

The Filipino “Backer System” in the Maritime Industry: The Privileged Access to Seafaring Jobs

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Abstract. Drawing from the narratives of twenty-eight global Filipino seafarers and two Crewing Managers, this paper analyzes how Bourdieu’s notion of social capital is utilized through the Filipino “backer system”. The “backer system” refers to a legitimated practice in the maritime industry where an applicant seeks a backer or a patron to recommend him to a manning agency to launch his seafaring career. This practice, however, is governed by characteristics that define the power relations among the social actors. The backer system emphasizes why strong ties matter – how the utilization of family social capital and ethnic ties mobilizes a jobseeker’s career and how prospective seafarers usually access these ties. As social capital is a network of trust and reciprocity, the Filipino value of *utang na loob* reflects the nature of the transaction enclosed in the “backer system”. *Utang na loob* refers to debt of goodwill where one who receives favor from another is morally required to return the favor. However, as polarizing as it is, the principle of *utang na loob* is shaped as symbolic capital and symbolic violence. As a capital, it transforms a disadvantaged position into an advantaged one, where economic and instrumental gains are received. When the transaction becomes abusive and exploitative, it becomes symbolic violence. Premised on an unequal endowment of social capital, the “backer system” reproduces inequality, where those with merit and cultural capital fail to advance their careers because their social capital is non-existent or inadequate.

Keywords: backer, social capital, social network, Filipino seafaring, ethnic ties, *utang na loob*.

Protekcijos sistema Filipinų jūriniame sektoriuje: apie privilegijas jūreivių darbo rinkoje

Santrauka. Pasitelkus Bourdieu socialinio kapitalo sampratą straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip filipinietiška protekcijos sistema veikia jūriniame sektoriuje. Protekcija yra įteisinta socialinė praktika, kai savo karjeros pradžioje pirmą kartą norintis įsidarbinti jūrininkas turi susirasti užtarėją ar rėmėją, kuris jį rekomenduotų agentūroms, įdarbinančioms įgulas. Tokia praktika pasižymi savitais galios santykiais, o pati protekcijos sistema atskleidžia „stiprių“ socialinių saitų svarbą – kaip šeimos socialinis kapitalas ir etniniai saitai leidžia užsitikrinti sėkmingos karjeros pradžią ir kaip būsimi jūreiviai šiais saitais pasinaudoja. Socialinis kapitalas veikia kaip pasitikėjimo ir abipusių mainų tinklas, kur protekcija grindžiama bendresniu filipinų visuomeinei būdingu vertybiniu principu – *utang na loob*. Šis principas nusako įsiskolinimą geradariui, kai iš kito

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žmogaus gavęs malonę asmuo yra moraliai įpareigotas jam atsilyginti. *Utang na loob* veikia ir kaip socialinio kapitalo, ir kaip simbolinės prievartos sistema. Viena vertus, ji padeda asmeniui pereiti iš blogesnės pozicijos į pranašesnę, teikiančią didesnę ekonominę ir instrumentinę naudą. Kita vertus, kai mainai tampa ydingi ir jais manipuliuojama, jau susiduriame su simboliu prievarta. Filipinuose protekcijos sistema, grindžiama nevienodu socialinio kapitalo paskirstymu, palaiko nelygybę, kai turintiems kultūrinį kapitalą ir gabumų asmenims karjera blokuojama tik dėl to, kad jie stokoja socialinio kapitalo arba jis nėra tinkamas. Svarstymai apie protekcijos sistemą grindžiami interviu, kurie buvo atlikti su 28 jūreiviais ir dviejų įgulų vadybininkais, medžiaga.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: protekcija, socialinis kapitalas, socialinis tinklas, Filipinai, jūrų pramonė, etniškumas, *utang na loob*.

1. Introduction

The Philippines has established itself as a top labor supplier in global seafaring. In the two-tiered profession where the crew is categorized as ratings and officers, the country ranks first in labor-contracting and officers (UNCTAD 2021).¹ Though the number of deployed seafarers has decreased over the past few years, the Philippines remains a significant recruitment hub for global ship owners. The demand for seafaring officers remains high, and supply is currently in deficit. However, there is an oversupply of ratings, as reflected in the Seafarer Workforce Report (BIMCO and ICS 2021). Seventy recognized Maritime Higher Education Institutions (MHEIs) in the Philippines produce an imbalance of graduates and employment opportunities for career starters and ratings. As most manning agencies demand previous sea experience, new maritime graduates find it hard to launch their seafaring careers. Hence, the need to utilize social capital becomes inevitable for those who have accrued social networks in the field.

Bourdieu's contention of social capital serves as the theoretical framework in this study of using backers or referrals, which provides a vital understanding of social capital. The Backer system is a common organizational practice in the maritime profession and across numerous careers in the Philippines. This practice is even more pervasive in government positions. It guarantees privileged access to the applicants, and manning agencies legitimize the practice as they can save from hiring processes, which may also offer better hiring outcomes (Fernandez et al. 2000).

