

Empowering or Disempowering? Online Support Among Seafarer-Partners

by Lijun Tang
Cardiff University

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Abstract

Past research in sociology and social psychology has revealed two aspects of online support. This mutual support among members of online support groups brings about empowerment as well as produces common values. The interaction between the two, however, has not been explicitly explored. This paper fills in this gap by examining the activities of a group of seafarer-partners in an online support group. It shows that common beliefs and values in groups can make online support, which is supposed to be empowering, serve disempowering purposes. This suggests that online support can produce a tension between empowerment and disempowerment. The finding leads to the conclusion that group values condition the empowerment potential of online support.

Keywords: *Cyberspace, Empowerment, Gender, Relationships, Seafaring, Support Groups, Values*

Introduction

1.1 This paper discusses the issue of empowerment/disempowerment involved in online support through a case study which examines the activities of a group of seafarer-partners' in an online support group named the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS). Past research in sociology and social psychology has suggested that online support groups foster user empowerment (e.g. Barak et al. 2008; Orgad 2004; van Uden-Krann et al. 2008). However, such research was conducted mainly in groups of people with medical conditions including both physical illnesses and mental disorders. The topics that seafarer-partners discuss in the HCS are related to separation and relationships, rather than medical problems. As such, the HCS provides a different context to study the issue of empowerment, which helps to reveal an empowerment/disempowerment tension associated with online support and thus shed new light on this issue. Before discussing the relevant literature, I shall first briefly introduce the context of the study, since seafarer-partners are an understudied group and their living conditions may not be widely known (Thomas 2003).

1.2 Seafarer-partners, who in this paper include both married seafarers' wives and unmarried seafarers' girlfriends, have to endure long-term and intermittent separation from their husbands/boyfriends due to the nature of seafaring careers. During the separation period, seafarer-partners are likely to suffer loneliness and isolation (Brown-Decker 1978; Foster and Cacioppe 1986; Parker et al. 1998; Tang 2007; Thomas 2003). Further, despite the development of modern communication technologies, the communication between the ship and the shore is neither convenient nor cheap (Kahveci 2007; Thomas 2003; Thomas et al. 2003; Wu 2007). The constraint on communication arguably exacerbates seafarer-partners' sense of loneliness.

1.3 Seafarers' working patterns also have a negative impact on their partners' social activities. The intermittent and long-term separation can make seafarer-partners feel that they live different lifestyles from other women whose partners work ashore. For this reason, past research on seafaring families suggests that seafarer-partners tend to separate themselves from others and feel that non-seafaring people cannot fully appreciate and understand their situation (Foster and Cacioppe 1986; Thomas 2003). Thus, many seafarer-partners feel socially isolated and they desire to meet and share their experiences and concerns with similar others (Foster and Cacioppe 1986; Thomas 2003). Yet, most seafaring families are geographically separated, and therefore seafarer-partners have limited chances to meet and know each other face to face. This is also the case for Chinese seafarer-partners: they live in different regions and cities (Tang 2007).

1.4 The advent of the Internet, however, makes it possible for people in isolation to meet each other online and to form online communities across time and space (Alder and Alder 2008; Orgad 2005; Williams and Copes 2005). In 2003, a seafarer set up a Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) website: *the Home of Chinese Seafarers* (HCS), aiming to provide a communication platform for people in the seafaring community including seafarers, seafarer trainees, and seafarer-partners. It turned out that seafarer-partners were the most active contributors. Some participants even joked that this website should be named the *Home of Chinese Seafarer-Partners*. This may not be surprising, taking into consideration that seafarers' involvement in it can only be periodic, since while at sea they have very limited access to the Internet. The HCS enables hundreds of Chinese seafarer-partners to 'meet' each other, share their experiences, and help each other to cope with problems caused by seafarers' working patterns. As such it can be regarded as an online support group for seafarer-partners [1].

