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# Risk as a Basis for Taboos among Fishermen in Southern New England\*

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The paper examines the relationship between fishermen's taboos, a form of ritual behavior, and a number of sociocultural variables. Taboo usage was positively related to time spent at sea and negatively related to socialization in a fishing family. These interrelated findings strongly support the risk and ritual hypothesis proposed by Malinowski by showing that within a single dangerous occupation, degree of ritual covaries with the degree of risk involved.

A number of theorists have suggested that religion is an institution which functions in part to relieve men of otherwise irreducible anxiety (e.g. Homans, 1941; Kluckhohn, 1942; Malinowski, 1948). This assumption receives some empirical support from research which indicates that both fearfulness and anxiety are significantly correlated with degree of religiousness (Wilson & Miller, 1968). In an attempt to further clarify this relationship, this paper examines the multivariate correlates of taboos among commercial fishermen in Southern New England. These taboos form a class of ritual prohibitions which are an important aspect of the domain of religious behavior.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to taboos as an aspect of religious behavior indicates that this paper adheres to a relatively broad definition of the concept religion. Many anthropologists from Tyler (1889) on have defined magic and religion as separate entities, although some were forced to admit that the two concepts overlap to some extent. Recently, several scholars have been questioning this dichotomy. Hammond (1970) writes that magic is a form of ritual behavior and thus an element of religion. Douglas (1973) notes that the apparent differences between sacraments and magic on the one hand and taboos and sin on the other are more an artifact of our vocabulary than the result of any real differences. Saliba (1974) suggests that the dichotomization of magic and religion is due to the fact that they are concepts formulated in the Western

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Several authors have documented the extent of fishermen's taboos (e.g. Frazer 1890; Dorson, 1964; Creighton, 1950; Goode, 1887), and others have related these to the high risk involved in this activity (e.g. Mullen, 1969; Poggie & Gersuny, 1972; Price, 1964). The broader theoretical issue which deals with the relationship of risk and ritual stems from the work of Malinowski among the pre-industrial fishermen of the Trobriand Islands. He reports a definite relationship between the incidence of ritual and the risks involved in fishing.

While in the villages of the inner lagoon fishing is done in an easy and absolutely reliable manner by the method of poisoning, yielding abundant results without danger and uncertainty, there are on the shores of the open sea dangerous modes of fishing and also certain types in which the yield greatly varies according to whether shoals of fish appear beforehand or not. It is most significant that in the lagoon fishing, where man can rely completely upon his knowledge and skill, magic does not exist, while in the open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results (Malinowski 1948: 30-31).

There are, however, two elements of uncertainty in the Trobriand situation. On the one hand, there is uncertainty of catch, while on the other is uncertainty or risk to fishermen. This may be conceptualized as the difference between risk related to "production" and risk related to "person" respectively. Noting this important distinction, Firth distinguishes magic of production from magic of protection in Tikopia ritual and belief (1967). Price (1964), however, combines these two types of risk in an analysis of the relationship between ritual and fishing-related risk in Martinique. The combination of these two types of risk may obscure significant relationships. The distinction appears to be crucial in understanding why ritual prevails today among certain occupational groups and behavioral settings in industrial societies. Poggie and Gersuny (1972) emphasize the distinction between rituals associated with production and protection in a study comparing the ritual of fishermen and textile workers in a New England community. Data on ritual beliefs of the two occupational groups from the same community show that fishermen have a rich body of taboos predominately related to matters of personal risk and the textile workers none.

Steiner (1956) elaborates on the theme of danger in his definition of taboo by pointing out that taboo is concerned with protecting both individuals and society from danger. Commercial fishing is a dangerous activity. It is far more dangerous in terms of loss of life than the most dangerous land occupation in our society—coal mining. In 1965 commercial fisheries of the United States recorded 21.4 deaths per million man-days (Office of Merchant Marine Safety, 1972) in contrast to 8.3 in coal mining (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1970). In contrast the rate of fatal accidents in textile mills in the United States was 0.8 deaths per million man-days in that same

Christian tradition. Finally, Grossman argues that religion is better defined as "... the system of practices and ideas ... mental and psychological devices, which help man overcome, obviate, alleviate, or counteract fear and anxiety ..." (1975:290). Although the ritual avoidances practiced by the fishermen cannot be placed within the framework of a widely recognized, institutionalized religion such as Christianity, they are part of the belief system of this occupational subculture, universally recognized by the fishermen interviewed, and openly adhered to by many. Given the broad interpretation of religion that is presented above, these ritual avoidances can be considered part of the religious system of the fishermen. No matter which viewpoint one takes concerning the definition of this concept, it is clear that ritual behavior forms an important part of religion; thus a study which attempts to explain variability in this behavior is of interest to the student of religion.

