festive occasions, they entertain themselves with the “chain-dance.” The dance is inclusive. Everyone participates;

⁴ Goffman may have been inspired by William Shakespeare, although it is not clear from his book: “All the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrance. And one man in his time plays many parts, his act being seven ages” (quote from “*As you like it*”). <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/446687-all-the-world-s-a-stage-and-all-the-men-and>

no one is excluded. When more people join, they make room by extending the chain. Holding onto each other as they turn, they sing ancient, rhythmic chants, handed down through generations. Only the voices and the feet are heard. A chant may have more than a hundred verses, typically of a moral content.⁵ The lead singer is characteristically called “skipper.” For participants, the chain-dance is exhilarating and creates a sense of togetherness. As described on a website: “You have to participate, and when it is at its best, the chain melts together and you feel a part of something vast”.⁶ What I dared to say in my talk in the Faroes was: “If you want to have an effective fisheries management system and a vigorous fishery, you’d better keep up the chain-dance tradition.” I did not, of course, submit that there is a direct link here, only that there is an indirect one, because the dance helps to sustain the community experience. It creates a sense of togetherness and belonging, which nurtures social responsibility and inclusivity, which helps to sustain the resource as well as the community, where one is constitutive of the other.

The chain-dance is to me a beautiful metaphor for a healthy, well-integrated, and functioning community sure of itself. Its inclusiveness is worth emphasizing. Fishers move and migrate with the fish according to the rhythm of the season. They know that they cannot expect to be welcome elsewhere if they are not welcoming others at home. This was always a shared understanding of Norwegian small-scale fishers dependent on their ability and opportunity to be mobile. Some Icelandic small-scale fishers, who in recent years have moved to Norway to escape the exclusivity of Iceland’s ITQ system, did not meet animosity among their Norwegian counterparts in the communities where they settled. Fishing communities are open systems, with networks that extend beyond a particular place. As Doreen Massey posited in the context of globalization and “the migration of people, images and information”, instead of thinking of communities “as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations.” (1991; 28). Barnes would have been in agreement with her way of putting it.

Community research

Small-scale fishing communities experience the effects of globalization for better or for worse. We need to understand what globalization does to social relations and cultural traditions like the chain-dance. From a research perspective, communities are not just a focus but also, as Arensberg (1961) argued, a locus—a place to situate ourselves when trying to understand issues that also manifest themselves beyond a

specific location, like the impact globalization on the culture of small-scale fisheries.

For my PhD research, I did not locate in the community I chose because I was particularly interested in it. Inspired by the work of my mentor supervisor, the social anthropologist Cato Wadel, who is known for his studies in Newfoundland and Norwegian fishing communities (see, e.g., Wadel 1973, Andersen and Wadel 1982), I settled there because I was interested in how autonomous but interdependent fisheries entities built organizational relations to coordinate their activities in situations of frequent resource and market crises. The community was a relevant context, a locus, because it was home of such entities. I could well have gone elsewhere.

We can have an idea about small-scale fisheries from afar, but we cannot know for sure how they work as a process. We may come up with a definition of them at our desk, but cannot be certain to have hit the nail on the head. We cannot know what small-scale fisheries represent for those who live them unless we engage with small-scale fishers in their communities. We would benefit from an analytic perspective that suggests how to look at the community, where to find it, and what to look at. But we need to go there. What we discover may then come as a surprise. We may not find the community where we thought it was. It may, for instance, be more open to the outside world than we anticipated beforehand.

Still, there are limits to what we can possibly know. Even our informants cannot know for sure what growing up in another fishing community besides their own is like. You cannot even be certain that other members of your community have the same experience as you have. In his book *The Children of Sanchez* (1963), which is another read that inspired me in my early career, Oscar Lewis showed that even growing up in the same family can be a different experience for different members. His children recalled the same things in their own distinct way, to the extent that you almost would believe that they did not belong to the same family. I think we all have similar experiences when we talk with our siblings. Our memories differ and we tell our stories differently. There is hardly one story about the community either. Still, stories are shared and help to bind people together. As stories make families (Stone 1988), they also make communities.

We do not really know how to be another person, because we cannot be that other person. We are unique even if we are similar. We are also in a sense a world of our own. The same thing can be said about communities. Yet, as the philosopher Wittgenstein (2009) noted, it is because we are similar that we can understand what it is to be unique. This is what he called “family resemblance.” Fishing communities differ but they are still similar in a way that allows us to talk about them as fishing communities. The anthropologist Geertz (1973) postulated that even if we cannot know exactly how people see their world, we can at least understand what people see their world *with*. We can get access to how they conceptualize what

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rX-AIuthTuM>

⁶ https://issuu.com/visitfaroeislands/docs/faroe_islands_touristguide_2014-en/29

they see, the words they use to explain what they know and do, and these words are shared among them. It is also through the way people talk to each other, the language we use, that we get the idea of what is both similar and unique about it.