Empowerment, Group Values, and Online Support Groups

2.1 The core element of the term empowerment is power which can be regarded as 'transformative capacity' (Giddens 1984; Karlberg 2005; Murphy-Graham 2009). Consequently, empowerment entails provision of this capacity. Empowerment is also a relative term: empowering a person implies that he/she is given the capacity which he/she did not possess before (Mosedale 2005). Thus, following Mosedale (2005), empowerment can be loosely defined as a process through which people acquire a new capacity to change their situations. The opposite process of empowerment is obviously disempowerment through which people lose their capacity to transform the living environment.

Empowerment in online support groups

2.2 The Internet allows people to do things which they might not be able to do before, and therefore is regarded to have empowering effects (Amichai-Hamburger 2008; Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008). This is particularly the case for people using online support groups. Past research suggests that such groups empower members in several ways. They enable people with marginalised identities to 'meet' and share experiences, which helps them to reduce the sense of isolation (Alder and Alder 2008; Malik and Coulson 2008; Miller and Gergen 1998; Orgad 2005; van Uden-Kraan et al. 2008). Online support groups also facilitate information exchange. For those involved in patient groups, for example, this helps them to challenge medical professionals' monopoly over knowledge and to level the power relation between doctors and patients (Orgad 2005; Radin 2006; van Uden-Kraan et al. 2008). Besides sharing information, group members also share various feelings and provide each other with emotional support (Orgad 2005; Salem et al. 1997; van Uden-Kraan et al. 2008). Finally, the opportunity of sharing information and feelings, the availability of emotional support, and the sense of solidarity involved in online groups help individuals to manage crisis and improve their well-being (Barak et al. 2008; Orgad 2004; van Uden-Kraan et al. 2008).

2.3 It is worth noting here that men and women tend to participate in online support groups differently. Blank and Adams-Blodnieks (2007), Klemm et al. (1999), and Seale et al. (2006) compared men's usage of online prostate cancer support groups with women's usage of breast cancer groups. They found that men were more likely to seek factual medical information, while women tended to focus on social and emotional support. Maybe for this reason, it is suggested that the atmospheres in women-centred online support groups are usually nurturing and supportive (Madge and O'Connor 2006; Wallace 1999), which produces a strong sense of bonding and solidarity (Orgad 2005).

Group values

2.4 Meanwhile, another body of literature suggests that online support tends to convey and promote certain messages. Bar-Lev (2008) and Bar-Lev and Tillinger (2008) noted in their studies on HIV/AIDS support groups that online interaction legitimised a heroic image of 'moral patients' who fight against disease with bravery and dignity. As a result, Bar-Lev (2008) found that while group members supported those who showed courage and determination in the face of the disease, they were unwilling to accept expressions of despair and resignation. Likewise, Sandaunet (2008) observed in an online breast cancer support group that 'socially desirable stories' were circulated here, which again promoted 'patient heroes' who stay in control and keep a positive outlook in spite of the life threatening illness. The predominance of this socially desirable message, as Sandaunet (2008) noted, made participants in the group reluctant to reveal feelings of uncontrollable fear and hopelessness. In another two earlier studies on breast cancer patients' writings in cyberspace, Orgad (2005) and Pitts (2004) found that these writings conformed to a dominant offline message advocating that patients should be responsible for managing their own illnesses.

2.5 The promotion of particular messages implies that there are common values in online support groups. Participants who hold different views are likely to be sidelined (Sandaunet 2008), and thus disempowered. More often than not, however, common values are instilled in, and accepted by, group members. Otherwise,

they would not be common values. This leads to one set of questions which have not been explored: How do group values affect the empowerment of those who subscribe to the values? Does the former enhance or compromise the latter? This paper addresses these questions through examining seafarer-partners' activities in HCS.

Research Methods

3.1 To acquire a detailed picture of seafarer-partners' activities on the HCS website, I took an ethnographic approach which included online observation and qualitative interviewing. From May 2005 to October 2007, I logged onto the website almost daily to observe and analyse activities on the website. According to my observation, in the autumn of 2005, the HCS had more than 10,000 registered members, and the number of participants online simultaneously was on average around fifty over any given 24-hour period. Besides registered members, non-members were allowed to visit this website as guests. As on many of other BBS websites, however, the number of registered members did not represent the participating population. It seemed that only a few hundred members were active at a given time. The others remained inactive for long periods of time or disappeared after a few 'visits'.