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year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1971). The perception of this danger by the fisherman is evidenced by his frequent reference to near or actual mishaps of his own and others. These references are made in the stories he tells, the songs he sings, and in his everyday conversation. The perils of the sea, compounded by the hazards of labors peculiar to fishing, appear to provide the contingencies for a rich body of taboos even in a subculture which places a high value on "rational" behavior.

One potential determinant of variability in taboo behavior is the occupational subculture of the family of origin. It is expected that individuals from a fishing family are more extensively exposed to the folklore tradition of taboo behavior, and thus possess a greater knowledge of fishermen's taboos than those without such a background. This knowledge of taboos therefore forms part of a cultural tradition. Conversely we might expect that individuals from a fishing family are more effectively preadapted to maritime fishing through successful parental role models and thus would perceive it as less anxiety producing. Therefore the need to maintain a large corpus of coping devices in the form of taboos would be reduced or eliminated. Individuals not from a fishing family would lack this preadaptation and would be more likely to perceive the occupation of fishing as dangerous and anxiety provoking.

Another potential determinant of variability in taboo behavior is vessel size. Vessel size varies considerably (from 20 to 100 feet) in the several ports we have studied, and there would appear to be a direct relationship between vessel size and perceived security while at sea. Larger craft provide more security in rough waters, a large crew size resulting in greater safety of numbers, more onboard safety equipment, etc.

Time spent at sea may also influence degree of ritual avoidance behavior. It can be argued that time spent in the hostile marine environment, particularly during inclement weather and/or darkness, will correlate directly with amount of perceived personal risk, thus resulting in increased ritual behavior as a coping mechanism.

Formal education may prove to be another variable related to variance in ritual avoidance behavior inasmuch as it promotes secularization and thus a greater reliance on "rational" means of coping with danger. On the other hand ethnicity may function to reduce the amount of individual secularization and support the retention of traditional coping techniques, thus becoming a potential determinant of variability in taboo behavior.

We therefore hypothesize that frequency of ritual avoidances are positively related to length of time spent at sea and coming from an old world origin negatively related to vessel size and individual education either positively or negatively related to whether or not ego comes from a fishing family.

## METHODS

Examination of a set of potential determinants of taboo behavior was conducted among three different New England fishing populations. The three ports vary from large trawler fishing at New Bedford where crews spend from a week to eleven days at sea each trip, to a mixture of day trawler and tripper operations out of Point Judith and Stonington. The ports also vary in terms of other factors such as ethnicity.

Among the three ports in our study Point Judith, Rhode Island is the most "Yankee" population, Stonington, Connecticut the most Portuguese, while New Bedford Massachusetts is composed of a mixture of "Yankee," Portuguese, and Norwegian fishermen.

Data for the study were derived from an interview schedule administered to a random sample of 108 fishermen from the three ports. The dependent variable, number of taboos, was measured by asking the respondent to describe all the superstitions related to fishing he could remember and to indicate their meaning.<sup>2</sup> Although this is not a direct measure of ritual behavior in a fishing context, it is assumed that knowledge of a topic is related to one's interest in the topic (Cattell, 1965) and, as noted below, the fishermen said they do not break the taboo when fishing. The independent variables were measured by responses to direct questions in the schedule.

#### ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Taboos reported by the Southern New England commercial fishermen are in the form of proscriptive sayings. For example, the five most frequently mentioned taboos were "don't turn the hatch cover upside down," "don't whistle on board," "never say pig," "never turn against the sun," and "don't bring a black bag aboard." These were the most frequently mentioned in each of the three ports in our sample, thus suggesting that interport differences in ethnicity have little effect on the corpus of taboos. When talking about their ritual beliefs and practices, the fishermen expressed a degree of embarrassment. Often respondents would disclaim "believing in these superstitions" but would admit that they dared not "break the rule" of the taboo when aboard their vessels.<sup>3</sup> The interrelationships between the dependent and the independent variables for the entire sample can be seen in the correlation matrix presented in Table 1.

