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## The Off Season: Masculinities, Rurality, and Family Ties in Alaska Commercial Fishing

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**THE OFF-SEASON:  
Masculinities, Rurality, & Family Ties in Alaska Commercial Fishing**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the intersections of masculinity, rurality, the family, and ecology through the experiences of commercial fishermen in Alaska. By understanding the plurality of masculinities and how men operate within a rural space, this study investigates the relationship between the *masculine rural* and the *rural masculine* and how that relationship pertains to commercial fishermen. This study examines existing discourse about Alaska and the masculinity of commercial fishermen in light of the concepts of cultural and economic capital, as well as local ecological knowledge (LEK). It further examines how fishermen describe their experiences in the industry as ones that are rooted in family influence and economic gain, while also believing that in order to make money, a “true fisherman” needs to be able to learn fast and endure what the industry throws at them. By exploring these parallels, this study reveals that Alaska commercial fishermen shape their gender identities on the notion that only a “true fisherman” is capable of achieving success through hard work, family support, and the utilization of local knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

Bobby, a south central Alaskan resident fisherman, can't remember a time when he wasn't involved with his family's commercial fishing business: "I started in Cook Inlet and did that until I was six." Bobby's experience commercial fishing at a young age in Alaska is not uncommon for others who grow up in the state. In Alaska, commercial fishing was the second largest supplier of jobs and labor income in 2015; in 2014 harvesting supplied 60% of the U.S. total of seafood (Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, 2015). In fact, in the harvesting sector, there are a total of 6,609 resident-owned fishing vessels and 17,634 resident fishermen (ASMI 2015:13). For fishermen like Bobby, male and female, the sacrifice of two to three months for high financial reward is enticing. As urban lifestyles begin to spread from the metropolitan areas of Alaska to the rural, many Alaskans are having to reevaluate their views of masculinity in order to either accommodate this urban lifestyle or maintain a rural one (Hogan & Pursell, 2008). This study reveals that Alaska commercial fishermen shape their gender identities on the notion that only a "true fisherman" is capable of achieving success through hard work, family support, and the utilization of local knowledge.

It is not uncommon nowadays to find multiple television shows portraying the life of an Alaska commercial fisherman. These shows often represent the Alaskan man as a rugged, middle-class worker risking his life for the potential of a promising paycheck (Kirby, 2013). Like all reality television, these depictions are often highly dramatized yet still reinforce stereotypical representations of commercial fishermen and Alaskan men (Kirby, 2013:111). The men in these shows, along with a few women, are seen battling the deadly Alaskan weather in the hopes to reach the end of the season with a hefty paycheck and their lives. Although obviously somewhat

distorted, these shows do hold relevance in trying to understand how commercial fishermen view what is masculine and what is not.

This study joins many others in building on the scholarship of Raewyn Connell. Connell (1995) theorizes that masculinities should be looked at as plural. She argues that men operate within a variety of social circles and recalibrate depending on the hegemonically masculine ideologies or identities of other men in each setting. Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinities has been used by scholars of rural sociology to understand the relationship between masculinities and rural settings (Aboim, 2010; Brandth, 1995; Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Campbell *et al.*, 2006; Hogan & Pursell, 2008; Ramírez-Ferrero, 2005; Woodward, 2009). This study will also join the scholarship that has been done on the relationship between the ecological sector of fisheries as well as the role the family has in the family business (Barlett, 1993; Creed, 2000; Douglass, 1992; Lomnitz & Pérez-Lizaur, 1987; Murray *et al.*, 2006; Netting, 1993; Wade, 1991). This study shows that by engaging both of these areas of scholarship, parallels between rural masculinities and socioeconomic family life are visible.

In addition to the relationship between commercial fishermen and the industry, this study examines how these fishermen view themselves — in particular their gender identities — as well as how these identities are created and perpetuated in the rural space. Parallels are also made between masculinity, rurality, the family, and ecology by using Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) notions of cultural and economic capital as well as local ecological knowledge (LEK) (Murray *et al.*, 2006) commonly found in industries such as this. In the case of commercial fishermen however, LEK takes the form of radio groups. By exploring these parallels, this study shows that for Alaska commercial fishermen, masculinity is achieved through hard, physical work and seasonal experience on the boats.



This study draws upon eleven semi-structured interviews that were conducted with ten males and one female<sup>1</sup>, all selected because they had at least one season of commercial fishing experience. Although the study did not intend to focus on a particular type of fishery (e.g. seining, gillnetting, etc.) or geographic location, almost all interviewees fished in the Cook Inlet, Prince William Sound, and/or Bristol Bay, making the size of the boats and number of deckhands relatively the same.