3.2 Being a BBS website, the HCS mainly consisted of public forums in which participants made and replied to postings. The website also provided each participant a public online diary book. Each day, there were on average 40 diary entries. Viewing, taking notes of, and analysing seafarer-partners' postings and public diary entries were the main focus of my online fieldwork. Of particular relevance to this paper are postings that revealed and discussed problems caused by the absence of the seafarers. Since seafaring couples are physically separated and the communication between the ship and the shore is far from easy, it is not surprising that the major issues seafarer-partners discussed on the website were related to communication.

3.3 In order to understand seafarer-partners' activities more adequately, I also interviewed thirty seafarer-partner participants from different parts of China. Three strategies were utilised to recruit informants. With the help of the website manager, a recruiting letter was sent to all participants in the form of a group message in October 2005. I also sent out 220 private recruiting messages directly to active website participants in the winter of 2005. ('Active website participants' in this paper refer to those who had made at least five postings in total.) The response rate was very low and only twenty-two informants were recruited through these two strategies. Snow-ball sampling was used as the third strategy. When I was doing face-to-face interviews in China, the website manager introduced me to three informants, and two seafarer-partner informants led me to five of their online friends. Therefore, altogether thirty seafarer-partner participants were interviewed. All the interviews were conducted between November 2005 and April 2006. Thirteen interviews were undertaken face-to-face in three places in China: Shanghai, Nanjing, and Shandong Province, and two were conducted by telephone. The remaining fifteen participants were interviewed via email. In the interviews, they were asked about their motivation for participating on the website, the ways they participated, and the perceived impacts it had on them.

3.4 All the interviewees were active members, and for this reason they were more visible on the website. Thus, the data gathered tend to reflect the experiences of the several hundred active members. The low response rate and the snowball sampling may introduce another bias: those who had a positive view of this website were more likely to agree to participate in the research, and as a result those who had negative experiences on the site were under-represented.

3.5 Among the thirty respondents, twenty-nine had received, or were receiving, higher education; twenty five were below age of thirty; and eleven were married at the time of interviewing. According to my observations, the profile of the interviewees reflected the general population of seafarer-partner participants on the website – relatively young, well-educated and living in cities. To ensure the informants' anonymity, all names in this paper are pseudonyms.

3.6 The data were translated from Chinese into English and were coded according to their content. After this initial analysis, the postings collected were analysed based on *how* participants replied to the postings.

Informational Support

4.1 Similar to seafarers' wives in past research (Foster and Cacioppe 1986; Thomas 2003), eighty-five percent seafarer-partners in this study mentioned that non-seafaring people could not fully understand their experiences and concerns and that they had few opportunities to meet other seafarer-partners offline. In the HCS, however, seafarer-partners could come to know and communicate with each other. Although different in many respects, such as age, profession, marital status, educational background, and living area, they shared one identity – being seafarer-partners. Since the discussions on the site were seafaring related, the differences did not affect their ability to identify with each other. The informants of this study reported that

they spoke 'a common language' and had 'same feelings' and 'common topics' to discuss on the website. The commonalities encouraged seafarer-partners to share and validate their experience, which helped them to reduce the sense of isolation.

4.2 In sharing experiences, seafarer-partners provided each other with informational support. When seafarers are at sea, seafarer-partners are likely to wait in the dark: they may not know what their husbands/boyfriends are doing and experiencing, and they may have no idea about which ocean or port they are heading to. To be better informed, seafarer-partners expect some basic information, such as how long it normally takes from port A to B, how to contact shipping companies, and what communication method is cheap and convenient. In this context, the HCS enabled the less experienced seafarer-partners to learn from the more experienced. Rainbow, a seafarer's girlfriend aged twenty-three, mentioned in the interview:

I could ask questions on this website, for example, I knew little about the route his ship took. Experienced seafarer-partners could give me answers, for example, how long it would take for him to come back.

