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Navigating the waves: the usefulness of a pilot in qualitative research

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ABSTRACT   In line with a more reflexive approach in social science, particularly amongst ethnographers, authors increasingly report not just what they have found from a piece of research but how they have gone about doing it. Using a similar style this article considers the importance of pilot work in undertaking qualitative and ethnographic studies, prior to researcher immersion in the 'field'. It offers an account of the author's experiences of 'cold' and total immersion in a fieldwork setting and uses a contrasting example of a funded and carefully developed pilot study using a variety of methods, in order to highlight the benefits of pilot work. In doing so it suggests that while pilots are not new to ethnographers they are under-discussed and to some extent under-utilized, perhaps as a consequence of methodological allegiances and a tendency to link pilots with more positivist approaches in social science. The article suggests that while pilots can be used to refine research instruments such as questionnaires and interview schedules they have greater use still in ethnographic approaches to data collection in fore-shadowing research problems and questions, in highlighting gaps and wastage in data collection, and in considering broader and highly significant issues such as research validity, ethics, representation and researcher health and safety.

KEYWORDS: *ethnography, maritime education and training, pilots, qualitative research methods, seafarers, ships*

Introduction

In April 1999 I stood on the edge of a quayside in the port of Sheerness, England, and surveyed at close hand the vessel I had earlier described to my partner as a 'rust bucket' and dismissed laughingly as an impossible candidate for the role of 'my first ship'. Realizing the magnitude of my error, I wended

my way with some trepidation between fork lift trucks loaded with the pallets of fruit that emerged from the bowels of the vessel. I headed for what I thought might be the 'way up' to the looming decks fearing that at any moment somebody would shout at me and ask who I was, or what on earth I thought I was doing. As I climbed the precarious gangway I considered what I should do once, or if, I made it to the main deck. In a factory or a school I would look for an office or a reception but 'what' I wondered 'does one do on arrival aboard a ship?' Under a heading of 'personal experience' I noted in my diary:

> I was quite apprehensive when we arrived at the ship as the deck was a long way up from the quay and it took me a moment or two to see (through the activity of the dockers) how on earth one went about boarding her. There was also no way to know how to find someone on the ship or where to go etc. (Not like turning up at an office and knocking on the door!).   (Author's fieldnotes)

This experience despite an intervening three years that has included 118 days undertaking research aboard five different cargo vessels remains crystal clear in my memory. Writing about it after all this time I nevertheless experience a bizarre increase in heart rate and a very precise recall of the events and emotions of the moment. It was the beginning of a new adventure, a new challenge, and a new understanding.

In the course of that first voyage, I learnt two rather different but equally important things about pilots. One related to the role of pilots aboard cargo vessels. In my state of 'blind ignorance', I had not previously appreciated the importance of a 'pilot' in guiding a vessel in and out of a harbour, port, or river mouth. I hadn't appreciated the interactional complexities pertaining to the relationship between a ship's captain and the pilot (or pilots) while he or she was on the bridge, and I hadn't realized how important a knowledge of local conditions is in bringing a vessel safely into port. This could perhaps be forgiven as it was my very first venture aboard a cargo ship. However, in the course of that voyage and the project as a whole, I also learned a great deal about the importance of a pilot in qualitative social science research. This is not to suggest that the project was unsuccessful in any way, in fact it was awarded an outstanding rating on evaluation by its funders (ESRC[1] ref: L214252036). Rather I would suggest that the experience led me to understand how a pilot study can enhance research in general: How a pilot is just as important in finding the way through the 'waves' of the field as one is in navigating the somewhat more physically formidable waves of the ocean.

The use of pilots in qualitative studies

This article attempts to specifically discuss and highlight an aspect of qualitative research that is both under-reported and under-developed. While pilot studies are often utilized in an informal way and are on occasion utilized

by default rather than design (for example when research is initiated and then abandoned for some reason but then used to inform further research in the future), very few examples can be found of researchers reporting the systematic use of pilots in qualitative and ethnographic work. This has resulted in the haphazard use of pilots and has perhaps encouraged researchers, particularly but not exclusively the inexperienced, to overlook the benefits of pilot studies altogether or to imagine that they are only of relevance in more positivist methodological approaches to research. In discussing the use of pilots in qualitative/ethnographic research the article attempts to highlight some of their benefits and limitations and to initiate a discussion amongst researchers of the best use to which they can be put. In specifically putting pilots on the agenda it hopes to stimulate greater aware-ness of their uses and abuses and to encourage other researchers to offer reflexive accounts of their experiences of this part of the research process which has traditionally been underreported, even, in more reflexive accounts of research practice.

