



Comparing bonding capital in New England groundfish and scallop fisheries: Differing effects of privatization



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ABSTRACT

Based on qualitative data analysis, this paper makes three contributions: (1) following recent privatization policies, social inequality emerged across New England's two most prominent fisheries—the scallop and groundfish fisheries. Given that inequality is not solely a financial phenomenon but also social, engrained in daily practices, the decline in bonding capital serves as an important indicator of this growing disparity between vessel owners and active crewmembers. (2) While the resulting class formation is characterized by differences in labor *precarity* in the scallop fishery, it is characterized by differences in labor *inactivity* in the groundfish fishery. Labor precarity refers to the disproportionate risk and vulnerability experienced by active scallop boat crewmembers as compared to vessel owners. Meanwhile labor inactivity describes both vessel owners' ability to earn money without fishing and fishermen's difficulty in finding employment, creating a sharp social divide between those who work and those who do not. The contraction of the active labor pool in the groundfish fishery coincides with stronger ties of kinship, which serve as a survival tactic under times of stress. (3) Although there is a wealth of literature on the privatization of the world's oceans and inequality, few studies have investigated the textured experience of class formation, which this analysis seeks to remediate.

1. Introduction

In 2013, New England's scallop fishery was touted as a conservation success story and a shot in the arm to the region's struggling fishing economy [16]. At the same time, the New England groundfish fishery reached a point of near collapse for crucial species such as Atlantic cod [15]. Despite these ecological differences, there are important socio-economic similarities across the two fisheries, namely a growing inequity between vessel owners and active crewmembers. An important indicator of this inequity is not only economic disparity but also social transformations within the fishing community—the most significant of which is a marked decline in bonding capital. Bonding capital, as defined by Robert Putnam [43,44], represents exclusive ties of solidarity and reciprocity, which are measured in this study by multi-generational knowledge exchange and inherited gear and permits. In order to understand the phenomenon of growing inequity, this study focuses on New England's largest and the nation's most profitable port, New Bedford, Massachusetts, and asks, *how have patterns of bonding capital changed in two fisheries under different forms of privatization and what are the effects of that process?*

Within commercial offshore fisheries, bonding capital has been a crucial component to entering and succeeding in the industry, as well as to managing its natural resource fluctuations [13]. However, recent

privatization policies that remove barriers to individual wealth accumulation attenuate the role of bonding capital in employment and privilege financial capital instead. Effectively, boat owners emerge as “utility maximizers”, creating a new social class unto themselves [48]. Earlier studies have pointed to shifts in bonding capital following fishery privatization, namely asymmetric access to information [38] and the “disintegration of community bonds” [25]. For this analysis, the decline in bonding capital therefore serves as an important indicator of class formation and draws from a broad literature on social capital in the fishing industry [13,17,29,13,21,7,2,22,46].

It has been well documented in the literature that the privatization of the world's oceans can cause social inequality [11,27,48,26,28,38,34,49,25]. However, few scholars have explored the lived experience of this phenomenon, a gap which this work seeks to amend. Understanding the process of class formation is important because inequality is not only a quantitative phenomenon. It is engrained in daily interactions and practices, shaping the culture of fishing communities within ports such as New Bedford. These communities are diverse; for instance, the scallop fishery is single species and semi-sedentary, regulated primarily by rotationally closed areas and limited access, whereas the groundfish fishery is multi-species and migratory, managed by a form of catch shares. One can therefore expect variation in class formation across these two distinct fisheries.

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Using a triangulated methodology, this study uses oral histories collected by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) Voices from the Fisheries project, interviews with key informants, and archival data from local newspapers including New Bedford's local newspaper, *The Standard Times*. Results indicate that privatization policies put in place to improve biomass ultimately drove down bonding capital and consequently exacerbated social inequality in both fisheries. However, the resulting class formation in each fishery is characterized differently—by differences in labor precarity in the scallop fishery and by differences in labor inactivity in the groundfish fishery. Labor precarity describes the increased risk and instability that now defines the work of active scallop boat crewmembers as compared to vessel owners. Whereas labor inactivity describes both vessel owners' ability to earn money without fishing and fishermen's¹ difficulty in finding employment, creating a sharp social divide between those who work and those who do not. The contraction of the active labor pool in the groundfish fishery coincides with stronger ties of kinship, which serve as a survival tactic under times of economic and ecological stress. These policies and corresponding processes of class formation in each fishery will be explained in later sections, following a review of relevant literature.

2. Social capital and privatization in the fishing industry

Social capital is a complex topic and amidst the wealth of scholarship that has emerged on this phenomenon Robert Putnam is widely heralded as one of its foundational thinkers. According to Putnam, social capital “refers to the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other” ([44]:19). In order to measure social capital, Putnam examines the amount of trust and reciprocity in a community and between individuals. Reciprocity, while hard to gauge, is commonly measured by new job opportunities resulting from connections with family and friends.