4.3 As a contrast, Smiling-Face, who was in her early thirties and had been married for three years, mentioned in the interview:

Some beginners ask about basic knowledge, such as communication between the shore and the sea. I reply a lot, since I am experienced.

4.4 Seafarer-partners, especially the inexperienced ones, may have a limited understanding of their partners' work, because separation makes it impossible for seafaring couples to discuss job related matters frequently. Hence, seafarer-partners want to know more about seafaring jobs. Half of the informants mentioned in the interviews that they searched online in order to find out more information about seafaring and that the searching led them to the HCS website. On the site, some seafarers wrote postings about their experiences at sea, and some seafarer-partners also produced writings about seafarer life onboard ships according to what they heard. For example, one seafarer wrote his experiences at sea on the website:

I just found this website and noted that many seafarer-partners do not know much about life at sea. So I want to write about my experiences here. ... Seven years ago I joined my first ship at Guangzhou, from where we sailed to another port Fangcheng. The voyage took two days, and during this short period we had to work overtime to clean the seven huge cargo holds... Having washed the holds, we had to clean the bilge which was filthy and stink. Fortunately we were from rural areas and therefore were able to bear that. ...

The next voyage was from Fangcheng to New Orleans. In more than thirty days we saw nothing but sea water... In the Indian Ocean, the ship was rolling and pitching heavily... Many seafarers including me got seasick and had no appetite for anything. During work time in the engine room, the fuel smell made it even worse ...

Finally, we reached the New Orleans anchorage. Old seafarers started fishing in the evening... Later that evening we made fish soup. Although the fish did not taste good, the soup was delicious, because we had been eating frozen food for more than a month... We also had a good sleep that evening – the ship stopped rolling and the noisy engines were also switched off...

The second day, the ship entered the port ... and we made phone-calls back home. I told my girlfriend that I was fine onboard the ship... I did not tell her the hard times because I did not want her to worry and to feel bad...

4.5 Working at sea which is commonly regarded as volatile, challenging and dangerous, seafarers are often depicted as 'masculine heroes' (Thomas and Bailey 2006). Writing about seafarers on the website echoed this image, which is suggested by the above posting. Furthermore, the posting also indicates that despite the harsh working and living conditions, seafarers did not reveal their difficulties to their partners, perhaps in order to protect their partners' well-being.

4.6 Therefore, writings about seafarers not only provided seafarer-partners with knowledge of life at sea, but also served to construct a heroic image of seafarers. This image gave seafarer-partners a new understanding of seafarers. A dozen of seafarer-partners replied to the above posting, and all of them thanked the posting author because he did what their husbands/boyfriends failed to do – letting them know how hard it was working at sea. In the interview, Mermaid, a seafarer's girlfriend in her mid-twenties, also stated:

He [her boyfriend] does tell me something [about his work]. But he has never told me how harsh his work is, since he is afraid that I may worry about that. [When coming to that], he equivocates. From others' postings, I can loosely feel that his work must be hard.

4.7 This further indicates that information support on the website constructed an ideal seafarers' image: they worked hard but never complained. Such a 'masculine hero' image was also invoked in emotional support, to which I turn next.

Emotional Support

5.1 During the separation period, seafarer-partners experience various kinds of problems – they may long for their partners; they may worry about their safety; and communication between seafaring couples is infrequent and inconvenient (Tang 2007). These problems cause seafarer-partners significant stress. The HCS gave seafarer-partners a space to reveal these problems and also to help each other manage the negative feelings. Three quarters of the informants mentioned explicitly that they liked to disclose their feelings and read and reply to others' postings revealing emotional problems. Lotus, a seafarer's wife aged twenty-eight, for example, said in the interview:

I like to initiate, and respond to, postings regarding emotions, for example, when seafarers' relations with their lovers meet problems, when some people are not confident about their relationships in the separation period, etc ... These emotions and feelings are very similar to mine. I feel empathy with them. I will try my best to comfort them, to encourage them, and to support them.