This study engages with existing discourse on rural masculinities by exploring how notions of masculinity operate within the realm of commercial fishing. The interviews suggest that the commercial fishermen construct their masculine identities based upon their experiences on the boats. They then understand their masculinity by enforcing ideologies of hard work through physical labor on the boats while maintaining a hegemonically masculine hierarchy during each season. Additionally, the interviews also highlight the importance of family and how the ideologies are shared within family members and reproduced through the family business in the form of LEK. In the end, commercial fishing is important in the understanding of masculinities in Alaska fishermen because of the strong connection between the rural space and family ties.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Past studies on masculinities, particularly those of rural masculinities, provide valuable insight into what it means to be a man in a rural setting. Other scholarship on masculinities has focused on the performance (Butler, 1990) and hegemonic (Connell, 1995) aspect of masculinity. Additionally, literature on the influences of the family guides our understanding of what

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<sup>1</sup> Because I was only able to interview one female, I will refer to this subgroup as ‘fishermen’ rather than making the distinction between ‘fishermen’ and ‘fisherwomen’.

influences these fishermen to fish and keep on fishing. The work that has been done on masculinities, rurality, and the family provide a framework for understanding why commercial fishermen value the family structure in their work and how it influences their understandings of masculinity. The literature asserts that understandings of masculinity come from the rural spaces which an individual occupies and reproduced through the family and family business. First, the intersection between masculinities and rurality emphasizes the importance of the rural space in the construction of rural masculinities.

In a special issue of *Rural Sociology* on ‘rural masculinities’, Campbell and Bell (2000), anthropologist and sociologist respectively, stress the need for an examination of masculinities in order to broaden our “understanding of gender and power relations — particularly how they are embedded in rural spaces or incorporate the rural as a symbolic entity” (p. 535). Campbell and Bell, instead, offer to look at this field of study in a contrast between studies of the *masculine in the rural* (masculine rural) and the *rural in the masculine* (rural masculine) (p. 539). Campbell and Bell make the distinction between these two categories by describing the *masculine rural* as the ways in which masculinity is constructed within various rural places and sites. For example, studies in masculinities in farming contexts find that the farmer is always constructed as a “he” rather than male *or* female (p. 540). Masculinity is thus reproduced through this rural site despite the presence of female workers performing the same work as the men. Alternatively, the *rural in masculine* relies on the notions of rurality to emphasize images of masculinity. This category is more commonly seen in the discourse of men who work in jobs such as logging (Brandth & Haugen, 2005), farming (Ramírez-Ferrero, 2005), warfare (Woodward, 2000), etc. (p. 540). The rural symbols associated with these professions establish a masculine ideology that men occupying the specific sphere must uphold. All of these portrayals of “real men” rely on the

notions of rurality in order to construct and enforce notions of masculinity. The distinction between these categories<sup>2</sup> allows researchers in this field to better understand the complexities of the intersections of the rural and the masculine including the fishermen's understanding of masculinity.

A fair amount of literature on rural masculinities highlights the construction of masculinity in a specific environment. One such piece is Brandth's (1995) article on the relationship between masculinity and agriculture and how the two are influenced by technology. The article explores the construction of masculinity in agricultural production and how the dominance over technology, or in this case machinery, creates a hegemonically masculine identity on farms. The mastery over technology allows the farmer to control (within reason) the unpredictable nature of the environment. The need to control the elements can be related to the desire to physically test oneself and overcome laborious tasks in order to gain dominance within the given space (Woodward, 2000; Campbell *et al.*, 2006). This is a central theme in rural masculinity studies (Little, 2002; Saugeres, 2002)

Alternatively, Hogan and Pursell (2008) explore the relationship and influence the state of Alaska has on ideal standards of masculinity. Because the discourse surrounding Alaska is still one that highlights the rugged and emphasizes the rural, many individuals have a preconceived notion of what it means to be a "true Alaskan". Additionally, in order to maintain a masculine identity in the 49th state, individuals must exhibit "the domination of nature and the ability to survive in a challenging landscape" (p. 68). They suggest however, that Alaska's youth as a U.S. state contributes to local constructions of masculinity competing with the hegemonically masculine urban identities that are spreading throughout the state. A "real

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this study, 'rural masculine' will be used to talk about the combinations of the rural masculine and masculine rural categories.

Alaskan” complex is thus created from these tensions and enforced through different forms of discourse. Comparing this construction with the construction of masculinities, and further, rural masculinities will help highlight the potential tensions Alaskan commercial fishermen find themselves in.

To this end, Campbell *et al.*, (2006) provide a list of “key sites” in which the combination of the rural and the masculine are important. This list ranges from “At the Household Level” to “Through the Association with Nature” (p. 16-18). Examining how commercial fishermen operate within these categories reveals how they interact with their household, community, and nature. It should also be noted that, where this study may not focus on the performance of gender (Butler, 1990), understanding how the fishermen perform within their specific spheres (household, community, boat, etc.) will also be helpful in understanding the intersection between the rural, masculine, family, and fishing.