Filipino social capital works well in perpetuating the “backer system” or *palakasan* system in the maritime industry. It refers to a culture of patronage, penetrating across many organizations. Utilizing a backer is an offshoot of the Philippine workplace's *Padrino* (patron) system. The *Padrino* system depicts a network of symbiotic relationships between a patron (godfather/godmother) and a client (godchild). Though initially constructed in a religious context, it extended outside the spiritual realm as an exchange relationship between a more robust and resourceful patron and a recipient-client of the patron's favors. The *Padrino* system highlights

¹ This section is an extended version of a chapter in the author's ongoing dissertation *Exploring Filipino Seafaring Practice through Bourdieu's Lens*.

the Filipino idea of the family. The family's political-economic role is better understood as a combination of blood-tie kinship and ritual kinship networks (Wong and Lara-de-Leon 2018). In a modern Philippine corporation, the *Padrino* system is often called the *bata-bata* relationship – *bata* is a kinship term meaning "child." Jocano (1997) expounds that in Filipino social psychology, *bata* means a "patronized individual," a protégé, a confidential man, a close friend, a loyal comrade, someone you can depend on in times of need. Like the *Padrino* system, the relationship persists as long as the superordinate person has power, and the *bata* must be protected (Kondo 2008).

The strategy of having a "backer" or *Padrino* as an entry mechanism in the maritime industry, either as a utility man, a cadet, or be deployed as a seafarer, has been utilized by many Filipino seafarers, especially those who have no sea experience and have accessible social capital. The strategy has been in place for several decades, yet scholarly studies about this system remain scarce. The following questions guide this current study: 1) How does the backer system mobilize Bourdieu's notion of social capital vis-à-vis Granovetter's more individualist interpretation of social capital in his weak-tie theory? 2) How does the circulation of social capital forms two different structures of power relations that generate symbolic power and symbolic violence? Auxiliary to these aims, this paper also aspires to contribute to the dearth of research on the backer system in hiring global Filipino seafarers. As Granovetter (1973) claims, finding a job is not a socially disconnected process but rooted in the applicant's web of social ties. Filipinos' most accessible social capital lies within the family network, and members mobilize it for their good. One's community, where a person accumulates social capital, is also a source of ethnic ties, which can be accessed and mobilized in the field of seafaring.

There are several reasons why many job-searching seafarers subscribe to the backer system. While the manning agency aims to cut costs in hiring and training seafarers, applicants aim to shorten the time they spend applying and waiting for the agency's response and get better job placements. The center of seafaring job opportunities lies in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, and for seafarers who hail from the province of Iloilo, staying in Manila while on a job search entails financial costs. Mobilizing social capital through the backer system presents the most practical solution to quickly launch one's maritime career.

In the succeeding sections, a brief overview of related literature on social capital, social network, and employment provides the reader with the theoretical foundation where I attempt to link Bourdieu's concept of social capital to Granovetter's social network theory, particularly on the strength of weak ties. Subsequently, an outline of data collection and analysis procedures follows the literature review, from which I drew my data from active seafarers' and crewing managers' narratives. The discussion tackles the Filipino seafaring field as a field of intense competition, thus the subscription to the "Backer System." This strategy highlights the use of strong ties (family network, ethnic ties), divulging how the backer system is operationalized. Moreover, the underlying principle of trust and reciprocity enshrined in the backer system is discussed, exploring how the actors situate themselves in a relationship governed by the Filipino value of *utang na loob*, which reproduces a polarizing consequence of symbolic capital

and symbolic violence. In addition, there is a discussion on how the backer system produces social inequality generated by individual disparities in the capital acquisition and the structure of the maritime industry in the Philippines.

2. Social Capital, Social Network and Employment

Bourdieu considers social capital as the aggregate of the actual or virtual resources that accrue to an individual or a group through a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; 119; Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu emphasizes that the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent primarily relies on the density of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and depends on the volume of the capital possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected (Bourdieu 1986; 241). Lin's (2000) contention of social capital is close to Bourdieu's, defining social capital as "investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns." Social capital boosts one's chances of instrumental returns, that is, ease of job placement for Filipino seafarers.

Portes (1998) argues that Bourdieu's analysis of social capital is the most theoretically refined among those that introduced the term in contemporary sociological discourse. Social capital focuses on the benefits accruing to individuals by participation in groups and the deliberate construction of sociability to create this resource. Social networks are not possessed naturally; they must be constructed through conscious investment strategies geared to institutionalize group relations and can be a reliable source of other benefits. Indeed, Bourdieu's definition of social capital can be analyzed through two elements: first is the social relationship in which individuals can claim access to resources possessed by their associates. Second, the volume and quality of those resources. Through social capital, actors can gain direct access to economic resources; they can increase their cultural capital through contacts with experts or individuals with refinement; alternatively, they can affiliate with institutions that confer valued credentials (Portes et al. 1999).

Moreover, Portes (1998) elucidates that social capital acquisition requires deliberate economic and cultural resources investment. He stresses that despite Bourdieu's insistence that social or cultural capital outcomes are reducible to financial capital, these alternative forms' processes are not. They each possess their dynamics and are characterized by less transparency and more uncertainty relative to economic exchange. For example, social capital transactions can be described by undetermined obligations, unknown time frames, and the unenforceability of reciprocity expectations (Portes 1998; 4). When contextualized in Filipino seafaring practices, reciprocal obligations revolve primarily around the seafarer negotiating for his relative's entry to the company for his continued loyalty. Out of shame or *hiya*, he will remain in the company once the company acts upon his request. However, this does not guarantee he would stay for long, as ship officers easily navigate their employment, especially since the global maritime industry has struggled with a low supply of ship officers.