5.2 Such emotional support was helpful, as Mermaid suggested in the interview:

I feel that ... since he is not home, there is a kind of longing. I want very much to talk to other seafarer-partners about my situation, the problems I experienced in work and everyday life, and my pressure. Then they would reply to me... some of them give me advice, which provides me with guidance in life. Their replies also help to remove some of my pressure.

5.3 To illustrate how this support was offered, it is necessary to closely examine one typical posting which reveals communication problems encountered by Butterfly, a seafarer's girlfriend in her early twenties. She wrote:

Having waited for his messages for two months, I received his short email this evening. My long waiting was only reciprocated by several sentences, such as he is ok, he has arrived at Chile, and he is expecting my letters. I feel that there is only me in this love story longing and waiting for him! It is very disappointing – this is what I got for two months' waiting! I cannot find any courage to wait for him anymore. I cannot feel his love and want to give up! ...

5.4 Clearly, Butterfly's boyfriend failed to meet her expectation: to write her a long, expressive and intimate message to show that he cared about and loved her. This failure disappointed Butterfly, and she thought that her boyfriend did not love her enough. Butterfly's posting attracted twenty replies from other seafarer-partner participants. The following two examples are representative.

Rose: Most seafarers are not good at expressing their emotions. That he said everything was ok is to set your heart at ease...If he told you all the difficulties and pains on the ship, you would worry to death...The same thing happened to me once and I wondered whether my husband still loved me. Until he came back and I found the scars on his body, did I realise what his word 'ok' contained....

Phoenix: I used to be like you. ... Now I have changed. The following advice may help you. First, learn to see things from their [seafarers'] perspective. They are under tremendous pressure working onboard ships. Maybe they do not have time to write their feelings and emotions. Therefore, we [seafarer-partners] should learn to tell ourselves: it is not because he does not love me, but because his work pressure does not allow him to be sentimental. Secondly, we should understand that men do not express their feelings in the way women do. Therefore, we should not expect them to be as verbally expressive as we are...

5.5 Reframing situations has been noted to be one way of managing emotions (Francis 1997; Gergen 1994; Hochschild 1979). Clearly, both Rose and Phoenix were trying to reframe the situation in order to contain Butterfly's frustration. In Phoenix's opinion, seafarers had to work hard at sea and thus had no time to communicate their feelings. Rose had a similar view: seafarers' working conditions were harsh. Sociologists argue that there is a 'gender asymmetry' in affective expression (Duncombe and Marsden 1993, 1995a,

1995b; Harrison 1998). Rose and Phoenix were obviously aware of this asymmetry and employed it to justify seafarers' lack of emotive and intimate communication. Since 'men do not express their feelings as women do', according to Rose and Phoenix, Butterfly should not expect her boyfriend to be as verbally expressive as she was. Furthermore, Rose suggested that seafarers did not say much because they did not want their partners to worry about them. In this way, the 'fact' that 'men do not express their feelings' was no longer a shortcoming but a merit, since it indicated that seafarers cared about their partners so much that they would rather bear the pressure alone in order not to make their partners unduly concerned. Through reframing, Rose and Phoenix tried to persuade Butterfly not to challenge her boyfriend's behaviour, but to accept it.

5.6 To a certain extent, Butterfly accepted the views of Rose and Phoenix and came back to this thread later and wrote:

Thanks for your replies. I know sometimes I am capricious ...Maybe it is like what you said – he is not necessarily 'ok' onboard but does not want me to worry about him. Actually, he is very considerate. Maybe many things are not under his control onboard. Sometimes I feel that I am not kind to him.

These words indicate that Butterfly's bad feelings were managed, at least for the time being.

5.7 Reframing, at least during my observation period, was commonly used by seafarer-partners to comfort, and offer support to, those who were in stress. It was also common that in offering support, seafarer-partners invoked and promoted the heroic image of seafarers. Reframing, however, does not change anything external but individuals' perception. I will come back to this point later.