Qualitative researchers, using a range of methods, have become accustomed to criticisms of subjectivity in their work and increasingly, in a post-modern context, to accusations of triviality and relativism. They have robustly defended their methods, as well as their collective epistemological and ontological stance. This stance is not uniform however, but can be visualized as taking differing forms along what might be regarded as a continuum of thought. Within the qualitative tradition there are those who, in their different ways, retain a desire to represent an objective 'truth' (Flaherty, 1996; Whyte, 1955, 1996) and who may concern themselves with methods of validating their accounts (see Bloor, 2001). Additionally, there are others for whom a more 'post-positivist' relational approach is favoured (Lehnerer, 1996). Within such relational approaches there is little attempt to oppose what is regarded as 'the inherent subjectivity of the research endeavour' (Cassell and Symon, 1994: 4) and it is usually as part of such approaches that the most flexible research designs are to be found (Cassell and Symon, 1994: 4). At first sight it might appear that conducting a pilot study might have more benefits to the former group. However, the practical advantages of a pilot can be seen to apply to research at both ends of the qualitative spectrum. Many ethnographic researchers have recognized these advantages either implicitly by regretting a lack of preparation prior to entering the field (Hammersley, 1993) or explicitly by utilizing them in a relatively undocumented and possibly haphazard fashion (Delamont, 1993; Sampson, 2001).

Researchers' methodological standpoints can be seen to have influenced the use to which they have chosen to put pilots in qualitative research. Some have explicitly chosen to refine and develop research instruments (Gillham, 2000) and assess degrees of observer bias (Hammersley, 1993, King, 1993) in the conduct of a pilot. Others have used the experience of a pilot to frame questions (Ball, 1993), collect background information and adapt a research

approach (Fuller, 1993, Hammersley, 1993). However, pilots have rarely been comprehensively reported on in reflexive accounts of research in action. There is no philosophical reason why this should be the case; there are many practical reasons why such approaches could be extremely helpful. Yet this is a relatively under-considered and unexplored area. This leaves open the possibility that some researchers, and particularly the less experienced, are unaware of the benefits that follow from the systematic conduct of a pilot study in ethnographic research. Other researchers may well be making incomplete use of pilot studies, failing to appreciate the variety of benefits that can flow from a well-planned preliminary visit to the field.

A tale of two studies

This article draws on the experience of being involved in two very different research projects. The first entailed working as a 'contract researcher' on an ESRC-funded project on Transnational Seafarer Communities (ref: L214252036) which was designed and funded without the prior conduct of a pilot study. The second involved working on my 'own' project (with co-applicant Fairbrother): A British Academy[2]-funded pilot study of 'Skills Development and Training in a Globalized Industry' (ref: LRG33549) which was explicitly conducted as a pilot.

The Transnational Seafarer Communities Project incorporated 14 ethnographic voyages aboard cargo ships of which I carried out five, the remainder being shared between a team of researchers, all but one of whom had never been aboard a cargo ship previously (Kahveci et al., 2002). All researchers were required to keep detailed fieldnotes and conduct tape-recorded, confidential, in-depth interviews with all seafarers willing to take part in the research. Photographic studies complemented the research and formed part of a useful visual record of voyages. The shortest period spent by any team member aboard a vessel was 12 days. The longest voyage undertaken by any team member was my first voyage, which lasted a total of 42 days and took me from Europe to Patagonia and back. The project also entailed separate fieldwork of a land-based nature in the Philippines, Rotterdam, Hamburg, and India; however, this article focuses on the voyage-based research experience gained in relation to the project.

The second piece of work drawn upon in this article is a British Academy-funded pilot study of skills development and training. This pilot incorporated fieldwork on a 'trial' basis in Maritime Education and Training Institutions (METs) in the Philippines, in Singapore, and in the UK. Like the Transnational Seafarer Communities study it entailed the maintenance of detailed fieldnotes and a series of in-depth, tape-recorded, confidential interviews. A minimum of two separate visits was made to each MET site and an average of seven days was spent in each institution. The study had an additional element which involved a series of interviews with employers, trade-unions, and other key

informants in the world of maritime education and training in the three identified nations.

In drawing on these encounters, and comparing the experience of under-taking research with the benefit of a pilot study and undertaking research without such 'assistance', the benefits of a pilot in undertaking qualitative research, and more specifically prior to undertaking ethnographic fieldwork, become evident. This is particularly relevant and timely in the contemporary context of increased amounts of contract research (Allen Collinson, 2003), the conduct of multi-site ethnographies (Hannerz, 2003), and shorter more time-constrained and pressured research projects requiring precise organ-ization and planning and leaving little scope for deviation. The article considers what can be reasonably expected of 'feasibility' studies in a qualitative context and how they might assist in improving aspects of the research process that have long since been identified as critical to successful project completion.