Murray, Neis, and Johnsen (2006) explore the relationship between these four fields through a concept known as local ecological knowledge (LEK). This shared knowledge, they state, “is embodied in a variety of material forms, as talk, action, performance or as texts or artifacts” (p. 551-552). The LEK is thus gained through personal fishing experiences, obtained from older generations, or shared from others who are part of the community (p. 552). Shared knowledge is an important component to fishing communities in that it can “extend beyond the boundaries of the vessels and the fishers to local institutions such as households and communities” (p. 552). LEK is therefore a dynamic process that is changed and altered depending upon the socioecological network it presents itself in. One such network worth exploring further for this study is the importance of the family.

It is no surprise that the family, in its various forms, plays a central role in any group

studied by social scientists. Most notable for this study is the importance of family on an economic level. Creed (2000) goes into length to explore the relationship between the idea of “family” and the economic value it holds within various groups. It is here that he makes the claim that family values “attempt to tap the cultural capital concentrated in the idea of ‘family’ for personal, social, political, and economic objectives” (p. 330). The cultural capital (discussed in the ‘Theory’ section of this study) of a given family grants certain privileges when looked at in family businesses, or family farms. Families who run their own businesses often attempt to “[tap] family connections for economic gain” (Creed, 2000:338), yet fall short by wasting resources (Douglas, 1992; Lomnitz & Pérez-Lizaur, 1987). Barlett (1993) explains that family farms are able to survive economic hardship because of their size, operation, and management style. Managers of the family farm rely and value the work of other family members over hired employees. Similarly, Netting (2002) reaffirms the idea that households are able to more efficiently train family members in the trade rather than rely on outside help. Children in these families begin learning how to work in the family business at an early age with the intention of transferring the skills to the family business.

Explorations of how masculinities are constructed within rural spaces as well as how families reproduce these constructions are necessary in order to fully understand how commercial fishermen construct their gender identities. As Campbell and Bell (2009), and many other rural masculinity scholars have expressed, the separation between the *masculine rural* and the *rural masculine* allows for a clearer understanding of how men construct their gender identities in rural spaces. It is also clear that there is value in the family, especially in families who run businesses, in these spaces. This study adds to the current literature on rural masculinities by revealing how commercial fishermen understand their masculinities within their

rural Alaskan landscape. Additionally, this study takes the notion of the socioecological family and furthers the exploration of the influence families have within rural communities.

## THEORY

While this study explores the relationships between masculinities, rurality, family, and ecology, questions arise about why masculinities should be viewed as plural as well as why certain masculine identities are more influential in specific social spheres than others. This study uses the framework established by Connell on masculinities and hegemonic masculinities to answer why masculinities are plural and interact differently within different spheres. Additionally, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital further Connell's framework by providing a lens to explain why the socioecological family is an important component in constructing masculine gender identities in the rural space. This study utilizes the two lenses to explain that the commercial fishermen's masculine identities are influenced and constructed by habitus and capital.

Raewyn Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity sheds light on how commercial fishermen understand their masculinity while on boats. Connell is not concerned with specific types of masculinity (i.e. white masculinity, black masculinity, etc.) but rather, the relationship between all of these typologies:

To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them. Further, we have to unpack the milieux of class and race and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them. There are, after all, gay black men and effeminate factory hands, not to mention middleclass rapists and cross-dressing bourgeois (1995:76).

Connell urges the acknowledgment of multiple masculinities in an effort to not fall back upon "collapsing into a character typology" (1995:76). Television shows like *Deadliest Catch*

present commercial fishing boats as hyper masculinized spaces where the blue-collar male is exalted as a heroic figure. What Connell offers however, is a look into how masculinities work within the same spaces as one another. Her concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as a useful viewpoint into this exploration.

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of woman” (1995:77). She also explains that not all hegemonically masculine bearers “are always the most powerful people” (1995:77). Instead, individuals who are involved in outlets such as film or politics have a “successful claim to authority, more than violence, that is the mark of hegemony” (Connell, 1995:77). Connell argues that by claiming and maintaining power and/or authority, one specific type of masculinity is deemed acceptable within a community. Ultimately, Connell offers a framework in which to conceptualize and “analyze specific masculinities” as well as provide terms like *hegemonic masculinity* that “name not fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships” (1995:81). While Connell provides a useful lens in which to understand masculinities, her theories are insufficient to explain what influences commercial fishermen to construct their rural identities.

To examine this construction, Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital are useful in looking at commercial fishermen and masculinity. Bourdieu emphasizes the structure of identity through predefined rules and limitations by defining habitus as:

structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or as express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (1990:53).