Similarly, the seafarer who launched his career through a backer would also be bound by shame or *hiya*. Moreover, he would prove to his patron that he is worthy of his privileged access to his career. And still, as the terms of *utang na loob* remain vague and ambiguous, the seafarer-beneficiary may not look back on the benefits received from a backer.

Granovetter (1973) argues that weak ties produce significant macro-cohesive results, facilitating influence and information, mobility opportunity, and community organization. His position was supported by Brown and Konrad (2001), Fingerman (2009), and Catherine O’Sullivan and Terry O’Sullivan (2022). However, studies challenge the assumption that weak ties produce more results than strong ties (Krämer et al. 2021). Strong ties have found their relevant influence (Murray et al. 1981), especially on employment in Asian societies (Bian 1997; Obukhova and Zhang 2017). Some studies posit that both ties are significant in job search (Montgomery 1994; Van Hoye et al. 2009). However, while Absuelo and Hancock (2018) detail the inefficacy of strong ties in Filipino migration, Saksela-Bergholm (2020) contends that Filipinos utilize diverse social relations, but the actual mobilization of social capital happens in a particular socio-economic context.

3. Methodology

I conducted narrative inquiries with 23 active Filipino seafarers who speak the *Hiligaynon* language and belong to the sub-ethnic group of *Ilonggo* people. *Ilonggo* seafarers have established themselves as global seafarers and came into the focus of few social and anthropological studies (Alimen et al. 2013; Lamvik 2002; Swift 2011). Narrative inquiry is a method that focuses on the potential of storytelling as a means of generating data (Huber et al. 2016). Narrative inquiry aims to access individuals’ practices in a given or extended moment and place (Connelly and Clandinin 2006; 480; Costa, Burke and Murphy 2019). The interviews were conducted in November 2019 – August 2020, where interviews average at one hour and thirty minutes.

Using thematic analysis, I noted that a persistent theme among their narratives, especially how their careers started, is the utilization of a backer. I explored different themes from such narratives, using Bourdieu’s notions of the social field, social capital, and symbolic violence. In further enhancing the data, I conducted online semi-structured interviews with two crewing managers in October 2021, who can corroborate and expound on the dynamics of the backer system in the hiring process of Filipino seafarers. I also conducted five additional semi-structured interviews with Filipino seafarers of diverse ethnic backgrounds in a seafarer accommodation in Germany, where I stayed for a week. Research informers were chosen through convenience sampling and a snowball method, where the initial set of participants gave referrals for another group of participants. Names of participants were anonymized for ethical and confidentiality purposes. Out of the 30 seafarers interviewed, 12 are ship officers, 16 are ratings, and two are crewing managers. The table below shows the participants’ profiles:

Table 1. Informants' profile

Informant seafarer	Age	Position and Category (R-Ratings/O-Officer)	Informant seafarer	Age	Position and Category (R-Ratings/O-Officer)
1. Nonoy	49	Bosun/R	16. Jet	28	Oiler/R
2. Ramon	58	Captain/O	17. Angga	32	Second Mate/O
3. Joel	44	Helmsman/R	18. Lee	37	Second Mate/O
4. Roger	43	Electrician/R	19. Tisoy	29	Third Engineer/O
5. Dan	50	Electrician/R	20. Dennis	53	Second Engineer/O
6. Rodel	36	Able-Bodied seaman (AB)/R	21. Rey	27	Oiler/R
7. Brad	43	Engine Repairman/R	22. Jerry	34	Oiler/R
8. Pedro	58	Chief Engineer/O	23. Vicente	55	Captain/O
9. Niel	45	Cabin Steward/R	24. Andy	40	Crewing Manager
10. Matt	36	Second Engineer/O	25. Gil	63	Crewing Manager
11. Janus	52	Engine Fitter/R	26. Rolly	33	AB/R
12. Owen	57	Captain/O	27. Tope	40	AB/R
13. Lando	38	Second Officer/O	28. Gapo	52	Second Mate/O
14. Art	40	Second Engineer/O	29. Nick	32	Electrician/R
15. Chad	27	Oiler/R	30. Rico	43	AB/R

4. The Filipino Seafaring: An Intense Field of Competition

The seafaring field for many Filipinos is a field of struggles and competition. The imbalance between the demand and supply of Filipino seafarers in the global market put many aspiring seafarers in a disadvantaged position, which influences their behavior to seek strategies to modify their social standing. Bourdieu recognized the presence of constraints in a social field and the need to strategize. Utilizing one's social capital is evident through the "backer system" that enhances one's chances to enter the field. The strategy moves a seafarer to a secured slot to a company's pool of seafarers, albeit with consequential symbolic violence.