Being pilot-less: reflections on the experience of entering the field 'blind'

As anthropologists have often demonstrated, the experience of entering a research setting as a 'stranger' has its own advantages. As an outsider quite new to a social setting it may be easier to be objective and distant – the researcher has not yet 'gone native' and may consequently see things with a clearer lens – while arguably, concurrently, understanding things in lesser depth (Siskind, 1973). My own experiences of entering a new research setting, that of a merchant cargo ship, 'blind' and 'ignorant' were not in themselves negative despite my trepidation on observing my first 'field site'. Contrary to my fears I negotiated the gangway without crashing through the safety nets back onto the dock. I found my way to a senior officer, who (in spite of detailed negotiations and agreement with his company) was quite unprepared for my arrival. However, he accepted my presence, and so, in an unceremonious fashion, the research began. My complete ignorance of all things to do with ships as spaces, work places, and indeed as triumphs of engineering were immediately made explicit to me by all the seafarers aboard who instantly revealed themselves to be delighted to 'show me the ropes'. I had of course prepared myself in the library and had come across all kinds of vivid and sometimes moving accounts of life and work at sea (Birkett, 1992; Schrank, 1983; Sherar, 1973). I had read that:

> Work life aboard a ship is probably one of the most perfect examples of Durkheim's 'Theory of Organic Solidarity.' Interdependence is essential for the running of any ship and it is a seven-day job. . . . The ship continues to run weekends, holidays, as well as daily. As long as engines are running, men to be fed, weather and navigation problems to be encountered, there must be men on hand. [sic]
> (Sherar, 1973: 10)

And that:

> In a way the ship might be likened to a *total environment*, that is, an environment that is complete in and of itself, such as prisons, boarding schools, mental institutions. The adjustment to living in such complete universes excludes being part of or relating to outside influences and because of this readjustment to life outside of one's total environment takes quite a while.   (Sherar, 1973: 12)

The well known ethnographer William Foote Whyte echoed such ideas in terms reminiscent of Goffman when he described a ship as a 'total institution'. He explained:

> The merchant ship is what sociologists call a total institution. Those employed on the ship live and work there twenty-four hours a day and thus are constantly under the physical constraints of the workplace and under the social control of the organization. While at sea for many weeks at a time, the members of the crew are completely isolated from contacts with family, friends, and acquaintances in the community. Necessarily they live under restraints that are decidedly unlike the experience of typical blue- or white-collar workers in other fields.   (Whyte, 1983: 164–5)

However, in spite of this reading and a theoretical appreciation of the world of seafarers, nothing that I found within the limitedly available literature adequately prepared me for exposure to the reality of a working cargo ship; the nature of the daily life and work, and the fortitude and largely good-humoured approach of the seafarers. In an early fieldnote aboard my first ship I noted:

> . . .it was worth seeing the forward hatch being cleaned. The air hose they use to blow all the dirt to one end of the hatch is very noisy and, coupled with the noise of the bow crashing down into the troughs of the waves and the heavy motion of the ship, working conditions are not very pleasant there at all. It is also rather hazardous getting to the hatch as the sea was coming over the decks and it was very windy. Within the cargo bay itself there are (naturally) no rails etc. so when cleaning in these rough seas it must be difficult not to lose balance at least as a new O/S. No one complains much about the work which is probably because they are paid a bonus for doing most of the 'dirty work' on the ship (including $10 to the engine guys when they clean out the sewage tank!) and the hatch cleaning is counted as 'dirty work', which it is!   (Author's fieldnote)

And later reflecting on the public persona of seafarers aboard I observed:

> . . .The deck cadet has had some bad news from his girlfriend and he thinks the relationship is off. He says he is not all that bothered about it but he looks quite sad. I don't think the ship's culture really allows people to express their feelings. Perhaps this is because it is such a male environment or maybe it would just be impossible to cope if emotions were allowed free expression – joking and a brave face may be the best strategy for survival in this strange and remote environment.   (Author's fieldnote)

Immersion in the field without any pre-exposure can provide a researcher with a feast of fascinating information and observations and can result in not

knowing 'where to start', prompting some researchers to advocate suspension of the start time for a short period (Waddington, 1994). In reflecting on my own initial eagerness to soak up the environment and imbibe the 'salty atmosphere' of life at sea I am reminded of the robot in the film *Short Circuit* demanding 'more input Stephanie' as he greedily learned about the world of humankind, a sensation that other researchers have alluded to in their experiences of similar immersion (Lareau, 1996). The novelty of a new and strange environment lends the researcher an openness to new information. Ingenuousness can result in a kind of omni-directional approach to data collection, one that has been termed 'dredging' by some (Hammersley, 1993) and a researcher's evident 'innocence' may appeal to the better nature of their informants and endow his/her presence with an air of innocuousness that facilitates access. In this context, researchers are also more likely to accept accounts at face value, and reproduce them more faithfully in their fieldnotes. I was certainly more of a mirror in undertaking my first voyage than in my fifth, by which time I had unconsciously become transformed into a filter, my innocence replaced by experience, if not cynicism.