Bourdieu explains that there are “structured structures” that influence the decisions we make and continues by explaining that habitus is “embodied history, internalized as a second nature” that we restrict ourselves to (1990:56). An individual's habitus is constantly with them from “the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body...[to] fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world” (Bourdieu, 1984:466). Thus, an individual's habitus is the way in which they act within a given sphere. For Bourdieu, the ways in which a person acts are influenced by the amount and type of capital that an individual has.

According to Bourdieu, capital can take various forms, most notably cultural, economic, and social. The combination of these different forms of capital are then transformed into symbolic capital once that individual enters a specific field (Bourdieu, 1986; Reynolds, 2013). Once inside this field, the individual can navigate between the various kinds of capital in order to better their position within that field. For example, fishermen are able to utilize their economic capital to enhance the amount of income they make within a given season. This takes the form of LEK and is transferred through the entire community. Alternatively, fishermen can use this same economic capital to ensure successful fishing for future family generations. Whatever the case may be, capital is acquired through the family and then transferred to the individual and their status in different fields. Families with more capital will therefore have a better status when they enter a field that benefits from that form of capital.

Connell and Bourdieu's theories offer a valuable framework in which to explore the reasons why commercial fishermen act the way they do on their boats and how households reproduce successful forms of capital. Drawing upon these theoretical lenses, this study finds that Connell's theories of masculinities and, in particular hegemonic masculinities, reinforce the relationship between the fishermen and the work that accomplish on the boats while Bourdieu's



notions of habitus and capital explore how families utilize their local knowledge to ensure a successful fishing season.

## METHODS

For this study, I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with ten male commercial fishermen and one female commercial fisherwoman, between the ages of 20 and 48. These interviews focused on the experiences commercial fishermen have while fishing and therefore only individuals with at least one season of Alaskan commercial fishing experience participated in the study. I began my study with a convenience sampling of individuals above the age of 18, with no preference on the type of commercial fishing that they had done. Snowball sampling was then used as previous participants referred me to more individuals. All interviews took place in an area in Alaska which I have entree in. Because the focus of this study is masculinity, I particularly sought male participants, but I did not exclude female participants although female commercial fishers are rather uncommon. All of the interviewees were active in the industry, with one who was intending to not participate in the following season. The amount of years in the industry ranged from six years to 34 years.

Interviews consisted of open-ended questions that ranged from asking about background in commercial fishing and the amount of seasons and types of fisheries they were, or still are, a part of, to how they felt they acted on and off of the boat. To gain a better sense of how they became involved in the industry, I asked the interviewees about how they were introduced to commercial fishing and based upon these responses, I composed specific questions about their personal experiences. For example, if an interviewee introduced a memory of fishing with his/her parent, I would ask them if fishing played an important part in their family dynamic. In

general, the interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were all conducted in English. Pseudonyms were given to participants to preserve their anonymity.

### **FAMILY, LEK, AND MASCULINITY**

The interviews with the fishermen presented three factors as large influencers in the lives of commercial fishermen: the role of the family, the sharing of local knowledge, and overcoming the challenges of fishing in order to become a “real fisherman”. The exploration of these factors sheds light on how commercial fishermen come to situate themselves within the commercial industry as well as how they understand and develop their masculine gender identities within the rural sphere they inhabit. What can be seen from these interviews is that family, LEK, and masculinity intertwine with one another in such a way as to construct and maintain the fishermen’s identity. To this extent, notions of habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986; 1990) explain the ways in which fishermen become successful and maintain this success within the field. Additionally, Connell’s (1995) theories of masculinities, specifically hegemonic masculinities, offers a helpful lens in which to understand how fishermen situate themselves within the rural sphere of commercial boats. The exploration of these three factors through the lenses of Bourdieu and Connell provide a valuable insight into how commercial fishermen understand not only their masculinities, but also themselves as a whole.

#### **Family Ties**

The interviewees recalled their experiences commercial fishing as ones that were influenced by their family and/or influenced by the potential of high financial gain. For most interviewees, older family members introduced them to the industry; those who did not recall

any familial influence gained industry knowledge from either close friends or from the community in which they live. Despite coming from varying industry backgrounds, each of the interviewees had in common the utilization of local knowledge to acquire their first boat job. Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) theory of habitus and capital (1986) effectively explain these experiences. The fishermen all grew up within the commercial fishing world and thus were taught specific tools needed to operate within this realm. For example, Bobby, a 24 year old gillnet fisherman in Bristol Bay and Cook Inlet, recounts when he was first introduced to commercial fishing:

I started when I was six just goin' on the boat with my dad so that, if he went out alone he would just pull me out of school and I would go with him [...] That's kinda how I got into it. And then, once I started to get older, you know, I took on a little more each year. Like my first year I was doing everything I was twelve and it was me, my dad, and then my cousin. And that was a lot of fun because it was like family. That's basically what it's always been, just family. If it wasn't me an my cousin, it was me and my dad by ourselves.