From the narratives of thirty research participants, I tracked themes on the dynamics of the backer system. Seafarers' narratives emphasize the role of family ties and how the family social capital is accessed and mobilized for a family member's career. The frequency of contact is not an issue as blood relations in the Filipino culture are valued. Aside from familial ties, ethnic ties become an apparent bias among seafarers that led many of them to offer their social capital to applicants with the same ethnic background. Research participants discuss the governing trust relationship in the backer system, whereby each actor is governed by an

unwritten set of rules of trust and reciprocity. The Filipino culture of *utang na loob* binds the client to perform certain obligations. Despite insufficiency in cultural capital, the backer system may give those with accessible and utilizable social capital the privilege to access seafaring jobs. However, as the endowment of social capital is not equally distributed among jobseekers, this strategy reproduces socioeconomic inequalities and overtakes someone else's opportunities. The following sections expound on the complex dynamic of the backer system in Filipino seafaring.

4.1. The Backer System: Strong Ties Matter

Contrary to Granovetter's (1973) hypothesis that weak ties provide micro-macro bridges more effectively than strong ties, Filipino seafarers utilize their strong ties to launch their careers. The family has been the most substantial network of relations. Research participants often cite their immediate family members (father, brother) and relatives (uncles, cousins) roles in their initial engagement in the seafaring field. The family's social capital is not only relevant in seafaring. Boyd (1989) notes how family, friendship, and community networks facilitate migration to industrial nations. Moreover, job information is provided by both weak and strong ties (Murray et al. 1981).

The family's importance has been emphasized in Filipino society. The 2019 Pew Research Center Global View on Family Life reveals both Indonesia and the Philippines as an exemption to the majority sentiment across 27 surveyed countries that believe family ties have gotten weaker over the past 20 years (Pew Research Center 2019). Indonesians (61%) and Filipinos (52%) think that family ties have gotten more potent, which is a positive thing.

Though McDonald and Elder (2006) argue that social capital matters minutely in early career, seafaring applicants need to actualize their social capital this early on and may abandon the solicitation of other's social capital when they have become experienced seafarers. Excerpts from participants' narratives manifest that the use of strong ties catapulted their seafaring careers:

My brother recommended me to his shipping company. He was already a Second Engineer at that time. I worked with him in my first vessel assignment as he requested the company that I join in that vessel. My seafaring continues from then on. It is better to have someone to follow-up your status in the company than having nobody at all. (Dennis, 53, Second Engineer)

I applied at my first manning agency through a cousin, and I joined their ship as an oiler. After a few months, I requested my twin brother who is about to graduate as a nautical student; the Korean principal approved the request, and he joined me in the same ship as a cadet. (John, 54, Motorman)

Yes, a backer is needed. Most have backers. By the time I applied, my brother was not on good terms with the captain. So, I have to wait for things to calm down. However, before that, our youngest brother already got in. (Gapo, 52, Second Mate)

Participant seafarers divulge that one way or another, they sought some form of help from their family members to launch their first international onboard experience. In Dennis, John, and Gapo's narratives, we have to take note that they were able to access their strong

ties' influence in the hiring process. Still, their referees' cultural and social capital is crucial to mobilizing their careers. Their backers were ship officers, having positions sought after by the companies and wanted to retain as seafarers. To pay it forward and optimize their accumulated social capital, participants also revealed that they had helped siblings and relatives join them in their companies.

Boyd (1989) argues that social networks, especially those linked with families and households, allow the understanding of migration as a social product – not as a sole outcome of agent's decisions nor as an exclusive product of structure – economic or political parameters, but instead as a consequence of all these factors in interaction. This approach also permits conceptualizing migration as a contingency. Migration is conditioned by both sending and receiving parties' historically generated social, political, and economic structures. Families undeniably play an essential role in migration. They function as sustenance units that condition the propensity to migrate and the migration pattern. Secondly, families are socializing agents and transmit cultural values and norms, influencing who migrates and why. They also share norms about the meaning of migration and maintain familial-based obligations. Thirdly, families represent a social group that can create kinship networks that influence geographically dispersed migration decisions. Furthermore, families are mobile units where they migrate together, or individuals can be set out with expectations that other family members will benefit from (Boyd 1989; 643).

In Philippine organizations, personalism, familism, and other values (smooth interpersonal relations or *pakikisama*, *utang na loob*, *hiya*) govern harmonious relationships (Arce 2001). This set of values is emphasized in the individual's network of selected relatives and other allies. In contrast, the impersonal and more universal values such as merit principle and rationality of procedures demanded by official laws are not central in organizational behaviors (Arce 2001; 187–190). Although manning agencies cater to global market demand, their operations are imbued with Filipino values, inserting familial social capital as privileged access.

Another feature of the Filipino seafaring families is its extended family relations wherein evident cooperation is among the consanguineal family and the affinal relatives and kinship relations to boost family welfare. Rico, an Able-Bodied Seaman (AB) I interviewed in a seafarer's hotel in Germany while waiting for his flight home, recounted that his godfather, a ship captain, backed him up in launching his career. He has been an active seafarer for 17 years and has been loyal to one manning agency.

Other seafarers' accounts reveal that they have received financial and referral aid from their aunts and uncles, their spouses, and even their godfathers and godmothers, who extended help to get them through their college education. These informant seafarers are likely to oblige whenever these family members ask for financial support because of the Filipino sense of debt of gratitude or *utang na loob*.