The 'Happy' and 'Competent' Seafarer-Partners

The 'Happy' Seafarer-Partner

6.1 The above discussion suggests that the HCS did empower seafarer-partners to provide mutual support. The support made seafarer-partners feel that the HCS was a 'warm home', as one of them explained in a posting:

The HCS is our warm home. Here we should comfort each other, encourage each other, and support each other.

6.2 The word 'should' suggests that providing mutual support was regarded as a norm on the website. Seafarer-partners also likened the HCS to their parents' homes where they could always find support. Because it was a 'warm home', seafarer-partners normally regarded each other as 'sisters'. Such a perception reflects a strong sense of belonging and solidarity, which is also indicated by the fact that twenty five out of the thirty informants had made friends with other seafarer-partners on the website (for a detailed discuss of friendship on the HCS website, see Tang forthcoming). This confirms the finding of previous research that women centred online groups tend to be characterised by a positive and nurturing atmosphere (Madge and O'Connor 2006; Wallace 1999).

6.3 The support and solidarity seem to improve seafarer-partners' well-being. In the interview, Rainbow, a seafarer's girlfriend in early twenties, compared her feeling before knowing the HCS with that of after and said:

I feel fuller and happier, compared with the past. In the past, when he was away, I felt like a grousing woman, always thinking about when he was back, when he would ring me, and was never happy. The agony of waiting was always with me. But after making many friends on this website, I felt that besides waiting, I should make life full and myself happy.

6.4 Seagull, another seafarer's girlfriend, made a similar comparison in the interview:

Before I knew this website, I felt that I did not have any friends with whom I could communicate and who can understand seafarers and their partners. Here, we have similar husbands, similar experiences. We help and support each other. I feel that waiting days are very full....

Thus, waiting days for both Rainbow and Seagull were no longer teemed with painful loneliness and helpless. The company of similar others and their support made their lives happy and full. Becoming happy reflects the empowerment dimension of online groups.

The 'Competent' Seafarer-Partner

6.5 However, such empowerment was intertwined with a narrative that seafarers worked hard but never complained. According to Mead (1972), one has a sense of self because he/she is able to take others' attitude to look back at him/her-self, to treat it as an object and to reform it. The heroic image of seafarers provided seafarer-partners with a different perspective to view and judge themselves. From this perspective, seafarer-partners noticed that they had misunderstood their partners before, which led seafarer-partners to change their attitudes. Mermaid explained how participation in the group changed her:

[Participating] makes me feel that I can be a competent seafarer-partner. In the past, I had a misunderstanding. I felt at that time that working onboard was good. He only needed to work eight hours per day. Besides that, life was sleeping, eating and reading. I felt that this kind of life was better than my life. I had to get up in the morning and walk for a distance to start my work, and then had to cook on my own. In contrast, they did not need to take these troubles but enjoyed a higher salary. Later and gradually, I understood that life at sea is harsh. They sacrificed their youth and life in exchange for improving the life quality of their family members. This knowledge and feeling touched and changed me. When he was on leave last time, I felt that I was kinder to him than before. ... I feel that from now on I will ... if he chooses to carry on with this career, I will back him; if he is tired of this and moves ashore, I do not mind the possible low salary and will keep supporting him.

The postings on the site clearly convinced Mermaid that her boyfriend was sacrificing himself for the sake of her welfare. As a result, she determined to give her boyfriend full-hearted support. This determination, in Mermaid's words, made her 'a competent seafarer-partner'.

6.6 The online support also convinced seafarer-partners that they should be less demanding and understand that their partners could not always live up to their expectations. In the interview, Seagull explained that she was able to accommodate her boyfriend's delay of communication:

In the past, I did not know how hard and tiresome his work is. I felt that he should make a phone call to me immediately once his ship was moored to a wharf. Otherwise, I would be very angry. Now I know that their job is hard and busy. This [knowledge] makes my mind more at peace. Having read others' experiences, I feel that life should be like this.