Bobby's memory of fishing with his father at a young age can be best understood through Bourdieu's notion of habitus. As was discussed, habitus is "embodied history, internalized as a second nature" (1990:56) that constitutes how an individual acts within a given sphere.

Acquiring the knowledge needed to be a successful deckhand was given to Bobby by his father as he grew up. This not only ensured Bobby's success as a commercial fisherman, but also encourages Bobby to continue to use the knowledge given by his father every season he fishes.

Bobby's childhood experiences are quite common. For Ken, a 21 year old gillnet fisherman in Bristol Bay, the introduction into the industry began when he was around the age of eight.

Similar to Bobby, Ken was not able to accomplish many of the physically demanding jobs on the boat and thus, did not "officially" start fishing with his dad until he was fifteen. He describes his fishing experience as one he didn't initially enjoy because "he had to do it" but soon changed his

mindset when he realized that he “needed money” and fishing was a good way to make it. As a result of his love for fishing and father’s teachings, Ken now owns his own boat and manages two deckhands. He states that he’s nervous because “the fish just don’t swim into your net, you have to go and find them. And my friends are tryin’ to get through college so...they kinda want some money.” Ken’s stresses stem from the potential of a bad season and not being able to provide for his deckhands. His mentality is to “go and find them [fish]”, relying on the teachings of his father and cultural capital in order to do so.

Bobby and Ken’s personal histories provide a valuable look into the important role family plays in the development of family dynamics and formation of habitus with commercial fishermen. For both instances, family members transferred cultural capital through years of exposure to the commercial industry. This transfer of knowledge established each interviewee’s habitus within the commercial field allowing them to succeed as deckhands or, in the case of Ken, as a captain.

Transferring fishing knowledge to other kin is something that is not entirely unique to Bobby or Ken. Parents involved in the commercial fishing industry also express the need pass along their knowledge to their kin. For example, Johnny, a 48 year old gillnet fisherman, has fished in the commercial industry longer than any of the other interviewees. He now manages seven commercial boats from home and only gillnet fishes during the summer season with his daughter Lauren. The two describe gillnet fishing seasons as “very much a family operation”. Johnny purchased the permit to fish during the summer season in 1992 and ever since then has fished with members of his family, particularly Lauren. Johnny explains that working with Lauren and another deckhand for the last six seasons has made it so he doesn’t have to worry about what they are doing on the deck:

We have a pretty good division of labor on that particular boat because Lauren is really familiar with the boat and also familiar with how we need to be supplied and stuff. It's the first time this crew, she and Duncan<sup>3</sup> and I working together, it's the first time I really have just been able to forget about certain aspects of it and focus on my, you know what I'm suppose to be doing—catching fish and making sure the boat is operating safely. But Duncan and Lauren together can do the gear: put the nets on, remove a net, change it, mend the gear; they can do all that without me being involved and they do. And maybe Duncan does a little bit more of that. And Lauren knows, like she said, about the supplies and what we are going to need. I really don't have to think too much about that.

Johnny's example of the division of labor and ease he has about the competence of his deckhands highlights the significant role the family farm plays in the commercial fishing industry. Because Lauren and Duncan have worked on Johnny's boat for multiple seasons, they are able to not only be efficient with the tasks that need to be accomplished but they also know about the specific needs and functionality of the boat that a new deckhand may not know (e.g. Lauren's knowledge of supplies). As Johnny explained, their knowledge and efficiency is advantageous for the functioning of the boat as a whole, serving as an example of Netting's (2008) exploration of household worker efficiency. Additionally, Johnny expresses his praise for Lauren's skill as a fisherwoman yet is hesitant to think about the potential of her owning her own boat. He states:

We actually have a couple boats. We have my old boat and this one we bought in 2011 — she's a newer one — and I've been sort of nudging Lauren over the last couple years to take over the other boat. She has her own permit. She's more than capable you know? But what we have is pretty easy [and] works for us and so, you know, it's hard to move off. She doesn't know if she wants to — to move out of comfortable working relationship and into...a situation where she would be making all of the decisions.

The pride that Johnny feels towards his daughter is rooted in not only teaching her what he has to know about commercial fishing but also her natural talent and aptitude for the industry. Despite having her own permit and the natural talent her dad sees in her, Lauren still expresses that the thought of running her own boat intimidates her. This view towards his daughter not

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym of deckhand given for confidentiality reasons.

only shows the importance of hiring family members as deckhands, but also the influence Lauren's habitus has in her life. Similar to Johnny's unease about not having his daughter captain her own boat, Dick, a 41 year old gillnet fisherman, regrets not being able to pass his fishing knowledge to his kids so they can "share the experiences" with him. The idea of "passing" the knowledge down to your next of kin is an important distinction in the area in which he lives he states: "And I think too you'll probably find that a lot of fishing, at least in our area, is kinda handed down through families. The dad fishes, the kid fishes, the next kid fishes. I know a lot of that...there's a lot of that that happens here."