With the established relations among family members, accessing family social capital is a norm. Coleman (1988) contends that social capital is inherent within and outside the family and affects various outcomes for the family and its members. These are relationships that parents have with their children. Further, family social capital is not confined to blood relatives.

Still, it includes relationships that parents have with teachers, school administrators, librarians, or any non-family member who can affect their child's academic outcomes. Social capital, however, is often based primarily on the family. The family represents the central context in which such capital affects youth's school performance and attainment. Family capital is then regarded as providing children with a sense of identity and a common purpose, both within their family and culture (Blair 2014).

4.2. Ethnic Ties as Strong Ties

Aside from familial relations, Filipinos strongly value their ethnic ties. Anthias (2007) argues that social capital includes ethnic ties. In an interview with Andy, an *Ilonggo* Crewing Manager, he admits that he prefers hiring *Ilonggo* seafarers because of their work quality and the sense of belongingness that he feels with them. Andy previously worked as a seafarer before assuming the managerial position. He also studied in a maritime school in Iloilo and has established strong ties with his comrades. Social capital among townmates tends to mobilize migration (Christ 2020). This contention is evidenced by the migration trajectories Ilocanos navigated as they are the primary source of Filipino migrants in Hawaii (Norbeck 1959; Perriera 1994). Although a stranger is not usually sought as a backer, there are instances where co-ethnicity brings people together and mobilize careers. Lee, a Second Mate, recounts how a fellow *Ilonggo* helped him with his referral:

There was a coffee shop in the boarding house where I stayed in Manila. I was with fellow applicants; we were at the coffee shop when this seafarer from Iloilo saw us. He talked to us and asked which company are we from. We told him we are new graduates and are on a job search. Then he told us to go to this company. He gave me a referral letter, and I stopped applying to other companies as this one is almost sure to hire me. And it did! (Lee, 37, Second Mate)

Although without previous social interaction or relations, Lee and his backer belonged to the same ethnic group in the Philippines. There are at least 77 major ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippine archipelago. The *Ilonggo* people mainly occupy the province of Iloilo (Peralta 2000) but generally refer to the Hiligaynon-speaking people of the Panay Island. Lee's narrative suggests that ethnic ties may be resources available to actors but may only be effectively mobilized upon the applicant's persistent action. Anthias (2007) posits that social capital based on ethnicity compensates for the lack of mainstream social, cultural, and economic capitals. Lee is disadvantaged by not knowing anyone who can help him with his application. Meeting his fellow *Ilonggo* may have been serendipitous. Nevertheless, he took his offer for sponsorship seriously, asked for a reference letter, and waited for his application to be approved though it has taken three months.

Ethnic ties are mobilized in launching seafaring careers and when a seafarer deserves a promotion. Pedro, a Chief Engineer, recounts how he helped a townmate get the promotion he deserved by talking to the captain to promote this Third Engineer to Second Engineer, emphasizing why he deserves the promotion. It was their first time as crewmates, and Pedro was

fascinated that they both knew many people from their town but were strangers to each other.

To the more experienced and higher-ranked seafarers I interviewed, they explicitly stated that they had launched the careers of their immediate family members, neighbors, relatives, and townmates, to help mobilize the socioeconomic statuses of these people. Ramon, a ship captain, whom I interviewed as one of my first participants, was then beaming with pride when he recounted how he backed up twenty-five townmates so they could upgrade their economic lives. He is trying to build a legacy of helping as many prospective seafaring townmates as a way to optimize his social capital.

4.3. A Network of Trust and Reciprocity

The Backer system rests on a trust and reciprocity principle. Some research participants seriously contemplate when to use their acquired social capital. There is an underlying fear of whether their referrals would value their privileged access and prove worthy of their skills and character, avoiding compromising their reputations with their principals and agencies. Smith (2005) notes that this fear is a common antecedent why referees have denied help to their job-seeking ties. Access, therefore, is not a guarantee of the actualization of social capital. The prospective referee's willingness to recommend an applicant to the manning agency rests primarily on the cultural and symbolic capital of the applicant – whether he has qualifications and whether he is perceived as a “good” worker (O'Connor 2013). From participants' narratives, backers feel accountable for their referrals. For each favor they put forth, their reputation and credibility are at stake, both for the skills and behavior of their referred seafarers.

In reviewing the findings of a national survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations, Abad (2005) sees two distinctive notions of Filipino social capital: networks and trust manifested in the backer system in the Filipino seafaring. The patron trusts the client that he would fulfill his onboard duties well, and at the same time, the patron counts that the manning agency would also act positively on his referral. The client also trusts the patron to honor his referral by regularly following up on his application.

Abad (2005) deduced that findings fall into three general themes. Firstly, the perpetuation of network contacts with close family and friends or bonding social capital. Secondly, the insufficiency of associational ties, or bridging social capital among adult Filipinos. Lastly, the asymmetrical aspect of social capital is that those who bond more and trust more come from the privileged ranks. He has also identified three types of social networks in Philippine society. First, the kin-based network is centered on family and household arrangements that provide social and economic support to its members. The second one is the non-kin-based networks that focus on friendship relations, organizations, and financial or work-based arrangements that care for people's needs. The third type is the alliance system that combines kin and non-kin members in a network geared to provide support in times of need and enhance one's social position (Abad 2005; 6).