The advantages and disadvantages of 'filtration' may be debated elsewhere but just as I recognize, and others in other contexts have recognized (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Schutz, 1964), clear advantages in boarding a ship 'blind' in terms of access, openness, and enthusiasm, so too did I come to appreciate the *disadvantages* resulting from such sudden and total immersion. While ethnography is frequently portrayed as involving ongoing analysis and adjustment in its conduct, this is not always the case with some researchers choosing to apply an analytic framework only at the writing-up stage during which process they feel sufficiently distanced to begin to 'take a wider view' (Cassell, 1988: 99). However, the extent to which analysis can occur in the field is not only a matter of conscious choice, it also depends to a great extent on the intensity of the fieldwork setting and the degree to which a researcher is immersed. Juggling time aboard a ship between interviewing, observing, and participating in both work and social events may be an all-consuming process. Living aboard is exhausting not only because of the nature of the 24-hour work cycle of seafarers but because of the conditions found on commercial cargo vessels. I was fortunate in seeming 'immune' to physical seasickness, but I was far from unaffected by the motion of the ship and spent many sleepless nights attempting to wedge myself into immobility and security in my 'berth'. A stranger to the ship, I was unprepared for all of this and as a result my fieldnotes contain numerous references to tiredness and the motion and noise of the ship. These factors undoubtedly affected the quality of my work:

> The boat is really pitching now and feels rather like a roller coaster. It is not easy to walk let alone work in these conditions! The channel is now quite full and I am glad that we are nearly through it. Unfortunately we are now heading for a depression in the Bay of Biscay . . . [Days later] . . . I am very very tired and am

> falling asleep as I write this . . . [More days later] . . . I am still very tired. I was up at 07.00 this morning for breakfast and although I spent some time in town today I feel as if I have been working non-stop (well I have been except for two hours today) . . .   (Author's fieldnotes)

The accumulated affects of sleeplessness and a work process that was un-bounded by time resulted in high levels of fatigue and limited opportunities for leisurely reflections on shipboard life. Once back in the University, pressures to complete the project to deadline militated against the kind of analysis that might have directed the research into new and productive areas. While our data were extensive and more than adequate for the project's analytic purposes, it had real limitations. In the development of my own personal writing I have often found myself wondering 'why didn't I spend more time on that?' and this issue touches on the position of contract researchers and the ways in which sociological knowledge is developed in the contemporary context.

Thus I found that the environment of a merchant cargo ship was not fully conducive to attempts to let the research 'unfold' (see Cassell and Symon, 1994). While this inevitably did occur to an extent, a properly planned and conducted pilot would certainly have helped in focusing lines of enquiry (both personal and project-based) as well as better preparing me for the research environment and for the need to force myself to 'take time out' to operate more effectively and to better consider the research directions and lines of enquiry.

More seriously perhaps, a pilot might have allowed us as a team of researchers to collectively reflect in greater depth on the nature of the activity in which we were engaged (Sampson and Thomas, 2003). In the course of the research several situations arose demanding careful handling and a close consideration of ethics. Aboard one ship my presence was not welcomed by the Captain (again despite full access being granted by the company) and this resulted in an extremely unpleasant and personally threatening experience that lasted for a period of 16 days isolated from the land. This led me to request a satellite telephone for use in future voyages and belatedly high-lighted the potential dangers associated with this kind of fieldwork (Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Such dangers are increasingly being highlighted by researchers engaged in remote or violent fieldwork settings (Lee, 1995; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000) yet in the enthusiasm for the collection of new and revealing data they often remain overlooked in research preparation and design (Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Had we conducted a thorough pilot study and given ourselves proper time and resources to fully reflect on the lessons to be learned from such a pilot, perhaps our team might have been in a position to consider the dangers involved in the fieldwork more carefully. However, such opportunities are often restricted in terms of their availability by a lack of resources in terms of time and money, and as a result of the research structure of many universities. The shipboard research project was externally funded and my appointment followed the design and planning

stages after which a pilot had become redundant. This is increasingly usual in the UK setting but there may also be parallels with the organization of the distribution of research funds in other parts of the world where similar performance assessment models are being introduced (see the assessment of Brazil's postgraduate programmes). As such, higher education has been transformed in recent decades, and the research process has been affected as a consequence. As a result it seems that tenured staff have less time than they may have had in the past to conduct fieldwork or indeed to collect any kind of primary data. Teaching and administrative workloads have increased within academic departments, class contact hours have often increased alongside student numbers, and sabbatical-leave periods may be harder to negotiate and of relatively short duration. In this context, staff are increasingly required to rely upon 'hired research-help' supplied in the form of funded research posts attached to specific projects and only funded for a fixed term (see Allen Collinson, 2003, for further details on numbers of UK contract researchers). Thus, where pilots *are* conducted prior to funding applications being submitted, the project applicants (who undertake the pilot) are often not the individuals ultimately engaged in gathering project data. These are likely to be researchers employed by the project on the 'soft money' of short-term fixed contracts. In these ways current forms of research funding and the structure of institutions of higher education in the UK combine to fragment the research process and militate against the conduct of thorough pilot work prior to immersion into fieldwork settings. This automatically, and perhaps unintentionally, promotes the approach of cold and total immersion which, while carrying some advantages, also carries a number of significant dangers and problems. Elsewhere such techniques may be practised intentionally by researchers favouring cold immersion or regarding pilots as inappropriate for ethnographic studies. However, the situation would be improved were such decisions taken *only* as a result of conscious choice and not as a consequence of funding arrangements or a lack of awareness of the potential dividends to piloting ethnographic work.