Biologists do not have to bother with how fishes describe their situation, but social scientists cannot avoid how fishers do it. Fishers, as opposed to fish, have their own theories, models, and concepts, which we must have access to in order to understand their situation and what they must do to cope. Then, on top of these, we build or own social science theories, models, and “second level constructs” (Alfred Schutz⁷). This is also Giddens’ point with his concept of the “double hermeneutics” of social science, in contrast to the “single hermeneutics” of natural sciences (Giddens 1987).

More so than we used to do, we seem to let the government define our research questions (Bavinck et al. 2018), for valid reasons: governments have become ambitious in the fisheries realm, especially after UNCLOS, which gave coastal states extended responsibilities.⁸ Governments increasingly set the fisheries agenda, like with the Blue Economy, and we discover new research questions. The politics of fishing are captivating, whether we like them or not. The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines), which FAO member states endorsed in 2014, call for governments to act. With this landmark achievement, we need to track whether governments do what they committed themselves to. We must get an idea of how they think about the challenge ahead. The double hermeneutics also applies here. Like social scientists, governments also have theories about how fishers think and act, and what communities are. The SSF Guidelines are marching orders for the academic community. We have a contribution to make, which may help to make implementation a more reasoned effort.

In our effort to understand how governments think and act on the SSF Guidelines, we must not forget how the people they target understand their own world. Government policies may look very different from the side of the community than they do from the summit of power. We need to explore whether policies have “latent functions,” as Robert Merton, and before him Bronislaw Malinowski, talked about, be they dysfunctions or not. I am afraid with their neoliberal agenda, governments are now more than willing to let small-scale fisheries communities go. They are “collateral damage.” The SSF Guidelines induce governments to think differently about communities. The human rights approach, which the SSF Guidelines advocate, is about protecting their integrity and supporting their agency, i.e., enhancing both their “positive” and “negative” freedom.

⁷ <https://www.iep.utm.edu/schutz/>

⁸ United Nation’s Convention on the Law of the Sea (https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

Conclusion

There is a vast academic literature to draw on that is not specifically about fisheries, but which is still relevant. The Norwegian sociologist Gudmund Hernes once said that all thoughts have not only been thought before but also been thought “better” before. That may well be true, but it should not discourage us from following our academic interest. There is no upper limit or remaining last hole to be filled in the current stock of knowledge. Our job will never be done. As social researchers, we are part of a learning process which continues. We are in a different situation than the classical thinkers. But we have every reason to consult them, and they are likely as not to be found outside fisheries. I mentioned Marx and a few others, but the list of thinkers is much longer than those I have pointed to, and it keeps expanding.

The quality of fisheries research would improve if we were to learn from these scholars. I believe that our fisheries social research would benefit if we are social scientists first and fisheries scientists second, rather than the other way around. We should also look across and beyond our disciplines. If we do not, we risk narrowing our narratives, missing their wider implications. We must engage in transdisciplinary work by engaging with local people. They have knowledge that we cannot ignore. We need to understand their norms and ethics. This is the idea underpinning so-called legal pluralism, which is a school of thought that has inspired me (Jentoft and Bavinck 2019). Scientists have no particular authority on moral issues and the legal norms they motivate. These norms, and the knowledge they build on, must underpin fisheries policy, and scientists may help with a deeper reflection on them. I made this point in a *Marine Policy* article, where I drew on Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis*, sometimes translated as “prudence” (Jentoft 2006).

With regard to sustainable small-scale fisheries, we should provide more evidence on the direction of the causal arrows: from nature to resource to the individual to culture to community, or in the opposite direction.⁹ Contrary to how we usually think about it, I have here argued for the latter direction, and that is where I believe more of our research should focus from now on. Although important, we should not only focus on what small-scale fisheries do for communities, but what communities do for small-scale fisheries. The policy implications of exploring one or the other would be profound.

Peter Fonda, most famous for his role in *Easy Rider*, takes issue with Kris Kristofferson and Janis Joplin: “Freedom is NOT just another word “for nothing left to lose,” he says (<http://www.peterfonda.com/about/>). Instead, as cited in the

⁹ In his book «*Dialoger med naturen*» (“*Dialogues With Nature*”), Jens-Ivar Nergård observed that renowned social anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Barth all worked from the assumption that the causal arrow goes from nature, to humans and then to culture, and not in the opposite direction (Nergård 2019: 25).

beginning, he posits that freedom is closely associated with learning; learning sets you free, and when you are free you learn more. This, one must assume, works not only for individuals but also for fisheries communities and society as a whole. As social researchers, we are part of that learning process. Our work is essentially a freedom project. We assist society to reflect on its problems and opportunities. We offer empirical evidence. We speak truth to power, and by doing all this, we help democracy function. We should never doubt the meaning of what we are doing.

We have to protect our “freedom to” pursue our curiosity, to advance our own knowledge. We need positive freedom to define our research questions and be “free from” external interference. Even if it is essential to know what the classic thinkers were up to and what the paradigms and dogmas in our disciplines are, it is still important to be critical of them, and be free to even rebel if we feel like it. We may stand on their shoulders but are not supposed to be their parrots. The same holds true for those in power, like government. This is what tenure is about, why we have universities, and why we need to protect academic autonomy.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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