Gil, a crewing manager, claiming that the backer system is an industry-wide practice in the Philippines, explains why manning agencies accommodate referrals from their crew, especially coming from their ship officers:

As a way of appreciation for our ex-crew members, the company provides an opportunity to our crew's relatives who want to pursue the profession by initially serving as office utility personnel. We were able to produce long-serving crew and officers through this system. (Gil, 63, Crewing Manager)

Gil acknowledges the small number of vessels his manning agency manages. He clarifies that he has to take in referred applicants initially as utility men. This strategy buys him more time to look into the crew rotation schedule. He may then insert a utility man for onboard work when the schedule permits. He must be cautious not to unfairly situate a crew member for an extended contract or longer vacation time. Existing crew members are a priority as they have been serving the company.

From seafarers' narratives, a referral may result in a ship assignment right away, especially if there is an urgent need for additional crew or be assigned for a few months to a year in the manning agency as utility men. Galam (2019) expounds on the dynamic of this trust relationship which embodies exploitative work. Manning agencies use this strategy as a technology of servitude as utility men are made to work without monetary compensation. However, the manning agency does not perceive utility manning as abusive. They constantly justify it as a training ground for future seafarers to condition themselves how work onboard would be. As utility manning becomes a legitimated practice, utility men perceive their entry as privileged access to the maritime career. As "men in waiting," the company guarantees that they will be deployed in months, a few weeks if there will be an available position in one of the agency's vessels.

5. The Polarizing Consequence of the Filipino *utang na loob*: The Symbolic Capital and Symbolic Violence Divide

The backer and the *Padrino* system's consequence for those whose favors have been extended is always to look back to the patrons with gratitude, or in Filipino character *utang na loob*. *Utang na loob* is believed as indebtedness. It is non-repayable, and the demand to be acknowledged and recognized becomes an underlying expectation from the receiver and not the provider (Rungduin et al. 2016). As an indebtedness that death cannot even erase, *utang na loob* stands out among the many virtues that define a Filipino. The English translation gratitude is even inadequate as the term fails to encompass the nuances of *utang na loob*. The English translation that most resembles *utang na loob* definition is "debt of goodwill" (Dancel 2005).

Leonardo de Castro (1998), just like Dancel (2005), renders *utang na loob* as a "debt of goodwill" and is incurred when a person becomes the beneficiary of significant assistance or favor given by another. De Castro describes the beneficiary as in acute need of the extended aid. The debt is appreciated as goodwill. By extending help to another person's pressing need,

the benefactor can express positive dispositions towards the beneficiary. The essence of *utang na loob* is that receiving the assistance or favor situates the recipient in a position of indebtedness. However, the benefactor's *kagandahang loob* (goodwill) forms the state of indebtedness. An act conveys *kagandahang loob* only if done out of *kusang loob* (roughly, free will). If this is so, the benefactor has no right to demand reciprocity. However, the beneficiary has a "self-imposed" obligation or is bound to follow an unwritten rule in repaying *kagandahang loob* with *kagandahang loob* (De Castro 1998).

The concept of reciprocity as enclosed in the principle of *utang na loob* is practiced universally. Putnam (1995) retains social trust in his definition of social capital, where when combined with networks and norms, it facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Gouldner (1960) acknowledges that reciprocity is a moral norm and that it is a pattern of "mutually contingent exchange of gratifications" which regulates human behavior. As reciprocity is based on unequal power relations, exploitation is part of the relationship (Grøn and Svendsen 2013).

Distinctiveness of Filipino *utang na loob* encompasses complications as it has been and is still being practiced in so many complex forms. In Filipino seafaring, *utang na loob* produces symbolic capital for both the providers and develops into symbolic violence to the recipients. Symbolic capital refers to a form of capital that the various guises assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate (Bourdieu 1989; 17). Therefore, it is a way of talking about the legitimation of power relations through symbolic forms. It is a form of "legitimate accumulation, through which the dominant groups (herein the provider) secure a capital of 'credit' which seems to owe nothing to the logic of exploitation." Bourdieu understands symbolic capital as "a sort of advance" extended by the dominated to the dominant. As long as the dominated finds it is within their interest to accord recognition and legitimation to the dominant. It is a "collective belief," a "capital of trust" that stems from social esteem as well as material wealth (Swartz 1997).

Symbolic capital concerns reputation and has roots in the other forms of capital that a social actor might possess. Therefore, all forms of capital can qualify as symbolic capital (Ihlen 2018). According to Bourdieu (1986; 257), social capital always functions as symbolic capital since it is "governed by the logic of knowledge and acknowledgment." An individual's reputation for being well-connected is a form of symbolic capital. For seafarers who "backed up" or recommended new seafarers to a manning agency, this already signifies that the dominant here have already accumulated social capital within the organization. The more symbolic capital he earns, his reputation is further enhanced by his power to launch someone else's seafaring career. Through this form of symbolic power, as he has power over the dominated as a backer, he simultaneously puts the recipient of his help in symbolic violence as the recipient is "at his disposal" – socially obligated by *utang na loob*.

Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e., culture) upon groups or classes as they are experienced as legitimate. It includes processes whereby, in all societies, order and social restraint are produced by indirect, cultural

mechanisms rather than by direct, coercive social control (Jenkins 1992). Seafarers must prove to their backers that they deserve the received help. Their behavior onboard is interlinked to their backers. This scenario is given as backers vouched not only for their abilities but also for their excellent character.

Utang na loob rests on a set of firm explicit social expectations. Failure to meet any of these leads to social stress or cleavage of varying degrees. Failure on the part of the person of whom particular behavior is expected can generate ill will, humiliation, shame, and desire for retaliation on the part of the one expecting. It can also have effects that are of broader implications. Breakdown threatens more than the close relationship between two individuals; it threatens the functioning of a whole network of relationships (Kaut 1961).

The *utang na loob* reciprocity is an ancient Filipino operating principle. Colin (1663, see Blair and Robertson 1911) described the social obligations binding a barangay chief and his constituents. Every Filipino is culturally wired to possess an *utang na loob*; he should be aware of his duties to those he receives favors and repay them in any acceptable manner. The concept of *utang na loob* primarily stems from the family; it is used regarding parent-child and sibling relationships, although the affective part is more profound than non-familial *utang na loob*. Children, for example, are expected to be everlastingly grateful to their parents, not only for the care and material needs they have provided but more essentially for giving them life itself. Although Hollnsteiner (1961) qualifies that the parent-child *utang na loob* is complementary rather than reciprocal. Parents do not possess *utang na loob* toward their children as they have to rear them and complemented by the children's obligation to respect and obey them, and show their gratitude by taking care of them in old age (Hollnsteiner 1961).

Hence, Filipino seafarers felt chained to the obligation to support their parents until their deaths, as they are earning lucratively. This perpetual obligation is what happened to Chief Engineer Pedro. Despite having nine siblings, he was left to support his parents when they were alive and financed both parents' burials without his siblings' help. However, each has to share proportionately yet receives nothing from siblings working and earning decent incomes. Pedro fulfilled his obligations as a son, because he was required to do that, but he was also bound by *hiya* (shame) since everyone in his hometown knows that he is a ship officer. Society expects him to act according to social propriety, considering his image in the community. Though abused and used by his family for financial matters, his mother's burial, who passed away a year after his father, signaled his freedom from financial bondage from *utang na loob*. As he resides in Manila, he only goes home once a year to participate in the biggest cockfighting derby, opts to stay in his cousin's house, distances himself from his siblings and nephews/nieces. He laments that he felt he was perceived as a human figure of US dollars, having worked as a seafarer for more than 20 years. His siblings fail to see him as to how he is. It is always about money matters – borrowing or asking for money if they see him. Nobody has attempted to ask how his life is going on, how his family is – more essential issues than one's income.

Out of *utang na loob*, Dan, whom an uncle backed up his first seafaring experience, complied to repay it when his uncle needed financial help while paying off amortizations for his

house. As he also trusted his uncle's wife, he left his atm card under the safekeeping of his aunt. When he returned home, his aunt disclosed that she borrowed around 1,700 euros for the family's miscellaneous expenses. It was all right for him as it was considered a credit payable at a term. However, when he started collecting these debts, he was called an "ingrate" for being persistent in demanding payment. He decided that it was better to write off those collectibles. He transferred his family to another town to be physically freed from this bondage of *utang na loob* and escape from debtors. *Utang na loob*, when practiced problematically, definitely breaks relationships. *Utang na loob*, when practiced problematically, definitely breaks relationships.

Hollnsteiner (1961) illustrates that *utang na loob* reciprocity is created when a person sends a relative or friend's child through school, paying all or part of the expenses. Here, the sponsor creates a lifetime obligation in the child and his family. To make possible a professional future is a valued interest for a Filipino family. This typical scenario also happened to some of the informants. After several years of seafaring, they are still making amends for this *utang na loob*, giving *pasalubong* or gifts when returning home, or extending any help whenever the provider or his family needs it. It is not surprising that Filipino seafarers are hesitant to incur *utang na loob* as it is challenging to get out of its pit (Dancel 2005). This sense of repayment could also be why some seafarers would instead not compel one to feel indebted during their seafaring years.

Utang na loob has brought about good and lousy vantage points. This *utang na loob* is exploited by those who have done favors to others as they may demand repayment that may either be unreasonable or beyond the means of the one in debt. *Utang na loob* carries blind loyalty towards the family. Friendship can also be an avenue to misemploy *utang na loob*. At the outset, it may commence with simple favors. Another favor and a third will follow it, and sometimes as the reciprocation continues, it may contain corrupt elements which may now abuse *utang na loob*. Another effect would be the inability and inefficiency of an employee when employing him is founded on friendship rather than his knowledge of the job (Agaton 2017).