In the UK, while research grant applications are generally supported only where there is a clear and explicit research design, timetable and plan included in the grant application, there are possible sources for the funding of preparatory pilot work. One source of such funding in social science and humanities related disciplines in the UK is the British Academy. Thus, feeling that the project I had worked on involving ethnographic work aboard ships could have been improved by a pilot study prior to immersion in the field, I applied to the Academy for funding to undertake a pilot study of skills development and training in the globalized shipping industry, before applying for a grant to fund a full-scale project. The application was successful[3] (ref: LRG33549) and in conducting the pilot I was given the opportunity to compare my experiences of working with and without a pilot study and to carefully evaluate what a pilot could deliver in terms of a contribution to research

design and planning. Where it is possible, even on a small scale, it became clear to me that some kind of pilot study deeply advantages qualitative inquiry of all forms. However, it also became clear that the areas in which a pilot informs a study are not necessarily those which we anticipate. In common with many research undertakings, some of the lessons I learned in the conduct of the pilot study were wholly unanticipated and sometimes a result of serendipity rather than good forward planning.

Being prepared and being better prepared: the objectives of the pilot

In undertaking a fully-funded pilot study I had a number of objectives. Firstly, I wished to demonstrate to myself, and to potential future funders, the feasibility of a large-scale international study of training for merchant marine officers. In doing this I needed to establish access to ship owners and managers, training colleges, training centres, and crewing agents, and to demonstrate that their support would be forthcoming. I intended to 'test' appropriate research tools. I hoped to identify potential research collaborators in other world regions and to establish the levels of resource realistically required in order to conduct such international work, and I wanted to collect some data which would be useful in its own right. The project was scheduled over a 12-month period from early 2002–2003 and was completed to deadline.

The pilot in detail

Pilot work was undertaken in three different countries – the Philippines, the UK, and Singapore. In the Philippines access was negotiated with three Maritime Education and Training establishments (METs) reflecting the ubiquitous nature of such institutions in the country. In both the UK and Singapore access was negotiated in one Maritime Education and Training establishment (in the case of Singapore this is the only MET in the country). Remembering my experience aboard ship I was aware that 'access' guaranteed by institutional heads would not guarantee cooperation on the ground and could sometimes result in the opposite. Others, too, have documented thoroughly the need to work continually at maintaining access particularly when researching organizations (e.g. Bryman, 1988; Cassell, 1988; Hartley, 1994). I was concerned that while I had access to course observations in participating institutions I also needed to talk in detail with lecturers and staff. In two maritime education colleges in the Philippines such contact was assisted by the fact that I was able to 'live' on site (as did most staff during the working week) and I consequently had access to the full range of activities taking place on campus. In Singapore and the UK access to classrooms and staff was similarly freely granted and where there was occasional staff concern or resistance I found that it was easily overcome.

In the course of the pilot, I also undertook 30, in-depth, tape-recorded, interviews with representatives of the main target groups (lecturers in Maritime Education and Training establishments, shipping company representatives, Trade Union representatives, and others including the International Maritime Organisation, and Nautical Institute). New contacts were established in all three geographic areas covered by the pilot study. In addition new contacts were established at a training centre in Cyprus where a separately funded visit was organized and a separately funded visit was made to Shanghai Maritime Academy as part of an industry facilitated conference programme. While not part of the initial design of the pilot study, these contacts and visits assisted in developing a more detailed and systematic understanding of the issues involved in training in the context of a global industry. They highlight the need for a flexible and adaptive approach in maximizing the benefits of pilot work. Prior to the start of any project it is not always the case (indeed it may rarely be the case) that one always knows which are the best research sites to visit and with whom one might wish to seek research access. It is not only the case that access to particular spaces, times, places, and people may be denied researchers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) – they may also lack the knowledge which allows them to plan the desired shape of their 'sample'. Here a pilot study can be helpful but also needs to be flexible and adaptive in itself.

Lessons learned

In carrying out the pilot study I found that I learned some things that I had not anticipated and, in the way of all things, found that it was harder than I expected to learn about the things that initially seemed the most obvious and least problematic.

THE UNANTICIPATED AND INCIDENTAL

Having come from a background in commercial research I was used to a process of competitive tendering but was relatively inexperienced in applying to academic funding bodies for research grants. My first 'lesson' took me by surprise therefore coming in unanticipated form from the application process itself. In the commercial research world daily employment and subsistence rates are generally set by the tenderer and may often be subsequently manip- ulated and obscured in the final tender document in order to appear lower than they actually are. Thus the number of days a project will take is calculated and the cost of these days plus employee subsistence is used as a benchmark in costing the project. For 'cosmetic' purposes the tenderer may then lower the daily rates specified in the tender document while increasing the number of days 'required' to complete the project to compensate – always ensuring that the 'benchmark' is met. Believing the academic funding system to be different, I made a very 'straight' funding application outlining exactly