Focusing on the dependent variable, we see that coming from a fishing family was negatively related to number of taboos mentioned ( $p < .05$ ), while vessel size and day versus trip fishing were positively related ( $p < .01$  for both). The relationships between the dependent variable and the other independent variables (age, education, and ethnicity) are not statistically significant.

The relationship between vessel size and number of taboos was not in the expected direction. We must therefore tentatively reject the hypothesis presented above. It is important to note, however, that there was a strong positive relationship between vessel size and day versus trip fishing. When type of fishing was controlled for, the partial correlation between vessel size and number of taboos was reduced to .08 ( $p > .05$ ).

2. Superstition is the term used by the fishermen themselves when making reference to rituals of avoidance.

3. Beattie (1964) would argue that their reluctance to empirically test the efficacy of the taboos reflects the fact that they are expressive, symbolic behaviors. The pragmatic fishermen empirically test their fishing techniques, but there is no point in testing taboos if as Beattie notes, a part of a rite's central significance is expressive and an end in itself. More important for the purposes of this paper, however, is what Beattie refers to as the instrumental function of ritual behavior. It provides a means of coping with actual or potential danger or misfortune (Beattie 1964: 207).

TABLE 1  
INTERCORRELATION OF MAJOR VARIABLES

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	.13	.26**	.19	-.51**	.40**	.06
2. Fishing Family		-.09	.01	-.20*	.10	-.19*
3. Vessel size			.74**	-.17	.03	.32**
4. Day vs trip				-.11	-.09	.36**
5. Education					-.47**	-.06
6. Ethnicity <sup>a</sup>						-.13
7. Number of taboos						

NOTE: N=108; decimal points omitted. \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

<sup>a</sup>If respondent speaks a foreign language he is coded as an ethnic.

A step-wise multiple regression was applied to determine the interrelationships of all the independent variables with the dependent variable. The multiple correlation between the independent variables and number of taboos was .46 ( $p < .01$ ) indicating that the six variables account for 21 percent of the variance in the dependent variable—a modest but respectable sum. The first two variables entered in the stepwise procedure were day versus trip fishing and fishing family origin. These two variables alone explain 17 percent of the variance ( $R = .41, p < .01$ ) in the dependent variable, thus accounting for the greatest proportion of variance and the statistical significance of the total multiple correlation.

## DISCUSSION

The strongest positive relationship was between number of taboos and day versus trip fishing. In this study we differentiated high risk and low risk fishermen by reference to their "style" of fishing. A "day fisherman" who goes out for only one day at a time would be more "secure" than a "tripper" who spends anywhere from two to eleven days at sea. The latter is more exposed to storms, illness, injury, and disaster because of the nature of the ecological niche exploited and because of his removal from shoreside aid. In some cases these "trippers" are more than fifteen hours' steaming time from land. The positive relationship between number of taboos and day versus trip fishing thus suggests that the greater amount of risk associated with trip fishing results in anxiety which is lessened by more extensive ritual behavior.

The negative relationship between coming from a fishing family and number of taboos suggests that individuals coming from a fishing family are effectively preadapted to the psychological stresses of fishing through extensive familial involvement and exposure to successful role models as argued above. Those entering the fishing occupation from the outside must acquire this psychological plateau through their own experience. It is important to note that the negative relationship between number of taboos mentioned and fishing family origin also provides evidence against an alternative explanation of our findings. It could be argued that those who spend more time at sea interact more frequently with other fishermen, and

thus have the opportunity to learn more taboos. If this social learning hypothesis were correct, we would expect that the extensive interaction implied by being socialized in a fishing family context would also contribute to the number of taboos learned and remembered. The negative correlation, however, leads one to reject this alternative hypothesis. It appears that mere exposure is not sufficient stimulus for learning taboos—there must be some motivation or interest (Cattell, 1965). We argue that this motivation or interest relates to the instrumental functioning of taboos as a means of coping with danger and reducing anxiety. The significant relationships thus suggest that the primary function of taboos is to reduce anxiety generated by exposure to personal risk.

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