6. Skipping the Queue: Inequality in the Backer System

Acquisition of sufficient forms of capital gives leverage to a prospective seafaring applicant. Having an advantageous position gives rise to inequality in capital ownership and further contributes to socioeconomic inequality (Kim 2019; Lin 2000). Referrals and access to information alter market mechanisms, thereby increasing discrimination in hiring (Takács et al. 2018). Lin (2000) further contends that inequality of social capital occurs within two principles; first on a structural basis where individuals and groups differ in socioeconomic positions, and second is homophily, the tendency of individuals to share and interact with people of similar characteristics.

Research participants narrate how the backer system puts forth an unfair playing ground for seafaring applicants:

Sometimes it is unfair for the utility men who have been around, and some will skip the line. The ship officer will tell the Greek principals, I have a nephew, and I wanted to help him launch his

career. Upon complying with the requirements of the crewing agency, he will be deployed easily [...] If you do not have a backer, it is difficult. (Dennis, 53, Second Engineer)

It is easier to get on board if you have a backer than those with no backers. After a three-month required training, I submitted all my documents, and after seven days, they required me to undergo the medical exam. I was deployed after another seven days; it was quite fast since my seafaring uncle requested me. (Rey, 28, Oiler)

Access to organizational resources for Filipinos, like these seafarers “backed up” by their family members, may not be based on merit and qualification as demanded by official laws and procedures but primarily based on social ties and patronage or *palakasan* (Ballano 2017). The participants clarified that they still have to undergo a formal hiring process, such as passing an office-administered examination and the panel interview even with their backers. However, they acknowledged that the likelihood of being hired even failing to qualify these requirements remains relatively high compared to those without referrals. Backers, who generally have accumulated cultural and social capital, can negotiate their referrals with the agency and the principals. Most of these backers negotiate a relative’s entry with their loyalty to the company, which means they would not leave the company for a certain period. Being hired because of the family’s social capital indicates Filipinos’ view of the social world as oriented toward the welfare of a small circle of friends and relatives or the idea of *sakop* (in-group) rather than the public good. These also show the personalistic and in-group orientation of Filipinos’ cultural values (Ballano 2017).

Another form of social capital inequality permeating the maritime industry is the gap between MHEI’s social networks and manning agencies. Some manning agencies produce their own set of prospective officers through scholarships to first-year students who qualify for screening. MHEIs are supposed to maintain a certain number of enrollees based on the number of graduates they can deploy, but many MHEIs remain non-compliant. The oversupply of maritime graduates to job opportunities available is also a problem most new graduates face. Tisoy, a Third Engineer, and Gil, a Crewing Manager, articulate this imbalance:

There are so many graduates every year, and only a small percentage is hired as graduates have to have sea experience in a suitable vessel before they are accepted. You cannot work on board, even in domestic shipping, if you will not pay or do not know somebody [...] The only possibility of becoming an international seafarer is when you know somebody in that company. (Tisoy, 29, Third Engineer)

I cannot fully understand why the (Philippine) government allowed the setting up of so many maritime schools. But then, as an ordinary citizen, and suppose I established a school, I must assure the students’ parents that their children will have good opportunities once they graduate. But then, unfortunately, as a personal view, establishing a school has become profit-oriented. (Gil, 63, Crewing Manager)

The essential inequality in the ownership of social capital augments economic disparities. In the study of social capital inequality, not only were the institutional structures considered but also individual attributes and the interrelations between economic and human capital,

which reproduce the same form of inequalities (Pena-López et al. 2021). Gil's concern about the state of maritime education in the Philippines was echoed by the study conducted by Del Rosario et al. (2020). They examined the low success rate of Filipino cadets, and such may have stemmed from failures in the governance system.

7. Conclusion

The backer system which permeates the hiring process for global seafarers in the Philippines reveals the seafaring field as a field of struggles where there is a need to compete for resources and where power relations exist. For career entrants, having a backer is a strategy, one which guarantees deployment. Though one may be assigned as a utility man for several months, the waiting time is not lost, as the likelihood of vessel assignment is definite.

The dynamics of the backer system are intertwined with the actors' social capital and within the strong ties of family relations as social capital is usually accessed. As family ties are highly valued among Filipino people, social capital is often mobilized to launch a family member's career. Another social capital, which originates from ethnic ties, is accessed and mobilized by some research participants. However, as the backer system is a network of trust and reciprocity, a power-ridden relationship governs the client, patron, and the manning agency. The concept of Filipino *utang na loob* becomes polarizing, one that is both a symbolic capital and symbolic violence. One that transforms a disadvantaged position to an advantaged one, yet an advantaged positioning may also revert to a disadvantaged one when seafarers are exploited by the one who extended them favors.

The unequal distribution of social capital becomes an antecedent on how the backer system reproduces socioeconomic inequality. Those with backers can quickly launch their seafaring careers, while those without backers spend years of job searching, and some eventually give up in the process. The lack of social capital among MHEIs and manning agencies, which is a cause of the low success rate of Filipino cadets, needs to be addressed by the appropriate governing bodies as a way to restrict the gap in social capital inequality.

The accumulation of social capital and mobilizing such capital to expect gains, mirrors how valued social capital is in the Philippine maritime industry. Filipino cultural values, the Filipino management practices, allow the pervasiveness of the backer system as the actors involved – the patron, the client, and the manning agency, accrue benefits from the transaction.

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