the number of days I believed would be required and my best estimate of the necessary daily travel and subsistence rates. I was disappointed to discover however that the funder implemented stringent limits on such daily rates world-wide (giving a rate for Manila that was less than half of that for Glasgow) and approved my application at a reduced level of funding. This resulted in a shortfall in the project budget (that was fortunately met by the research centre). It seemed the worlds of academic research funding and the commercial research sector were closer than I had assumed. This lesson could be learned at relatively low cost in conducting the pilot study but would have cost significantly more in a full-scale international project. A system which relies on the professionalism and ethics of researchers seems to me to be preferable to one which requires grant applicants to be 'creative' in their thinking and 'accounting' but the first step in undertaking a research project is getting adequate funding and in this the experience of the pilot held unanticipated lessons. Establishing the correct levels of resource would there-fore seem to involve more than a simple costing exercise. In pragmatic terms it involves establishing the levels of resource and then working out ways of getting it. Not knowing this when applying for a full-scale international project could have resulted in a significant shortfall in funding and might have resulted in placing hired researchers or myself in unsafe or un-satisfactory conditions. Manila for example holds a number of specific dangers for women and for foreigners which are amplified by residence in low-budget accommodation in poorer districts of the city. There are also more prosaic risks associated with eating in street cafes and cheap restaurants. Concern with such matters may be regarded with scorn in the male dominated and arguably 'macho' research culture that has come to dominate some social science research (Sampson and Thomas, 2003). It may also be seen as somehow ethnocentric, yet it is undoubtedly the case that it is different, and often inherently more risky, operating in a social context with which you are unfamiliar and in situations where you may be unable to find your way around either geographically or in social terms. In terms of physical sickness, researchers lack the local awareness and knowledge to gauge degrees of risk and may also lack specific immunity and/or tolerance to local micro-organisms. This is of course part of the argument that can be proposed for employing local researchers wherever possible. However, notwithstanding the increasing popularity of action research methods and the ways in which they can operate effectively, particularly in the context of international research, employing local researchers can be problematic and may not always be desirable or practical. Thus, where researchers are required to travel inter-nationally, lack of concern over such issues can place them in unacceptable situations to which unacceptable risks are attached and it is not unknown for researchers to be killed, hurt, or traumatized, in the course of their work as a result (Lee, 1995; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). In employment environments such as universities in Europe and the

USA that place increasing emphasis on employee health and safety such risks should no longer be acceptable and thus costing a project properly so that risks can be minimized, within reason, is essential.

FALLING SHORT OF THE ANTICIPATED AND MORE FUNDAMENTAL

Being influenced by a realist philosophy (Bhaskar, 1998; Outhwaite, 1998; Sayer, 1992) I was keen to 'test' and refine my research tools in the pilot and to try to assess and find ways of minimizing observational bias within the project. I considered this to be a major part of the pilot and placed some importance on this aspect of the study. I therefore built into my interview schedule a section asking participants to reflect upon the interview and consider any omissions or unnecessary elements, as well as to report back on how they had experienced the interview in order to check that the process was not too demanding or invasive. This approach has been used by others seeking to test the validity of their research by asking participants to offer feedback on research accounts prior to publication (Bloor, 2001; Whyte, 1996). However, like Bloor's experience the responses I had to this line of questioning were gratifying and confidence enhancing they were also of limited help in refining the study. Participants invariably stated that the interview was fully comprehensive and wholly adequate. No participants were able to identify significant omissions, although one advised me to gather specific information on budgets, something I had deliberately avoided fearing it would be regarded as too sensitive. Despite my request for email feedback should anything subsequently occur to them, none of my respondents ever followed-up with a more critical evaluation. Thus, I was able to enjoy conversations such as the following:

Interviewer: So that is the end of the interview based on training. It is a long interview; does it feel too long, too intrusive or uncomfortable in any way? How did it feel to do the interview basically?

Respondent: I suppose for the questions you are asking then two hours is about right. It wouldn't have felt like two hours if we had the air conditioning. As for the questions no I didn't think they were intrusive I think they were correct questions. If at all I felt uncomfortable it is because sometimes you realize this is an area that we should be doing, but we are not doing, so you start racking your brain, 'why aren't we doing it' or 'are we doing it in some other form which isn't immediately apparent'. So that is a little bit uncomfortable but I think the questions are fine. For me, I am going to ask you right now, I would appreciate the transcript because I am in the midst of revamping the whole training program and how we are going to train and bring in new people into this industry so the questions you have asked have jolted a lot of things within me, which it will do invariably, but it has jump started things again. So they are very good, pertinent questions.

and:

Interviewer: [As] I said at the beginning this is a pilot interview and I want your feedback. Are there some issues that aren't being touched on . . . maybe there is a question I haven't asked you – so feel free to say whatever comes to mind. Is there some issues with regards to training that aren't touched on here?

Respondent: I don't have it yet, if I have anything I'll keep in touch with you, within the week. So far you have a lot of very sensible questions, I think in fact all the questions you ask are very sensible.

Interviewer: There's nothing that you think should be cut out?

Respondent: No, I think it's very good.