The narratives of Bobby, Ken, Lauren, Johnny, and Dick all explore the influence and importance family ties have within the commercial fishing industry. By having their children — or another young family member — join them on the boats at a young age, fishermen can begin to teach the youth the secrets of the industry as well as transfer along with them the knowledge needed to be a successful deckhand later in their lives. These youth are therefore given the necessary cultural and economic knowledge to continue on their captain's influence and have a successful career. Not only does this transferal of knowledge take the form of family ties, but it can also be seen in the form of radio groups.

### **Radio Groups and LEK**

Commercial fishermen pass along their knowledge of the industry to their children, or other young family members, to create a more efficient work environment, transfer knowledge of the industry, and provide economic stability. Sharing knowledge from parent to child is just one way the interviewees discussed bettering their capital within the industry. The radio groups that each boat belong to serve as 'pseudo-communities' for the captains and crews to accomplish this

same task. Ed, a 22 year old gillnet fisherman notes:

We have an exceptionally good one [radio group], probably one of the top ones in that industry. There is a level of...professionalism that is required to be on that radio however; everyone has been there for so long there are also...everyone laughs on the radio. There's, you have to know what you're talking about, but there's joking. Everyone is making fun of each other. It's a good time you know? The purpose of the radio group, I suppose, is so you have a wider knowledge of what's going on when you're fishing. And if there is fish somewhere else and you aren't catching it, then you know where to go.

Ed points out that the captains use the radio groups to share with each other local knowledge about the fishing area. Additionally, Ed explains that the radios are meant for business and professionalism but are used for humor and joking once the "professional" information has been given for the day. Lauren and Johnny also point out these same characteristics in their radio group and state that it is used for fishing and business but turns more into a "constant conversation that anyone can be a part of." Lauren remarks humorously that, "the purpose of it is fishing talk but most of the times it's really boring out there and the guys just want to chat and so they do". Johnny notes that if it is a busy fishing time, then all of the talk is regarding fishing but other than that, fish politics is a popular topic.

They also explain specific "roles" each person serves over the radio such as providing inappropriate comments or as Lauren classifies her dad, "someone who provides a lot of the fishing politics." Johnny describes his role in the group as one of the coordinators mainly because of his 20 plus years of experience. He recalls that it's completely natural for younger fishermen to rely on the experience of older fishermen for advice in a radio group because he did the same when he first began.

As Murray *et al.* (2006) explain, LEK "is embodied in a variety of material forms, as talk, action, performance or as texts or artifacts" (p. 551-552). For these fishermen, the radio groups serve as 'pseudo-communities' where the transferal of knowledge can still occur between

community members, but over a wider area. Knowledge for financial gain is the dominant purpose of the radio group, but as Johnny mentions, younger captains use the radio groups to learn about the industry in order to be better captains themselves. Alternatively, some interviewees provide examples of radio groups being used less to share with the community but more for the overall benefit of the individual.

The transferal of local knowledge is important in a commercial community because everyone wants to succeed in a potentially tight season. That being said, some groups are created in such a way to benefit a select few. For example, Samuel, a 24 year old gillnet and seine fisherman, recalls an example of a family of ten boats who maintain their own radio group as a way to maximize their group profit. He explains a specific situation he witnessed first-hand: “I saw this happen last year. They block every other boat out and there’s just be a giant school of fish and they’ll put in 30,000 pounds in one set. In the first ten minutes. It’s a giant chess game basically.” The situation that Samuel describes is called ‘blocking’ and the end goal is to take over the area and maximize the amount of fish caught within the group. This, as Samuel describes, is the main purpose of a radio group. Similarly, Steven, a 21 year old gillnet and seine fisherman, contrasts the usage of radio groups in Alaskan commercial fishing versus Californian squid fishing. He explains that communicating is a weird combination of lying about numbers and being truthful about locations [in squid fishing]. He contrasts his experience in his Alaskan radio group: “There was *so* much lying going on. People would make lies about fish being like, I don’t know, like 70 miles away and people would waste money and time going over there. It was exhausting because you never knew what the truth was.” He explains that a reason behind this could be because of the “high stakes” involved in acquiring a boat and permit as well as the monopolization of boats by companies’ — something that can’t happen in Alaska.