Seagull was no longer angry at her boyfriend's failure to communicate with her at the earliest possible time. This was because she now understood that her boyfriend was busy and that for seafarer-partners 'life should be like that'.

6.7 The analysis so far indicates that seafarer-partners on the website tended to have a common belief – seafarers were hard-working and self-sacrificing, which in turn produced a common value – seafarer-partners should understand and support their husbands/boyfriends. The belief and value provided a framework within which seafarer-partners comforted and supported each other.

6.8 The value reflects, and is also influenced by, the traditional gender role in the Chinese society. Women's place in traditional Chinese culture was in the home as care-givers, while men were supposed to earn a living outside of the domestic sphere (Chan 2008; Yu and Chau 1997; Zhang 2006). In modern China, women have joined the workforce and gender equality is promoted by state policies. According to Stockman (2000), in contemporary urban China both men and women in wedlock are economically active and therefore marital relationships are relatively egalitarian, compared with even Western societies. However, traditional values die hard (Ding 1997; Zhang 2006): women in general are expected to be caring and affectionate, while earning a good living is still regarded to be men's priority. For seafarer-partners, the geographic separation between the couples corresponded with the traditional division of labour: although they had their careers outside of their homes, they nevertheless stayed at the home base; by contrast seafarers were sailing far away from this base. Since seafarers were fulfilling their 'duty' by working hard for a better life for the family, seafarer-partners felt that they should provide them with support and affection at the home base. Thus, to a discussion thread: *What do our seafarer boyfriends/husbands need?*, all seafarer-partners' replies revolved around themes such as understanding, support, love, and a warm home.

Dismissing the Problem

6.9 If we make a distinction between the external environment and the internal perception, it seems that in the process of becoming 'competent', online support did not help seafarer-partners much to change the external environment. Instead, it mainly made them change their perceptions, or rather, themselves. If in the past they had tried to challenge their husbands/boyfriends' certain behaviours, participation in the HCS seems to have made them accept that this was the way it 'should be'. As such, online support helped seafarer-partners to dismiss some of their problems – they no longer perceived problems as problems. The

strategy of dismissing problems seems most visible when the common belief was under threat, for example, when seafarer-partners had to discuss the issue of infidelity.

6.10 There is a common perception about seafarers – they are promiscuous and have girls in every port (Foster and Cacioppe 1986; Sampson 2005; Thomas 2003). Infidelity is an issue for couples in most, if not all, societies. In the past, Chinese women were required to be faithful and obedient to their husbands by the Confucian patriarchal order, while men were legally allowed to have concubines (Fang 1988; Stockman 2000). As a result, though women were not happy about their husbands' promiscuity, they had little power to challenge this inequality. In modern China, the promotion of gender equality and the ban of polygamy make it possible and legitimate for men and women to require fidelity from their partners on an equal footing (Chen 2005; Ding 1997). Therefore, the perception about seafarers' infidelity threatened the belief and value in the HCS. During the online observation period, I noted that this issue was a recurrent discussion theme. One reaction to such a topic was to steer clear of it, for example, Dolphin, a seafarer's girlfriend at mid-twenties, explained in the interview:

I think that it is better not to discuss negative topics, such as red-light areas. This may be regarded as self-deception, but I think it is better not to discuss these. I think that people tend to generalize a special case to all other ones. Couples inevitably get affected psychologically by discussing these issues, even though there is mutual-trust. For the sake of most seafaring families and marriages, it is better to discuss less the dark side.

6.11 Likewise, several other seafarer-partners did not like discussing this issue either and wrote in their replies to such discussion threads: this topic had been discussed many times; there was no need to discuss it over and over again. However, the recurrence of this discussion indicates that it was impossible to avoid it. In this context, two strategies were employed to reframe the issue as something unworthy of concerns. One was to dismiss infidelity as something specific to seafarers, which is evident in one seafarer-partner response to a thread about infidelity:

Infidelity is not a unique phenomenon of seafarers. Aren't there lots of men working ashore unfaithful to their wives? It is an issue of the whole society. Seafarers should not be equalled with infidelity. They should not be singled out in discussing this issue.