When asking people for such feedback I was aware of the personal and professional risk involved. I was faced with the stark question 'did I really want people to dwell on all the research designs' shortcomings which were effectively "my" shortcomings?'. I wondered if I was breaking one of those golden rules of daily life 'never ask a question that you don't want the answer to' but in the end I concluded I wasn't. My refuge was in the pilot nature of the research. If my respondents had savaged the design I hoped they would give me credit for seeking to improve upon it. In the event they did not. This may be because as Bloor notes:

> All encounters between researchers and researched are species of social relationships governed by conventions of politeness and etiquette; in the case of ethnographic research the relationship in question may well embrace fondness and regard. Fieldwork methods and fieldwork relations will shape the nature and content of members' responses. (Bloor, 2001: 392)

Additionally it occurred to me that asking for interview feedback entailed a somewhat unreasonable set of expectations. Having just got through a long and detailed interview, how could I reasonably expect my respondents to suddenly distance themselves from the process and analytically reflect upon it? I wondered how much of it they would even be able to recall at such a moment. Equally, I increasingly wondered if they were qualified to comment. The project was not after all their conception or design. They were inadequately briefed on its purpose or objectives (although they had been given broad details relating to these issues in correspondence prior to interview and in the form of a pre-interview information sheet). Here, a researcher's epistemological stance is critical. Mine does not accord the knowledge of individual 'lay people' with the same status as a social scientist, at least in terms of such evaluation exercises, and so I began to wonder if including such opportunities for reflection by participants in the research design had any practical value at all. On the other hand my respondents were the 'experts' on seafarer training; could I have afforded not to ask them if I was 'missing' anything? The dilemma is one that, for me, remains unresolved. Instinctively I favour such opportunities for participants to feedback on research and research design but in practical terms this exercise, and the experience of

others such as Bloor, forces me to question the real value of such practices. If respondents are forced by a combination of social mores and practical limitations to only respond positively to such questions then they can hold little validity. What can be done, however, and to great effect, is to utilize such pilot interviews by subjecting them to thorough coding and analysis in conjunction with a consideration of the theoretical or practical questions the project is designed to address. In the course of such analysis omissions and deficits inevitably emerge and unnecessary data also becomes evident. Here, the real value of piloting interviews becomes apparent and genuine progress can be made. In the case of this pilot I came to appreciate that I needed a clearer understanding of maritime education and training at the macro level both in terms of international and national regulation and control. This level of work was therefore integrated into my plans for a large scale study to its overall benefit.

LIVING UP TO EXPECTATIONS

Happily, as well as holding a number of surprises, the pilot study also went to plan in many respects. It allowed me to establish a network of contacts which I was fortuitously able to subsequently consolidate by way of a successful European Union grant application enabling joint research and human resource development to be conducted by three of the four participating METs in conjunction with the institution for which I work. These consolidated relationships constitute better links than I had hoped for in applying to undertake the pilot and have been of tremendous value in putting together a further funding application for the main study. The pilot also allowed me to reconsider the design of the main study, which I had originally conceived as a study considering training relating to both seafarers and the workers of another suitable industrial comparator. In the pilot, I had deliberately concentrated on seafarer training and the experience convinced me that this more focused approach was the most sensible strategy for the future development of the project.

Additionally, the pilot did not disappoint in delivering a discrete set of useable data. This of course raises its own dilemmas with regard to both data use and the subsequent conduct of research. If the pilot results in modification of the research design, should a researcher revisit research participants and take them through the amended interview again? If, as in this case, the researcher judges such action as inappropriate can the data gathered in the course of the pilot be incorporated into the modified research project or should it be discarded? If data are reported objectively and anonymously but institutions nevertheless dislike the reported findings can this limit future access thus achieving the exact opposite to the intended effect?

Where access has not been compromised site (return) visits should almost certainly be facilitated by the prior conduct of the pilot. Even when returning to a site where fieldwork has gone less well than a researcher hoped such a

return is generally beneficial (Hammersley, 1993). Familiarity with the researcher and the research process allows research 'subjects' to relax, to be themselves, and to behave more naturally. As time passes between a pilot study and a full-scale piece of research, and if findings are not unfavourably received, participants are likely to feel less threatened by the idea of being 'observed'; it is more familiar to them, more comfortable. Equally they are able to observe that a researcher is true to their word and maintains confidentiality and anonymity. As time passes and respondents' lives are not broadcast for all to see on national television, or spread over national, or even trade, press publications, so can participants and researchers consolidate the mutual trust that has facilitated initial access.

Conclusions

The experience of this pilot study and my earlier experiences of entering the 'field' of the ship relatively 'blind' have convinced me that pilot work is invaluable in conducting ethnographic, as well as other forms of qualitative research.

Specifically, in the case of the funded pilot study of seafarer training I was reassured that my presence was well-tolerated by both lecturers and students in METs in Asia and the UK. I was able to establish a rapport with MET staff which would stand me in good stead for future research. I found that staff began to trust my integrity and open up to me both in the course of the pilot and during subsequent communications. Perhaps most importantly, my exposure to the METs taught me more about the research environment than I could have anticipated and allowed me an insight into maritime education and training that was otherwise unavailable. This, in turn, allowed me to develop my research lines of enquiry with confidence and in modified form.