Withholding information, such as in Steven's example, is another way where individuals in a radio group can increase their economic capital in a radio group despite being a member of the 'pseudo-community'. Lewis, a 20 year old salmon troller recognized a similar form of radio group within the salmon troller community. Like a commercial radio group, the trollers will communicate with each other in order to pass along information pertaining to where the "hotspots" are located for the day. Lewis is quick to note however, that his grandfather, who he fishes for, does not communicate with the other guides because he does not want to give away his successful locations or listen to what they have to say about theirs. Lewis' grandfather contradicts the main purpose of LEK by ensuring the success of himself rather than the community as a whole.

In these three instances, the radio groups are used as a means for personal and economic gain. The examples emphasize the importance and competitive atmosphere surrounding commercial fishing and reinforce the 'as much money by catching as much fish' mentality that commercial fishermen have. For example, Lewis' grandfather does not interact with his radio group, despite likely being the oldest member, because he is afraid that the other fishermen will discover his "secret spot". He seeks to preserve his knowledge because it provides him and his business with the highest profitable outcome. Similarly, the family radio group that Samuel describes exhibits a way in which LEK is used to benefit a specific family at the expense of other boats in the area.

Although the transferal of information and LEK in the commercial fishing industry can take many forms (e.g. from parent to child), it can be most commonly seen in the radio groups each boat is a member of. These 'pseudo-communities' provide valuable information for each boat and can, as was explored, either help or hinder the performances of other boats in the

specific industry. What should be noted as well is the crossing of paths between familial influence and LEK to form and maintain the radio groups. Through the interviews with Ed, Johnny and Lauren, Samuel, Steven, and Lewis a connection is made between these experiences and Murray *et al.* (2006) work with LEK and the dynamic ways it functions.

### **A Real Fisherman**

The interviews show that the fishermen construct their gender identities based upon the hard work and experiences they have on the boats. Additionally, a hegemonic structure is established on each boat based upon the experience each fisherman has each season. Using Connell's (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinities, the hegemonically masculine male on the boats is established to be the captain while the least masculine is the greenhorn (first-time fisherman). According to Charlie, a 23 year old seine, steak net, set net, and pot fisherman, the longer you fish the more you learn about how a boat runs and how to handle specific equipment.

Despite it being his first time winter fishing, Charlie explains that he isn't really the greenhorn because there is another deckhand who only has experience with charter fishing versus his eight years of commercial fishing. He concludes that it is important to communicate while on the boat and "if someone does have more fishing experience, you kinda like, wanna give them that respect like, 'hey they've been doing this longer than me, I should probably listen to what they're saying and take it in as advice and keep up on it', that way there's no tension." This idea of respecting those who have been in the industry for a longer period of time is also seen in radio group structures. Those with the most industry knowledge are designated as *de facto* leaders for the group and the younger fishermen listen to what they have to say.

It should also be noted that for those who are motivated to fish primarily for profit, such

as Charlie, recognizing the potential for a bad season is always “a gamble”. In order to combat this, they believe that high financial gain is possible if they work hard and deal with whatever issues arise on the boat. These remarks reinforce the studies on rural masculinity by Campbell and Bell (2000), Brandth and Haugen (2005), Ramírez-Ferrero (2005), Woodward (2000) and Hogan and Pursell (2008). The fishermen use the boats as a way in which to prove their masculinity by fighting against the elements and performing physically demanding jobs. For example, Dick loves commercial fishing because of the work ethic he associates with it. “It’s vigorous” he states, “and so, when I am ready to step out on the boat I am ready to catch fish and it’s cool to think that you’re making money at the same time. So I think there is a correlation between how hard you work and the amount of money you make.”

Similarly, Ed’s favorite job on the boat is picking the fish out of the net because it is “the most dependent on us making money and it’s the most fun bit of the entire job.” Even though this is one of the more physical aspects of the job and is something that he enjoys, it is the most taxing on the body. This is the one part of commercial fishing that he doesn’t enjoy because he is feeling it in his body despite his young age. When asked what his favorite part is though, he notes the level of camaraderie that it takes to commercial fish. “I enjoy the camaraderie” he states, “‘cause, it’s something that most people can’t do. It takes a certain kind of mindset to do and it’s nice to know I have that.” He describes this mindset as “constant vigilance”. The relationship Ed shares with the other deckhands is “excellent” because, as he explains, he is in the unique position where he is able to fish with his best friend. The dynamic they share on land changes when they get on the boat because it “has to” but it is this dynamic that helps him keep the vigilant mindset he describes earlier.

Dick and Ed’s experiences on the boats are similar in that they value physically pushing

their bodies to the limit for the financial end goal of a good season. For them, maneuvering around the boat is like a team sport where camaraderie is an essential piece of deckhand life. Not only does it create a work ethic that emphasizes physically testing the body, but it also fosters the mindset needed to be a successful fisherman. Bobby touches upon this specific mindset when he goes to fish in Bristol Bay. Lack of cellular service gives him an opportunity to “get away” from his life on land. “[I] take it as a, kind of, spiritual kind of vacation where you just get to kind of look in on a lot of the things that are going on in your life [...] you’re kind of lost in your own head.” This “spiritual vacation” allows Bobby to not just make money, but figure out what he wants to do with his life the next year. Being able to make it over his mental “walls” allows Bobby to “man up” and “make it to the end [of the season].”