Putnam [43,44] identifies two sub-types of social capital: bridging and bonding capital. Bridging capital, which extends outside of the uniform group, is based on loosely knit solidarity ties grounded in shared interests across culture groups. On the other hand, bonding capital, which is based in homogenous groups, is cultivated through common values seen predominantly in families, ethnic groups, and close-knit occupational communities. Resting heavily on familial lineages and ethnic enclaves to transfer knowledge and resources, bonding capital has traditionally laid the foundation for new employment opportunities in major fishing ports throughout the U.S., including those in New England [4,13,14], Hawai'i [2], and Alaska [22,29].

Despite its advantages for opening up new employment opportunities within tight-knit social groups, bonding capital can be a deterrent to leaving the commercial fishing industry or to looking for employment in another port. One of the main inhibiting aspects of bonding capital is its tendency to create excess claims on individuals and ultimately to restrict individual freedoms [42]. The “identification with one's own group, sect, or community can be a powerful motivational force” to either stay or leave ([41]: 8). Community participation inevitably creates demands of conformity and norms, making bonding capital both an asset, and at times, a liability [5,6]. This has been the case for many fishermen throughout New England. For example, despite the precarity and volatility of New Bedford's fishing industry, scholars have found high labor retention. They attribute this trend to “sticky labor”, whereby surplus labor is retained, owing to imperfect economic mobility and strong bonding ties to the industry [14].

The extent to which fishing communities employ bridging versus

¹ The term “fisherman” is used in this analysis instead of “fisher” or “fisherfolk” because that is how commercial fishermen refer to themselves. It does not imply any gender nor type of fisherman, whether vessel owner, deckhand, or otherwise.

bonding capital is determined by the relative valuation of resources and social networks [21,7,46], shaped in part by institutional forces [4,23]. For example, Holland and colleagues [23] assessed levels of social capital for New England's groundfish vessel owners after the initial implementation of sector management, a form of catch shares. They found that inshore boats have higher bonding capital within sectors than offshore boats, while offshore boats have higher bridging capital, requiring information from a variety of sources to follow far-reaching migration streams of groundfish. Such examples reinforce the need to understand the varied social impacts of marine policies on fishing communities.

Fishery privatization policies have been cited as an important factor in reshaping social capital patterns and in class formation [25,26,28,38,48,49]. Privatization can include the creation of limited access permits, individualized market-based incentives, or enclosed areas, all of which are used in New England's scallop and groundfish fisheries. Since the creation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in 1976, the first effort by the US to privatize the oceans, states and regions have introduced policies that create market-based incentives to fisheries access. The most common form is individual transferable quotas (ITQs), or catch shares. “[T]he ITQ solution assumes that self-interest will discipline fisheries by providing fishers with individual private rights to harvest specified portions of fish stocks or quotas” ([25]: 46). Although in some cases ITQs have been proven to reduce the likelihood of fishery collapse by minimizing the race-to-fish,² one of the primary social outcomes is social inequity [25,49]. For example, from the outset, ITQs privilege those who are already well established by doling out quotas based on catch history. Therefore, those with more boats and those who have been fishing the longest receive higher allotments, and newcomers, especially first-generation fishermen, are left marginalized with a smaller catch share [25].

Over time, inequality is exacerbated, as indicated by a decline in bonding capital. In broad terms, privatization efforts, including ITQs, remove political barriers to individual wealth accumulation. As a result, boat owners have emerged as a new class of “utility maximizers” [48], while crewmembers who do not own leases or permits become more transient and vulnerable, with less influence and power in the fishery [28,34,48]. In other words, shifts in economic structure have corresponding shifts in the social experience of the industry. Taken together, “the social tragedies of ITQs include disintegration of community bonds and greater inequality in fishing livelihoods” [25: 50].

Barring a few examples [26,28,38], most studies overlook the lived experience of the process of rising inequality, which this study seeks to remediate. One example of a study that does attend to lived experience is the work of Lowe and Caruthers [26] who collected eight ethnographic and historical case studies on the sociocultural consequences of fisheries privatization from around the world. They found that “sea lords” and “armchair fishermen” — fishermen who gain wealth without fishing — are emblems of declining solidarity and growing social disparity. In sum, “fisheries privatization has real effects on real people in real places” [26: vii]. This paper argues that the way in which class formation manifests is contingent upon fishery-specific differences in privatization policies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Background on the fisheries

Since the early 2000s, the scallop fishery has been considered a “conservation success story” [24], with many arguing that effective

² The ecological consequences of ITQs and other privatization strategies have had varying results. In general, ITQs have reduced the “race-to-fish” by allocating individual quotas to be used within a given season, eliminating the rush to use up a given global quota for a whole fishery or region. However, in some cases ITQs have actually precipitated severe ecological consequences because of unsustainable overfishing of target species (due to inappropriate quota recommendations) or higher bycatch of non-target species (in order to avoid fines) [49].

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