6.12 The other strategy was to believe that only a small number of 'immoral' seafarers went to red-light zones and that their particular husbands/boyfriends would not do that because they loved each other. For example, one seafarer-partner replied to one of such threads:

My husband once told me that several of his colleagues were caught by police when they were doing business with prostitutes².... [But] only a minority of seafarers are like that! I trust my husband and am not worried.

6.13 In this way, seafarer-partners' knowledge that seafarers could be promiscuous and the confidence that their husbands/boyfriends were faithful to them were 'naturally' and yet paradoxically united. Employing these strategies, seafarer-partners persuaded each other not to be concerned with the issue, which also helped to preserve the heroic image of seafarers.

The Empowerment/Disempowerment Tension

6.14 Participation made seafarer-partners 'happy' and 'competent'. They became happy because the HCS enabled them to come together and to provide mutual support. However, such support helped them to change their perception and accept a negotiated 'truth' instead of questioning their partners' negative behaviour. To put it another way, seafarer-partners were empowered to change themselves, but this empowerment made them give up their effort to challenge the status quo.

6.15 Thus, an empowerment/disempowerment tension was created in the HCS. As Mosedale (2005) and Murphy-Graham (2009) point out, the issue of empowerment needs to be discussed in a relevant context. In this paper the appropriate context is gender equality in intimate relationships. Following Rowlands (1997), Murphy-Graham (2009) argues that to become empowered, women must develop the capacity to negotiate with their partners. Through negotiation, according to Murphy-Graham, women can influence the (unequal) nature of the relationship and make it more equal and more rewarding. Duncombe and Marsden (1993; 1995a) point out that the gender asymmetry in affective expression reflects gender inequality – women are required to satisfy men's emotional needs without receiving the same in return. The online support, however, discouraged seafarer-partners from questioning the issue and took away their capacity to negotiate. In this context, seafarer-partners were disempowered. The same applies to the issue of infidelity – seafarer-partners were persuaded not to be concerned.

6.16 According to Summers-Effler (2002; 2004), when women come together and share personal experiences, they are likely to see their individual problems as collective ones caused by social inequality, which in turn can raise critical consciousness and encourage them to challenge the status quo. The case of seafarer-partners, however, suggests that in a group, individuals can help each other to dismiss problems. If problems are not really problems, then, there is no need to do anything about them. In this way, a group can help to preserve, rather than subvert, the status quo.

Conclusion

7.1 Research has revealed two aspects of online support: it brings about empowerment (e.g. Barak et al. 2008; Orgad 2004; van Uden-Krann et al. 2008), and at the same time it produces common values (Bar-Lev 2008; Bar-Lev and Tillinger 2008; Sandaunet 2008). The interaction between the two, however, has not been explicitly explored. This paper fills in this gap by showing that common beliefs and values in groups can make online support, which is supposedly empowering, serve disempowering purposes. Thus, it suggests that online support can produce a tension between empowerment and disempowerment.

7.2 This finding applies directly to cases in which group values persuade participants not to pursue the effort of changing external environments, but to change their own perceptions instead. It is reasonable to assume that different cases also exist, in which common values encourage individuals to raise critical awareness internally in order to acquire the will and the capacity to change the external world effectively. In these cases, online support is likely to empower individuals to transform both themselves and their living conditions. Equally, in these cases, the vision of Summers-Effler (2002; 2004) – when women come together and share personal experiences, they can raise critical consciousness and encourage them to challenge the status quo – might be realised. Considering both types of cases, we can come to the conclusion that group values condition the empowerment potential of online support.

7.3 The above discussion begs one set of questions: how can individuals' critical awareness be raised in (online) support groups? Does the composition of the group (for example, the homogeneity or heterogeneity of participants) play a role in raising this awareness? These questions, however, are beyond the scope of this paper and invite future research.

Notes

1 The website is also for seafarers to exchange their experiences and views. This paper, however, focuses on seafarer-partners' participation.

2 Prostitution is illegal in China.

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