However, the pilot with METs was less rewarding in terms of my intentions with regard to the adaptation of my research 'instruments', specifically the design of interview schedules. While it gave me a valuable opportunity to personally review the design of my interviews, in the course of the pilot I became less and less sure of the benefit of participant feedback. As a result of self-ascribed 'feminist-realist' leanings I had been committed to trying to find the best ways of collecting 'accurate' data about the 'real' structures and social forces influencing seafarer training while nevertheless valuing the knowledge and expertise of participants and attempting to break down the barriers between researcher and researched. By the end of the pilot, however, I was unsure of the value of participant feedback on research design; an uncertainty that lingers, leaving me with unresolved questions and concerns.

More generally the contrast between the two projects reflected upon here held other lessons. At the start of the MET pilot study, and notwithstanding my previous experiences of entering the field of 'the ship' relatively 'cold', I imagined pilots to be of *greatest* potential benefit to qualitative researchers at

the least relational and more 'scientific' end of the qualitative research continuum. I specifically believed that while they were important in ethnographic work, they were likely to be of most use to those planning to utilize semi-structured, and informal, interviews in their data collection. Paradoxically, given the anthropological traditions behind ethnography, notions of immersion, and my own preconceived ideas about 'testing' research tools, it is in establishing ethnographic projects that I now believe that pilot work is of *greatest* use. Not only in order to find ways of minimizing observer bias, nor in simply determining the best course of action in establishing access or maintaining good fieldwork relations, although in all these endeavours a pilot can be helpful. Rather, as should perhaps be self-evident, it seems to me that pilots are invaluable as introductions to unknown worlds.

In terms of the general advantages of conducting a pilot the experiences of the two research projects reflected upon here suggest that there are potential benefits in putting a toe or two in the research waters before diving in. There are several issues here. It is only having gone through a process of analysing and evaluating the limited data generated by a pilot that the kind of distance often required to focus on the wider issues of research importance is generally acquired. It is often only when the data is evaluated that any gaps in a research design begin to show up. Thus, a pilot may be regarded as essential before large amounts of time are invested in a project, particularly in the context of today's social science, which is frequently strictly time-bounded and pressurized. However, a pilot has other benefits beyond those of foreshadowing research issues or questions. Pilots have great importance in enabling those responsible for research design to give careful attention to the assessment of researcher risk, something that is too often overlooked in many UK institutions. Relatedly a pilot facilitates the proper scaling and costing of a research proposal. It takes much of the 'guesswork' out of estimating requisite funds and this also has a positive impact in minimizing the risk researchers are exposed to in the conduct of international research eliminating the need for them to 'make do and mend' in terms of living and travel arrangements in cases of under-funding.

However, despite their many positive aspects pilots carry with them some 'risk'. Where pilot funding is dependent on limited reporting of findings, or where researchers simply choose to report early findings, there is always a danger that even properly and ethically handled research reporting can meet with a negative response from research subjects and can backfire in making further access more problematic rather than easier.

Such risks require consideration but should not deter researchers from striving to report early findings, however, as it is in making the attempt to do so that pilots often yield the richest lessons. Where pilots simply stop at the exit 'gates' of the research site or at least after limited reflection back in the home, or office, much of their potential value is lost. It is only on a proper interrogation of the findings via systematic coding and analysis of data that a pilot

really begins to yield dividends. Such detailed analysis of pilot data is rarely reported as having been undertaken and without it a pilot is of limited use.

For a pilot to facilitate the proper direction of research lines of enquiry, to minimize researcher risk and resource wastage, it must therefore be undertaken with considerable care and must be complete in underscoring the research design. Too often pilots are used in incomplete and haphazard ways as tools to tweak research instruments or as background to inform research questions and foreshadow problems. Their value is far higher than this – in particular in the conduct of qualitative research, which should arguably make far greater use of fully-funded and thus properly conducted pilots, entailing an analysis phase as well as the specific piloting of research instruments. Thus researchers should seriously consider setting aside their methodological affiliations and any preconceived notions about the kinds of research that are suited to piloting and incorporating them more systematically in their work. This could serve to improve the quality of ethnographic and qualitative research studies, it would reduce resource wastage, it would ensure that projects have their full costs met by research funders, and it would allow for proper risk assessment and the implementation of risk reduction strategies in future research design. Should other researchers begin to offer reflexive accounts of the uses of pilots in their own work it might begin to be possible to offer clearer guidance to those new to using pilot studies in qualitative, and particularly in ethnographic, work of their uses and abuses. This would undoubtedly be of benefit to the wider research community.

NOTES

1. ESRC is the acronym commonly used to refer to the main funder of academic social science research in the UK: the Economic and Social Research Council.
2. The British Academy is a UK institution that provides research grants and has a specific programme under which pilot studies and extension work can be funded in a variety of disciplines.
3. I would like to acknowledge the support of the British Academy and the ESRC in carrying out this work.

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