Keeping in mind the relationship between masculinities and rurality, many fishermen believe that being masculine comes when you are able to sacrifice your body and mindset and become “reborn again as a fisherman”. Bobby describes a particular experience where his boat’s net became entangled with other boats’ nets:

This net is three football fields long in length; so, you gotta lotta work ahead of you. So, you’ve got a lot goin’ on and I don’t know if he had ever done anything like that before but we had to do that twice that night and at one point I was pulling the whole thing in by myself. It’s like, where you at dude [the other deckhand on the boat]? Like what’s goin’ on. He’s just standing there watching me do this and it’s like grab this shit and let’s get goin’. And I kinda got to this point where it’s like ‘you don’t even wanna be here’ and I called him out on it like “you don’t even wanna be here” and he’s like ‘yeah, I don’t wanna be here. I wanna go home’. And it’s like, okay, the moment one dude wants to go home, that’s when it is all over.

Bobby empathizes with his friend/deckhand for not wanting to be away for so long but highlights the importance of pushing through personal walls in order to accomplish the group goals. Like Ed and Dick, Bobby reinforces the belief that in order to be a “real man”, a fisherman needs to compete and overcome the challenges that being a fisherman has (e.g. physical fatigue,

seclusion). Thus, the rural space shapes and enforces the masculine gender identities of the fishermen. He concludes: “I *like* the challenge. I *like* the mental toughness side of it. *That’s* how competitive I am, that’s who I am. Actions speak louder than words [...] you work through your shit and you help your team out and people are going to look up to you.”

Of the fishermen that were interviewed, opportunities and knowledge in the commercial fishing industry were influenced by the cultural and economical capital they gained from their families and community. LEK is therefore reproduced through shared networks of knowledge (radio groups) and family businesses, enforcing Creed’s (2000) view of the family as a source of economic gain. The acquisition of knowledge is then transferred to an unofficial boat hierarchy in which the captain is the hegemonically masculine member of the crew and the greenhorn is, as Charlie explains, “the last man on the totem pole”. Identities of masculinity, especially in the rural sphere, are then created based upon the expectations of more experienced deckhands and interactions with the environment and equipment. Bringing these three influencers together not only explores why and how commercial fishermen are affected by the industry in which they work and live but also adds a valuable contribution to the field of commercial fishing and rural studies.

## CONCLUSION

My exploration of Alaska commercial fishermen reveals that the intersections between masculinities, rurality, family, and ecology are far more intertwined than what was originally anticipated. At the start of this study, the intent was to explore the ways in which commercial fishermen understood their masculinity in different locations. Instead what I found was that a commercial fishermen’s masculine identity is intimately related to the spaces in which the

fishermen inhabit. Additionally, for fishermen with families, the need to transfer the LEK of the commercial industry to their kin is a central theme seen throughout. On the other hand, fishermen without families or still in their youth put emphasis on the potential economic gain two months of hard work can bring. These connections are an essential feature to any commercial fisherman but for those born in Alaska, the need to establish a masculine identity hinges on the experiences had during each season and on each boat.

Similar to Brandth (1995), this study finds that masculinities of Alaska commercial fishermen are greatly influenced by the environment in which they live and work. Looking at this relationship from the rural masculine lenses that Campbell and Bell (2000) introduce add some depth to rural scholars' increased interest in rural masculinities. The stories and experiences of the fishermen reveal that their masculine identities operate within both the rural masculine and masculine rural spheres despite expressing concern about the misrepresentation of their industry in reality television.

Utilizing the entree that I have in this community was effective in multiple ways. First, I was able to draw upon the knowledge and experiences of fishermen of all backgrounds and experience levels that provide a more diverse pool in which to interview. Because this study also occurred in a small, rural fishing community, I was able to utilize pre-established networks of fishermen to seek knowledge from. The results from these interviews reveal that commercial fishermen relate their masculine identity with being a good fisherman specifically rather than with "being a man" in a more generic sense.

While this study has shed light on the Alaska commercial fishing subculture, it has revealed other areas that warrant similar attention, including the exploration of commercial fisherwomen in relation to fishermen; the influence urban masculinities have on fishery

masculinities; and the comparison between different types of commercial fisheries and masculinity. Although not covered to the full extent in this study, these relationships all offer more insight into the intersections between masculinities, rurality, family, and economic factors. With that being said, this study has offered more to the field of rural masculine studies with an introductory look at a group of individuals who have yet to be explored in such an ethnographic way.

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